

INDIGENOUS AND TRANS-CULTURAL SHAMANISM IN ITALY

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If there is anything I have learnt from studying shamanism and engaging with its varied communities is the central importance of relationality. Just as cultural phenomena do not manifest in a vacuum, neither do individual works. Every idea and endeavour, each achievement or failure, resulted from a substrate of interconnections within which I was immersed. Thus, if this work sees the light of day is thanks to a number of meaningful relations and relationships, which aided – directly or indirectly – the genesis of the present study. First and foremost, I thank my husband Riccardo, who helped me brainstorm ideas every time I felt uninspired and sustained me during the dark times which – I am sure – every PhD student has to go through along the way. I also thank my best friend Cipriano for the book recommendation which led me to discover ‘Italian Shamanism’ and Luigi, who aided my case study on indigeneity in Italian history. More importantly, your friendship made me feel as if I had never left, as if we were always by each other’s side no matter the distance. My deepest thanks to Dr Suzanne Owen, the best supervisor I could have wished for, a mentor and an inspiration for the kind of scholar I want to become. Her guidance and expertise were pivotal in my development as a doctoral researcher while her kindness made me feel capable of completing this study, even in times of hopeless discouragement. My gratitude also goes to Prof Graham Roberts, whom I was lucky to have in my supervisory team as his experience and cheerful attitude turned my PhD progression into a much more pleasurable experience. Thank you for always putting a smile on my face!

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Abstract

Shamanism is a growing religious movement in Italy and manifests itself in two main forms. The first is trans-cultural shamanism, a cross-cultural set of practices inspired by one or multiple indigenous traditions, which get 'translated' when imported into Western cultural discourse. Second, encountering on the field a web of underground yet widespread vernacular magic traditions prompted the inquiry on whether such practices might constitute an indigenous Italian shamanism, native of the land.

This thesis aims to fill an ethnographical gap on trans-cultural forms of shamanism in Italy and the relation between contemporary forms of folk magic and shamanism. The selection of participants for both trans-cultural shamanism and folk magic traditions was on the basis of networking derived from fieldwork and online engagement with practitioners.

The label 'shaman' has worked by superimposition over local identifiers and, being a Western etic category of the 19th Century, retains some degree of exoticism in its semantics. These traits are found in reference to the Italian context, too, as every region calls their vernacular healers with a term sourced from the local dialect or parlance. It is also easier for trans-cultural practitioners to identify foreign practices as shamanistic than to acknowledge that what the town healer does may fall under the same category. This, I argue, may be due to the absence of romantic exoticism embodied by the 'next-door neighbour'. Even when the label 'shamanism' is employed spontaneously by *Segnatori* (folk magic practitioners), it is reportedly the result of the person leaving their native place (moving from regions in the South to the North of Italy), thus creating an 'exoticising' distance.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Research Aims

From the first publication on shamanism by Mircea Eliade *Le Chamanisme et Les Techniques Archaïques De l'Extase* (Eliade, 1951) and its considerable influence outside of the academic world, much has been studied and written about shamanism. In more recent decades, studies started expanding from the original interest in ethnographical accounts in faraway countries to the Western world itself. The West saw the birth and growth of shamanic practices not only as a response to the popularisation of indigenous peoples' practices but also as a new religious tradition not emulating but creating a Western tradition.

This study started a few years before the actual commencement of my doctoral degree as a result of witnessing the growing shamanic phenomenon in my native country. Having always been keen on understanding religions, especially new religious forms, for several years I had been participating in the Pagan community in Italy, whereby I was able to witness the growing involvement of practitioners toward experiencing shamanism. By means of the information provided by practitioners within the Pagan community, I soon realised that shamanism was not limited to being a branch of Paganism, but was also present in different communities with dissimilar religious backgrounds. This long-term engagement also helped me build a network of contacts that over time rendered me trustworthy in their eyes, giving me the opportunity to collect data once I had decided to pursue this as a research topic.

The aims of this research are essentially three. First of all, I want to fill an ethnographical gap, since little scholarly literature has been produced on forms and manifestations of contemporary shamanism in Italy, and none that comprehensively research the field as a whole. Although there are some studies on the history and conceptualisation of shamanism in general, as well

as on folk magic and the *Segnatori*, very little has been written on trans-cultural forms of shamanism in Italy or on the relation between contemporary forms of folk magic and shamanism. The second aim consists of examining ‘imported’ shamanisms alongside indigenous¹ forms of folk magic, both to trace the traits of their manifestations on the territory and to critically analyse whether there are connecting points between the two. Lastly, I intend to investigate contemporary shamanism from a critical point of view: how shamanism can be contemporary and how contemporaneity reconsiders shamanism, whether as an imported or an indigenous form. Although the definition of shamanism will be fully investigated in chapter 2, a preliminary clarification on the use of the selected terminology is needed to fulfil these introductory remarks.

The category of shamanism, albeit existing long before in Russian and Scandinavian studies, was popularised by Mircea Eliade as referring to a set of ecstatic techniques aimed at obtaining power and healing through interacting with spirits (Eliade, 1972, pp. 3–13). This definition is still rather wide and, as Fiona Bowie highlights,

‘Shamanism’ is one of those terms (like ‘witchcraft’ or ‘totemism’) which is often used very broadly, referring to many different phenomena, some of which bear little relationship to one another or to any original derivation (2006, p. 174).

Even though there are scholars that would prefer to restrict the term exclusively to Siberian practitioners (Kehoe, 2000, pp. 101–102), the large majority of those who study shamanism embrace the fluidity of the term.²

Unlike shamanism, folk Magic lacks wide scholarly debate to establish a definition for the category. For this research, I will use ‘folk magic’ as a category referring to a set of practices that comprise the use of magic and are ingrained and inherited for generations, mainly through oral transmission. I will also use ‘The Tradition of *Segnatori*’ as a label to cluster the regional folk

¹ The rationale behind the adoption of the term ‘indigenous’ will be addressed in chapter 5.

² The different uses of the term will be fully discussed in Chapter 2.

magic variations practised throughout Italy which share the same core ritual setting involving the use of specific gestures and words called *Segnature*. Even though the ritual practice of *Segnare* has been previously studied - specifically within the region of Emilia Romagna - by Maddalena De Bernardi in her doctoral thesis (De Bernardi, 2015), my contribution will be to look at this ritual practice as the nucleus and shared foundation found across different Italian regions, which were previously defined with either vernacular names varying from region to region or not named at all.

I will use 'shamanism' to categorise the traditions that use various techniques to enter an altered state of consciousness whereby practitioners gather power and healing (Winkelman, 2010, pp. 20–37), and 'folk magic' in reference to the set of magical rituals native to Italy and having a history of local and/or familiar transmission. There are several traditions of folk magic in Italy, the large majority of which are shrouded in secrecy, myth and folklore. As hard as it is to explore this area from an anthropological point of view, I will expand more on these traditions in the attempt to understand their kinship to shamanism. The large majority of said traditions of folk magic are based on similar practices, the most popular of which is that of *Segnature*. *Segnatori* is a term referring to those who perform the *Segnature*, which translate as 'Signs, signatures' and consist of specific symbols drawn by hand while uttering words of power for specific purposes, such as healing and protection. I'll adopt throughout my thesis the 'Tradition of *Segnatori*' as an umbrella term to refer to different traditions that share a common pattern and employ this practice.

As these premises may suggest, the Italian context has a specific significance and hence can deliver a substantial contribution to the study of Shamanism, as it shows that even in Western countries it is possible to find 'indigenous' traditions. It would, therefore, be an ethno-centric negligence to only consider as shamanistic foreign 'others' and avoid looking with the same enquiring lens at traditions present in our European societies. In addition, by analysing how native and imported traditions co-exist and interact with each other, as well as the diverse ways through which syncretisms take place in the Italian setting, this study will contribute to the understanding of similar dynamics in other countries.

1.2 Shamanism and Folk magic: A Literature Review

The types of sources that I pursued are those related to three main scholarly roots from which my subject developed. Despite the lack of sources explicitly tackling indigenous and trans-cultural shamanism in Italy, there is nonetheless some significant literature from which my work stemmed.

I have branched these main literary precursors in the Italian context into three extents (see Figure 1-1), which include literature that tackles trans-cultural shamanism in Italy, Italian folk magic, and broader works on new forms of shamanism in Western countries that were significant to my research.

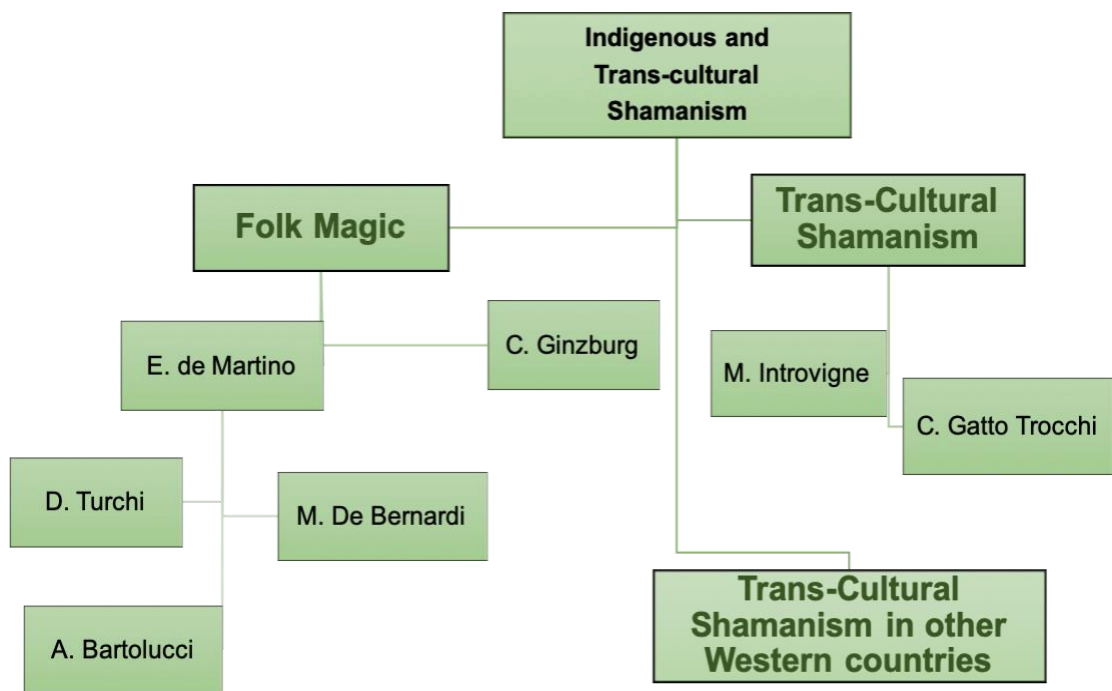


Figure 1 - 0-1 Literature Review

The scientific literature on trans-cultural shamanism in Italy - sometimes referred to as 'neo-shamanism' - is still in its infancy as only a few scholars have studied the topic, and mostly in generic terms, associating contemporary shamanism to the broader spectrum of new religious movements and 'Neopaganism'. Massimo Introvigne (Introvigne, 1989, 1990), founder and director of CESNUR (Centre for the study of new religions) mentions 'Neopaganism' (*Neopaganesimo*) and, marginally, 'neoshamanism'

(*neosciamanesimo*). The CESNUR website³ (CESNUR, 2014a) represented – at the beginning of my research - the only exiguous ethnographic map of contemporary shamanism in Italy. The list was somewhat outdated, as I discovered during the first months of my fieldwork. Cecilia Gatto Trocchi (1996, 1997) also wrote about new religions in Italy, calling them ‘cults’ (*sette*) and mainly focusing on religions that have a magical belief system. Neither Introvigne nor Gatto Trocchi appear successful in explaining what ‘neoshamanism’ is and how it manifests in Italy as both address the topic quite briefly and as an appendix to the wider category of Neopaganism. Lastly, Giovanni Filoramo (1986, 1993, 1999) studied new religious movements more broadly with the aim of discovering how the perception of the ‘Sacred’ had changed and what new religions can tell about the cultural changes in contemporary society without any explicit reference to the neoshamanic movement. My fieldwork and my attendance at international conferences helped me come across an article published by Enrica Tedeschi on trans-cultural shamanism in Italy, where a distinction is made between Core Shamanism and ‘neo shamanism,’ and Denise Lombardi, whose work focuses on neo shamanism in Europe – especially in France – covering marginally Italy as a field of study.

Overall the Italian academia has mostly focussed on historiographical interpretations of the term and philosophical understanding of shamanism (mainly as practised outside of Italy) as well as on comparative studies, especially in correlation to psychological disciplines (Arcari and Saggiaro, 2015). Other popular approaches include ethnographical studies on shamanisms in non-Western countries (Marazzi, 2017; Torri, 2015) and interpretative accounts of the role and influence of Mircea Eliade (Ambasciano, 2014; Casadio, 2014).

Even though the approach of taking into consideration only, or preferably, shamanisms in far-away countries has been a recognisable tendency in the West, this attitude is slowly changing. Recently the

³ The website URL for this, as well as for all the referenced websites throughout the thesis, is provided in the References section.

significance of inquiring whether shamanic forms are present in Western countries and researching them is becoming of increasing value. Shamanism is not to be assumed, as often happens, as a prerogative of foreign others unless empirical data and critical analysis suggest so. A number of scholars have used this approach in recent years and analysed the models whereby shamanism manifests itself in Western countries (Kraft et al., 2015; Sanson, 2011; Gredig, 2010; Burgess, 2008). It is anyway an interesting and challenging field that needs further attention and study.

Part of the present research will be concerned with traditions of healers and folk magic in Italy to comprehend their characteristics and determine whether they can be considered forms of shamanism, including the new generation of healers and the syncretisms they employ between traditional Italian practices and forms of neoshamanism.⁴ One of the first scholars to have associated local magical practices to shamanism is the historian Carlo Ginzburg, who authored several books highlighting such similarities. A tradition he addressed that uncovers parallels with shamanism was the ancient agrarian visionary tradition of *Benandanti* from Friuli (Ginzburg, 2013, p. 29), whereas in a different book Ginzburg also suggests that, 'an ancient shamanistic nucleus was included in the well-established stereotype of the witches' Sabbath'⁵ (Ginzburg, 2012, p. 76). As we will see in the next chapters, folk magic in Italy is quite varied, untidy and composed of diverse practices and yet imbued with shamanistic qualities. Ginzburg studies the phenomenon in history rather than in the contemporary world, but given the heritage and features that succeeded to the living traditions, it still serves as a valuable source. By studying historical records of trials, folklore and popular iconography, Ginzburg also hypothesises an underground shamanistic culture that has existed in Europe for centuries (Ginzburg, 2004).

Moving from a historical to an ethnographical account, a scholarly milestone in the field is represented by Ernesto De Martino, whose

⁴ In the dedicated chapter 3, I will explain why I prefer the label 'Trans-cultural Shamanism', which will be adopted in reference to these traditions from that chapter onwards.

⁵ The witches' Sabbath that Ginzburg refers to is linked to the traditions in Early Modern Europe, not to be confused with the Neo-pagan seasonal gatherings.

endeavours were oriented both towards producing ethnographical accounts on the field, especially in the South of Italy (De Martino, 1982, 2015), and understanding the very presence of magic in religious practices. Using a historical and philosophical perspective, he shows not only an interest in the *Mondo Magico* ('the magical world') but also in the way Westerners approach this kind of study (De Martino, 2007). He stated that it is not quite possible to fully grasp the magical worldview unless the "ethnocentric" approach is abandoned and the scholar engages fully as a participant observer. This approach is the one I adopted for my study, endorsing a rejection of ethnocentrism by challenging the assumption that shamanism refers exclusively to non-Western indigenous settings. A similar position was also argued – among others - by David Wilson in his study of Western spiritualism as a form of shamanism where he highlights that,

The perception of shamanic activity as magical restricted the model to discussion and analysis of native North American or other 'primitive' cultures, obstructing its possible application to mediumistic traditions within Anglo-American culture itself (Wilson, 2013, p. 123).

I will attempt to avoid falling into the various traps set by an ethnocentric understanding of shamanistic practices by relying on discourse analysis and a context-sensitive approach, for both will allow me to avoid the tying of shamanism to selected ethnicities.⁶

Another key aspect in De Martino that appears relevant to my research is the centrality given to the role of magic. Magic has, in fact, a precise role for De Martino as it represents the means whereby human beings resolve the 'Crisis of Presence', where 'Presence' is intended in Heideggerian terms.⁷ I will also investigate further the role of magic in shamanic practices, expanding more on De Martino's stance and analysing the whole matter in reference to the data emerged from my fieldwork. The association between magical and shamanic practices is also mentioned briefly by De Martino, who deems that

⁶ This methodological approach will be fully discussed in Chapter 2.

⁷ To be fully addressed in Chapter 5.

‘The *Tarantolismo*⁸ from Puglia [...] has parallels with several historical and religious traditions, especially with shamanistic types of magic’(De Martino, 1982, pp. 187–188)⁹. Furthermore, a few studies analyse the connection between the figures of the magician and the shaman in De Martino (Testa, 2015) alongside the correlations and influences that his contemporary Mircea Eliade had had on his work (Severino, 2015; Testa, 2015).

Dolores Turchi is a journalist and an ethnographer and has spent the vast majority of her career writing books, articles and delivering lectures on popular traditions of the region Sardinia. Among the dozens of works she has published, one appears of particular interest, as its very title *Lo sciamanesimo in Sardegna* ‘The Shamanism in Sardinia’ may suggest (Turchi, 2017). In this book she openly states that there is a broad heritage of beliefs, legends, practices and cults in the Sardinian tradition which are in fact shamanism, she says, and the only reason the word was not used in the past to define them is because the word was not known at the time (2017, p. 74). The same opinion is shared by Paola Giovetti, whose book – highly recommended by several informants - *I guaritori di campagna* (‘Countryside Healers’) highlights, in the introduction, the similarity between vernacular healers and shamans (Giovetti, 2016). A scholar who tackled these practices is Maddalena de Bernardi, whose doctoral thesis (De Bernardi, 2015) focussed on the traditions of *Segnatori* in Emilia Romagna, also including practices from other Italian regions that might still fall under the same category for the act of *Segnare* has a central role in their rituals. This work has represented a valuable reference to foster a coherent understanding and help systematise a set of rituals performed throughout Italy and passed down through generations. As a consequence of this oral transmission, such practices appear as lacking a solid unified framework. The difficulty in deducing a consistent framework is enhanced by the reticence that practitioners have at disclosing rituals that are secretive on one hand and scorned as irrational superstitions on the other.

⁸ *Tarantolismo* or *Tarantismo* is usually translated as ‘Tarantism’ and refers to an ecstatic dance believed to be caused by a form of possession that induces a trance-like state. The topic will be addressed more in depth in Chapter 5.

⁹ ‘Al tarantolismo pugliese [...] fanno riscontro numerosissimi paralleli storico-religiosi, specialmente nel magismo di tipo sciamanistico’.

Sarah, one of my informants who received the *Segnature* (a ritual act that represents a form of initiation in the tradition), suggested I would read a book written by the anthropologist Antonella Bartolucci with whom she had collaborated in the past. Sarah's advice proved to be fruitful indeed, as the aforementioned book, based on twenty years of ethnographic research, explains the major features of the *Segnatori* traditions as well as how these ancient rituals got reshaped in the era of internet and social media (Bartolucci, 2016). Since I discovered the works of De Bernardi and Bartolucci after about a year of fieldwork, I was particularly thrilled to be able to confirm similar findings in my own research, which helped inform my inquiry move forward.

Moving on to works on neoshamanism in the Western world, there were some studies essential to the development of my research questions. For instance, P. Johnson (1995), M. D. Jakobsen (1999) and R. J. Wallis (2003) gave a significant contribution to the understanding of some main differences between neoshamanic forms developed in the Western world and traditional shamanisms found among indigenous peoples. However, as it will be shown in the following chapters, the presence of dissimilarities does not imply necessarily that contemporary Western traditions are not legitimate forms of shamanism but possibly different manifestations suited to a different cultural context.

Some doctoral studies on neoshamanism in Western countries also represented a viable reference for my research, especially in terms of structure and methodology. Gredig (2010), for example, conducted his fieldwork with neoshamans in France, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland, employing semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Even though the field of reference was not Italy, it is nonetheless a valuable source to see the type of data gathered by adopting similar methodologies. Similarly, Burgess (2008) tackles contemporary and cross-cultural shamanism in Scotland, employing interviews and case studies in a similar fashion as to how I did my research. Another doctoral thesis having New Zealand as an ethnographic background, states that 'Cross-pollination and the sharing of traditions between people is an unavoidable result of human movements around the worlds, heightened and magnified in the contemporary era by rapid technological changes and globalisation' (Sanson, 2011, p. 249) mentioning

that she witnessed a Māori healer wearing a Native American-inspired shirt and wondered, 'If my reaction would have been different if I had seen a Pākehā wearing a similar motif; instead, I interpreted it as an example of indigenous people legitimately mixing their cultures, without the complications of neo-colonial undertones' (2011, p. 250). The latter scholars depict neoshamanism in the Western world – later in the thesis referred to as trans-cultural - as forms of shamanism in their own right. The cases presented by these scholars suggest that when shamanism is primarily studied within a chosen location to understand its own traits rather than to compare it with indigenous traditions, the focus is not on evaluating its authenticity against a recognised standard any longer. This shows the benefit of analysing a shamanic tradition in relation to the cultural context whereby it manifests, avoiding a yearning for validation against criteria emerging from extremely dissimilar sociocultural circumstances.

1.3 From Contemporary to Indigenous and Trans-Cultural Shamanisms in Italy

The present study began by looking at forms of contemporary shamanism in Italy, having as a premise that the types of shamanism present in the territory were either imported and readapted traditions (e.g. Andean, Siberian) or 'Westernised' forms inspired by indigenous traditions (e.g. Core Shamanism, Tensegrity, psychologised shamanisms). The intent was to map all the traditions in Italy, discern their traits and then deduce what the common features were to get a comprehensive portrait of contemporary shamanism in the country. The last and most challenging step would have been to compare and contrast contemporary and traditional shamanisms to investigate whether the contemporary one encompasses enough elements for it to be defined a form of Shamanism. Instead, the contemporary forms appeared to be more numerous, eclectic and intertwined with other non-shamanic traditions than I thought, making it difficult to address them all with the same accuracy. At the same time, a tradition that claimed to be autochthonous/indigenous¹⁰

¹⁰ More on the differences between the two terms and rational for choosing 'indigenous' in chapter 5.

surfaced, hinting at further types of traditions to be evaluated as forms of shamanism from the land.

This all translated into a change of direction as - for my study to include both autochthonous and trans-cultural forms - I had to focus my ethnographic fieldtrips on one form of 'imported' shamanism to allocate more space to investigate the Tradition of *Segnatori* as a possible form of Italian shamanism. The imported form of Shamanism that I chose is Core Shamanism, a Western tradition founded by Michael Harner and defined by its founder and practitioners as 'trans-cultural' shamanism, to indicate that it is not linked to one specific culture or place but it is transversal to them all.

Therefore, It is worth illustrating the metamorphosis that took place during the first year of fieldwork and data collection. As mentioned, the original aim of my research was to investigate forms of neoshamanism only. This was planned to be tackled by mapping the ethnographic field of contemporary shamanism in Italy and to then see how many types of shamanism were currently there, what distinguished one form from another, and how they related to the dominant religious system. An analysis based on both qualitative and quantitative data would have then followed to inquire what Italian contemporary shamanism had to say about contemporary shamanism itself and how it relates to traditional shamanisms, the main differences between them, how the traditional imported ones fit into modern society, and what is 'lost in translation'.

The ethnographic map of the territory provided by the CESNUR website (CESNUR, 2014a) showed that less than ten groups throughout the country share a common pattern based on eclectic practices imported and reinterpreted from non-Western traditions. The most widespread group was the one formed by the Core Shamanism tradition alongside solitary practitioners mainly inspired by its teachings, using an eclectic approach. In addition, there were a couple of Castaneda-inspired traditions (Tensegrity and Arte de Vivir a Propósito), a couple of Andean-inspired traditions (Tawantin and Fratellanza Solare degli Intic Churincuna), one Siberian-inspired tradition (Where the Eagles Fly), and two that combine shamanism and psychology to different degrees (Biotransenergetica and Deer Tribe Metis Medicine

Society). By 'inspired' I mean that these groups are mainly inspired by a specific author or tradition but maintain some form of eclecticism and do not appear to be strict reconstructionisms.

During the first two months of my fieldwork, the map of the ethnographic field was completely reshaped. Four of the groups mentioned by the CESNUR's website were not active nor did they appear to be responsive anymore. Many other groups emerged and the more I entered in contact with solitary practitioners, the more groups I discovered, along with the difficulty of defining which of them were to be considered 'shamanism' and which were not. One aspect that emerged was a strong eclecticism within the community and how they perceived shamanism as a non-exclusive religious practice, as combinable with other New Age practices.¹¹

At the beginning of November 2016, I created a Facebook Group called 'Praticanti di sciamanesimo in Italia' (Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy) with the aim of gathering different types of practitioners from different groups or traditions and optimistically to create a community to help me understand, engage and network with the Italian shamanic community. This Facebook experiment proved to be decisive in the development of my research, both for the data collection resulting from polls, comments, posts and discussions held within the group and for the resulting networking. One member of this group messaged me once to say that he saw a book called 'Il cerimoniale iniziatico: nello sciamanesimo italiano' ('The Ceremony of Initiation in the Italian shamanism) by Tatiana Longoni, which he reckoned relevant to my research (Longoni, 2016). This informant was right, by reading this book I discovered a tradition in Italy that claimed to be native to the place, not imported from another country or culture but legitimately Italian. Thus, I approached Tatiana via social media (Facebook and WhatsApp) and she suggested I spoke directly to her spiritual teacher, the primary holder of that tradition. This was Michela Chiarelli, a woman in her forties that lives with her family in the countryside of Turin, who defines herself as 'the last Italian Shaman of a

¹¹ The New Age movement and its relation to shamanism will be covered in chapter 3.

hereditary tradition' (*L'ultima sciamana italiana di tradizione ereditaria*) and has published more than a dozen books on her practice.¹²

In May 2016, I spent a few days at her home as Michela's guest, getting a brief immersion into her life, her tradition and how the two intertwine. After collecting approximately ten hours of interviews, the core traits and features of Michela's tradition are clearly identifiable, making me realise that many of those aspects had a strong similarity to other centuries-old autochthonous traditions in Italy which fall under the umbrella of folk vernacular magic. Such a resemblance first occurred to me during one of our interviews, prompting me to ask Michela what she deemed to be the distinctiveness of her tradition compared to folk magic traditions. She replied that the only difference is that her tradition remained pure and unadulterated whereas all forms of Italian folk magic employ a strong syncretism with Catholicism.

This opened a completely new inquiry around the role folk magic plays in relation to shamanism. Thus, new research questions arose, such as whether folk magic may be seen as a form of shamanism, considering the liaison and contrasting points between the two. To answer these questions, I thenceforth incorporated into my research a new lead to follow, which decisively affected selection of traditions and data.

1.4 Rationale for Selection of Traditions and Data

Selecting which traditions to include had been a long process that was significantly affected by the change of direction that occurred during my first year of research. Once the research topic was finalised as to encompass both indigenous and trans-cultural traditions, I had to decide which ones to include to make my enquiry as comprehensive as possible. Since one aim of the present study is to draw a picture of shamanism in Italy as it is currently lived and conceptualised, I faced the difficulty of dealing with a rather wide territory comprising numerous traditions and groups. To be thorough in my analysis,

¹² Michela's tradition will be tackled in chapter 7.

only a few representative groups were to be selected and I chose them using different criteria for trans-cultural and autochthonous traditions.

Core Shamanism is the most popular trans-cultural tradition in Italy, as it is in most countries that register its presence (Harvey and Wallis, 2015a, p. 164). Not only is it popular for the workshops offered across Italy but, first and foremost, for the wide accessibility of books and online information that make it the primary inspiration for those who undertake the courses as well as for solitary practitioners and founders or followers of similar groups (Jakobsen, 1999, pp. 158–165). It is not necessary to partake in events organised by the Foundation to follow Core Shamanism since one of their key principles is that shamanism represents the path of ‘direct revelation’ where no intermediary is necessary and everyone is considered able to access the shamanic state of consciousness (Ingerman and Wesselman, 2012, p. ix). Apart from being the most popular, Core Shamanism is the one tradition that has laid the foundation and structure for other trans-cultural traditions, which additionally makes it significantly representative. Consequently, Core Shamanism was chosen as the main ethnographic focus for those falling under the umbrella of Neo-shamanism. It is nonetheless important to clarify that not all Neo-shamanic traditions are the same and - albeit they share similar patterns and practices - it is still necessary to acknowledge the peculiarities of each individual group (Gredig, 2010, pp. 25–26), which will be addressed in more details in chapter 4. Although my field trips were solely conducted with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies Italy, I was able to get interviews and collect data from primary sources to provide an overview and examples of other trans-cultural traditions currently active on the peninsula.

Selecting which indigenous traditions to include was dependent on rather different criteria. Trans-cultural shamanisms produce extensive amounts of information and see the birth of new groups at a considerable speed whereas native traditions are reserved and concealed, less keen on sharing their rituals and only the ‘new generation’ of *Segnatori* tends to be more open and allow the spreading of their rites.¹³ In addition, they appear to

¹³ To be fully discussed in Chapter 5.

be centuries-old and shrouded in myth so that only by studying their practices thoroughly it is possible to tell the facts from the folklore. Due to the aforementioned restrictions, it is very difficult to gather information from practitioners, making accessibility the main selection criterion to consider. Since it is essential to be 'accepted' and trusted by the informant, I had to develop a network of contacts through the aid of friends and their relatives. The old generation of healers would traditionally only allow family members to inherit - on biological grounds - the power and knowledge associated with the tradition (De Bernardi, 2015, p. 203). My years-long participation and attendance within the Pagan community were therefore of great help, for it allowed me to build a network of contacts with whom I am on friendly terms and were hence amenable to participate in the research. It appears that a significant number of young Pagans have family members affiliated with this vernacular healing tradition, enabling me to collect data from most Italian regions. Yet, the most substantial contributions were collected from informants who live or come from the regions of Campania, Sardegna, Emilia Romagna, Piemonte, Toscana, Sicilia, Puglia and Calabria.

The modalities whereby data were collected are diverse in nature. Part of the data has been collected through undertaking workshops and training and participating in shamanic practices whereas others were gathered through interviews, questionnaires, conversations, a survey, published books, articles and online discussions on the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy'. The kind of interview I preferred was semi-structured ones, which are more conversational and hence allow informants to feel more comfortable and open to talk. After the first year, when my research became more defined, I also designed a questionnaire (see Appendix A) with all the key questions to fulfil my inquiry and used it both to guide interviews and as a form to fill out for participants willing to share their experience. The whole data selection process was subject to the ethical review process, which will be addressed in a later section and whose application forms are attached in Appendix B.

The selection of participants, for both indigenous and trans-cultural traditions, was on the basis of networking derived from fieldwork and online engagement with the community. Numerous conversations – even with non-

practitioners - revealed to be key in discovering new groups and informants for my research as I tried to collect as many inputs as I could. For instance, during my undertakings of Core Shamanism workshops, I conversed with every single attendee - and collected their responses – while also looking for recommendations on *Segnatori* in their home area, other trans-cultural groups or shamans they were familiar with and other such questions. I thus followed the same pattern and asked every new informant for suggestions which would lead to further investigations and interviews as my aim was to collect as much data as possible to have a wide array of information as a source for my later analysis, favouring the most recurring themes and responses which had emerged from as wide a scale as possible.

Gredig argues that beginners and attendees of the basic training should not be favoured because most of them abandon shamanism quickly and do not have a clear understanding of what shamanism is (2010, pp. 23–24), often syncretising shamanism with other New Age spiritualities or with Paganism. I partly disagree with Gredig as the latter traits are found among neophytes and experienced trans-cultural practitioners alike. As emerged from my study, those are among the characteristics of trans-cultural traditions rather than prerogative of a specific group of practitioners. In addition, newcomers to shamanism can explain what drives people to this practice and how such introduction occurs. They are also a valuable source to understanding how and why people either keep engaging or leave the practice of shamanism after their first experiences, which contributes to providing a well-rounded picture of the journey of the Italian practitioner in (and out of) shamanism. I have therefore included neophytes as well as advanced practitioners in my research, preferring those with whom I participated in training or other shamanic activities. Other informants who were selected to contribute are shamanic practitioners who have a significant representability in the community, such as those who have published a few books on shamanism and/or have a considerable following.

Valuable information was also gathered in more informal contexts like conversations or discussions that do not abide by a standardised interview format. The main challenge in such a case is to determine the level of consent and how sensitive the information may be. Last - but most certainly not least

- data and informants derived also from the Facebook Group I created to gather more information and participants.

1.5 Facebook group

In November 2016 I created a private Facebook Group called 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy'¹⁴, with the intent of using it as a research tool to collect data and create a network of informants. In my four years of research, this group revealed to be a valuable source of information, thanks to the posts published by its members, the resulting interactions in the comments and the network of contacts it produced.

For ethical reasons, I stated in the group description my role as a researcher and the aims of the group. Thus, when someone searches for it, the first lines to appear are the following,

This group aims to gather shamanic practitioners present on Italian peninsula, of any tradition. I am an academic/doctoral researcher and this group stems from my personal interest in the topic but – most of all - to help my anthropological research. I might use any content published by users anonymously in order to help my PhD research on shamanism in Italy. Thank you all, Angela P.¹⁵

As a rule, I decided to not invite anyone to join but to let people actively ask to join in. This approach gauged better the interest of every single member as they had to purposely type in the search bar 'Practitioners of Shamanism', 'Shamanism in Italy' or other such key words that only somebody who does intend to engage with that specific community might look for. I also designed two questions that people wanting to join would get asked, the first inquiring

¹⁴ 'Praticanti di Sciamanesimo in Italia'. URL to the Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1304697146247780>.

¹⁵ 'Questo gruppo ha lo scopo di raccogliere i praticanti di Sciamanesimo presenti sul territorio Italiano, di qualunque tradizione. Io sono una ricercatrice accademica e questo gruppo nasce dal mio interesse personale verso l'argomento ma soprattutto per aiutare la mia ricerca antropologica. È possibile che io utilizzi qualunque contenuto pubblicato da utenti in forma anonima allo scopo di aiutare la mia ricerca di dottorato sullo sciamanesimo in Italia. Grazie a tutti, Angela P.'

what is - in their opinion - shamanism and the second asking whether they identify as a practitioner of shamanism and – if so – which tradition or approach do they follow. Answering these questions was not mandatory but most people still answered them, granting me a large amount of responses which showed recurring themes.

As of August 2020, the group counts approximately 3300 members and keeps growing at a rate of about 20 members a week. Since all posts require approval before they are allowed in the group, in February 2020 I added a trusted friend of mine as a moderator to help me manage the growing activity, as it had become too demanding to deal with on my own. Most members share regularly events they lead or are involved in, explanatory videos on related topics or requests of help and information to aid their practice. As the administrator and lead moderator of the group, I only intervene when there are heated altercations involving insults or to answer questions directly asked to me as the moderator of the group. Otherwise, my active involvement is limited to posting targeted polls, most of which will be discussed throughout the present study, and answering comments related to them.

Overall, this Facebook group has revealed to be – as the next chapters will show - essential to collecting key data, evaluating the trends within the community of practitioners and gathering more informants for my research.

1.6 Ethical Considerations

In November 2016, at the beginning stages of my research, I was granted ethical approval from Leeds Trinity University SAC Ethics committee. This application was then revised - to reflect the changes occurred in my research – and approved in May 2018 (see Appendix B).

When approaching an informant, I state that I am a doctoral researcher and explain the topic of my study, clarifying that any material emerging from conversations or interviews might be used for research purposes and will be subject to scrutiny and critical analysis. The informant can ask to be anonymised or might be anonymised even without an explicit request if the

researcher and the supervisory team deem it necessary to protect the informant.

One aspect that had a bearing on my research lies in the discrepancy between the informants' expectations versus what a doctoral research actually entails. From those who expect me to promote and spread their shamanic tradition to those wishing to become famous or get their work scientifically validated, the range of expectation that informants project onto my work is heterogenous. In some cases, explanations of what my role entails have been dismissed or misinterpreted as many of them show a romanticised idea of anthropological research. As chapter 3 and 4 will cover at length, the popularisation of shamanism has been strictly linked to anthropologists who had 'gone native', which led many shamanic practitioners to think they know what anthropology is and openly refuse 'to be lectured' on the subject when attempting to clarify such misconceptions. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who seek scientific validation of their practice, as I will discuss in chapter 4 and 7.

Despite this underlying tendency to misunderstanding the nature of academic research, I make sure to have provided my informants with all the necessary explanations on my role and my research. Even so, since the data are not analysed according to the participants' expectations but to the standards of critical analysis and in relation to existing literature, there is always the risk of making informants unhappy with the results or feeling 'betrayed'. As more experienced academics suggested, the latter is possibly an ethical concern that affects all researchers in anthropology and against which a rigorous methodology and the accurate and sensitive use of data still stands as the best defence.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis

This first chapter has covered the introductory remarks, clarifying the research aims and tackling the literature review on the subject matter to show the scholarly foundations of the study as well as how my research questions fit inside the existing literature, filling some of the gaps and building a bridge between trans-cultural and native forms of shamanism in Italy. I have also

addressed the methodology, starting from how the focus of my study radically changed after the discovery of autochthonous traditions during the first year of fieldwork, to then move on to the rationale for selecting data and traditions to include as part of the study and the resulting ethical considerations.

Chapter 2 will tackle the definition of shamanism, including the controversies around the use of the term as emerged from past literature, and my proposal on how to interpret and apply the term with regards to living traditions. I will also answer the question on whether Westerners can be shamans and which kinds of misinterpretations of the term are involved in the matter.

In chapter 3, I will contextualise trans-cultural shamanism in Italy, when and how such practices have entered the peninsula and formed their own communities. In addition, the two loosely related religious movements of Paganism and New Age will be tackled in their relation to shamanism, as they fostered its popularisation in the country.

Chapter 4 will be dedicated to trans-cultural traditions, sometimes referred to as neoshamanism. I first clarify why I am going to favour - from that point onwards - 'trans-cultural shamanism' as opposed to 'neoshamanism' and highlight how varied the movement is. The chapter will then move on to analysing how a trans-cultural approach to shamanism took roots in Italy and the significant contribution of Castaneda's model. Being the most popular trans-cultural tradition, I will mostly focus on Core Shamanism and its Italian manifestations in the work and events hosted by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies Italia. I will share the cosmology, belief system and ritual practices as emerged from my undertaking of basic and advanced workshops of the Foundation alongside interviews to the appointed teachers and some of the other attendees. To give a better understanding of active trans-cultural traditions on the peninsula, I will briefly analyse other groups and associations and the themes emerging from them.

Chapter 5 will be concerned with folk magic in Italy, which I here systematise as 'The Tradition of *Segnature*' arguing that it might be seen as the indigenous shamanism of Italy. In building up my arguments, I will tackle the construction of labels in vernacular traditions, the meaning and practice of

'*Segnature*' and how different generations approach local traditions in a different fashion, the role played by mythical interpretations and superstition to then tackle the concept of indigeneity and what it takes for a religious movement to be indigenous. Lastly, I will answer the question of whether the Tradition of *Segnature* can be deemed an indigenous form of Italian shamanism.

Chapter 6 will analyse the relations and contrasts between Catholicism and shamanism. After analysing how Catholicism is lived and interpreted by Italians, I will show how both the Vatican and the Catholic community relates to trans-cultural shamanism as well as to folk magic traditions. As it will be shown through the aid of a relevant case study and field data, the matter is multifaceted and manifest significant differences depending on the approach to Catholicism adopted by the individual or group.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to how indigenous traditions get syncretised with trans-cultural approaches. The chapter will tackle two case studies based on interviews and participant observation with two Italian healers who self-identify as shamans and believe their traditions, which fall under the umbrella of The Traditions of *Segnature* – as systematised in chapter 5 -, are manifestations of indigenous Italian shamanism.

Chapter 8 will illustrate the complex field of Italian shamanism(s) and how the Italian case can contribute to classifying both shamanism and indigenous religions. I will also clarify the limitations of the present research to then move onto the final section addressing what further research is needed on the subject.

The Appendices consist of the form used to carry out questionnaires and semi-structured interviews the ethical approval obtained to conduct the research.

Chapter 2

How to Define Shamanism: *Deixis* and Discourse Analysis

After having discussed the premises and methodology employed for this research, the present chapter will introduce a contextualisation of shamanism in Italy. I will start by defining shamanism, proposing a new way of constructing the category based on existing scholarship, to then move onto the matter of whether Westerners can be shamans. I will then cover how and when shamanism was introduced and spread in Italy alongside its relation to new religious movements which significantly affected such spreading; specifically, how the Italian manifestations of trans-cultural shamanism relate to the New Age movement and Paganism from a theoretical standpoint as well as in the shared practices.

2.1 Defining Shamanism

The phenomenon of Shamanism is so complex and in constant evolution that defining the term itself appears rather challenging. The term emerged from Russian ethnography to identify healers of a Siberian region. One of the earliest accounts is found in a study by Viktor M. Mikhailovskii, who deemed the shaman to be the intermediary between humans and the spirit world, and points out that the word itself is only found among the Tunguses,

The word shaman is only found among the Tunguses, Buryats, and Yakuts. It is only among the Tunguses that this is the native name; the Buryats, like the Mongols, also call their shamans *bo*, and the female shamans *odegon* or *utygan* (Mikhailovskii and Wardrop, 1895, p. 63).

The most influential definition of shamanism comes from Mircea Eliade due to the popular reception of his book - first published in French as *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* in 1951 and translated in English in 1964 as *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, drawing more attention to the mastery of ecstatic states and the idea that shamanism is at its core a set of techniques to reach altered states of consciousness

(Eliade, 1972). Mircea Eliade is still a popular reference for many shamanic practitioners in Italy, especially for those who see value in the academic study of shamanism and seek some degree of validation from it. In Italian there are, in fact, two translations of the term 'shamanism'. The most popular and currently used one is *sciamanesimo* but there is a second, more old-fashioned translation, which is *sciamanismo*. The latter has a close resemblance in pronunciation to the French *chamanisme* and was the selected term for the Italian translation of Mircea Eliade's aforementioned book, which is still found translated as *Lo Sciamanismo e le Tecniche dell'Estasi* (Eliade, 1974). Eliade's followers tend to still use the term *Sciamanismo* instead of the more popular *Sciamanesimo*, as a way of conveying through their vocabulary that they have a sound knowledge of what they deem to be a foundation stone of a proper education on shamanism. Eliade's understanding of the nature of shamanism has still a significant impact on the Italian community and, as the next chapters will show, many informants have argued that shamanism is not a religion on the basis of Eliade's definition¹.

The label shamanism, since its birth, has always been used by scholars or outsiders to define a phenomenon that had not generated this definition itself. According to Ronald Hutton, 'the only common factor in the study of shamanism consists of Western scholarship' (2006, p. 209) for it created the term, produced the studies that extended its meaning while also generating interest for the topic within the practising communities. In the process, Hutton argues, it has 'made the term into a label with absolutely no agreed-on meaning; in this regard, the ivory tower has become a Tower of Babel' (Hutton, 2006, p. 209). Every 'shamanic' tradition has usually its own local label to describe their practice, lineage and spiritual leader. In some cases, there is no label at all.

By imposing on Yukaghir society the term shaman, with all its implications about the existence of a specialized religious elite or an indigenous priesthood with a consistent set of practices, Jochelson made the matter of 'being a shaman' out to be much

¹ This is, for instance, a common response among Core Shamanism practitioners but more incidences will be evidenced in the chapters to come.

more cut and dried than it actually was. Although the Yukaghirs do speak about the shaman as a person with particular skills and powers, they do not recognize any formal office of shaman (Willerslev, 2007, p. 124).

Thus, the term 'shaman' - originating from Tungus - had been increasingly applied to similar types of practitioners around the world. The word, however, had quickly acquired its own connotation by overemphasising the role of the 'shaman' as a specialist priest-like person and becoming an interpretative category which goes beyond its original Tungusic meaning.

With the popularisation of shamanism, even those who did not use that term before started referring to themselves as shamans. This happened because shamanism is now more internationally understood than the actual names linked to a local tradition in a foreign language. As Hammer points out,

It does make sense to construct a scholarly terminology that encompasses a number of such local traditions. The alternative would be the rather fruitless exercise of using only indigenous terms and therefore of failing to address similarities between local concepts and practices (Hammer, 2015, p. 21).

The existence of 'shamanism' as a category has been and still is, extremely useful to the understanding of its different manifestations found across different cultures. Not having a shared terminology would make us lose grasp over the wider perspective and miss significant elements found across diverse expressions of this phenomenon. Acknowledging the existence of a common ground provides researchers with a scaffold of reference to then delve deeper into the local variations. The term appears most helpful when employed as a theoretical framework rather than a label to be earned under a definite number of conditions. Regardless of all the disagreements between what can be legitimately called shamanism, the term has outlived all such altercations and gives practitioners a sound understanding of what the subject matter is, leaving its details open to further exploration.

Words are powerful tools construed to convey meanings that people belonging to specific social circles are bound to understand. Yet the solid semantics of a word designating an object will likely not have the same

rigorous application when referring to a social activity. Nonetheless, the wider adoption of the term 'shamanism' has encountered the semantic expectations associated with an object rather than a social movement. Consequently, despite the usefulness and comprehensibility coming from adopting a common term, this has also created the impression that the phenomenon is more consistent and unitary than what ethnographers report,

The name 'shamanism' was invented by Europeans, so giving the impression that there was only one fixed belief system, instead of a number of disparate beliefs having many facets and continually increasing as new situations arise, although retaining many of the old beliefs and overlapping traditions (Stutley, 2002, p. 3).

Having such a malleable and undefined semantics, shamanism has been understood differently throughout history, once it reached popular usage. From the Enlightenment view of the shaman as a charlatan to the Positivist belief that shamanism represented an archaic religious form belonging to 'primitive' peoples, Cacopardo highlights how the term has constantly been shaped by the times and cultures that adopted and defined it. In the twentieth century, psychopathological interpretations arose deeming the shamanic experience a form of illness, specifically hysteria or epilepsy (Cacopardo, 2009, p. 32). Mircea Eliade represented a turning point in this respect for it portrayed the shaman as a mystical figure who is able to establish contact with the spirit world and receive powers by so doing. Through the reception of Eliade's work, the shaman starts to also be perceived as strongly associated with ecstatic techniques, as that the communication with the spirit world also entails exiting the ordinary world and body to travel where those spirits dwell (Eliade, 1972).

This overview of what 'shaman' has meant so far over different ages clearly shows the elasticity and resilience of the term itself and how its representation may change depending on the perception of a certain time and place. On the other hand, it also shows that a common foundation is indeed there, despite the divergent interpretations. Thus, more recent anthropological and ethnographic studies on the subject can help us clarify what living shamanic practices do have in common and whether can we really detect shared traits among faraway traditions emerging from data reported in existing

scholarship. Margaret Stutley helps answer the question summarising the three main traits shared by all forms of shamanism,

(1) belief in the existence of a world of spirits, mostly in animal form that are capable of acting on human beings. The shaman is required to control or cooperate with these good and bad spirits for the benefit of his community. (2) The inducing of trance by ecstatic singing, dancing and drumming, when the shaman's spirit leaves his or her body and enters the supernatural world. (3) The shaman treats some diseases, usually those of psychosomatic nature, as well as helping the clan members to overcome their various difficulties and problems (Stutley, 2002, p. 2).

Another common aspect found in various shamanisms is animism, Understood by Graham Harvey as the underlying idea that everything in the world is sentient and has a spirit (Harvey, 2010). The shaman is hence able to interact with 'other-than-human people' and establish relationships with the spirits populating the world as well as the human body (Harvey and Wallis, 2015b, p. 288). This might be seen as conflicting with the theoretical framework fostered in neo-shamanism, where there is a construed dichotomy between the 'Ordinary' and 'Non-ordinary' realities (Castaneda, 1968) or between an 'Ordinary State of Consciousness (OSC)' and a 'Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC)' (Pratt, 2007, p. 432; Harner, 1982).²

In the light of both the similarities and the differences existing among its various manifestations, Cacopardo suggests that in order to understand shamanism, we need to make a distinction similar to what anthropologists make between 'structure' and 'process', namely to distinguish between the structural model of shamanism and its concrete implementations (Cacopardo, 2009, p. 41). Following up on Cacopardo's assessment, I argue that shamanism cannot be analysed as a definite label but rather an evolving process. This process is malleable and in constant change, challenging a scholarly understanding that works through categories and definitions, which can hardly be satisfactory to its cultural fluidity.

² I will discuss at length how this theoretical stances affect neo-shamanic cosmologies in Chapter 4.

The solution I adopt in this study to tackle the issues raised from the aforementioned scholars is twofold. First of all, adopting a local-specific understanding of the term. While Michael Lambek argues in favour of 'provincialising God', Bettina Schmidt advocates to 'provincialize the experience by embracing locally specific features' (Schmidt, 2016, p. 3). This approach also entails the inclusion of deictic words, explained by Schmidt as,

Deixis is a linguistic term that highlights the problem that the meaning of certain words depends on a given context. A typical example of deictic terms are the words 'here' and 'now' because the determination of their referents depends on the context in that sentence or situation (Schmidt, 2016, p. 3).

Although Schmidt applies this methodological approach to the conceptualisation of spirit possession, I argue that such an approach might also play a role in solving the issue of defining shamanism. Attempts at providing one definition that would be consistently applied to all the phenomena falling under the umbrella of shamanism have revealed to be ineffective and fostered internal conflicts within the communities on the matter of who is practising the 'true shamanism'. The ineffectiveness might be due to the very nature of shamanism, a practice strongly linked to the land and the local culture in which it takes place. Shamanic practices originating in a secluded community in a non-Western country will inevitably mirror its social norms and range of acceptable undertakings, including the use of psychotropic drugs or spiritual trials where the body is exposed to extreme conditions. Likewise, shamanism born in a Western society where globalisation and internationality are founding elements of the cultural context will also project these traits into its shamanic practice.³ Perhaps shamanism is, indeed, a deictic term that eludes a widely applicable definition and hence challenges the scholarly search for a unanimous definition.

The second methodological approach I adopt to help find a new and context-sensitive definition of shamanism is discourse analysis. The discourse analysis I employed takes its roots in Foucault's works and has flourished in

³ Chapter 5 addresses such elements in details.

social constructive approaches (Foucault, 2001c, 2001b, 2001a, 2020; Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2017). Following Foucault, discourse becomes a mediating lens that brings the world into focus by enabling people to discern the meaning of experiences as constructed in the discursive narratives whereby those in charge of the experience become also in charge of its representation (Waitt, 2010). I thence argue that employing Discourse Analysis as a methodological strategy might benefit the development of a better understanding of shamanism as the way practitioners construct shamanism through discourses as a cultural indicator of what shamanism is for the community and place sharing the same narrative.

Discourse analysts challenge the common-sense view that language is a purely descriptive medium used to convey information about the real world. They argue that language actually shapes (constructs) the real world, and our views of it (Potter and Edwards, 1996, p. 419)

In this sense, 'shamanism' becomes 'an empty signifier in the sense that it is historically, socially and culturally constructed and negotiated in various situations'(Taira, 2013, p. 26). Although Teemu Taira is here referring to the term 'religion', it still holds relevance to the concept of 'shamanism' for it represents a core idea when employing discourse analysis. Taira continues, in his article on making space for discourse analysis in the study of religion, that both verbal and non-verbal discourses are used by communities sharing the same language to construct their realities and,

Establish one version of the world in the face of competing versions; it positions people and persuades them to perceive the world, and act in it, in a certain way (Taira, 2013, p. 28).

Enrica Tedeschi, in her study on neo-shamanism in Italy, highlights the importance of studying the phenomenon focussing on the definitions given by the practitioners rather than those of other scholars. Although she opted for a Grounded Theory methodology, I agree with the idea that scholarly definitions should not be the only frame of reference for understanding such a heterogeneous movement (Tedeschi, 2017, pp. 369–370). It is, nonetheless, necessary to understand how both scholars and practitioners define things to then acknowledge that they often influence each other. The subject matter

becomes the constantly reshaped narrative which represents the scaffolding of a living phenomenon with all its cultural-religious ramifications and its slippery boundaries. As David G. Wilson suggests,

It is clear that we will continue to fail to develop a general definition of shamanism if we persist in attending to 'shamanic' practices (the finished product) at the expense of understanding the social or other mechanisms whereby those practices are learned by practitioners, and valued by those whom they serve (Wilson, 2013, p. 125).

Despite the difficulties that scholars encounter in defining shamanism, the reality of its existence is what bears the most significant meaning. There is an increasing number of practitioners who use this label in various ways and, despite the divergences, still appear to understand each other. So, what are the shared premises underlying the different narratives around shamanism? What the reality constructed by competing yet similar narratives? That reality, the causal matrix of Italian shamanism, is what I am exploring while testing a new way of understanding this phenomenon in the process.

Whilst the use of the term shamanism has either seen a progressive extension or the exclusion of certain phenomena in favour of others, I propose a selective way of narrowing down the use of this label. In the present study, shamanism is hence used in a context-sensitive and discourse-led connotation. It will not be the researcher dictating what shamanism is on the basis of previous scholarship but rather the semantic patterns emerging from the narratives that the community itself creates. Such an understanding of the label is context-sensitive in that the local use of the term will be analysed in relation to where, to whom and on which circumstances the term is applied.

2.2 Can Westerners be shamans?

But *is* shaman a Tungus word or is it now an English (or French, German, Hungarian or Russian) word? Are the only real shamans those found among Tungus speakers? Is what Tungus speakers mean when they say 'shaman' necessarily definitive? Or has the word now become part of a new vocabulary where it carries

additional associations and implications? (Harvey, 2003, p. 2)

As the previous section tackled, the term shaman has seen and it is still undergoing an evolution in its use, both among scholars and practitioners. Similarly, there is an ongoing debate on whether Westerners can be or become shamans. It has been long debated, in fact, whether shamanism is to be considered solely the product of specific geographical places and non-Western peoples. Although the term was shaped after the Tungusi practitioners in Siberia, soon its application widened to include many non-Western countries often referred to as indigenous.⁴ As Sergio Botta explains, the range of geographical associations correlated to shamanism extends in such a limitless manner that no historical theory would be able to encompass. This, however, does not justify a dismissive approach towards the definition of the term,

It is necessary to take scientific charge of this process, even at the cost of losing descriptive accuracy, to identify the reasons as to why shamanism has been turned into such a malleable object able to represent cultural phenomena extremely different from one another (Botta, 2018, p. 19).⁵

The reason, I argue, as to why shamanism is so malleable in its manifestation and understanding is that shamanism eludes a rigid definition for its own nature. As the previous section explained, scholars were the ones who invented the term and used it in reference to a specific category of people and practices. Over time, the same patterns found among Siberians were discovered in other places and, yet again, scholars adopted the term to locate such practices in an understandable frame of reference and because there were indeed enough similarities for this extension to be implemented. The issue arose when the extension became difficult to confine when more and

⁴ The use of the term will be thoroughly tackled in the next section of the chapter.

⁵ 'È invece necessario farsi scientificamente carico di questo processo, tentando di riconoscere le ragioni che hanno trasformato lo sciamanesimo in un oggetto così malleabile da consentire di rappresentare fenomeni culturali tra loro estremamente diversi, anche a costo di un'irrimediabile perdita di precisione descrittiva'. *Translation is mine.*

more traditions around the world were uncovered engaging in similar practices or adopting the label. Thus, the instance of narrowing its use to avoid losing 'descriptive accuracy' emerged and is being discussed until this day.

The Western phenomenon of Core Shamanism and trans-cultural shamanism⁶ has complicated the matter further and possibly expanded the semantics of shamanism even more. Among practitioners, the view of the shaman has been significantly affected by the so-called New Age movement and the works by Carlos Castaneda, Michael Harner, Sandra Ingerman and other authors falling under the trans-cultural umbrella. In their view, the shaman is someone who is able to travel to non-ordinary realities to get power and healing (Ingerman and Wesselman, 2012; Harner, 1982). They still deem the label 'shaman' prerogative of indigenous peoples. As emerged from the large majority of my interviews, a Westerner who practises core shamanism can only self-identify as a 'shamanic practitioner' but never as a shaman, 'out of respect for the indigenous cultures' where they believe such role originates. 'Shaman' is therefore not a title earned by self-appointment but rather through the work that the person does for a community that, in return, will designate or 'make' the shaman. Overall, my data shows that those who consider themselves practising any form of shamanism manifest some kind of reverence towards the indigenous shamanisms and believe the latter to be the primary source from which their practice stems. This stance is widespread among Core Shamanism practitioners and yet it appears to be more a formality, a declaration of humility, rather than an actual belief. When they are confronted with a direct question inquiring, 'Do you not consider yourself a shaman, then?' unless they are beginners and still consider themselves in the process of learning, the answer always gives away that they do believe they are shamans but they leave to others the 'validation' of this belief, to the community or the people for whom they provide help and healing.⁷

⁶ The differences between the two and whether they can be seen as different phenomena will be addressed in the next chapter.

⁷ This emerged from all my interviews. Provided they follow Core Shamanism as their main tradition and are experienced practitioners, in all occurrences the

While practitioners of neo-shamanism use the labels 'shaman' and 'shamanism' extensively and trans-culturally, those belonging to autochthonous traditions⁸ hardly acknowledge the very existence of the term. There are two aspects to be highlighted in this regard. On one hand, 'shaman' and 'shamanism' are categories whose function works by superimposition. They are not related to any specific place but superimposed on local (often non-Western) traditions when the latter show enough similarities to the traits that the category denotes. As such, only when the practice of a local tradition is accompanied by the acknowledgement of what 'shamanism' means, the superimposition can happen. A healer who works in a rural area and in a community unfamiliar with the term 'shamanism', might not think of himself or herself as a shaman despite fitting the label as much as a Tungusic healer. The Overlaying can only occur when the foreign label encounters local traditions, whether it be through the work of an ethnographer or the acknowledgement of one or more members of the community, healer included.

So, where does the question 'Can Westerners be shamans' come from? Given that shamanism is not a label exclusive to a specific geographical area and has always worked as a scholarly overlay to relate similar traditions to a frame of reference, why would it need to be reserved only to non-Western traditions? What the history of the study of shamanism shows is that the question was created by the Westerners themselves, taking its roots in eighteenth-century Europe. Gloria Flaherty addressed the interests that the eighteenth-century Europeans took in 'the other', highlighting how they became fascinated with the tales of explorers venturing in far-away countries and acclimating to the local customs and languages of the place. The initial attitude of mockery towards peoples with such different cultures turned into some kind of fascination towards 'the other' represented by those peoples. As Flaherty elucidates,

interviewees showed a sound belief of being shamans, despite rejecting to self-appoint themselves as such.

⁸ See Chapter 5 for all the details regarding the Italian autochthonous tradition.

Expensive, deluxe books that comprised beautifully illustrated, though not always accurate, descriptions of aboriginal peoples provided news about clothing as well as evidence of physiognomic differences. They stimulated their readers' imaginations by focusing on the accoutrements as well as the activities of the shaman [...] Thus, information about shamanism - whether fact or fiction – became all-pervasive and extraordinarily intense in the eighteenth century. While some Europeans continued to ridicule what they considered puerile trickery and ignoble credulity, others began taking shamanistic practices very seriously. Shamanism seemed to them to epitomize a grand confluence of ageless human activities the world over (Flaherty, 2014, p. 13).

This exoticisation of the shaman - through the use of the term - persisted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and it is still found in contemporary manifestations of shamanism in the Western world (Harvey, 2003, p. 156; Francfort et al., 2001, p. 371; Noel, 1999), fostering a correlation between the shaman and 'otherness' to the point that only foreign healers from exotic places would be considered shamans in their own right. This was evidenced in my fieldwork among solitary practitioners, too, for they tend to get validation for their shamanic practice by highlighting their trips to South America, Siberia and other non-Western countries or, alternatively, their encounters and training with foreign teachers.

The idea that shamanism belongs to exotic 'others' is, therefore, as much a Western construct as the category of shamanism itself. So, Western scholars created the term and the semantics entailed by its category while, at the same time, implying that the very traits found in shamanism belong necessarily to far-away peoples or, alternatively, to far-away times in the past. When Westerners started to take interest in various forms of shamanism, it became something other than shamanism, it was 'neo-shamanism'. And even though a different label for neo-shamanic movements is righteously explained by its distinctive novelty and trans-cultural nature, there is still the issue of autochthonous shamanisms in Europe. The exoticism that has been associated until recent years to shamanism, has led to assume that there were no forms of European shamanism flourishing in our contemporary society unless retrieved from a romanticised past.

This assumption, significantly more spread among practitioners than scholars in the field, is still fostering a dichotomy between what is ‘true’ and ‘false’ shamanism. During my fieldwork, both in person and online, I have witnessed many altercations on the matter. Three heated debates occurred on my Facebook group ‘Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy’ (*Praticanti di Sciamanesimo in Italia*)⁹ and all three showed the same pattern arising from all the arguments on this topic I have witnessed in my four years of research. One party upholds the idea that only traditional initiatory shamanism is ‘true shamanism’ and a Westerner can only become a shaman by being initiated in one of such traditions. Conversely, the other party endorses a more eclectic view and the possibility of shamanism to be a cross-cultural phenomenon. In this view, a practitioner can become a shaman by engaging with the spirit worlds without having to necessarily be initiated by another shaman or being a member of one set tradition.

Since there is no central authority in shamanism to dictate what rules should one abide by in order to be named a ‘shaman’ and since the term itself has always worked by superimposition upon local specific labels, there is no legitimate impediment for somebody who believes to fit what the label denotes to call themselves as such. As Wallis points out,

The term ‘shaman’ can arguably be seen as self-defining: essentially, people calling themselves shamans *are* shamans since the term is invented and means different things to different people (Wallis, 2003, p. 30).

Thus, if the word itself can easily be used by whomever identifies with its meaning, what remains to be discussed is the role that the social acknowledgement plays in validating its use. Is the shamanic identity necessarily produced by the community or is it more individual? The label itself bears no social meaning unless other people share that same acknowledgement and yet might retain personal meaning for somebody that self-identify as such regardless of social validation. This means that if Paola believes she is a shaman but no one else does, that term will remain confined

⁹ The debates referenced here occurred on the 4th of August 2017, the 3rd of October 2017 and the 2nd of January 2018.

to a solipsistic field of action, still producing meaning within those confinements. As a consequence, from a personal point of view, Paola is a shaman but not for her community. This example shows the deictic context-sensitive approach at play; a practitioner can define himself or herself as a shaman, and so will he or she be for him or her. Differently, if that practitioner is also believed to be a shaman by a community, they will be a shaman for that community. According to the categorisation I propose in this study, it is not any longer a matter of being rightfully a shaman or not but rather shaman for whom, shaman to what, where the 'recipient' can be the self-appointed shaman or a community or just another person. Therefore, provided the term 'shaman' has semantically entered one's vocabulary, what 'makes a shaman' is a correlation produced in discourses between what a shaman is believed to do and what a person or self is perceived to do.

The role of the ethnographer, according to my methodological approach, is not to assert what is or is not shamanism but rather report and analyse the patterns emerged from the discursive use of 'shamanism' in a specific context, which in my case is the Italian contemporary scene. These patterns are, in fact, useful to understand how shamanism is entering the cultural Italian fabric and what this increasing development of the phenomenon can tell about the religious perception in the country.

2.3 Misinterpretations of Shamanism

'What happens, then, when practitioners use a term improperly, be it because they don't know better or they deliberately decide to alter the meaning for a personal agenda?' asked my friend Cipriano, inquiring upon the reliability of my use of discourse analysis to define shamanism.

An element of complexity found among the Italian communities that might challenge my methodology is the creation of alternative facts which don't always match what factual evidence would suggest. This appears to be the product of a Post-Truth socio-theoretical framework, according to which

narratives hold more credibility to emotionally invested individuals than the facts themselves (Puca, 2018a). These alternative facts translate into alternative or extended semantics associated with terms and definitions. There are numerous occurrences of this phenomenon in relation to the understanding of shamanism, ranging from the belief that shamanism is the root of all religions to the idea that there is a core of practices found across all shamanisms around the world, both of which upheld by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (Foundation for Shamanic Studies, n.d.) as well as by the Italian practitioners of trans-cultural shamanism. In the Italian context, evidenced by my field data, the term 'shaman' can be strategically used to convey that the practitioner is not an evildoer, contrary to the popular connotation attached to the contender term *strega* ('witch'), or be used to increase the popularity and better promote one's tradition (Puca, 2018b). Thus, what are the implications of the misuse of the term for an understanding of Italian shamanism based on discourse analysis? Can intentional or unintentional misunderstandings affect the reliability of the results?

To answer the question more clearly, I will use a fictitious example. Mario is a carpenter and identifies as a shaman. He believes that being a shaman means to do carpentry work and convinces a few other people that he is, in fact, a shaman for shamanism is related to carpentry. Is Mario really a shaman, then? According to my methodology employing discourse analysis, it is not up to the ethnographer to establish whether a specific practitioner is a shaman or not but rather identify how shamanism is comprehended across various communities, adopting a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses. Consequently, if the discursive patterns arose from studying fifty communities evidenced that shamanism is overall agreed to involve at its core an intentional contact with the spirit world or non-ordinary realities, the one person or group who believes shamanism to be some form of carpentry will be identified as an anomaly in an otherwise uniform system, in stark contradiction with the understanding that the wider communities of practitioners share. This anomaly can be tackled as part of the research in qualitative terms, to understand what that alteration may signify for that specific person/community, or in a quantitative fashion to evaluate whether it is a minority view of what shamanism is. It is thus the community of

practitioners the one who should stay in charge of the term and its applications but, concurrently, it needs to be taken into consideration that practitioners use at times terms inconsistently. As a result, they may not be aware of what specific terms mean or even deliberately use them improperly for a personal agenda. This matter highlights the key role of the scholar, even - or especially - in a subject where the leading role belongs to the community. While practitioners are involved in doing, creating and fostering an ongoing evolution of shamanism, the scholar needs to identify the patterns emerging from the aforementioned behaviours, analyse them in relation to the cultural framework and let underlying outlines surface.

In conclusion, I clarified the conceptualisation of 'shamanism' that will be employed throughout the thesis and the methodology which leads it. Since the category of shamanism is rather fluid and can mean different things to different scholars or practitioners, I deem valuable a context-sensitive approach which connotes the term depending on the specific place and cultural framework. Discourse analysis also appears to be a suitable tool to aid an understanding of what shamanism is based on how the practising groups intend it, as the patterns emerging from the narratives created by the community tell the story of *their* shamanism rather than that of *any* shamanism.

Chapter 3

Contextualising Shamanism in Italy

After having clarified the methodology and the rationale for data selection in the first chapter, along with the evolution in my inquiry which took place as a result of research findings on the field, I have tackled in Chapter 2 the complex subject of how to define shamanism and the kind of approach I chose to endorse on the matter. The present chapter will hence focus on contextualising shamanism in Italy, how shamanism has begun spreading on the peninsula and the models of interpretation which affect the perception of Italian practitioners on what constitutes a shamanic endeavour. I will be referring to trans-cultural forms of shamanism as they are the ones which popularised the category of shamanism, affected its perception and initiated the debate on the nature of shamanism.

3.1 Contextualising (Trans-cultural) Shamanism in Italy

Reconstructing the introduction and diffusion of what practitioners label as ‘shamanism’ in Italy is a challenging task as there is a lack of literature on the matter. I will attempt to do so, based on the information gathered during my fieldwork in Italy, as well as from interviews to those who played a significant role in the diffusion of this movement.¹

Nello Ceccon, teacher and faculty member at the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Italy, provided me with the most detailed description of the phenomenon. Other informants from Core Shamanism only provided fragmentary information, yet all those fragments are in accordance with Nello’s reconstruction. Nello and I first met when I attended the basic training of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in May 2017 in Villabartolomea

¹ This overview will focus on trans-cultural forms of shamanism only, as they were introduced to the territory already labelled as ‘shamanism’. I will cover autochthonous manifestations of the sort in Chapter 5.

(Verona)² and we kept in touch ever since. In November 2019 we had an email exchange where Nello shared his understanding of how and when shamanism was introduced to the Italian context.

In 1998, Nello had his first encounter with shamanism through a magazine. He explained that a friend, who was also a teacher for Louise Hay,³ bought a 'New Age magazine' that contained a ten-word ad on an upcoming workshop on Carlos Castaneda's shamanism in Munich, Germany. At that time, in Italy there was nothing of that sort on Carlos Castaneda, whom Nello deems to be one of the most influential authors in the field of shamanism and key in its popularisation in the Western world. That same year, Lorenza Menegoni, who had recently completed her PhD with Michael Harner in New York, began teaching the basic workshop for the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Italy. Before 1998, there were very few 'shamanic practices' in Italy, he continued. There were only 'academic studies' and a few books but little to nothing in terms of living practice. In January 1999, the University of Verona held a conference hosting some 'traditional shamans' (*sciamani tradizionali*)⁴ from Siberia, Tuva, the United States and Mexico. On that occasion, Nello attended his first sweat lodge led by a Native American Lakota. Since that first induction in 1998, the spreading of shamanic practices in Italy begun, significantly aided by the work of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. In 1999, Nello organised his first Core Shamanism workshop as a teacher, guided by Lorenza Menegoni. The workshop was held at his house and counted a dozen attendees. Things began to progress and, from that moment onwards, 'shamanism' slowly entered the Italian vocabulary.

² All details on the workshops I attended with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies are covered in Chapter 4.

³ Louise Lynn Hay was an American author of Self-help books related to the New Thought Movement (Mosley, 2006). In Italy, her works became known in the communities interested in the New Age in the late 1990s. One of her most popular book is *You Can Heal Your Life* (Hay, 1984)

⁴ When referring to indigenous shamanisms and indigenous shamans, Nello has always used 'traditional' instead of indigenous. Perhaps because of the negative connotation the term has in Italian. More details on the Italian *indigeno* in Chapter 5.

Nello believes that Core Shamanism contributed in a remarkable way to this early stage, not only by popularising its own practices but also by putting a spotlight on 'traditional shamanic practices', raising interest towards indigenous shamanisms worldwide, ranging from South America to Siberia. This resulted in the turning point, occurred around 2006 and 2007 when shamanism moved from being a niche interest to attracting numerous people involved in alternative spiritualities.

Nello underscored that the most important medium to prompt the spreading of shamanism in Italy were - and still are - the books.⁵ The most influential books are those authored by Carlos Castaneda, which still impact significantly the community and drive people to engage in or become practitioners of shamanism. Also influential were Michael Harner's books, especially *La Via dello Sciamano* ('the Way of the Shaman'), first published in Italy in 1995 and still standing as one of the most important books for practitioners. A similar influence had the book by Sandra Ingerman, *// Recupero dell'Anima* ('Soul Retrieval'), published in Italy in 2001 (Harner, 2009; Ingerman, 2002; Castaneda, 1999).

Around 2005, there was a short pulling back from the interest in shamanism, a fear almost, Nello recalls. This was caused by the disappearance of two boys in the Amazon, whose search was broadcasted in an episode of the popular tv show *Chi l'Ha Visto?* ('Who saw them?').⁶ After 2007-2008, shamanism can be said to have slowly but steadily expanded to the point of becoming a mass phenomenon.⁷

⁵ This is a key difference between trans-cultural and indigenous shamanism. While trans-cultural forms are quite reliant on the information conveyed in books, the indigenous ones tend to be based more on oral transmission (see more on the topic in Chapter 4).

⁶ 'Who saw them?' is a popular Italian tv show, broadcasted on a national channel since 1989. It covers old and new cases of disappearances, cold cases and mysteries to be solved with the help of viewers.

⁷ From an interview with Nello Ceccon occurred on the 18th and 21st of November 2019. An interview with Vanth SpiritWalker, president of Pagan Pride Italia, on the 15th of November 2019, as well as conversation with practitioners of trans-cultural shamanism in Italy over my four year of fieldwork between 2016 and 2019 are in agreement with this reconstruction of how shamanism was introduced and has spread in Italy.

Sarah Bernini⁸ also provided useful information to trace back the introduction and diffusion of different forms of shamanism in Italy through the lens of someone who does not practise Core Shamanism. At the beginning of 2019, she encountered an 'Andean teacher' who claimed that the Q'ero shamanism had been present on the Italian peninsula since the 1960s. Whether this information is correct or not, Sarah recalls a significant spreading of shamanism in Italy between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Sarah mentions Tawantin as one of the associations born in the early 2000s, whose contributor was Giovanni Feo, expert on Etruscan culture and author of books on the topic as well as practitioner of Andean shamanism since the 1990s. Sarah deems this association of particular relevance as it brought Andean shamanism to the attention of the Italian people. Beside Giovanni Feo, other founding members were Don Juan Nuñez del Prado, anthropologist and practitioner of the Inca tradition, Don Ivan Nuñez del Prado, a follower of Andean shamanism, and Roberto Sarti, practitioner and author of an influential book on Inca shamanism (Tawantin, 2019; Feo, 2018; Feo and Torlai, 2013; Sarti and Belloli, 2009). Other two Andean-inspired groups, Sarah continues, are Ushai founded in 2005 and Enqay in 2007 (Enqay, 2019; Ushai, 2019). The latter was founded by Dario Astengo, whom personally told Sarah that he used to follow the Buryat tradition through the teachings of Nadia Stepanova but eventually encountered the Andean tradition, which he has followed since 2007. The Buryat shamanism has been popularised across the Italian shamanistic communities by Nadia Stepanova, whose seminars and workshops Sarah had attended in 2005 and 2006 in the province of Parma. The experiences she had with Nadia Stepanova are reported in three articles published on the magazine *Labrys* (Bernini, 2005b, 2005a, 2006).⁹ Sarah also recalled a group focussed on the Mayan tradition that has been active in Emilia Romagna since the early 2010s, called *Il cammino della*

⁸ Sarah Bernini is a an artist and write about movements falling under the umbrella of esotericism, spirituality and Paganism. She published two books on Paganism in Italy, was president of the magazine *Labrys* and is president of the association *Artès*. More on her work in the section on Paganism and shamanism, later in this chapter.

⁹ Thanks to Sarah Bernini for providing copies of these articles and their references as the related archive is currently unavailable for consultation.

libellula ('The dragonfly path') founded by a transpersonal counsellor and a psychologist (Il cammino della libellula, 2013).

However, Sarah believes that the interest in shamanism pre-dates the formation of organised groups occurred from the early 2000s. In her words,

I believe that the interest in the culture and shamanism of Native Americans started much earlier than that, between the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the wellness and natural/organic fairs of the 1990s, like at the *Sana* in Bologna, there have always been books on the subject - from what I remember - as I used to go there as a little girl with my mother [...]; I also remember examples of twinning between local culture and native tribes that brought several representatives of these tribes in Italy.¹⁰

An example Sarah gives of the aforementioned collaborations, comes from a town of the Parmese Appennines, called Berceto, which is twinned (*gemellato*) with the Lakota Sioux of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation since the 1988 (Comune di Berceto, 2019). Sarah argues that the interest in different indigenous traditions has fostered the diffusion of shamanism in Italy before organised groups were formed. She reports that various sweat lodge and sacred pipe ceremonies have been held over the years by Native Americans who came to Italy and passed on their traditions. For instance, Turtle Heart is a Native American from the Ojibwe tribe who moved to Italy in 2003 and has later settled in Pantelleria. His house hosts dedicated rooms where he carries out a number of ceremonies, such as sweat lodges, dream ceremonies, and astrological readings based on the moon phases (AICAP, 2015). Another known figure, according to Sarah, is Bhol Nath Banstola, Nepalese shaman who leads workshops and initiates people who undertake his courses on shamanism (Nepal Shaman Association, 2010).

¹⁰ 'Credo però che, ad esempio, l'interesse per la cultura e lo sciamanesimo dei nativi americani sia ben precedente, tra fine anni '80 e primi '90. Ripeto, nelle fiere del benessere e del naturale degli anni '90 come il 'Sana' di Bologna, libri sull'argomento ce ne sono sempre stati, da quanto mi ricordo (ci andavo da ragazzina con mia madre [...]); ricordo anche esempi di gemellaggi tra paesi nostrani e tribù native che portarono qui diversi rappresentanti di queste tribù.' From an interview occurred on the 3rd of December. *Translation is mine.*

The syncretic traditions of African-Brazilian descent have also contributed to raising interest in shamanism in recent years, as Sarah highlights. Umbanda, Quimbanda, Candomblé, Santeria, Kardecism – to name a few – engage with the spirit world while remaining anchored to a Christian religious system. I argue the reason such traditions may have prompted an interest in shamanic practices could be due to their strong syncretic nature, which shows how a communication with the spirits can be attained even as a Catholic. Sarah mentioned a few of such groups in Italy, like Umbanda Italia founded in 2010 as well as Adica and Candomble Italia for the Candomblé tradition (ADICA Associazione Diffusione Candomblé, 2019; Candomble Italia, 2019; Umbanda Italia, 2010). Influential on the peninsula is also the Esoteric Store *Il Crogiuolo*, with their physical store in Milan and online presence, encompasses a wide variety of African-Brazilian traditions and has actively engaged with esoteric communities in Italy since the mid-1990s, often attending national esoteric or Pagan fairs and festivals (Il Crogiuolo, 2019).

The fascination towards Native American shamanic traditions was further inspired by television programmes and personalities. Sarah references, as an example, Enzo Braschi, a very popular comedian, actor and writer in Italy. He has been very vocal about his interest in the First Nations, his participations in their ceremonies and the new-found outlook on life these experiences brought about. As a result, he has published several books on Native American spirituality and teachings (Braschi, 2013, 2014, 2017).

While the interview with Nello provided data on the first inception and diffusion of trans-cultural shamanism in Italy, Sarah helped understand the cultural premises that allowed that burst of interest to occur in the early 2000s. It was a slow and gradual process which began long before an active engagement with shamanic practices started to take place. The premises to the spreading of shamanism were first laid out by the portrayal – through mass and social media - of indigenous cultures from Asia, North and South America as neglected custodians of a primordial spirituality dismantled by Western civilisation. *Pocahontas* and *Balla coi Lupi* ('Dances with the Wolves'), with the wide popularity gained in Italy, are two examples of a trend which saw its peak in the 1990s and 2000s. This new tendency sought to reverse the

ethnocentric depiction of Native Americans provided by American Western movies (Stoddard et al., 2014) while also portraying indigenous wisdom as the answer to spiritual and environmental ordeals faced by Westerners. As a result, this romanticised understanding of indigenous cultures slowly but steadily infiltrated the popular culture enabling and fostering the introduction of shamanism to the Italian context.

To summarise, the depiction of indigenous cultures – mainly in the form of books, films and workshops - as bearers of an ancient wisdom and spiritual teachings set the premises for the popularisation of shamanism, as it offered a positive, benign outlook on practices which might have otherwise appeared far off from the Italian worldview. Within groups loosely associated with the New Age movement, the interest in shamanism began through Carlos Castaneda's books as well as through seminars and workshops based on his portrayal of shamanism. There are no data to support that any significant shamanic activity occurred before the 1990s as all my sources indicate the starting point of a shamanic practice on the peninsula around the mid to late 1990s. This initial spreading occurred mainly among New Age networks and people interested in alternative spirituality and Asian philosophies. From the 2000s onwards, Core Shamanism offered a more structured approach which helped bring shamanism to the attention of a wider public.

Furthermore, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies raised awareness towards indigenous shamanisms, becoming a gateway to the discovery of 'traditional' forms of shamanism while fostering the practice of their trans-cultural counterparts.

3.2 Relation between Shamanism and the 'New Age' Movement

The 'New Age' movement is a set of new religious spiritualities rather difficult to define and yet, as George D. Chryssides points out, those who are involved or research new religious movements find them easy to intuitively pinpoint. In his words,

At an intuitive level, many readers would claim to recognise the 'New Age' when they see it. It manifests itself in shops that

specialise in Tarot cards, crystals, incense, alternative remedies and books on ley lines, the paranormal, astrology, and eastern and esoteric spirituality. It appears in the form of magazines such as *Kindred Spirit*, *Caduceus* and *Resurgence*, and in local directories providing advertisements and addresses for the services of Reiki healers, yoga teachers and various psychic consultants. It has its centres, either in practitioners' owned or hired premises, or in renowned towns such as Glastonbury or Totnes. There are also characteristic events, such as Mind-Body-Spirit festivals and psychic fairs (Chryssides, 2007, pp. 5–6).

The term 'New Age' itself (henceforth without quotes) refers to the Age of Aquarius, a perceived golden age that the hippie movement in the 1970s identified as a coming time of religious freedom and enlightenment. As a consequence, there was a tendency to overthrow authoritarianism in each of its manifestations, political as well as religious (Chryssides, 2007, p. 9). From this derived the tendency to seek the spiritual teachings underlying various different religions while, at the same time, attempting to go beyond the affiliation to one specific religion. As a result, an active eclecticism becomes an integral part of New Age, fostered by one of its theoretical underpinnings which can be identified in the perennial philosophy. Although the idea of a *philosophia perennis* takes roots in the Renaissance, there was a revival of the concept in the twentieth century, inspired by Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* and seen as 'the notion that there is an eternal truth or wisdom which *can* be accessed and has been expressed in the world by various elements down through the ages' (Duggan, 2013, pp. 99–100). The concept of a perennial philosophy also conveys the idea that there is a shared philosophical core that all great philosophies and religions share. This core is the one that bears the most value because it represents the 'truth' disguised in its different manifestations, uniting rather than dividing people (Griffin, 1989, pp. 72–76). As Hanegraaff exemplifies, while addressing Ken Wilber's interpretation of perennial philosophy, 'It is not in the 'pre-personal' stage of mere undifferentiated fusion but in the 'trans-personal' stage of integrated wholeness that salvation can be found; with this message, the *philosophia perennis* has definitively left the realm of history that has been our concern here, and entered the domain of the mind' (Hanegraaff, 2006, pp. 1134–1135).

A Deep Ecological worldview is also rather common in the New Age. Deep Ecology was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and refers to a firm stance against anthropocentric views of the world to foster what the author calls 'biospherical egalitarianism'. Also, the exploitation of less powerful human communities is condemned to favour local communities and the diversity they bring about instead. Key to the movement is the 'total-field image' that opposes the human-in-environment perspective (Greer, 2013, pp. 299–300; Clowney and Mosto, 2009, p. 193). This new holistic perspective on the interaction between human beings and their surroundings links to the noticeable awareness this movement has towards a specific kind of science. This 'New Science', or 'New Age science', is the one which can work as an ally against what is perceived as an old traditional science which led human beings to materialism and alienation. Within the realm of this New Age science there are scientists themselves, some of whom, have gained popular recognition, such as David Bohm and Ilya Prigogine. New Age science has as its main goal to develop 'unified worldviews' (Hanegraaff, 1996, pp. 62–63).

This search for 'wholeness' brought about by the perennialism theory, the Deep Ecology and the New Age science shows this movement's attempt at combining a newly enchanted interpretation of the world with the rationalism of a secular age. Another noticeable trait in the New Age is, in fact, what has been called in recent scholarship the 're-enchantment' of the world and that Egil Asprem explains as follows,

Parallel to the inversion of secularization theory, scholars of new religious movements started reversing Max Weber's thesis of the disenchantment of the world as well (*Entzauberung der Welt*), arguing that a process of re-enchantment is sweeping through Western culture. In 1918 Weber had proclaimed that all 'mysterious incalculable forces' were being eradicated from the world by science and scientifically based technologies. *Entzauberung* – literally the disappearance of magic – signified a new mentality in which modern people believed that anything around them could, in principle, be comprehended rationally, and that no offerings to capricious deities or magical manipulations of occult forces were needed to master the world (Asprem, 2014, pp. 330–331).

Re-enchanting the world may be interpreted as a step back from secularism - or rather a different way of implementing secularism – that allows those who embrace this worldview to have a more active interaction with the material world surrounding them while maintaining a degree of rationalisation. Significant to notice that the New Age has re-enchanted the world in its own specific way, trying to combine the idea that we live in a universe comprised of energies and vibrations with which human beings can interact with a rationalisation and ‘scientification’ of how such a process may occur. Those lumped as followers of the New Age¹¹ tend to value greatly academic knowledge and science, which allowed former scientists or academics to gain more popularity in the movement than those who do not fall in this category, thus having ‘academic teachers as religious experts’ (von Stuckrad, 2014, p. 159). The relevance that the academic world has had on new religious movements has been well documented in literature and has decidedly emerged from my fieldwork (Hanegraaff, 1996; von Stuckrad, 2014).¹²

Thus, there are three main themes emerging across the various manifestations of the New Age. The first one is a search for a unity that overcomes differences for in a New Age worldview they may lead to conflict. Also, if something is to be identified as true it must be so in every age of history and across all its varied manifestations. The second one is a scientification of their religious beliefs, where science is a source of interest and yet only selected outputs are considered and interpreted according to a pre-existing belief system. The third theme is the so-called ‘re-enchantment’ of the world, a new-found perspective on things which perceives them as animated and sentient, allowing the individual to engage into a greater and more meaningful interaction with them. It is indeed in the encounter between the secularisation and the endurance of religious paradigms in Western society that the essence of New Age movements lies (von Stuckrad, 2014, pp. 181–182).

A link between the New Age movement and contemporary shamanism in the West has already been evidenced in the past (Wallis, 2003; Jakobsen,

¹¹ They do not describe themselves as followers of the New Age as it currently bears a pejorative connotation.

¹² More details on the matter in Chapter 7.

1999). Italy is no exception, as shamanism - in its trans-cultural form - appears indeed embedded in the worldview created by the New Age. Perennial philosophy, with its idea of a core set of concepts underlying their contextual variations, mirrors quite closely the standpoint fostered by Core Shamanism. The latter suggests, in fact, that it is possible to extrapolate the core practices found across different shamanisms and adopt them regardless of the cultural belonging of the practitioner. It has been already noted how perennial philosophy favours a knowledge that lies beyond any kind of contextualisation in time and space. Although those principles found to be true can be applied to different contexts, their essence stands outside the bounds of their phenomenological application,

The perennialist arrives at the ubiquity of his/her outlook more deductively than inductively. Having encountered a view of things s/he believes to be true, s/he concludes that it must be true universally, for truth has ubiquity built into its meaning (Smith, 1987, pp. 9–10).

The kind of cosmology that Deep Ecology endorses is also a plain trait of shamanism in Italy. According to my field data and interviews, there is not a single person who identified as a practitioner of shamanism who did not display some degree of interest in environmentalism – whether it be an awareness or an active involvement - as well as sharing the idea that the value of human life is equal to that of animals and other living sentient beings, which includes the vegetable world for an animist.

This links to a re-enchantment of the world, especially of the natural world. Even though not all shamanic practitioners are consciously embracing an animistic worldview or even know what animism is, they do endorse its worldview as their actions and choices show the underlying belief that all things are animated and sentient. For instance, shamanic journeying is rather common among trans-cultural shamans and it involves communicating with spirits of objects, plants or even relationships. Workshops on how to build a drum, name it and enter into a relationship with it occur on a regular basis across the Italian country, conveying the latent belief that those ‘mysterious incalculable forces’ that Weber deemed eradicated from our secular age have indeed re-entered the worldview of those who practise shamanism. Yet this

re-introduction does not come without having to face the rationalist paradigm of secularism. This may be the reason why such a large number of shamanic practitioners are interested in what Hanegraaff called 'New Age science' and defend their spiritual beliefs by wielding the weapon of science as a validating tool against those who would deem them as irrational or even lunatics in the worst-case scenario. As a result, it is extremely common to have academics or former academics become shamans or even create their own shamanic traditions (von Stuckrad, 2014, pp. 166–177). As Sergio Botta highlights,

Overcoming the boundaries established by the scientific community appeared as a decisive event to obtain the investiture as a charismatic leader. Once, in fact, the academic legitimacy was acquired, the shamans-anthropologists, moving away from the universities, began a path of institutionalization of their spiritual projects and a routinisation of that charismatic effervescence; a normalization necessary to make acceptable to the public those movements that had initially emphasised antagonistic instances [to the dominant worldview] (Botta, 2018, p. 128).¹³

This represents a rite of passage that marks the academic as a religious leader for two main reasons. First, the former status as an academic brings along a degree of validation which persuades the practitioner of the rational substrate underlying their worldview, in spite of a dominant stance suggesting that reason has to coincide with 'disenchantment.' Secondly, the act of leaving the academic world is interpreted as an acknowledgement that the scientific world is limited and lacks what only spiritual practice can provide. The need for validation and admission of the limitations dictated by the scientific world are evidenced by my fieldwork.¹⁴ In May 2017, I undertook 'The Way of the

¹³ 'Il superamento dei confini stabiliti dalle regole della ricerca scientifica appariva come evento risolutivo per ottenere l'investitura in qualità di leader carismatico. Una volta acquisita infatti la legittimazione accademica, gli sciamani-antropologi, allontanandosi dalle università, iniziavano un percorso di istituzionalizzazione dei loro progetti spirituali e una routinizzazione di quell'effervescenza carismatica; una normalizzazione necessaria anche per rendere pubblicamente accettabili quei movimenti che avevano inizialmente enfatizzato istanze antagoniste.' *Translation is mine.*

¹⁴ In chapter 7, the yearning for academic validation is tackled in relation to autochthonous forms of shamanism.

Shaman: The Shamanic Journey, Power and Healing' Basic Workshop with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, which took place over two days (6-7 May) in Villa Bartolomea, Verona, under the lead of Nello Ceccon. This training is the basic workshop of the Foundation, mandatory to access the advanced ones. Since my attendance was contingent on my research, I openly shared with the other attendees my research aims during those two days. The first day of training was particularly intense, as a few practitioners had moving experiences through shamanic journeying. During the night ritual, when we all gathered to dance in the dark, we had to envision ourselves as the Power Animal we recognised as our protector on that morning's journeying. Throughout the second day of training, the majority of the twenty-five attendees asked for my opinion as a scholar, seeking a validation to their experiences from someone they deemed to be an 'objective scientific judge'. To these questions, I always responded by inquiring what kind of answer they were expecting and why my opinion was significant to them. The answer was unanimous: they all wanted to know whether what had happened seemed 'real' and 'valid', or delusional, to me. These practitioners visibly expected my answer to be in line with their beliefs and experiences but, despite this apparent confidence, they were still eager to receive a 'seal of approval' from a scientific perspective (Puca, 2018a, pp. 86–87). Another question that I got asked a lot on that occasion inquired how could I genuinely engage with those shamanic practices maintaining an academic perspective as they perceived a scientific stance to be a constraint to experiencing shamanism to the fullest. I was, therefore, being a validator who failed to leap onto shamanism leaving the bounds of the 'old' scientific world to embrace the 'New Age science'.

Thus, the New Age theoretical underpinning constitutes an often-unseen frame of reference for trans-cultural shamanism in Italy. It has been noted in multiple interviews and conversations occurred during my fieldwork, that the first wave of interest in shamanism in Italy was generated within groups related to the New Age. As Nello Ceccon explained, when I asked whether there were specific religious/spiritual movements from which the first wave of practitioners arose,

In the beginning, people came from the New Age movement. They were especially into Eastern spirituality, practitioners of Reiki and

those who were interested in Buddhism. Also from Paganism, more so in the context of large urban centres, such as Rome and Milan.¹⁵

It is still relevant to notice that the New Age has currently gained a negative connotation among shamanic communities and practitioners do not normally like to be associated with it. The reason which led to this rejection is unclear, albeit I can speculate that the ample variety of practices that the movement encompasses might easily produce disagreement. For instance, somebody might have a fascination for Asian philosophies but dislike Reiki or Pranothepathy. Lorenza Menegoni, during the advanced workshop of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies I attended in 19-20 May 2018, repeated more than once that Core Shamanism is not New Age and that its practices were not conceived to be merged with any others.¹⁶ This view appears to be the majoritarian as even those who are involved in different kinds of practices, including those falling under the umbrella of the New Age, deem them to be parallel to the shamanic practice and definitely something different from it. Maria Capasso, who defines herself as a shaman and engages in a variety of practices ranging from folk magic and Reiki to Core Shamanism, strongly asserted how they are all different tools in her toolkit and that they are not to be merged but she would rather choose one or the other according to what the situation may require or the spirits suggest.¹⁷

In conclusion, there is a relation between trans-cultural shamanism and the New Age movement in Italy insofar as the two share some founding theoretical principles and the latter fostered the first wave of interest in shamanism in the country. Nevertheless, trans-cultural shamanism is a movement in its own right and interpreting it as one of the manifestations of the New Age would constitute a reductionist fallacy which would lead to an oversimplified understanding of trans-cultural shamanism.

¹⁵ 'All'inizio le persone provenivano dall'ambito della New Age, soprattutto dalla spiritualità orientale, praticanti di Reiki, coloro che erano interessati al buddismo. Anche dal paganesimo, soprattutto in ambito dei grandi centri urbani, come Roma e Milano.' *Translation is mine*. From an interview occurred on the 18th of November 2019.

¹⁶ Lorenza Menegoni is the only appointed teacher by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies who was trained by Michael Harner himself.

¹⁷ Maria Capasso, her story and tradition, are tackled in details in chapter 7.

3.3 The interaction between Paganism and Trans-cultural Shamanism

Although Paganism and the New Age Movement can be seen to have some liaison points in their philosophical underpinning, the two – I argue – need to be analysed as completely different phenomena. The New Age is a heterogenous movement while Paganism refers to earth-based religions inspired by pre-Christian polytheisms.

Hanegraaff tackles ‘Neopaganism’ in relation to the New Age deeming the first as part of the latter movement, albeit acknowledging existing differences between the two. As Hanegraaff explains,

My own research confirms Luhrmann’s conclusion that Neopaganism is part of the New Age in this general sense at least. Having stated this, however, it must also be said that Neopaganism definitely has its own distinctive flavour which sets it apart from other New Age trends (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 79).

The issue arising from this stance is that, although there are some Pagan groups which present strong commonalities with the New Age movement, others do not show any significant similarity of the sort. Thus, an ‘eclectic Wicca’ as manifested in Italy¹⁸ might share a common ground with a New Age thought while heathenry and other more ceremonial-based traditions might not. As Ronald Hutton clarifies, there are two different viewpoints in literature depending on the field the scholar belongs to. While those who specialise in New Age movements tend to include Paganism as one of its aspects, scholars in Pagan Studies strongly disagree and point out all the traits which clearly set Paganism apart from the New Age (Hutton, 2019, pp. 422–423).

Joanne Pearson, in her study on the ‘assumed affinities’ between Wicca and the New Age, concludes that the two present enough differences to be regarded as separate phenomena. Her conclusion is based upon

¹⁸ More details on this later in the section.

analysing the theoretical bases of both as well as taking into consideration the strong aversion Wiccans themselves have towards being regarded as New Age, as emerged from a survey she conducted among British Wiccans (Pearson, 1998). Melissa Harrington argues that merging the New Age and Paganism into one phenomenon would be fallacious for it implies that the various branches of Paganism can be conflated into one cohesive category to be analysed as a whole. In her words,

One of the problems in overviews of the New Age is the depth, which gets sacrificed in place of breadth of vision. In the midst of groundbreaking work on esoteric religion, Hanegraaff and Faivre conflate Paganism and Witchcraft into a misleading homogenous whole. When discussing Christianity, one would never conflate Methodism with an order of monks, or an African house church with the Vatican. As a scholar of Wicca I am wary of discussing Heathenism, Druidry, Shamanism or Traditional Witchcraft. There are enough disparate beliefs, practices and ethical systems between these branches of contemporary Paganism that they each merit study in their own right (Harrington, 2007, p. 438).

This is particularly relevant when we take into account local-specific Pagan groups and all the individual elements they bring to the discourse. For instance, in Italy there are several reconstructionist movements depending on the Italian area and its heritage. As a result, I encountered reconstructionist groups of the Roman religion in central Italy, of the Hellenic traditions in Southern Italy and Celtic revivalisms in Northern Italy. Such movements are a clear example of branches of contemporary Paganism which have almost nothing in common with the New Age movement.

Endorsing the aforementioned arguments, I will tackle Paganism as its own religious phenomenon in Italy and not as part of the New Age movement for there are not enough similarities between the two for such a conflation to be employed. The advent of Paganism in Italy represented a turning point in reshaping and enriching the communities of those who sought a religious-spiritual affiliation beyond the confinements of the dominant religious system and, I will argue, helped shamanism take roots in the country and still manifests a substantial influence in contemporary forms of shamanism.

The term 'pagan' comes from the Latin *pāgānus*, *pāgāni*, which means 'farmer, countryman' as opposed to an urban dweller. As Alessandro Testa explains, 'Pagan' was a derogatory term used mainly to refer to polytheists during Early Christianity and then to all other non-Christian peoples in Europe, mainly in northern Europe, up to the Late Middle Ages. Alessandro Testa explains that the label denoted an 'inner Other', a sub-community within a larger dominant community; like the Jews, the 'heretics' and the 'witches' later in time (Testa, 2017, p. 67).

According to Ronald Hutton, contemporary Paganism – sometimes referred to as Neopaganism – sees its origins in 20th century Britain with the birth of Wicca and Pagan Druidry, which led to occult revivals in Europe as well as in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Hutton, 2019; Pizza and Lewis, 2009, p. 2). Contemporary Paganism is still a young movement in search of its identity and experiences the contradiction of wanting to grow and unify maintaining a substantial diversity of traditions, identities and rituals. As a consequence, 'Paganism' itself is considered an umbrella term rather than a univocal label. The main traditions falling under this umbrella are: Wicca and witchcraft, Druidry, Heathenry, Asatru, Goddess-worship, ethnic reconstructions and other animist earth-based traditions. Despite the variations found across different Pagan traditions, there are some common traits that can be highlighted. The first one being a polytheistic relationship with the 'sacred', which means that Pagans believe in the existence of multiple Gods and spirits of various nature and establish relationships with them in a non-institutionalised fashion. Scriptures and revelations do not present a significant relevance as every Pagan usually favours a direct relationship with deities and spirits. In addition, there is an immanent spirituality, the belief that the divine is embedded and present in every aspect of nature as well as the idea that the individual can interact with it. From this perspective, derives a reverence for land and place as well as a reverence for all tangible things and the spirits that inhabit them all (Pizza and Lewis, 2009, pp. 1–3; York, 2005).

As difficult as it may be to trace back when exactly Paganism was introduced to Italy, there is data to support its gaining prominence in Italy from the early 2000s, when the first national Pagan groups organising public events

were founded and started their activities on the Italian peninsula (Howell Ciancimino, 2008). The first of such groups is Pagan Pride Italia, founded in 2001 in Rome and part of the International Pagan Pride Project. Pagan Pride Italia works to promote the understanding of Paganism in itself and in relation to other religions as well as to dispel prejudices about the Pagan spiritual path through education. For this purpose, since 2001 it has organised the Italian Pagan Pride Day in Rome, as well as several other gatherings, workshops and study seminars. This group is not affiliated to any specific Pagan tradition but rather welcomes all Pagan paths and practitioners thereof. The Pagan Pride Day of 2001 was the first public Pagan event in Italy and it still – to this day - represents a yearly reference point for Pagans across the country. This national event takes place on the closest Saturday to the Autumn Equinox in Villa Doria Pamphili in Rome, gathering every year hundreds of Pagans. The event involves a number of seminars and workshops spread throughout the day, albeit the highlight of the event is represented by ritual to celebrate the Autumn Equinox,¹⁹ officiated by the president Vanth SpiritWalker as a priest and Erika Dell'Acqua as a priestess.

I interviewed Vanth SpiritWalker²⁰ to help me understand how and when the diffusion of Paganism began in Italy. Vanth clarified that before the year 2000 there was very little Pagan activity in the country. He is aware of the existence of a group called *Sacre Radici* ('Sacred Roots') which had a short life span in the late 1990s and had already died out by 1997-1998. This group was founded by an American young woman who was living in Italy at the time and had previously worked in the United States with Starhawk.²¹ She then decided to shut the Pagan group after experiencing surveillance and morning shakedowns by the DIGOS.²² There was also a group interested in

¹⁹ Wiccans usually refer to the Autumn Equinox as 'Mabon', one of the eight festivals of the 'Wheel of the Year'. (For more information on Pagan witchcraft practices and seasonal festivals, see Hutton, 1996, 2019).

²⁰ Interviews occurred on the 15th, 16th and 17th of November 2019.

²¹ Starhawk is an American writer and theorist of feminist Neopaganism and ecofeminism. The translation of her book 'The Spiral Dance' was a popular read among Pagans in the early 2000s and one of the very few Pagan sources available in book stores in those early days (Starhawk, 2009).

²² General Investigations and Special Operations Division, shortened by its acronym DIGOS, is an Italian law enforcement agency which investigates sensitive cases

Stregheria and the cult of Aradia,²³ which later became a community called *La Corte degli Scontenti* ('The Court of Discontents') and published a book called *Il Sabba italiano. Trattato pratico di Stregheria* ('The Italian Sabbath. Practical treatise of Stregheria').²⁴ Around 1999-2002, as Vanth recalls, there was also a Celtic revivalist movement which he deems to be a case on its own. This movement saw a rapid 'explosion' and 'implosion' due to its inner ambiguity. It was, in fact, comprised of people who were genuinely interested in Celtic spirituality alongside nationalists, more interested in a right-wing politics and endorsing a 'Christian Druidry.' Overall, the trend among Pagans before the early 2000s was to be secretive and practise in private. The main reason being the unwanted attention by the law enforcement agency that those who were at the time openly Pagans experienced. Reminiscing the first of Pagan Pride Day he organised, Vanth confessed,

At the time it was much preferred to be secretive. So much so that when we started talking about the Pagan Pride Day project, I received several threats based on the assumption that my real aim was actually to file Pagans in new proscription lists in order to facilitate their persecution.²⁵

Vanth reckons this initial suspicious attitude on the part of the authorities to be understandable, as Paganism was something new in the Italian context and nobody knew what it was and what practices might have involved. This lack of understanding, he continues, was also fostered by the unfavourable propaganda led by Catholic-funded research institutes such as

such as terrorism, organised crime and other severe threats to the public order. All the experiences reported are based on Vanth's words, I did not research to seek corroborative evidence of such facts.

²³ Stregheria is an Italian American form of witchcraft based on the writings by Charles Leland and the alleged experiences he had with *La Vecchia Religione* ('The Old Religion') in his trips in Tuscany, Italy (Leland, 2017).

²⁴ I am unable to provide a reference for this book because it has become unavailable. The only trace of its existence I was able to find was on old online forums where people were talking about the book or even selling it, yet without providing all the publishing information.

²⁵ 'All'epoca si preferiva di gran lunga rimanere nel segreto, tanto che quando iniziammo a parlare del progetto del Pagan Pride Day ricevetti diverse minacce che sostenevano che il mio scopo era in realtà di schedare i pagani con nuove liste di proscrizione al fine di agevolarne la persecuzione...' Interview occurred on the 15th of november 2019. *Translation is mine.*

CESNUR and GRIS.²⁶ Vanth held himself for half a day in the Questura²⁷ of Rome when he was organising the first Pagan Pride Day in 2001 and called up by the DIGOS of Parma when co-organising the first Pagan Camp, called *Sacri Fuochi* ('Sacred Fires') in Borgo Val di Taro. Things started to change for the Pagan community in Italy once Wicca took roots and became widespread in Italy, Vanth explains, as it helped 'normalise' (*normalizzare*) Pagan practices and dispel the fear surrounding them.

Sarah Bernini is president of the cultural Association Artès²⁸, director of the magazine Labrys²⁹ and author of two compendiums on Paganism and its multiple manifestations in Italy, called 'Pagan Voices' (*Voci Pagane*) and articulated in two volumes. The first volume tackles the online presence and projects related to Paganism in Italy, including interviews to individual Pagans and the 'Project Sphera' (*Progetto Sphera*)³⁰ while the second volume focusses more on Pagan groups and associations with an active presence on the territory (Bernini, 2011, 2012). The extensive amount of data Sarah has collected over the years on the development of Paganism in Italy led me to

²⁶ GRIS is the acronym for 'Group of Research and Socio-Religious Information' (*Gruppo di Ricerca e Informazione Socio-Religiosa*). From 1987 until 2001, it was called 'Research and Information Group on Cults' (*Gruppo di Ricerca e Informazione sulle Sette*). Based in Bologna, it aims at understanding non-Catholic religious movement in Italy, referred to as 'cults' (*sette*) on their website (GRIS, n.d.).

²⁷ The *Questura*, in Italy, is the public security department of police headquarters with provincial jurisdiction, reporting to the Ministry of the Internal Affairs (*Ministero degli Interni*).

²⁸ Artès stands for 'Art, esotericism and spirituality'. It is a no-profit association of social promotion (*associazione di promozione sociale*) founded in the province of Reggio Emilia in 2009, which aims to organize events and activities that focus on art and the inner world of the artist as well as on human spirituality.

²⁹ Labrys was founded on the 21st of December 2004 by Sarah Bernini (under the pseudonym of Xenia La Chouette) as a simple amateur paper notebook for a few interested friends; in November 2005, after the creation of a first temporary web portal, a website was put online at www.rivistalabrys.it, to guarantee a constant presence on the web. In April 2006 it becomes a printed journal registered with the Court of Reggio Emilia (Tribunale di Reggio Emilia), to address to a wider public, with the aim of covering anthropological, mythological, historical, esoteric and art-related topics in a non-academic fashion.

The magazine published its last issue in November/December 2011 after six years of activity.

³⁰ The 'Project Sphera', promoted by the Neapolitan Association *Quercia Bianca* aimed at creating a network among the Pagan realities on the Italian territory. The project had a short life span and encountered difficulties in creating such a network among Pagan groups.

ask her to be interviewed to further understand the rebirth and spread of Paganism in Italy.³¹ Sarah believes that Paganism in Italy has not seen a rebirth because it never really died out. She argues that Paganism has lived underground through the work and practice of many esoteric and hermetic orders, such as the famous ‘Ancient and Primitive Rite of Memphis-Misraïm’, a masonic rite founded in Naples in 1881. To my question on when and how did Paganism begin to gain a foothold in Italy, she replied that it really depends on what we mean by ‘Paganism’. As she explains,

If we talk about movements based on ancient Roman Paganism, in Italy they have existed for quite some time, starting from the end of the 1800s and the early 1900s (there were attempts at rebirth even before, but here I focus on organised groups) in areas related to esotericism. Honourable mentions are Arturo Reghini, Julius Evola and the Group of UR (Il Gruppo di UR), the ‘Group of the Dioscuri’, as well as various associations and related magazines; closer to our contemporary time, we have the MTR ‘Traditional Roman Movement’ (*Movimento Tradizionale Romano*) conceived in the 1980s and then ritually founded in 1992, the ‘Associazione Romània Quirites’ and others, such as the ‘Pietas’. After the 2000s, we have the most recent of this lot, called ‘Gentilitas’ which has ceased its activities (Movimento Tradizionale Romano, 2019; PIETAS, 2019; Bernini, 2012, pp. 85–111).³²

Apart from groups based on Roman traditions, there were other groups which focussed on traditions from the Mediterranean area, especially

³¹ The interviews on the Paganism in Italy and its relation to shamanism occurred between the 15th of November and the 3rd of December. These interviews consisted of a series of questions and answers that she provided in a written format and sent to me as a Word document.

³² ‘Dipende. Se parliamo di movimenti che si siano rifatti all’antico paganesimo romano, tanto per dirne una, in Italia esistono da parecchio tempo, già da fine ‘800 e primi anni del ‘900 (ci furono dei tentativi di rinascita anche prima, ma qui parlo di gruppi organizzati in un certo modo) in ambiti legati al mondo esoterico. Si vedano gli esempi noti di Arturo Reghini, Julius Evola e il gruppo di ‘Ur’, il ‘Gruppo dei Dioscuri’, oltre a varie associazioni e riviste collegate; arrivando, invece, più vicini a noi si vedano l’‘M.T.R.’ (Movimento Tradizionale Romano) concepito negli anni ‘80 e poi fondato ritualmente nel ‘92, l’‘Associazione Romània Quirites’ ed altri, come ad esempio le associazioni ‘Pietas’ e, arrivando invece già dopo il 2000, la più recente ‘Gentilitas’ (ormai chiusa).’ From an interview occurred on the 2nd of December. *Translation in mine.*

Hellenistic traditions, such as *Psyké Etniché* founded in Forlì in 2004 (Bernini, 2012, pp. 51–72). 'Pagan Federation' (*Federazione Pagana*) was another influential Pagan group in the 1990s, founded by Zoe Red Bear and her husband in 1992, with an active participation of Roberto Fattore. This group promoted Paganism and Wicca through organising events and releasing its own newsletter, 'Mercury' (*Mercurio*). Subsequently, in 1996, it changed its name to 'Sacred Roots' (*Sacre Radici*) and then ended its activities in 2000 (Bernini, 2012, pp. 17–39). The name 'Pagan Federation' (*Federazione Pagana*) was later taken up by Claudio Simeoni and Francesco Scanagatta in 1996, upon Zoe's concession, for their own group officially constituted in 2002 (Federazione Pagana, 2019).

Sarah deems of significant importance for the 'rebirth' of Paganism in Italy the Celtic revivalist movement, started in the 1990s in the North of Italy, which had a significant impact in introducing certain cultural elements to the Italian society. This happened through socio-cultural events, such as Celtic festivals, concerts, fairs and art exhibitions. As a result, elements of a Celtic worldview reached the popular culture before they began influencing the religious sphere. Sarah highlights the significant impact that neo-druidic movements and the sisterhood of Avalon have had later in that decade to foster a resurgence of Paganism to the attention of the community. Of pivotal importance were also the very first websites in Italian dedicated to Paganism, which were the only source of information for those Pagans who lived in towns and small cities where not even books on Wicca had reached the local book stores and libraries. Two of the most famous ones were *Morgana strega delle mele* ('Morgaine, witch of the apples') opened in 2001 and *Il cerchio della luna* ('The moon's circle') in 2002, reference points for young Pagans searching for information on the topic (Bernini, 2011, pp. 178–182).

After the early 2000s, Wicca quickly became the most popular Pagan tradition and, most importantly, the gateway to Paganism even for those who would eventually end up practising a different tradition. Phyllis Curott's Temple of Ara was, according to all of my informants, the most influential tradition when the interest in Wicca first started in the late 1990s. This occurred due to the publication of her book in Italian *Il Sentiero della Dea* (whose original title was 'Book of Shadows') in 1999 as well as her presence on the territory,

conducting seminars and workshops (Curott, 2012). Only a few years later, the Wicca portrayed by other American authors became – and still is – the most popular one in Italy. English authors of foundational relevance to Wicca, such as Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente, caught only the attention of those Pagans interested in getting a higher and more historical education on the matter. The large majority of those who practise – now as then – Wicca favour what they deem to be a more ‘practical’ and ‘easy-to-access’ approach, namely the one portrayed by authors such as Scott Cunningham, Silver RavenWolf and Raymond Buckland. From the mid-2010s even the interest in these authors – and in books more generally - has dropped within the young newcomers to Paganism, who now have as their main source of information the web, especially dedicated Facebook groups and YouTube channels. My regular attendance – for about a decade - at Pagan Moots and events organised by the association Quercia Bianca in Naples confirms the field data suggesting that younger generations are introduced to Pagan traditions less and less through the medium of books, preferring to receive inputs from online communities and even tv shows. This is evidenced by the change in trends within the Pagan community dependant on such inputs. For instance, both Sarah Bernini and Celeste B., reported an upsurge of interest in the *Ásatrú* and Nordic traditions in recent years as a result of the great popularity gained by the tv show Vikings. Although not as popular as today, the ‘Odinist Community’ (*Comunità Odinista*) was founded in 1994, which attests a presence of these Pagan traditions on the territory for a few decades (Comunità Odinista, 2011).

Based on my fifteen years attendance in the Pagan community and regular conversations with group leaders in Italy, the large majority of newcomers were – and still are – ‘eclectic Wiccans’ (*wicca eclettico/a*), although most of them will take a different path a few years down the line. Based on the definition given by practitioner, by ‘eclectic Wicca’ I mean a non-ceremonial Wicca which departed from the model set by Gardnerian and Alexandrian traditions to tailor the practice on the individual and integrate whichever element they choose, including those borrowed from non-Wiccan tradition. An eclectic Wiccan will not seek a formal initiation into a coven and in most cases will perform a self-initiation, if any, to the craft. This evolution

towards an open eclecticism may be due to Wicca being the most accessible form of Paganism, as it is the easiest Pagan tradition to find in local book stores – often beside New Age books - as well as the one portrayed in the most harmless fashion. It is fascinating to notice how books on Wicca (or alleged Wicca), including spell books, are visually laid out as children books or fairy tales (see Figure 0-1). The printing choice is even more notable when the book in its original language is compared to the Italian translation.

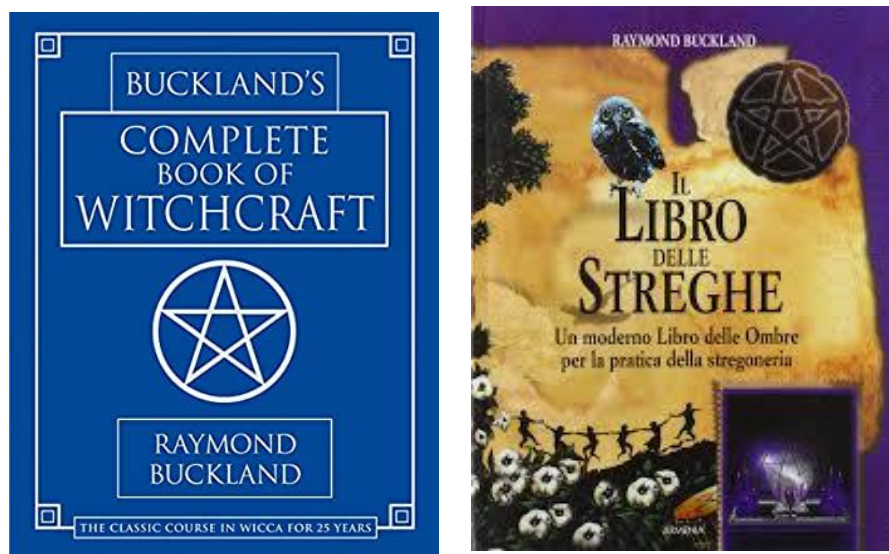


Figure 0-1 Original versus Italian Adaptation

This consistent choice on the part of the Italian publishers shows an attempt to depict Wiccan practices as harmless and innocent endeavours. It also allows those who are interested in the topic to feel more at ease and less harshly judged when reading from a book whose content is represented in such an inoffensive manner. Such a portrayal has been deemed erroneous by a few Pagan groups remarking the initiatory and mystic nature of the Wiccan religion. The most vocal on this topic are the *Circolo dei Trivi* ('Circle of the Trivi'), founded in 2002 and based in Milan. Differently from Pagan Pride Italia, they are more geared toward Wicca, specifically the Gardnerian and Alexandrian lineages of Wicca. They only acknowledge as a valid form of Wicca (*Wicca regolare*) the one involving a ceremonial initiation into a Gardnerian, Alexandrian and their derivative traditions while rejecting as 'pseudo Wicca' all the solitary and eclectic manifestations of Wicca arisen from authors such as Scott Cunningham and Raymond Buckland (Marrè, 2019). This group organises Wicca Study Groups across the country, Witches

Café and other seasonal events in collaboration with other Pagan Associations and influential Pagans, such as Janet Farrar and Phyllis Curott. The debate on what allows you to be a 'true Wiccan' or even give you the right to call yourself as such became an argument starter during the early to mid-2010s and led many eclectic Pagans to give up the label 'Wiccan' to avoid conflicts with other members of the community who denied the existence of any eclectic self-initiatory Wicca. This debate carried on for a few years and involved the most at the time active Pagan associations in Italy, including the *Quercia Bianca* ('White Oak') in Naples, which defended the legitimacy of an eclectic Wiccan path.

It is possible that this growing conservative attitude towards Wicca may have led those Pagans who embraced a more eclectic and less ceremonial approach towards shamanism instead as it was in the same years that shamanism gained popularity among Pagan groups. What has certainly emerged from numerous interviews is that Pagans register a similarity in the boom of interest towards Wicca from the early 2000s to the early-2010s and the rapid increase in interest towards shamanism occurred in the past decade. Representative of the average opinion among Pagans are Celeste B.'s words,

The great trend of shamanism - or shall we say of the 'perception' of shamanism - that developed in recent years can be compared to how trendy Wicca was when I initially got interested in [Paganism] when I was 15-16 years old [around 2005]. In Italy, a large amount of information on Wicca was taken and spread and hence there was the boom Wicca. Now there is the boom of shamanism instead, yet understood only as a practical tool. Therefore, as a means to associate with one's own religiosity independently from the nature of one's pantheon or the type of shamanism that one adopts.³³

³³ 'La grande moda dello sciamanesimo che c'è - o potremmo dire della percezione dello sciamanesimo che c'è - negli ultimi anni può essere paragonata alla moda della Wicca che c'era quando io inizialmente mi avvicinavo, quando avevo 15-16 anni. In Itali si prendeva e recuperava tutta questa informazione sulla Wicca e quindi c'era il boom della Wicca. Adesso c'è il boom dello sciamanesimo, però intesa solo come atto pratico. Quindi come mezzo da associare alla propria religiosità in maniera indipendente rispetto all'origine del proprio pantheon o del

A degree of syncretism between Wicca and shamanism is evidenced by data emerging from my research-led Facebook group, where Wiccan elements are often merged with shamanism or proposed as one and the same. The most frequent occurring example is the advertising of shamanic festivals and events named after the eight Wiccan Sabbaths. Examples of such occurrences are reported in Figure 0-2, in the form of screenshots capturing a few posts published by members of the group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy'.



Figure 0-2 Screenshots from Facebook Group

On the 14th of February 2017, I posted on the same group an article published on the Guardian discussing the book *Witches of America* by Alex Mar and how differently was it perceived by the press as opposed to the community of Pagans (Mar, 2016; Dean, 2015). The article prompted a discussion in the comment section regarding the difference and relation

tipo di sciamanesimo che si adopera.' From an interview occurred on the 2nd of December 2019. *Translation is mine.*

between Paganism and shamanism, not related to the starting point set by the article. Franco Volpe illustrates his opinion as follows,

Shamanism is first and foremost a philosophy, a harmonious approach to what surrounds us (through the use of rituals, prayers, and gestures), is an old yet new awareness that matches very well with Neopaganism (Wicca, Celticism, etc), precisely because Neopaganism bases its foundation on the cycles of nature. [The difference is that] shamanism is not one spiritual system in itself but rather a common approach to many world cultural realities... it is not a religion but a set of rituals and beliefs... [whereas those related to being a religion or spiritual system are] characteristics of Neopaganism.³⁴

Franco's statement sums up well the majoritarian view that followers of Neopaganism endorse regarding the relation between the latter and shamanism. It is noteworthy to point out that the term 'Neopaganism' in Italy is primarily used in reference to Wicca. It is also sometimes used to denote other Pagan movements born in the last century but most commonly Wicca. This is made plain when observing the difference between groups and associations on the territory and how they label themselves. Pagan Pride Italia uses 'Pagan' and encompasses a wide range of Pagan and Neopagan spiritualities whilst Il Circolo dei Trivi, Italus and other Associations led by Wiccans, or primarily focussed on Wicca, refer to themselves as 'Neopagan'.

From the point of view of most Pagans, there are liaison points between an eclectic Wicca (and Paganism more generally) and shamanism. The reverence towards nature is one of them and a pivotal element driving people to both Paganism and shamanism. The re-enchantment of the world and some kind of magic conceived in their belief system is another one. There is

³⁴ 'Lo sciamanesimo è soprattutto una filosofia, un approccio armonico con ciò che ci circonda (uso di rituali, di preghiere, di approcci e gesti), è una vecchia ma nuova consapevolezza che si sposa molto bene con il Neopaganesimo (wicca, celtismo ecc.), proprio perchè il Neopaganesimo fonda le sue basi sui cicli della natura.. Ma lo sciamanesimo non è una spiritualità a se stante ma è un approccio comune a molte realtà culturali mondiali... non è una religione ma un sistema di rituali e credenze.... Caratteristiche del Neopaganesimo.' *Translation is mine.*

also an animistic immanent worldview and the seeking for a direct relationship with the spirits and deities.

In the attempt to clarify the difference and similarities between Paganism and shamanism from the point of view of Pagans, I selected ten informants who practise both Paganism and Shamanism, have leading positions in their local communities and often take part in conversations where the topic has been addressed. These conversations and interviews to my informants have shown a recurring theme in the relation between Paganism and shamanism or Wicca and shamanism in Italy. This recurring theme is the 'limitation' - so was it defined by Celeste B. and Sarah Bernini, to name a few - derived from being an Italian speaking country and therefore having access to fewer resources compared to the English-speaking countries. As a result, the overall idea that the average Italian practitioner has of Paganism, Wicca and shamanism are significantly conditioned by the filters imposed from outer circumstances determining what kind of information and which traditions will the person have access to. Specifically, for shamanism most of the resources in translation gravitate around trans-cultural traditions, most of all Core Shamanism, but inputs come also from popular authors such as Carlos Castaneda, Hernán Huarache Mamani and Sandra Ingermann.

All the Pagans interviewed agree in stating that Paganism and shamanism are not the same thing nor are they to be considered part of the same tradition. There are occurrences where they overlap or influence each other or share similar - if not the same – underlying beliefs but they are not the same movement. Most of the informants highlighted that Paganism is a religious movement whereas shamanism is a set of techniques which can be adopted by practitioners regardless of their religious affiliation, provided such affiliation shares a worldview compatible with the shamanic practice. Cinzia Comari explains the matter as follows,

Paganism and shamanism are not the same, although there may be aspects which dilute the boundaries between the two [...], I do not think the common root (in a VERY broad sense) between the two currents, namely animism, is sufficient to make them one and the same. In addition to this, the affinity between the two currents can vary greatly depending on which Pagan tradition one follows:

if you focus on the different traditions you will certainly find a lot of differences in their relationship with the shamanic world. [It varies greatly if one compares it to] Druidry, Wicca or Egyptian-inspired traditions or even those traditions which include Christian elements and various hybridizations. As I wrote in the comment section to your poll,³⁵ I struggle to think of someone who practises shamanism without being a Pagan [...], but the opposite is not true. So, you can very well be a Pagan without practising shamanism.³⁶

When Cinzia here mentions 'without being a Pagan' she refers to, as she explains in the referenced comments, sharing a common belief system rather than identifying as a Pagan. Although Pagans acknowledge the diversity between Paganism and shamanism, they tend to be particularly persuaded that the follower of shamanism needs to have a belief system aligned with a shamanic worldview. Albeit theoretically shamanism can be combined with any religious affiliation, *de facto* what the shamanic practice entails implies the adoption of a specific worldview which could antagonise the theological bases of some monotheistic religions. As a result, my Pagan informants deem the belief system underlying Paganism particularly in line with shamanism, hence why there are so many Pagans who also practise shamanism. Furthermore, shamanic elements have been introduced into Pagan rituals as much as Pagan elements are to be found, as the aforementioned examples showed, in shamanism. For instance, Pagan rituals or festivals often include the inducing

³⁵ Cinzia is here referring to a poll I created on the 14th of November 2019 on the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy' asking the members' religious affiliations. Some of them opted to provide more information in the comment section to that poll.

³⁶ 'Paganesimo e sciamanesimo non sono la stessa cosa, sebbene ci possano essere dei punti in cui il 'confine' si stempera [...]. La radice comune (in senso MOLTO ampio) tra le due correnti, ovvero l'animismo, non credo sia sufficiente ad avvicinarli a tal punto. Oltre a questo, l'affinità delle due correnti può variare moltissimo in base a quale corrente pagana si sceglie di osservare: se stringi la messa a fuoco sulle singole tradizioni avrai certamente molta differenza nel rapporto con il mondo sciamanico osservando il druidismo, piuttosto che la Wicca, piuttosto che le tradizioni di stampo egizio o guardando invece ancora a quelle che pescano anche da elementi cristiani e ibridazioni varie. Come ho scritto nel commento al post con il tuo sondaggio, fatico a pensare qualcuno che possa praticare sciamanesimo senza essere pagano [...], ma non è vero il contrario, quindi si può benissimo essere pagani e non praticare sciamanesimo.' From an interview occurred on the 4th of December 2019. *Translation is mine.*

of trance through drumming, drum circles, rites to meet the spirit guide, workshops and lectures on shamanism, *et similia*. On the other hand, when I attended shamanic workshops and retreats, I was able to notice Pagan elements such as – just to name a few - mentions of the Wiccan Rede, belief in Pagan Gods and Goddesses and well as in magic as conceptualised in Paganism.

Despite this visible interconnection, it is still common among non-Pagans, namely those who identify as ‘Spiritual’ and/or derived their interest in shamanism from a loose connection to the New Age, to vehemently state the stark difference - sometimes to the point of incompatibility – between Paganism/Neopaganism and shamanism. A question I posed to the Facebook group ‘Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy’ on the 29th of November 2019 inquiring what they thought would be the difference between Wicca and shamanism, generated a stream of anger among respondents. This reaction was so evident that prompted me to edit the post to add a ‘P. S.’ stating that by posing that question I was not implying any similarity between the two but rather leaving the matter open to discussion. Based on a previous poll on religious affiliation, their Facebook profile and the content of their comments,³⁷ I can safely assume that the majority of responses came from non-Pagans.

The themes emerged from such responses, mostly implying the superiority of shamanism over Wicca/Neopaganism, were based on the popularly agreed-upon – or rather believed-upon - traits of shamanism in Italy. These are the idea that shamanism is the precursor to all religions, that it is not a religion but rather a set of techniques, that it pre-dates all structured spiritual and religious practices, that the shaman travels to the spirit world and communicates with the spirits (instead of ‘praying to deities’) and that shamanism is an ancient practice as opposed to the newly born Neopagan tradition. All such themes were listed by multiple respondents to uphold a

³⁷ Some of these comments clearly included misinformation and misunderstanding of Paganism and Wicca. For instance, one referred to Wicca as being potentially monotheistic while another one mentions ‘praying’ to an entity. In such cases, normally accompanied by statements implying the superiority of shamanism over Wicca, I can safely assume the person’s interest in Paganism accounts to be rather limited.

perceived superiority of shamanism in comparison to Wicca as well as to state the extent of the differences between the two.

Considering all the data at my disposal, I can conclude that Pagans tend to see the similarities and compatibility between Pagan traditions and shamanism much more than those who do not associate with Paganism in any shape or form and, in most cases, lack a thorough knowledge of Pagan religion. Despite the perceived dissimilarity perceived by non-Pagans, the influence and contribution that Paganism and its followers have had on the spread and contemporary practise of shamanism is indisputable, according to all the data shown thus far. In addition, a poll opened on the 14th of November 2019 on the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy', explicitly geared towards those who actually practise shamanism and not those members who are just interested in the matter, confirmed the significant presence of Pagans within Shamanic communities. In this poll, I asked members to declare their spiritual/religious affiliation, providing a set of answers yet leaving the option for members to add their own if they wanted. On total of 127 respondents, 53 ticked 'Spiritual', 26 'Pagan', 22 'On the Path'³⁸ (*In Cammino*), 14 'Animist', 6 'I go beyond Labels' (*Vado oltre le etichette*), 4 'Agnostic', 1 'Hinduist' and 1 'Non-religious.' This sample group confirms other data emerged from interviews to organisers of shamanic workshops and events, who reckoned the majority of attendees to come from the New Age movement, followed by Pagans. Representative of this picture is what Vanth SpiritWalker explained, during an interview, when asked which he thought the affiliation of shamanic practitioners in Italy would be,

The audience of shamanic seminars is mostly made up of people who are not Pagans, but rather relate to some kind of New Age background where people collect workshops in search for a discounted spirituality. That is, something that allows us to feel better without making a real effort in our everyday life other than paying for a workshop. This market segment, so to speak, was probably present as early as the early 1990s. Since the beginning of the new century, Pagans were compounded to this group as they

³⁸ Option added by a member of the group.

begun to gravitate around this community as well, both moving there from their interest for native spiritualities and through Wiccan traditions with stronger shamanic connotations, such as the Temple of Ara.³⁹

Such a substantial presence of Pagans among practitioners of shamanism seems to be occurring beyond the confinements of the Italian peninsula as, according to Robert Wallis, the same trend has surfaced in other European countries,

Neo-Shamans approaching European shamanisms are most often contemporary Pagans, falling into three categories, in order of popularity: Wicca, Druidry and Heathenry (Wallis, 2003, p. 81)

The relation between Paganism and shamanism goes, in some cases, as far as to regard shamanism as a practice falling under the umbrella of Paganism, or an 'old form of paganism' (Pentikainen, 2016, p. 50). This is the stance taken by the Pagan Federation, that list on their website shamanism as a form of Paganism (The Pagan Federation, 2019).

Whether shamanism is to be considered a form of Paganism or not is problematic and certainly a matter which encounters a lot of disagreement within the communities of shamanic practitioners. What emerges is a strong affinity in the philosophical underpinning and belief system between contemporary Paganism and shamanism. All the main traits of Paganism listed at the beginning of this section (i.e. pantheism, nature-worshipping, direct contact with spirits) are also found in shamanism, with the main difference being that Paganism is mostly deemed a religion whilst shamanism is regarded as a set of techniques or practices which can be combined with

³⁹ 'Il pubblico dei seminari di sciamanismo è in buona parte formato da persone che non sono pagane, ma casomai fanno riferimento a quell' ambiente un po' new age in cui si fa collezione di seminari cercando un po' di spiritualità a buon mercato, per così dire, qualcosa che ci consenta di sentirci migliori ma senza fare uno sforzo reale nella vita di tutti i giorni che non sia il pagare per un seminario. Questa fascia di mercato, per così dire, era probabilmente presente già dagli inizi degli anni '90; a questi si aggiungono i pagani propriamente detti che dall' inizio del nuovo secolo hanno iniziato a gravitare anche in quest' area, sia passando dall' interesse per le spiritualità native, sia passando da correnti wicca che attingono dallo sciamanismo, come il Tempio di Ara.' From an interview occurred on the 16th of November 2019. *Translation is mine.*

any religious system because it is believed to be a proto-religion, precursor to all those which later became religions. This latter concept is widely agreed-upon among practitioners although challenging to embrace from a philosophical standpoint. Even though shamanism may lack the assets that would make it a religion, there are still underlying beliefs behind its practices. For instance, if a practitioner believes that a communication with the spirit of a tree is possible, this also implies that trees have spirits alongside implying the possibility of a communication with the spirit world. Although these concepts would be perfectly in line with a Pagan belief system, they might not be in agreement with a monotheistic religion such as Catholicism with a transcendental view of the divine.⁴⁰ Such an affinity between Paganism and shamanism allowed the latter to become well known and spread, whether it be the primary practice or an adjunct to an eclectic approach, within Pagan communities. Paganism and shamanism have been influencing and reshaping each other for decades on the Italian territory. The Pagan Pride Days traditionally include a shamanic journey, often as the first workshop of the day, and most Pagan events and celebrations I attended over almost two decades included some kind of shamanic practice. Although the majority of Italian shamanic practitioners seem to have been exposed to ideas and practices associated with the New Age, no other religion/spirituality has been as substantially reshaped and enriched by shamanism as Paganism has. There are, in fact, a few significant contributions that shamanism has given to Paganism. The first one is the birth of Pagan traditions with strong shamanic elements, such as the Temple of Ara, which were the pioneers in the diffusion of Paganism in Italy. Wicca itself, in its most popular and eclectic manifestation in Italy – which is the one derived from American authors such as Scott Cunningham and Raymond Buckland – is believed to include substantial shamanic features. In addition, shamanistic techniques have been introduced into Pagan rituals such as shamanic journeying or the use of drums and rattles to induce an altered state of consciousness. The animistic nature of Paganism has also been emphasised due to the popularity of shamanism,

⁴⁰ A more in depth analysis of relations and contrasts with Catholicism will be tackled in Chapter 6.

allowing Pagans to acknowledge more the presence of spirits in everything that lives as well as the possibility to establish relationships with them. As a consequence, I find my research in agreement with Townsend's words,

Some writers lump all these under a generic New Age, or merge Core and Neo-shamanism within Neo-Paganism; others subsume Core shamanism under Neo-shamanism. Although some practitioners of Core and Neo-shamanism do overlap elements with Neo-Paganism and occasionally New Age, it is essential that all these be regarded as separate entities. To see any of them as merely subsets of others seriously obscures the uniqueness of each of these explorations (Townsend, 2004, p. 2).

I can therefore conclude that Paganism and shamanism in Italy are separate phenomena which significantly influence each other. Specifically, shamanism has reshaped the perception and practice of Paganism whilst the latter has provided a worldview which is in line with - and hence facilitates the interest in - shamanism. As a result, a person who embraces Paganism will be more likely to study and/or practise shamanism as well while, at the same time, shamanism keeps influencing the Pagan scene by generating more traditions and local groups that embed shamanic elements in their practice.

In conclusion, shamanism in Italy has not emerged in isolation but intertwined with a cultural framework and religious/spiritual movements which facilitated its spreading throughout the peninsula. The very term is being used in a different fashion by practitioners coming from different backgrounds or not used at all by those who, as I will argue in chapter 5, follow an autochthonous healing tradition. As a result, shamanism is a slippery category for scholars and yet bears a sound significance for those who adopt it to define their practices. Thus, adopting a methodology which employs 'shamanism' as a deictic context-sensitive term while allowing the discourses emerged from the community dictate how the phenomenon is socially constructed and understood will be my chosen methodology to employ the term in my study. Common elements such as deep ecology and a holistic worldview in the New Age as well as animism and the nature-worshipping feature in Paganism have let these two movements be the cradles of the Italian shamanistic culture. It is indeed from those phenomena - especially from New Age networks - that the

first inception of shamanism in Italy occurred, due to the popularity gained by Carlos Castaneda's books first and Michael Harner's Core Shamanism later. Over time, an increasing number of Pagans have been drawn to shamanism to the point where Paganism and shamanism are now deemed in Italy as different phenomena which yet significantly influence each other.

Following the terminological premises set in chapter 2 and the field data laid out in the present chapter, I gather the term is used in a trans-cultural manner to describe trans-cultural forms of shamanism, where by 'trans-cultural' I mean an element which has been imported from a foreign culture, reinterpreted by the adopting culture and bearing some degree of universalisation. The large majority of informants deem shamanism as an animistic proto-religious set of techniques pre-dating all institutionalised religions - including Paganism - and aiming at gaining power, knowledge and healing through an ecstatic contact with the spirit world. This view is trans-cultural in nature for such a practice is not deemed by practitioners to be linked and hence limited to any specific place or birthing culture. As much as indigenous people are regarded as bearers of this tradition in more contemporary times - due to a romanticised outlook on their culture as untainted by the Western model of civilisation - the techniques themselves are believed to be accessible to anyone living anywhere in the world, for shamanism is believed to be the one spiritual practice underlying them all.

Chapter 4

Trans-cultural Shamanism

As chapter 3 and 4 have covered in detail, shamanism was first introduced in Italy through the works of Carlos Castaneda and the popularisation of his teachings within communities loosely related to the New Age Movement first and to Paganism later. As a result, the model created by Castaneda has represented a moulding influence for those interested in practising shamanism. This model is that of a scholar endorsing the typical rationalist mindset as the average person living in a Western country who goes through a complete shift of perception after encountering, being trained and having incorporated in his still Western life the teachings of an indigenous shaman. The struggles in understanding and embracing a starkly different worldview that Castaneda addressed in his works are those that any Westerner can relate to and may wish to escape from when seeking to embark on a shamanic path. Castaneda did not end up leaving the United States to live the rest of his life in Mexico with his teacher Don Juan but went back to California choosing to incorporate and re-adapt what he had learnt to a Western life.

Being the first and most impactful story which brought shamanism to the interest of Westerners, this seemingly laid out a pattern for what the encounter between a Western and an indigenous mindset looks like, a 'Western shaman's journey' of sort. In this narrative, the indigenous shaman takes on the role of the 'saviour', who shakes the Westerner out of the West – so to speak – out of the rationalistic and positivist paradigms which dictate how to interpret the world while determining what is to be deemed real and what not. The central message thus conveys the possibility of combining the opposing worldviews as the teachings of indigenous people can transpose and be applied outside of their originating communities. Such a possibility also implies the idea that cultural products do not belong to a specific place and their employment is not limited to the communities which generated them.

Michael Harner pushes the boundaries even further, when founding his tradition of Core Shamanism, suggesting that all shamanisms share the same

core practices which he believes can be carried out by anyone regardless of their geographical or cultural belonging. This is how the concept of a trans-cultural shamanism takes form, a shamanism whose practices are not linked to any specific culture but can be employed by anyone belonging to any place or background in the world. The present chapter will henceforth address trans-cultural shamanism as it manifests in Italy, what its main traits are and the most popular traditions or groups presently active in the country.

4.1 Trans-cultural Shamanism(s)

Trans-cultural Shamanism, also referred to as cross-cultural by followers of Core Shamanism, can be defined as an umbrella term to encompass shamanic traditions practised across different countries through the same structure, as they focus on the techniques rather than on cultural heritage. These techniques are borrowed from, inspired by or reinterpretations of indigenous non-Western forms of shamanism. The most popular indigenous sources of inspiration in Italy are Native American traditions (especially Lakota and Sioux), Andean and Peruvian, Mexican, Scandinavian and Siberian shamanisms.

I chose to identify these traditions with the name most of them prefer and avoid 'neoshamanism', which is also used by scholars in reference to transcultural shamanic practices of Western descent and often adopted to distinguish between Core Shamanism and other trans-cultural traditions (Tedeschi, 2017; Townsend, 2004). 'Neoshamanism' appears to be more controversial, for it is perceived with a negative connotation as the term itself has been used to underlie its newly born status and perceived by practitioners as a means to undermine the authority of such traditions. The same attitude is encountered when trans-cultural shamanism is considered part of the New Age movement. As a consequence, I will avoid the term 'neoshamanism' and favour 'trans-cultural shamanism', which is also best suited as a descriptor of the shamanic traditions it denotes. A core trait of trans-cultural shamanisms is, in fact, that the same practices can be followed by people in Italy, France or New Zealand and adapted to different contexts. Although some of these forms are inspired from specific shamanic traditions, they do not appear to be

dependent on them. The origin is perceived more as an inspiration and some of the principles reinterpreted in a Western perspective. The epitome of this attitude is found in Core Shamanism, where it is clearly stated that the tradition is trans-cultural and not linked to any specific indigenous tradition. Only the core principles are claimed to be sourced from indigenous traditions and believed to be applicable to any cultural context, including that of Western countries.

There is a tendency towards homogenising different forms of trans-cultural shamanism under one label, assuming there is a consistent uniformity to these movements (Wallis, 2003, p. 228). Gredig argues that this is due to an 'over-representation of Harner's model of neo-shamanic engagement' while other manifestations of such traditions are excluded (Gredig, 2010, p. 26). As the data presented in this chapter will show in reference to the Italian peninsula, there are indeed a number of trans-cultural traditions currently active in the country which are not limited to the Harnerian tradition. Nonetheless, the most popular and practised shamanisms are either linked to or inspired by (and individually-tailored) reinterpretations of Core Shamanism.

4.2 Differences between Trans-cultural and Indigenous Shamanism

An article I find represents well the sentiment of those who perceive a stark difference – to the point of incompatibility – between Western and non-Western shamanisms, is Johnson's study comparing the practices of Core Shamanism in Chicaco with the Shuar's in Ecuador (Johnson, 1995). In his article, Johnson identifies some distinctive features of Core shamanism. The first one is a universalisation of the practice, meaning that shamanism is reduced 'to the shared traits of all the members of its class' but also universal because it becomes a set of techniques based on the alleged 'core' and culturally non-contingent traits (1995, p. 172). As a consequence, anyone from any place in the world, affiliated to any or no religion can expect to practice shamanism and obtain the same results as anyone else.

This contrasts with the Shuar's view and understanding of shamanic ritual, where the place as well as the performer, their development of spiritual

power and acquirement of spirit darts (*tsentsak*) are essential components in the effectiveness of the practice. A psychologizing tendency also plays a role in Core shamanism, where many of the encountered steps are explained in a psychological fashion, for instance 'soul loss' is said to be caused by psychological trauma and the discourses around soul retrieval appear based upon Freud's theory of repression and trauma (Johnson, 1995, p. 173). The view of the community also appears to differ when Johnson compared the Shuars and Core Shamanism practitioners, for the latter tend to focus more on the self and improving their own lives and well-being whereas traditional shamans seem more concerned with aiding the community rather than improving their own lives. This element also emerged from my fieldwork, specifically from an interview with Nello Ceccon,⁴¹ appointed teacher for the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Italy. To my question on whether there is a shift from the community to the self in transcultural shamanism, Nello explained that the community starts from the individual. When the person finds a way back to the power residing within each of us – he argues - the whole community will benefit from it. If someone is unwell, frustrated, unbalanced – Nello continues – their contribution to society is destructive. Communities are, thus, seen as made of individuals and the community's welfare is a consequence of that of the individuals living within it. Nello also explains that environmental pollution occurs as a result of internal pollution and disconnected-ness. The feeling of connection that shamanism brings to the life of practitioners leads them to abandon a selfish outlook on reality and, as a result, 'no one would hurt a blade of grass.' Nello's contribution informs us on a view which does not exclude the community but rather conceptualizes it as the sum of individuals, whose engagement with shamanism to improve their own lives will inevitably and ultimately benefit the community at large.

Moving forward, there is a process of 'sanitizing' occurring in Western shamanism, an epuration of all the dangerous aspects found in traditional shamanisms, such as the use of psychotropic drugs or the undertaking of extreme physical conditions to make the practice safe (Owen, 2011; Berman, 2009, p. 31). To summarise, with Johnson's words, far from being

⁴¹ From an interview conducted on the 5th of May 2017 in Villabartolomea, Verona.

independent from specific cultures, trans-cultural shamanism may actually be the product of what Berger called radical modernity,

Neo-shamans can be distinguished from shamans by their reliance on a context of radical modernity. Radical modernity entails: (1) the rationalization of society which relies on (2) universal, standardized conceptions of time and space and (3) the confrontation with a plurality of religions, which leads to (4) a focus on individual agency, choice, 'needs' and preference in the religious 'marketplace', and (5) an obsession with the 'self', subjectivity and reflexivity; (6) the discourse of mobility – individuals are free and capable of converting to any religious system in any place and at any time because (7) space is phantasmagoric and dislocated from place – there are not really sacred spaces but rather only sacred states of mind and sacred relationships with abstract deities (Johnson, 1995, p. 174).

Alongside the aforementioned, Robert Wallis also highlights some other intricacies emerging from comparing traditional shamanisms with their Western manifestations. For instance, Harner emphasises that the shaman is in control of the ecstatic experience which somehow reflects the Western need to be 'in control' over emotions, thoughts, finance and so on (Wallis, 2003, p. 54). This appears in stark contrast with what happens in traditional shamanism, where even the shamanic calling is sometimes considered a death curse (Vitebsky, 1998) and rarely a choice in pre-industrial societies due to its hazardous nature (Wallis, 2003, p. 56).

My fieldwork with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Italy further highlighted that techniques outweigh cultural diversities when evaluating whether a practice can be seen as indigenous or not. During my undertaking of the advanced training of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies on the 19th and 20th of May 2018, I asked Lorenza Menegoni – lead teacher - whether she truly believed that what we were doing during that workshop was what the Jivaro would do to perform an extraction ritual. My question was prompted by her reiteration, during that first day, that those techniques were indeed the same as theirs. She firmly restated her conviction on the matter, despite my inquiry over the potential alterations needed to adapt a shamanic training of

the Peruvian Amazon to an over-the-weekend workshop. Lorenza explained that what mattered the most was the technique and the technique (the extraction ritual, in that circumstance) was exactly the same as the Jivaro's. Nello Cecon, another teacher of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies with whom I undertook the basic workshop, endorses a slightly different perspective on the matter. During an interview on the 5th of May 2017, Nello acknowledged the existence of multiple differences between 'traditional shamanisms' (*sciamanesimi tradizionali*) – as he defines them – and trans-cultural shamanism. However, he explains that only language and methods may differ but the essence of the practice is the same and that underlying commonality is what he chooses to put the focus on. Therefore, in both cases, the message conveyed is that trans-cultural shamanism does essentially carry on the same practices of those indigenous peoples from whom they take inspiration. This is due to the distinction they make between essential and structural components to those practices, where the first bears more meaning than the latter. As a result, the active contact with the spirit world and working with allied spirits are deemed more important than the setting or the cultural context in which such techniques are executed.

Another element found in trans-cultural shamanism is the so-called 'cultural primitivism.' We can define cultural primitivism as the belief that civilisation has somewhat damaged Westerners and that a better way of living is to be found in another time and place, somewhere before the contemporary civilised world. As Armin W. Geertz explains it,

The main characteristic of cultural primitivism is that the ideal mode of life is thought to be led by contemporary so-called primitive or savage peoples, especially peoples in far-off exotic places. Thus, a basic motivating factor in cultural primitivism is the *attraction of the exotic* (Geertz, 2003, p. 39).

This is a fallacy already emerged from past scholarship on the study of indigenous people. Tylor and Frazer, for example, studied contemporary indigenous people deeming them representative of a primitive stage of humanity and hence able to allow us to understand a long gone era of humankind which would be difficult to access otherwise. This idea appears based on a romanticised primitivism which implies that a society organised in

a way that does not resemble the contemporary Western one, has necessarily remained at a stage of 'evolution' pre-dating 'civilisation'. Whether this is viewed in a positive light, as a more peaceful time where people lived in balance with nature, or in the negative light of a backwardly and retrograde social structure, it is still avoiding the reality of a diversity occurring at the same time and stage of 'evolution' where any other country is located. Cultural primitivism is strictly connected to another aspect found in the Western understanding of shamanism, the romanticising of indigenous people. This is evidenced by Michael Harner's quote, reported on the official website of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, on the web page addressing the 'official definition' of shamanism. Here Harner remarks,

Shamanism is not 'New Age.' It is Stone Age and has been living ever since (Foundation for Shamanic Studies, n.d.).

In Western society, the positivist underpinning that portrays the physical measurable world as separated from the metaphysical unmeasurable aspects of human experience, has impacted the view of shamanism that Westerners have (Puca, 2018a). The most common idea is that the shaman is a peaceful individual whose spiritual endeavours have as their main purpose the welfare of the community. He or she is somewhat perceived as above material interests, such as money or power. This view occurs as a result of a perceived dichotomy between spiritual and material, which I argue to be a consequence of a positivist paradigm underlying the social construction of Western societies. Contrary to this romanticised belief, traditional shamans are not solely spiritual beings transcending the physical world and all of its desires, concerns or fears deriving from it. Even Harner reports that the Shuar people asked for a shotgun as a payment, seemingly the most common compensation asked within those communities (Johnson, 1995; Harner, 1982).

All these reinterpretation traits of the indigenous shamanic practices in the Western world allow shamanism to take on the role of an escape from the Western social structure, albeit through its very categories of interpretation of the world. Where the Western society is perceived to focus on materialism, rationalism, warfare and laying in a state of disconnection from nature,

shamanism becomes an escape from it. A perceived solution to engage with spirituality by losing the grip on material possessions and the positivist disenchanting outlook on reality, to foster a state of peace and a reconnection to nature and the self. If shamanism becomes a spiritual escape, it makes sense that the ones seeking such a scope would turn their gaze at far-away places in the hope of attaining a completely different perspective on life.

What my data suggests is that the re-enchantment brought about by shamanism to Western practitioners is somewhat linked to a disenchantment of the Western culture and its main features. Trans-cultural shamans want to access a pre-Western state of consciousness, so to speak, an imagined lost perspective on things which allows a deep interaction between persons and all the other living beings populating the world, which - in an animistic view - would include every manifested element of reality, or what Hallowell calls 'other-than-human persons' (Hallowell, 1960, 1992, p. 63). As a result, practitioners are drawn to non-Western cultures to substantiate their need for a completely other way of living and interpreting the world.

In the next sections of the chapter, I will be tackling the different forms of trans-cultural shamanism active on the Italian peninsula and how they are socially and culturally constructed as counter-culture and an alternative not only to the dominant religious system but also to the dominant worldview.

4.3 The Lingering Heredity of Carlos Castaneda

Carlos Castaneda was an American author and undoubtedly the most influential figure in the first spreading of shamanism in Italy.⁴² Born in 1925 and deceased in 1998, Castaneda collected the material for his first and most famous book *The Teachings of Don Juan* while conducting fieldwork for his PhD at the University College California, Los Angeles, on the use of the psychotropic drugs in Mexico (Castaneda, 1968). The book became very popular in the United States and began to be translated in other languages, making Castaneda's alleged experiences with the shaman Don Juan available

⁴² See the data emerged from interviews on the first spreading of shamanism in chapter 2.

to a wider public around the world. The book was first translated in Italian as *A Scuola dallo Stregone* (literally 'At School with the Sorcerer') in 1970, just a year after its first publication in English, yet the Italian title was changed from the 1990s onwards to *Gli Insegnamenti di Don Juan* to mirror the original title at the letter (Castaneda, 1970a, 1999). After the public success of his first book, Castaneda published several more works based on his alleged experiences with his Yaqui teacher, tackling different aspects of the practice as well as unfolding the philosophical underpinning and cosmology underlying Don Juan's teachings.

When Castaneda first became popular, shamanism was not yet a known movement and – both in the original version and in Italian – there is no mention of 'shaman' nor 'shamanism' as the label which Castaneda reports as per his teacher's vocabulary was *brujo*, which translates as 'sorcerer' in English and *stregone* in Italian. Yet there is no doubt among contemporary readers that what Castaneda narrates of is shamanism. On this remark, it is interesting to notice how the phenomenon generated by Castaneda has gone beyond what the book prompting its inception conveys, both linguistically and in terms of its message. As David L. Krantz highlights, although Castaneda's works do not fit the category of self-help books nor do they portray him as a 'guru', they were still interpreted on a large scale as conveying a new philosophy of living and a way to reshape the lives of those who embraced it (Krantz, 2006, p. 576).

This reception may be due to the relatability of Castaneda's experience and the new cosmology he created. Even though the average Westerner reading his books would not have had the same experiences derived from encountering a Yaqui shaman in Mexico, the rational struggles as well as the process of understanding and embracing such a different worldview were extremely relatable for any Westerner picturing to be in his position. Castaneda also offered a 'separate reality', to reference his second book, a new understanding of the world which somehow validates the mundane daily experience of the world while offering an alternative, another reality which can be entered and exited at will (Castaneda, 1991). This idea, endorsed by many other trans-cultural authors such as Michael Harner, is very appealing to a Western audience who wants to escape their current state of living without

changing their lives outright. The possibility to enter and exit a shamanic 'reality' at will also emphasises the role played by 'the self' and 'self-control', which are traits of known value in the Western world, while keeping intact the daily 'ordinary reality' in which people have still to live in once the shamanic experience has ended. The cosmology portrayed by Castaneda is a dualistic view of reality, which separates the 'ordinary reality' from the 'non-ordinary reality', where the first one refers to the daily mundane experience we have of the world while the latter hints at a separate one which can be accessed through altered states of consciousness induced at will.

The dualism created by Castaneda extends beyond his portrayed cosmology. Such a narrative also creates and reinforces in the mind of his followers – and of trans-cultural shamans more generally - the idea that shamanism is a non-Western endeavour, to which Westerners can only relate to as outsiders and never as parts of one of such traditions. The one presented is a rationality/irrationality dichotomy linked to a Western/indigenous worldview. The narrative is not that of an American rediscovering the shamanic roots of his native tradition but rather that of a Westerner who goes elsewhere to meet people who are not his own to find and learn something new as an outsider. This common narrative among trans-cultural authors may be due to them being mostly Americans (or naturalised Americans), which means that even when they were to relate to the native cultures of their land, it will still be as 'outsiders' for historical reasons. However, the same rationale would not apply to a European context, which has a very different historical development and – as I will argue in chapter 5 – its own native vernacular traditions, whose (re)discovery on the part of their inhabitants would be an insider affair.

Yet the model of shamanism set out by Castaneda has moulded the reception of shamanism, and it is still currently influential, creating a layout for practitioners' experiences to fit into. As a result, this recurring theme of 'otherness' is ingrained in the narratives of those practitioners who belong to a trans-cultural tradition along with the belief that a life-changing experience will occur by encountering an indigenous shaman. Interviews and conversations I conducted have shown that practitioners keep referencing to indigenous shamanism as a reference trope to gauge the validity of their

practices. Those practitioners who have gone on trips specifically organised to have shamanic experiences, talk about them as a validating event which gives more value to their practice. This belief still holds true to them even when acknowledging – to my asking – that the technique itself had not changed. Trips to Peru, Brazil and other countries hosting indigenous shamans are often organised by several Italian ‘cultural associations’⁴³ (Shamanic Travels, 2020; Centro Studi per lo Sciamanesimo, 2017) and those who have spent longer periods of time in contact with indigenous peoples often come back to Italy and create their own group, knowing that their short or long attendance abroad will make their voice more authoritative within trans-cultural communities.

Trans-cultural shamanism is, therefore, a Western-born form of shamanism which embodies the ambivalence of wanting to be an effective set of techniques efficacious for whomever implements them while acting as if it were subordinate to indigenous shamanism, thence conveying the tacit idea that the latter still holds the most value. The cosmology of trans-cultural shamanism is mainly based on Castaneda’s works, Core Shamanism and the New Age movement. The understanding of reality on the binary dimensions of ‘ordinary’ and ‘non-ordinary’ comes from Castaneda, while the three worlds the shaman can travel to have been popularised by Core Shamanism. The New Age belief system also plays a role in such a cosmology, as practitioners have in their common parlance terms like ‘vibrations’ and ‘energy’ which are deemed to be founding constituents of the world - also referred to as ‘universe’ - and come from a New Age worldview (Lewis and Kemp, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1996).⁴⁴ Where Castaneda and the New Age movement have laid out the philosophical underpinning for the Italian reception of shamanism, Michael Harner and his Core Shamanism have created the shared basis for its practice

⁴³ ‘Cultural association’ translates the Italian *Associazione Culturale*, the most popular classification adopted by Italian groups engaging in new religious movements or spiritual paths of different nature. These are often informally established, more rarely they are formally registered at the *Agenzia delle Entrate*. In the latter case, such groups are most commonly registered as *Associazione di Promozione Sociale* (‘Association for Social Promulgation’).

⁴⁴ More on New Age and shamanism in chapter 3.

for - as I will address in the next sections - the large majority of trans-cultural shamans in Italy follows an individual reinterpretation of Core Shamanism.

4.4 Core Shamanism, as Manifested in Italy

Core Shamanism is the American-born shamanic tradition founded by Michael Harner, an anthropologist and a scholar who conducted early in his career fieldwork among the Jivaro Shuar and the Conibo peoples in the Peruvian Amazon. His biography also reports a vast teaching experience at several institutions, including UC Berkeley, Columbia University, Yale University, and the Graduate Faculty of the New School in New York. He then left the academic career in 1989 (The Foundation for Shamanic Studies, 2020).

Michael Harner first founded the Centre for Shamanic Studies in 1979, which then became the Foundation for Shamanic Studies later in 1987 (Fonneland, 2017). By studying different traditions of Shamanism from around the world, both in the field and through literature, Harner perceived that they all shared a common pattern, core principles (von Stuckrad, 2014, p. 171). At the same time, he reckoned the Western world would benefit from incorporating such principles and this could only be achieved by making shamanism available outside the indigenous communities, for everybody everywhere in the world to practise. In his seminal book, *The Way of the Shaman*, Harner also conveys the idea that people from different cultures can integrate those core techniques with their local culture (Fonneland, 2017; Harner, 1982). This is why Core Shamanism is defined by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies as 'cross-cultural' or 'trans-cultural' for it claims to teach principles found in and applicable to all cultures while, at the same time, not being limited to any specific one.

The Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Italy, mirroring the headquarters in the United States, offers one basic and a number of advanced workshops plus – as of 2019 - a three-years programme to become an appointed teacher. The Basic workshop is mandatory to access the advanced ones and covers all the basics regarding what Core Shamanism is and how to do Shamanic Journeys to find your power animal and seek healing and knowledge. The advanced workshops tackle more specific topics, such as

divination, death and dying in the shamanic perspective, healing and the 'extraction' technique, shamanism and the spirits of nature. In order to be accepted to the advanced three-year programme, which has only been introduced in Italy in 2019, the practitioner needs to attend the basic as well as all the advanced training offered by the FSS⁴⁵ in Italy.

I will now move on to cover the interviews of the three appointed teachers and analyse how their approaches to Core Shamanism informs us on the perception of this tradition on the Italian peninsula.

4.4.1 The Teachers of The Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Italy: Three Approaches to the Tradition

During my undertaking of the basic workshop⁴⁶ of the Foundation with Nello Ceccon and one of the advanced workshops⁴⁷ with Lorenza Menegoni and Sara Tenaglia, I had the chance to engage into long conversations with all three of the appointed teachers in Italy as well as interviewing Nello and, on a later occasion, Sara. Lorenza did not accept to be recorded but was willing to answer my numerous questions during our one-hour car ride from Bologna train station to the secluded area where the training would have taken place and, likewise, on our return trip.

At the beginning of my research, between 2016 and 2017, there were two appointed teachers for the FSS Italy: Lorenza Menegoni and Nello Ceccon. During a fieldtrip conducted in May 2018, I was informed that Sara Tenaglia had recently become a faculty member as well, although she decided to not lead workshops just yet and keep assisting Lorenza Menegoni as a lead teacher. Nello and Lorenza both lead basic and advanced workshops, Nello

⁴⁵ 'FSS' will be used as an abbreviation for 'Foundation for Shamanic Studies'.

⁴⁶ The referenced workshop is Seminario di base: La via dello sciamano ('Basic workshop: The Way of Shaman'), undertaken on the 6th and 7th of May 2017 in Villabartolomea (Province of Verona). I will henceforth refer to this workshop as 'the basic workshop'.

⁴⁷ The referenced workshop is *La guarigione sciamanica e l'estrazione* ('Shamanic healing and extraction'), advanced workshop of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, held in Casalfiumanese (province of Bologna) on the 19th and 20th of May 2018. Since this is the only advanced workshop I attended during my fieldwork, I will be shortening it as 'the advanced workshop' when referring to this experience in the present chapter.

mainly in the area of Verona and the North of Italy whereas Lorenza conducts workshops throughout the country, from Sicily to Friuli Venezia Giulia.

The three teachers mirror the three main trends found among followers of the Core Shamanism tradition. Lorenza is wholeheartedly devout to Michael Harner's tradition and has affirmed on multiple occasions her rejection of any syncretism between Core and other shamanisms or New Age practices, Nello is rather eclectic and leads multiple workshops on a number of trans-cultural shamanic traditions while Sara comes from a family of *Segnatori* in Emilia Romagna and appeared amenable to a degree of syncretism between the *Segnature* and Core Shamanism. It is essential to clarify that all three teachers made it very plain - during our interviews and conversations - that when they teach for the Foundation they will abide by the techniques of Core Shamanism exclusively and will convey in the clearest fashion what is Core Shamanism as opposed to what falls outside of its domain. The syncretism - or lack thereof - applies outside of the workshops, in the daily practice of the attendees. This is where I registered a difference in approaches comparing the three teachers, which undoubtedly enriches the understanding of Core Shamanism's outreach in contemporary Italy. In the following sections, I will address all three ways to shamanism as emerged from interviewing the teachers of the FSS.

4.4.2 Lorenza Menegoni, Anthropologist and Michael Harner's Pupil

Lorenza Menegoni was born in the province of Trento, in the North of Italy, in 1948. She studied first at the University of Trento and then in New York, where she was awarded her PhD in medical anthropology. Her fieldwork was conducted in Mexico where she researched tuberculosis among the Maya in Chiapas. One of her teachers at the New School in New York was Michael Harner and, as one of his students, she also participated in his shamanic workshops (The Foundation for Shamanic Studies Europe, n.d.). During one of our conversations, Lorenza explained that she struggled to find a place in academia after her PhD. It was at that time that Michael Harner suggested she would bring Core Shamanism to Italy and she then decided to leave the academic career and dedicate herself to teaching and practising Core Shamanism in Italy. Lorenza was the official translator for the Italian edition of

Harner's book *The Way of the Shaman* and began leading workshops for the Foundation in 1997 (Harner, 1995).

Lorenza refers to herself as an anthropologist and, during the lecturing part of the workshops, referenced quite often to Michael Harner and Mircea Eliade as foundational thinkers in shamanism. Her approach to Core Shamanism may be seen as a 'purist'⁴⁸ one, as emerged from her reiterated clarifications that Core Shamanism should not be practised alongside any other spiritual or healing system, such as Reiki.⁴⁹ Lorenza also conveys the idea that the techniques taught by Core Shamanism are the same as those practised by the indigenous peoples they are inspired by (she mentioned the Jivaro and Conibo on a few occasions) and, even to my questioning, she fiercely re-affirmed that the practice was the same regardless of different settings whereby those techniques get implemented and performed. This belief might suggest the already reported idea that the technique, in and of itself, is what bears the most value in trans-cultural traditions.

4.4.3 Nello Ceccon, from Engineer to Shaman.

On the occasion of my first workshop with the Foundation Italy – the basic training in Harner's tradition - which I undertook on the 6th and 7th of May 2017 in Villabartolomea (Verona) - I decided to get there a day early and spend some time with Nello Ceccon. Nello agreed to be recorded and we engaged in a semi-structured interview on the 5th of May 2017. All the information presented in this section will be based on the conversation we had on that occasion and corroborated by later interactions via email.

Nello is an engineer in his fifties and worked as such for many years of his adult life. For a long time, he did not cultivate any interest in shamanism or related currents. A turning point in his life occurred when, during the

⁴⁸ Term used by Sara Tenaglia to describe Lorenza's approach in the interview addressed in a later section in this chapter.

⁴⁹ Reiki is a form of pranotherapy created by Dr Mikao Usui which falls under the umbrella of alternative medicine. Reiki practitioners use symbols drawn by hand and palm healing, directly on the body or at a distance, and believe to work by channelling the universal energy through them to the body needing healing (Usui and Petter, 1999). Since the early 2000s it has gained an increasing following in Italy and it is now the most popular form of pranotherapy across New Age networks.

summer of 1997, he read Florinda Donner-Graus's book *Essere nel sogno* (Donner-Grau, 1996). This book ignited his interest in the 'Non-Ordinary Reality'. Later, in May 1998, he went to Monaco to undertake the Tensegrity workshop based upon Carlos Castaneda's teachings. From that moment onwards, he became increasingly interested in shamanism to the point that he decided to pursue it further by going to one of Lorenza Menegoni's basic workshops, shortly after she was appointed as a Core Shamanism teacher by Michael Harner himself. This experience completely 'opened him to this world', he said, a world he had been very sceptical about up to that point. Especially engaging in shamanic journeying allowed him to experience first-hand what Carlos Castaneda was describing in his books as well as letting him encounter his allied spirits.

In 1999, Nello went to San Diego in California to undertake a workshop with a few of Castaneda's disciples, and later that year to New York, invited by Sandra Harner to a five days training in shamanic counselling, based upon Michael Harner's methodology. Nello reported experiencing a persistent knee-ache at the beginning of that training. However, during those days, the 'non-physical cause' of that pain was revealed to him and Nello believes this led to his full recovery by the time the training was over. In the same time period, he began his own project involving shamanic counselling while continuing to undertake all the advanced workshops of the Foundation Europe with Carlo Zumstein and a Soul Retrieval workshop with Sandra Ingermann near Seattle in 2000. On that occasion, Sandra Ingermann told Nello that he was 'gifted', which took him by surprise and allowed him to gain confidence in his shamanic skills. In 2001, Carlo Zumstein began Nello's training as a teacher for the FSS in Italy, which allowed Nello to host his first workshop as an appointed faculty member in September 2002. In 2003, he started a collaboration with Cleargreen in Italy and began performing healing rituals to help other people. In addition, Nello undertook the three-year programme of advanced shamanism with Sandra Ingermann and, from that moment onwards, he has been teaching all the workshops affiliated to the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. In 2005, Nello left his job as an engineer to dedicate himself full-time to the practice and teaching of trans-cultural shamanism. His field of action extends beyond the workshops as a faculty member for the FSS, as he is also

involved in teaching other forms of transcultural shamanism, such as the Ho'oponopono. In 2006, he undertook a workshop in Ireland and then decided to embark in this new project. Nello states, at the time of our interview, that he is the only Italian teacher for the related association, called Self I-Dentity through Ho'oponopono,⁵⁰ a tradition he now teaches in Japan and China as well. To my asking, Nello explains that he receives payments for workshops and healing ceremonies he leads. However, if the person in need of help is destitute he would be open to a non-monetary form of payment, such as bartering (*baratto*). This might not apply to FSS workshops, as they have standard costs which are partly returned to the FSS in the United States of America. Even in that case, he would give a discount if the attendee is young, a student or someone economically disadvantaged.

Nello believes everyone bears shamanic gifts and Core Shamanism can significantly help their development. As he explains, Core Shamanism is not a tradition nor a religion, it is a collection of what various shamanisms have in common. From this acknowledgement, a number of techniques have been systematised, like Soul retrieval and Extraction to provide a structure and help people start their practice. As Nello highlights, there is a considerable difference between being born in a community which embraces a shamanic worldview and growing up unaware of the existence of a non-ordinary reality. Core Shamanism provides, therefore, a 'language' to access and operate within these invisible worlds.

To the question of whether he considers himself a Catholic, Nello replied that he grew up in a Catholic environment but does not 'practise'⁵¹ anymore. Overall, on the matter of religion, he deems himself inclusive rather than exclusive, especially as he endorses the idea that shamanism is a set of techniques which can be flanked to any religion. Nello showed no aversion toward Catholicism and is respectful of those who practise Core Shamanism and are Catholics. He also believes there are shamanic elements in Catholic rites, offering – as an example – the funeral rite, which he thinks incorporates

⁵⁰ More details on this transcultural tradition later on in this chapter.

⁵¹ The matter of 'practising/non-practising' Catholics in Italy is addressed at length in chapter 6.

shamanic transcultural elements. Even the idea that souls travel to a different place and move towards the light after passing over is shamanistic, Nello highlights, as religions are ‘codified shamanic practices.’ The formalities may differ across different religions and yet many core aspects are shared as they mirror the innate human yearning for transcendence, he explains.

Nello believes that the shaman is someone who is able to access the invisible worlds, encounter invisible entities with whom he or she becomes allied, to then bring the power gained to the ordinary worlds. ‘If you access those worlds and stay there, it’s not shamanism’, he continues, ‘which is what people do when taking drugs’. The shaman is a bridge between the worlds and brings balance about. Nello defines himself as a practitioner of shamanism but if someone asks him if he is a shaman his answer would be affirmative. The rationale behind this position was elucidated by referencing Michael Harner, who – Nello recalls - states that ‘shaman’ is a term reserved to traditional settings.⁵²

Nello clarifies that the age range of those attending Core shamanism workshops in Italy is quite wide, albeit attendees in their middle-age years seem to be more numerous. In terms of gender distribution, attendees tend to be females in a larger number compared to males. However, he points out that there is more balance in Core Shamanism compared to other transcultural traditions. For instance, in the Ho’oponopono there are almost exclusively female participants. Nello continues by explaining that he thinks this might be ‘due to women being on an average more introspective and have more insight than men’.

On the matter of why is there shamanism in the contemporary Italian society, Nello explains that he deems the calling to the spirit world to be an innate tendency in humankind, regardless of time and place. The necessity to know the unknown is what determines our survival and this – Nello continues - explains the birth of religions. Shamanism may be seen as a more ‘mature’ approach to tackle this tendency as the contemporary man now wants to ‘enter the unknown’ in a spontaneous way, without relying on dogmas and

⁵² Nello does not use the descriptor ‘indigenous shamanism’, preferring ‘traditional shamanisms’ (*sciamanesimi tradizionali*) instead.

rules dictated from the outside. Shamanism is also useful to contemporary Westerners, according to Nello, because listening to the inner intuition helps navigate the material plane. He highlights that practitioners often start engaging with shamanism out of suffering, as a result of an experienced illness, loss or an identity crisis. 'Just eating, drinking and caring about material aspects of life is not sufficient to produce purpose, happiness and healing in your life', he states.

Nello Ceccon has his own website dedicated to shamanism, where FSS workshops and information are advertised alongside activities unrelated to the FSS (Ceccon, 2018). The way information is presented shows blurred boundaries between Core Shamanism and other trans-cultural traditions as several events are advertised without a clear distinction between what is related to the Foundation and pertains to other traditions. For instance, there are 'individual shamanic sessions' and monthly gatherings alongside shamanic counselling, wedding ceremonies and trips abroad to meet indigenous shamans. Ceccon is also the coordinator for the Self I-Identity Through Ho'oponopono in Italy, for which he leads workshops and seminars, and is author of a book called *The Shamanic Creation: how to awaken your creative abilities* (Ceccon, 2007). In addition, Nello leads a two-year training programme for 'Professional Shamans', which he advertised with a leaflet given to every participant at the basic training.

4.4.3 Sara Tenaglia, Enriching Core Shamanism with Vernacular Healing Traditions.

Sara Tenaglia, born in 1980 and resident of Bologna, is the youngest and latest appointed teacher for the FSS in Italy. Sara and I met when I attended the advanced workshop in May 2018 and kept in contact ever since. During the weekend when I undertook the training, we engaged into numerous conversations but only had the chance to record a formal interview via Messenger voice call on the 2nd of July 2019. The information reported in this section will be, therefore, drawn from said interview.

Sara's first contact with shamanism occurred in 1998, when Lorenza Menegoni conducted a workshop in Bologna, which she attended at the age of seventeen. That first encounter with shamanism ignited her interest in that

practice as she especially enjoyed that shamanic working was not theoretical in nature but rather practical and the idea to practice straight away during the workshops was really appealing to her. There was also a 'love at first sight' with Lorenza Menegoni as they had a very compatible approach, Sara explains. As a consequence, she mostly worked with Lorenza throughout her formation and a few other teachers of the Foundation. For a short while she attended a feminist form of shamanism, which did not resonate with her as much as Core Shamanism as she thought it was lacking a gender balance. Since Sara mentioned to have worked with teachers of the FSS who are not part of the Foundation anymore, I asked her whether they were ousted from the FSS and she explained that the person she was referring to was Carlo Zumstein, a psychotherapist who freely decided to leave the Foundation as he wanted to integrate Core Shamanic practices with other techniques, adopting a more eclectic approach. Sara highlights that - at the time - Michael Harner was still alive and hence the teaching programme they had to stick to was more rigid and less open to incorporating outside elements. After Harner's passing, with the launch of the Foundation Europe, Sara now has as a reference point Roland Urban and she noticed now there is more 'flexibility' (*flessibilità*). She deems this opening to be a natural evolution for with the changing of generations and the passing of time, things become less rigidly adherent to the original standard set by Harner. After all - she continues - there is no deontological code for the teachers, only a set of auspicious behaviours, and hence every teacher can do what they want. Sara also clarified that she has never heard of anyone being ousted from the Foundation, although she assumes that may occur in extreme scenarios.

The process of becoming a teacher, also referred to as faculty member, of the FSS Italy is not easy to appraise and so I asked Sara herself to elucidate how someone can become a teacher. According to Sara's experience, the practitioner first needs to undertake all the basic and advanced workshops offered by the FSS Italy, to then follow a three-year programme which will be a further development of the teachings and techniques conveyed during the standard workshops. In addition, the already appointed teachers in Italy need to send references on your behalf to the FSS in the US and Europe. Consequently, there will be a set of audits and the person will – at that stage

- be considered 'in formation', which means they will work directly with the director/president of the FSS Europe or America. Sara reiterates she had to practise a lot before becoming a teacher and did so by starting to lead 'Shamanic Circles' (*cerchi sciamanici*), which she still organises in Bologna. Eventually, a position needs to open for someone to become a teacher. 'A few years ago, Italy already had Lorenza and Nello and' – Sara continues – 'another teacher was not necessary, considering the average number of attendees'. However, now Lorenza is over the age of seventy and thought of 'passing the baton' as she is getting tired of carrying out the same amount of work she used to. So, Lorenza spoke to Roland Urban and told him there was a need for a new teacher to start leading the basic workshops of the FSS in Italy. Roland asked whether she and Nello had someone to recommend for the position and they deemed Sara to be the right fit as she was evaluated ready for the task after twenty years of formation. If someone were to propose themselves to the FSS Europe without references from current faculty members, they would likely be rejected as the FSS Europe will always ask the already appointed teachers whether there is need for a new one. This occurs because they are trying to avoid competition between the teachers and so it becomes a matter of 'keeping an equilibrium between supply and demand'. Lorenza confirmed Sara's explanation for, during one of our conversations, she also mentioned that they tend to keep the number of appointed teachers quite low, otherwise there would be competition to get enough participants to carry out a workshop. The three-year programme has launched in Italy in 2019, as Sara thinks there is now an increasing number of practitioners interested in undertaking it as well as more teachers in the country to cover all the events. Prior to 2019, Italians who wished to join this programme had to go abroad, wherever the FSS Europe was holding the classes. Sara, for instance, recalls she had to undertake them in Switzerland.

Sara belongs to a family of *Segnatori*,⁵³ on her mother's side. These *Segnature* were passed down to her as she was interested in introducing them in her shamanic working. Sara highlights her active choice as a core element

⁵³ The *Segnatori* are practitioners of folk magic in Italy. This tradition will be fully tackled, analysed and compared to shamanism in Chapter 5.

to being initiated, which she deems typical to her home region (Emilia Romagna) and other Northern regions. From speaking to Southern friends, such as one from Calabria, she gathered that in the South the passage of *Segnature* may be more linked to belonging to the bloodline whereas in Emilia Romagna anyone who wants to 'receive' the *Segnature* can get them. She remembers dearly her grandmother organising gatherings on Christmas Eve - evening or night⁵⁴ - to initiate those who were willing to acquire these magical skills and reports these sessions to be moving experiences for everyone involved, as they strengthened a sense of belonging to the community. Sara was initiated and received the *Segnature* for St. Anthony's Fire, warts, pneumonia, sprains, worms, fear and high fever.⁵⁵

Since Sara is so well versed in vernacular healing alongside being a faculty member of the FSS Italy, I asked her whether - being effectively a *Segnatrice*⁵⁶- has affected (*influisce*) in any way her Core Shamanism workings and teaching. In Sara's words,

It does affect it in the sense that, when it comes to allied spirits, spiritual masters, etc. they will get a little mixed up at some point. The *Segnature* work more with the Christian tradition, with St. Michael and the archangels. Yet, when I actually started wondering which Gods or Goddesses or spirits to call upon in my practice, I realised that this had contaminated my shamanistic work enough anyway. In the sense that I often and willingly go to the non-ordinary world and call St. Michael rather than someone else. I've felt like this way would get me a bit more connected to my land, which is something I was really lacking, with the sole work of the Foundation. Because they [Core Shamanism] give you a general framework and, in my opinion, deepening it with a grip on local traditions is very important and can also facilitate the work. When we do a Shamanic Circle, I talk to people and tell them, 'Try to

⁵⁴ As Chapter 5 will cover in depth, this is the time of the year when – according to the tradition – the initiation can be performed.

⁵⁵ All the illnesses encompassed by the practice of *Segnature* will be elucidated in Chapter 5.

⁵⁶ Female singular for the practitioner of *Segnature*. *Segnatori*, the declension I will be using the most in this study is male plural.

contact and call upon the spirits and masters of your local tradition’ and I see that, for example, it is much more immediate for people to do the work afterwards. So perhaps, it makes me say, that based on where you are - being really focused on where you are - even on the spiritual level, provides you with an extra gear. At least it has served me a lot [...] The spirits of the place, truly!’⁵⁷

Sara made plain her belief that Core Shamanism lacks contextualisation and that she thinks it would be beneficial to enrich its practice with elements of the local traditions of the current time. Throughout our interview, as well as across our conversations in person, Sara has always shown an inclination towards eclecticism, the importance of individually-tailoring the shamanic practice and the relevance played by local traditions. I encouraged Sara to express how she feels about adopting an approach radically different from the one her mentor endorses. Sara’s response confirms my impression of Lorenza as a ‘purist’ (*purista*) to then explain that such an approach might be due to her being a first generation of Harner’s trainees, rigidly adherent to the standardised framework set by the Foundation. This involves a refusal of any kind of syncretism, which Sara is amenable to include in her practice. Sara believes that every person should be able to incorporate the elements which resonate with their personal inclinations. As important as it is to clarify which techniques belong to Core Shamanism itself – and hence to bear that acknowledgement in mind - if someone feels a connection with Nordic

⁵⁷ ‘Influisce nel senso che a livello di spiriti alleati, maestri e maestre, a un certo punto si sono un po’ mescolate le cose. Nel senso che le Segnature lavorano più con la tradizione Cristiana in realtà però ho iniziato un po’ a riflettere su quali dei o dee, spiriti chiamare e le Segnature sono legate a San Michele, a tutto un discorso legato agli arcangeli e al Cristianesimo, e mi sono resa conto che questa cosa ha contaminato abbastanza comunque il mio lavoro nella pratica dello sciamanismo. Nel senso che spesso e volentieri vado nel mondo non ordinario e chiamo San Michele piuttosto che qualcun altro. Un po’ mi sono sentita di legarmi di più alla parte legata alla mia terra che è una cosa che a me mancava in realtà, rispetto al lavoro della Foundation. Perché Loro ti danno un quadro generale e secondo me approfondirlo nel locale è molto importante e può anche agevolare. Quando facciamo un cerchio sciamanico, io parlo con le persone e dico ‘Provate a contattare, chiamare maestre e maestri della tradizione locale’ e vedo che ad esempio per le persone è molto più immediate fare il lavoro dopo. Quindi forse, mi viene da dire, che in base a dove sei – stare concentrato veramente su dove sei – anche al livello spirituale è una marcia in più. Almeno a me è servito molto, ecco [...] Gli spiriti del luogo proprio, veramente.’ *Translation is mine.*

traditions or Goddess worship, they can continue to work with such traditions having acquired more tools in their toolkit. The shamanic practice for Sara needs to be very fluid, practice-led and individually-tailored or – otherwise - it could become a constraint (*forzatura*).

According to Sara, a shaman is a person who is able to travel to the spiritual realm, gather power from it and bring it to the physical realm to heal people. She defines herself as a shaman, according to her own definition of the term. Shamanism is a life choice, Sara explains, not a part-time hobby as its effects will cascade on and affect every other aspect of the practitioner's life, providing a new outlook on every experience and determining how practitioners position themselves in the world.

4.4.4. Drawing a Portrait of Core Shamanism in Contemporary

Italy

The three different approaches of the three appointed teachers of the Foundation in Italy present a portrait of Core Shamanism's reception and integration on the part of shamanic practitioners on the peninsula. It is extremely rare to find Lorenza's more purist approach where core shamanic techniques are used on their own, without any form of syncretisation. The most popular reception of Core Shamanism is more in line with Nello's and Sara's approaches, where techniques are learned and collected in a toolkit which will then be implemented however the person deems appropriate. Most commonly, these practices are syncretised with other trans-cultural traditions, with vernacular healing techniques and with Paganism.

This was evidenced by a poll I opened on the 29th of December 2019 on the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy', inquiring what tradition of shamanism they practised.⁵⁸ Out of 151 respondents, only 4 members voted for 'Core shamanism' and, even in their cases, their comments on previous posts as well as their public profiles would suggest that a degree of syncretism in their personal practice is clearly implemented.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ This poll's results will be analysed in depth in the next section of the present chapter.

⁵⁹ Two of them advertise their own 'basic workshops' in shamanism, albeit not being affiliated to the FSS Italy, whilst another shows his interest in Celtic Paganism.

My conclusion – based upon data collected on my fieldwork, conversations, posts and polls in the Facebook group and a survey – is that Core Shamanism in Italy is not received and practised as a tradition, but rather as a trend, a moulding layout for the Westerner who wants to start practising shamanism with a cross-cultural and eclectic approach. Where Castaneda ignited the interest in shamanism through his works, Core Shamanism provided the tools, the techniques and worldview to turn that interest into practice. Yet, the average practitioner of Harner's tradition will not adhere to the layout set by the Foundation and re-interpret it liberally, tailoring the practice based on individual inclinations. Core Shamanism in Italy can therefore be seen a set of techniques, perceived as a practical model, which eclectic trans-cultural shamans will reshape according to their own belief system and inclinations. Core Shamanism has shown to be the most influential form of trans-cultural shamanism in Italy. The large majority of shamanic practitioners do not deem themselves affiliated to any specific form of shamanism and yet their practice, as well as groups of workshops they participate in or even lead as teachers, are clearly influenced by the setting provided by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies.

4.5 Other Forms of Trans-cultural Shamanism

The groups and traditions of trans-cultural shamanism in Italy are so numerous and often characterised by a short life-span that it appears unfeasible to track them all. At the beginning of my fieldwork, the only lead I had was a list of the active groups on the peninsula provided by the CESNUR's⁶⁰ website (CESNUR, 2014a). During the first months, I realised that half of those groups were not active anymore and their contact details were not operative. My Facebook group and the networking resulted from my fieldtrips allowed me to identify a few of the numerous associations still active across the country. The rationale for selecting the ones reported below is not based on popularity or number of affiliates, as these variables change rather quickly and I was not able to keep track of them. However, albeit the numbers

⁶⁰ Centre for the Study of New Religions.

and groups change at a fast rate, certain patterns remain the same, the most relevant being the themes around which these shamanic groups gravitate. These recurring themes are extremely useful in portraying a picture of trans-cultural shamanism and appear to be more relevant than individual groups themselves, as they rise and fall continuously while their typologies stay consistent. Consequently, the selected groups will be organised by such themes to the intent of providing examples of the patterns whereby interpretations of shamanism occur on the peninsula. It is also noteworthy to clarify that the groups listed in this section are public groups which advertise their activities to disseminate their work and attract more attendees to the events they host. This is in contrast with the vast majority of trans-cultural practitioners, who favour private environments and only on occasion attend events hosted by groups, yet they do take inspiration from organised practices and the experiences of other attendants to individually tailor their own.

To better understand the distribution of the different shamanic traditions among Italian practitioners, I opened a poll in the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy' on the 29th of December asking its - at the time - 1800ca members what their shamanic affiliation was. Out of 151 respondents, the most selected option was 'I'm an eclectic practitioner and I get inspiration from various traditions'⁶¹ with 58 votes, followed by 'Personal tradition inspired by Core Shamanism or Castaneda'⁶² with 31 votes. 20 members selected 'Native American',⁶³ 10 'Siberian'⁶⁴ tradition, 9 'Andean'⁶⁵ and 5 'Nordic'⁶⁶ tradition. Maria Capasso – whose case study is addressed in chapter 7 – added the option 'Sardinian, Italian and other cultures'⁶⁷ which was chosen by 8 members of the group. 'Asian Traditions (Nepalese, Indian, Japanese, Chinese)'⁶⁸ was selected by 3 practitioners while 'Buryat'⁶⁹ – added

⁶¹ 'Sono eclettico/a e mi ispiro a molte tradizioni diverse'. All translations are mine.

⁶² 'Tradizione personale ispirata a Core Shamanism o Castaneda'.

⁶³ 'Popolo rosso (indiani d'America)'. Option added by a member.

⁶⁴ 'Tradizione Siberiana'.

⁶⁵ 'Tradizione Andina'.

⁶⁶ 'Tradizione Norrena'.

⁶⁷ 'Sarda, italiana e di altre culture'. Option added by Maria Capasso. See chapter 6.

⁶⁸ 'Tradizione asiatica (Nepalese, Indiana, Giapponese, Cinese)'.

⁶⁹ 'Mongolo Butiata'. Option added by a member, I assumed he misspelled 'Buriata' as 'Butiata'.

as an option by a member – was chosen by 3 people. Those who deem themselves followers of Core Shamanism were only 4 members, confirming my thesis that Core Shamanism has become more popular and widely practised in its reinterpretation that as a tradition in and of itself.

4.5.1 Castaneda-inspired Groups

Tensegrity Italia is the Italian branch of the school created by Carlos Castaneda, based upon the alleged teachings he received from Don Juan Matus (Braga, 2010, p. 72). According to the Italian school, 'Tensegrity' represents the tension towards the integrity that the spiritual seafarer (*navigante*) aims to achieve. The term seafarer is connected to the belief that the practitioners need to have some characteristics in common with a seafarer sailing through the 'energetic tides' of the Universe, features like 'the passion, the courage, the imagination, the alertness, the discipline, the self-awareness [...] the humility' (Tensegrity Italia, 2018).

To fulfil the Tensegrity, there are different tools that the practitioner can use. First the Magical Passes described by Castaneda in his book (Castaneda, 1997), which help synchronise the body with its spiritual component. A reconsideration of one's experiences, belief system and behaviours are also considered fruitful to retrieve the vital energy lost through interactions with the world. Another tool is the 'Theater of Infinity' where, helped by the Magical Passes and other practitioners, episodes from the person's life are re-enacted and relived with a different awareness. The Art of Dreaming prompts an enhanced attention towards the dream world, by taking a journal of dreams and learning how to be aware while dreaming. Lastly, silence is a tool to foster a dialogue with the 'inner seer' and then keep notes of the insights emerged (Tensegrity Italia, 2018). The events the group organises are of three kinds: seminars, experiential workshops and conferences. Most of these events can be attended online as well as in person.

Another association which focusses primarily on the form of shamanism popularised by Castaneda is *Associazione Intento* ('Association Intention'), led by Marco Baston and centred around Toltec Shamanism, also

referred to as Nagualism. The association authored⁷⁰ numerous books, which are available to download on the official website, and tackle Nagualism from the personal perspective of someone who has had a direct experience of the tradition. In the book *Il Linguaggio Tolteco di Felipe Amezcua* ('The Toltec language of Felipe Amezcua'), authored by the association, there is an open comparison between the Toltec tradition the authors have experienced and the one portrayed by Carlos Castaneda in his books (Baston, 2020; Associazione Intento, 2018).

Although groups solely dedicated to Toltec Shamanism represent a minority in Italy, Castaneda's works are still the most influential among shamanic practitioners and continue to shape the practitioners' perception of what shamanism is and how the relationship between a Westerner and a form of indigenous shamanism takes place.

4.5.2 Psychological Shamanisms

Another leading strand of transcultural shamanism in Italy is represented by the one which attempts to integrate shamanism with psychology and psychotherapy. Forerunner of this trend was Sandra Ingermann, an American author and member of Foundation for Shamanic Studies, who then developed her own 'cross cultural shamanic healing method' called 'Soul Retrieval', translated in Italian as *Il recupero dell'anima* (Ingerman, 2002, 2008, 2013; Ingerman and Wesselman, 2012). Sandra Ingerman holds a Master's degree in counselling psychology awarded by the California Institute of Integral Studies (Harvey, 2003, p. X). Evidencing an academic degree, on the part of teachers, is extremely common in transcultural shamanism in general and within this strand specifically. In her workshops, books and interviews, Sandra Ingerman always introduces shamanism as the 'pact of direct revelation', meaning that – differently from other religious systems – there is no intermediary needed in shamanism as the practitioner can enter into a direct contact with the spirit world. To this purpose, shamanic journeying is the key technique for those who want to pursue shamanism. As Ingerman explains,

⁷⁰ Although Marco Baston is in charge of the association and the website's copyright is on his name, the referenced book appear to be authored by the association. This is confirmed by the use of the plural in the narrating voice.

shamanic journeying is able to allow anyone to experience first-hand a contact with the spirits who grant power and knowledge, which can be then brought back to the daily life and help the community (Ingerman, 2008). Another pivotal technique, according to Ingerman, is 'Soul Retrieval' which she explains as the method by which the person can mend a fragmented Self. One's Self can lose its wholeness as a result of a traumatic event, which leads part of the vital essence to part from the individual in an attempt to survive the experience by avoiding the full impact of the pain. The issue arises as that part of the person's vital essence, also referred to as 'the Self' or 'the Soul', remains lost and hence causes disease of various nature to the now fragmented person. Both diagnosis and healing of such a state are performed by shamanic journeys of different kind (Ingerman, 2011). Sandra Ingerman's narrative encompasses elements from conventional psychotherapy, with the intent to provide healing techniques which the latter does not provide. Such an approach, proposed as grounded in psychotherapy while also moving forward from it, has had a significant impact on those shamanic communities and traditions which started to incorporate, syncretise with or base their practices on psychotherapeutic concepts and methodologies (Walter and Fridman, 2004, p. 227). In the next sections, I will illustrate two examples of groups which are shamanistic in nature while also incorporating elements of conventional psychology and psychotherapy.

4.5.2.1 Biotransenergetica (BTE)

Biotransenergetica is a technique created by Pier Luigi Lattuada, which combines Transpersonal Psychology, perennial philosophy and shamanism. To better understand this shamanistic-inspired current, I interviewed Lattuada on the 28th of September 2018. The following information is thence drawn from the experiences and views Lattuada shared on that occasion.

Lattuada is a registered psychotherapist and psychologist, whose first experiences with shamanism occurred in Brazil in the 1982. Since his first wife was a Brazilian woman, he had spent two months a year in Brazil for two decades. As he reports, in twenty years he had numerous experiences, both with syncretic Afro-Brazilian traditions and with Amazonian tribes such as the Kayapo, the Xavante and the Bororo. Lattuada also mentions to have

encountered the Shipibo in Peru and the Quechua in Ecuador, hinting at a wide range of experiences with numerous indigenous peoples. As a result, his worldview began to change, to the point where he started incorporating some elements and concepts arisen from his experiences in his practice. This is how his methodology of transpersonal psychology was born, which he succeeded to have officialised as a Postgraduate Specialisation Programme (*Scuola di Specializzazione*) by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) in Italy. In Lattuada's words, 'It is psychotherapy with shamanic elements, which means it hasn't lost the soul as it often happens of academic subjects'. Shamanism was of significant important in Lattuada's life, as it gave him a 'connection with spirituality and the soul of the world'. His experiences with what he refers to as 'spirituality' are not limited to shamanism, as he reported having had encounters with Tantric Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia and Siberia as well as with religious Northern African traditions.

The wide variety of shamanic traditions he has practised throughout his life led me to inquire whether he perceived an underlying similarity among all the shamanisms he has encountered. Lattuada explained that it all depends on whether you want to employ a unifying or a divisive perspective on the matter and, since his interest is adopting a unifying glance in his understanding, he does acknowledge a shared core among all the shamanisms he has experienced. Lattuada defines shamanism as the act of entering expanded states of consciousness and engaging with the spirit realms to receive teachings and strength for healing purposes. Shamanism is, therefore, not a religion nor something 'you follow.' Lattuada continued explaining that he does not practise shamanism *per se* but he applies what he has learnt from shamanism to psychotherapy so to expand the methodology employed within contemporary psychotherapy. He thinks that 'a spiritual perspective should be reintroduced in science as it has been discarded for too long in search for unreachable objectivity'. Currently, he believes that science is a 'religion', for its dogmatic approach imbued with positivism and reductionism which deems it appropriate to apply the same methodology employed in natural sciences to the study of the psyche and spiritual phenomena. Such an approach is inadequate and hence he has decided to reintroduce a more holistic approach to the psychotherapy practice.

Biotransenergetica is, thus, an integral form of psychotherapy that - as Lattuada explains - works on multiple levels, including the different states of consciousness (Lattuada, 2012). It aims not only at healing psychological conditions but also to the 'evolution' of the patient. It is a form of transpersonal or integral psychology (Calabrese, 2014). To my question on whether there are liaison points between shamanism and psychotherapy, Lattuada replied that the roots of all healing methods can be traced back to shamanism. In his words, 'It is like asking whether there is a connection between the letters of the alphabet and a novel'. I then enquired whether the psychotherapist following the Biotransenergetica method goes into a trance state, since he had previously highlighted the importance of altered states of consciousness in the shamanic practice. Lattuada replied,

If by trance you mean listening to yourself, to the fields around you and the other person, then yes, he or she goes into a trance state. It is about capturing the essence of all things. If you are listening to a tree instead of thinking of what you have to do, you enter a state of trance or presence of unity. The same happens if you listen to your patients. Trance is expanding your consciousness and connecting yourself to the other person. In tantric Buddhism is *rigpa*, in Japan is *satori*. All traditions have this kind of state.

Psychosynthesis, developed by Roberto Assagioli,⁷¹ is another approach to psychotherapy which presents significant similarities to Biotransenergetica as they both follow the integral and transpersonal strand of psychotherapy. However, as Lattuada points out, Biotransenergetica works more with 'the forces of nature' while Psychosynthesis aims more at reaching the higher states of the Self. Biotransenergetica also manifests a syncretism with Eastern philosophies and religions. In our interview, he mentioned a practice called 'Shifting/crossing to the Zero' (*Passaggio dallo zero*) which involves entering a state which Lattuada compared to the Buddhist state of

⁷¹ Psychosynthesis, English translation of *Psicosintesi*, is an approach to psychotherapy created and developed by Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli. It is considered a forerunner of humanistic and transpersonal psychology and aims at integrating all the facets of human psyche, including those connected to a Higher Self which goes beyond the individual Self (Assagioli, 1977, 2000).

anattā.⁷² There are also other elements borrowed from Indian philosophies which are employed and integrated in Biotransenergetica, such as the chakras (Silveira and Lattuada, 1994).

Lattuada promotes the inclusion of elements of shamanism in our daily life and in our understanding of human nature as well as the environment. Adopting shamanic teachings in the contemporary world means to reach, as Lattuada stated in our interview, a 'Beyond-rational thinking' (*pensiero sovrarazionale*) and thus avoid thinking solely through the lens of a rationality which disenchanting the world.

4.5.2.2 Self I-Dentity Through Ho'oponopono

Ho'oponopono is the Hawaiian word for 'setting it right' and refers to a complex system of practices 'for maintaining harmonious relationships and resolving conflict within extended family' (Shook, 1985, pp. 1–2). The most popular definition of this practice has become the one provided by the esteemed Hawaiian teacher Mary Kawena Pukui while the development of its cross-cultural adaptation is credited to Morrnah Nalamaku Simeona, a woman recognised as a *kahuna lapa'au* (healer) in Hawaii who created in the 1970s the practice of Self I-dentity Through Ho'Oponopono, sometimes referred to with the acronym SITH® (Bodin et al., 2016). As E. Victoria Shook highlights in her study on the contemporary practice of *ho'oponopono*, some variations of this practice have existed in Hawaii before the advent of Europeans, although they saw a decline in interest around the mid-1900s (Shook, 1985, p. 7).

To better understand the *ho'oponopono* techniques as well as how they are taught and practised on the Italian peninsula, I interviewed Nello Ceccon - coordinator of SITH® in Italy - on the 31st of March 2020. As emerged from our interview, Nello undertook his first workshop in Ireland in 2006, he then invited Hew Len to teach this method in Italy in 2009 and 2011. In 2011, Hew

⁷² *Anātman* in Sanskrit, or *anattā* in Pāli, is a key concept in Buddhist philosophy which negates the ontological existence of the *Anātman*, conceptualised as a solid permanent and separate Self (Kuznetsova et al., 2012; Pérez-Remón, 2012).

Len first asked Nello to be his assistant instructor. After one year, in 2012, Nello became an instructor himself and has been teaching the SITH techniques ever since. Nello does not only lead workshops in Italy but also in Asian countries, such as Japan and China, as well as in the United States and United Kingdom. Nello highlighted that it is essential to make a distinction between the practice of Ho'Oponopono in traditional Hawaiian settings and the standardised method of Self I-identity Through Ho'Oponopono, developed by Morrnah Nalamaku Simeona and popularised, after her death, by Dr. Hew Len worldwide. The method of SITH is not a form of shamanism, Nello clarifies, but rather a Self-improvement set of techniques with spiritual elements. He explains that Morrnah Nalamaku Simeona included 'Self I-identity' in the name of her method resorting to the linguistic resemblance of the English 'I', which refers to one's identity, and the Hawaiian I, which refers to the divine intelligence within us and everything. The core message conveyed is often summarised in the sentences 'I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you' and the whole system is centred around forgiveness, understanding and conflict resolution. As Nello explains, the issues that people experience in their daily life are a result of memories replaying in our subconscious mind, *hunihipili* in the Hawaiian language, which interpret certain sensations as sorrowful. Releasing such memories and breaking the chain that connects those with the individual experience of reality will allow the person to change entirely their approach to the world and their life. To enter this process, there are meditations, breathing techniques, a system of twelve steps and 'cleaning tools' (*strumenti di pulizia*) which are aimed directly at the *hunihipili* to prevent the subconscious mind from clinging onto these replaying memories. The SITH system is learned during the workshops, but needs to be exercised throughout the person's life to be effective.

There are two levels of workshops offered in Italy, the Basic 1, which is an entry-level articulated in three types of workshops, and the Basic 2, which is the advanced one. The Basic 1 level consists of workshops on the SITH method more generically plus other two workshops focussing on either improving health or personal finances. The Basic 2 runs quite rarely, Nello informs, and it instructs on techniques which are very advanced and require the attendee to have undertaken a Basic 1 workshop as well as having

practised *Ho'Oponopono* for over two years. This more advanced workshop includes practices which are more shamanistic and yet Nello emphasises more than once that these are not shamanic practices, even when they show some resemblance to them. For instance, there is a technique of 'Soul restoration' which might be linked to the shamanic soul retrieval and yet the two are rather different, he argues, both for their nature and their aims. In Nello's experience, those who practise SITH do not know what shamanism is and neither wish to, as they appear more interested in finding a solution to practical problems and resolving conflicts in their lives through self-improvement. If he had to compare SITH to a religious path, Nello finds it to be more akin to Buddhism than shamanism and adds that - especially in Korea - there have been many Buddhist monks undertaking his workshops. To conclude our interview, Nello confirms my impression that there are numerous and wide-ranging - books on *Ho'Oponopono*, which makes it rather difficult to identify which ones tackle the method developed by Mornnah Nalamaku Simeona. To this purpose, Nello suggested to stick to the only two books he believes adhere to the SITH method, which are *Dewdrops of Wisdom* authored by the Foundation of I, which gathers the teachings of Mornnah Nalamaku Simeona, and *Zero Limits* by Joe Vitale, which is based on the workshops conducted by Hew Len (Vitale and Len, 2007; The Foundation of I, 1990). In *Zero Limits*, Joe Vitale keeps referring to Hew Len as the 'shaman therapist' (Vitale and Len, 2007, p. 9) or simply the 'shaman' (2007, p. 18,166).

4.5.2.3 Shamanistic Paganism

As discussed in chapter 3, Pagan communities fostered the spreading of shamanism in Italy. From the very beginning of its diffusion, Paganism in Italy seemed imbued with shamanistic elements as practitioners manifest an animistic and pantheistic worldview akin to the one underpinning shamanic practice. This was – and is – specifically the case with eclectic Pagans loosely associated with or inspired by the Wiccan religion, while the Pagans affiliated to ceremonial and reconstructionist traditions would not show the same approach. The yearly national Pagan Pride day which has been held in Villa Pamphili in Rome since 2001 features shamanic journeying as one of the offered workshops and the president of Pagan Pride Italy, Vanth Spirit Walker, is a practitioner of Core Shamanism himself. To better understand his point of

view as a representative of Paganism and a practitioner of shamanism in Italy, I interviewed Vanth on the 29th of April 2017, when I gathered the following information.

Fabrizio Ferrara, best known as Vanth Spirit Walker, is a well-known figure in the Italian Pagan and Shamanic community. Born in 1963, he has been for two decades the president of the first Pagan association on the Italian territory, called 'Pagan Pride Italia'. Vanth defines his practice as 'Celtic Shamanism' and has been influenced by Core Shamanism and Wicca. He has studied with the FSS for twelve years and still works with Lorenza Menegoni, helping her during basic and advanced training organised by the Foundation. During our interview, he explained that Core Shamanism is not a religious or spiritual practice as it only gives you a technique. In order to integrate this set of techniques, the person needs to develop their own spirituality which can be of any nature. There are a number of practitioners who consider themselves Catholics or are affiliated to other forms of religions or spirituality, likewise Vanth feels connected to a Celtic spirituality. The main shamanic practice he engages in is journeying, primarily to perform divinations and healing. Another aspect highlighted by Vanth was that shamanic healing is not meant to be exclusive for it only heals the spiritual aspect of the illness. To also let the physical component recover you must consult a traditional doctor. This is a concept that was also stressed during the FSS workshops I undertook, so much so that Lorenza Menegoni made all participants sign out an acknowledgement form. Since healing is believed to be a spiritual process whose success depends on changes that the person needs to make in their life, Vanth deems extremely important to obtain consent before performing any ritual of this sort. It would not be ethical to trigger a deep change within somebody who is not willing to embrace it. Vanth believes that it is acceptable to ask for money for a shamanic practice and he does not ask for a compensation. However, when the person spontaneously gives him a thank you gift, such as a pie or some fruit, he will gladly accept it. The belief system underlying this set of techniques is animistic, he argues. Everything in nature is deemed to be alive, sentient and able to communicate to you. This communication is tailored upon the individual and hence the visions you get are specifically significant to you or the person you are making the journey for.

We can deduce from this idea that symbolisms and concepts emerging from practitioners' journeys do not have a universal meaning and cannot be applied to somebody who was not involved in the ritual.

Vanth also points out that 'shaman' cannot be a self-appointed label or role. Since the very work of a shaman is to serve and help the community, only the community can call you a 'shaman' if they recognise you as such. He explains this with a metaphor, "'Shaman' is like 'beautiful.' If you say it to yourself, it counts for nothing'. Vanth argues that Europe has lost its shamanic roots and that through new forms of shamanism, such as Core shamanism, it is gaining them back. As a consequence, he deems likely that in a hundred years Core Shamanism might become the Indigenous Shamanism of Europe.

Vanth's understanding of shamanism does not the mirror that of the majority on shamanic practitioners but rather that of the most educated ones who base their understanding of shamanism on Mircea Eliade's and Michael Harner's works and seek out training from what they deem to be reputable sources. The latter would include teachers who have been trained by identifiable indigenous shamans, anthropologists or well-established institutions, such as the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. In January 2020, Vanth joined the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy' and, since then, has engaged in a few discussions over what constitutes a shamanic practice, meeting the disagreement of those who give less value to accredited sources, favouring an approach mainly based on personal experience and what resonates to them as being shamanism. Similar discussions have already occurred in the past, showing a recurring dynamic between the aforementioned two trends within the practising community. In all the occurrences, the party insisting on basing shamanism on accredited sources and institutions was constituted by known figures coming from a Pagan background.

Although most eclectic Pagans⁷³ in Italy tend to incorporate shamanistic views and techniques in their practice, there are also some Pagan

⁷³ By 'eclectic Pagans' I will refer to the Pagans who are not affiliated to any specific and structured tradition but rather have shaped their own religious practice by borrowing from different traditions what best suits their personal belief system.

traditions which openly operate a syncretism with shamanism or deem their tradition to have a sound shamanistic underpinning. Two of such examples are represented by The Temple of Ara and the Order of Bards Ovates and Druids in Italy.

The Temple of Ara is, according to what stated on their official website, 'an international shamanic Wiccan spiritual tradition devoted to experiencing the divinity that dwells within Nature and in ourselves' (Temple of Ara, 2011a). The Temple is legally organized as a religious corporation (Temple of Ara, 2011b) and was founded by Phyliss Curott, American lawyer and Wiccan priestess. The Tradition of Ara, as it is also referenced to by Curott and her followers, appears to result from a combination of Wicca and shamanism while maintaining a very eclectic approach, open to the practice both in covens and as solitary practitioners. On their official website, this tradition is described as follows,

The Ara Tradition is the result of our deconstructing many of the traditional and often patriarchal teachings embedded in Wicca to distil a system of essential principles and practices, including core shamanic techniques. We don't subscribe to the traditional definitions of magic as the mechanist projection of will. For us magic is about communion and co-creation with divinity. We use a divination not just to 'see the future,' or even to understand one's motivations, but to engage in dialogue with the Divine, and thus to guide us when we 'make magic' (Temple of Ara, 2011b).

In her books, Phyliss Curott focusses mostly on magic and its practice by means of reconnecting to the natural world and the feminine divine represented by the Goddess (Curott, 2002, 2018, 2019). Her work appears to follow the strand of eclectic and solitary-friendly Wicca which became the most popular in Italy, where we can locate other authors with a similar approach, such as Scott Cunningham and Silver RavenWolf. This is the kind of Wicca, as described by these authors, which is not restricted to an initiatory training within a specific coven but open to anyone, whether they wish to practise in groups or by themselves as 'solitary practitioners', a label popularised by Cunningham (RavenWolf, 2011, 2012; Cunningham, 2010).

The Italian division of Curott's tradition is the *Tempio di Ara*, led and coordinated by Phyllis Curott, has two Italian priestesses in their council: Linda Maglionico, who deals with the Social Media pages and Valeria Trisoglio, who has a more active role on the territory – specifically in Rome - and has led, over the years, workshops and rituals following the Tradition of Ara. Valeria Trisoglio has also undertaken a shamanic training with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies under the lead of Lorenza Menegoni (*Tempio di Ara*, n.d.).

Celtic imaginary and mythology are popular among Italian Pagans, leading a few Celtic-inspired forms of Paganism to take root in the country, especially in the Northern regions. Possibly the best-known group of Celtic Paganism is the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD), a Neo-druidic organisation founded in 1964 by Philip Carr-Gomm and Ross Nichols and based in England (Lahey-White, 2009; Carr-Gomm, 2002). The OBOD has its Italian division in the *Ordine dei Bardi, Ovati e Druidi*, also referred to as OBOD Italia, an association which offers workshops and training to become a Bard in the order (*Ordine Druidico Italiano Il Bosco dell'Awen*, 2010). To better understand the link between shamanism and Druidry, I interviewed on the 13th of March 2018 Renato Mancini, best known as Hagal, the spokesperson for the OBOD Italia. Hagal explained to me that he has always perceived and seen Druids as 'European shamans', to the point where he thinks it would be more suitable to call it 'Shamanism of the European continent'⁷⁴ rather than Druidry. In Hagal's view, shamanism is an indigenous⁷⁵ spiritual practice which is characterised by the strong relation to the natural world in an unstructured and proto-religious fashion. In this sense, he deems that the only difference between shamanism and Druidry is that the latter has acquired a structure by becoming an order but, that aside, the core of Druidry is shamanistic in nature. To further his point, Hagal mentions Brian Bates' work as a source proving the existence of sweat lodges among British Druids. The recurring mention of 'shamanic Druidry' on the part of the OBOD's

⁷⁴ 'Lo sciamanesimo del continente Europeo'. *All translations are mine.*

⁷⁵ Hagal uses the Italian *primitivo* here. We had a conversation on its English translation and we both agreed that the Italian *primitivo* is best translated with the English 'indigenous'.

headquarter was also pointed out by Hagal as evidence that the connection between Druidry and shamanism does exist (Bates, 2013).

Apart from these more structured inclusions of shamanism in Pagan traditions, it is apparent that Paganism and shamanism for the average eclectic practitioner are intertwined in multiple ways. From the workshop teaching shamanic journeying at the Pagan Pride Italy to the celebration of the eight Wiccan Sabbaths on the part of shamanic practitioners, the contact points between the two are numerous and increasingly popular. This is well evidenced by the posts and discussions which regularly occur on my Facebook Group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy', where shamanism, Paganism and witchcraft appear to be part of the daily practice of its members, as if they were all part of the same macro-category or, at least, so compatible to be easily combinable. According to a poll opened on the 14th of November 2019 in the same group asking the members' religious affiliation, 'Pagan' was the second most selected option. Likewise, my attendance at both Pagan and shamanic events in Italy has corroborated this argument, as I have witnessed Pagans engaging with shamanism as a coherent approach to their practice and shamanic practitioners including elements from Paganism with the same ease.

As with Castaneda-inspired groups and shamanistic psychotherapy, groups focussing exclusively on a form of shamanic Paganism represent a minority in the country. The large majority of groups and traditions found in Italy, are in fact characterised by an eclectic approach whereby all the aforementioned trends tend to be combined in various ways and to different extents. Nonetheless, providing examples of those who do focus on one of such approaches exclusively offers a better insight into that trend in isolation and hence facilitates its acknowledgement when more frequently found within groups which merge together a number of different trends.

4.5.3 Indigenous Reinterpretations (Siberian, Andean, Nordic Shamanism)

The present-day spiritual smorgasbord creates a plethora of possible combinations of spiritual traditions in which the traditional starting point is less prominent and the creation of unique methods predominant. There is not one unified light to be seen at the end of the tunnel, but endless individual variations. Both the organizer and the client find themselves choosing among the methods on offer (Jakobsen, 2015, p. 59).

Possibly the most popular trend found across groups falling under the umbrella of trans-cultural shamanism is the one based on reinterpretations of indigenous shamanisms, or rather shamanisms practised by indigenous peoples. This strand often conveys the underlying idea that indigenous peoples are those who truly know what shamanism is, which fosters different degrees of romanticising of such traditions. Depending on the group, there may or may not be an awareness of the alterations which had to be implemented to adapt the practice to the Italian context. In some cases, leaders and practitioners wish to stick to the tradition from which they take inspiration as much as possible whilst in other cases the focus is more on travelling to the places and staying with the peoples practising that shamanic tradition. It is very common across all these groups the yearning to help these populations, bringing to the light the richness of their cultures and providing financial aid to assure their sustenance so that their tradition can live on.

It is possible to identify three dominant focal points leading such groups, which are the preservation/dissemination of one or more indigenous tradition(s), fieldtrips to have first-hand experiences with indigenous shamans and the development of holistic healing systems. Although I will now proceed on showing examples of groups which focus on each of these three trends, it is essential to highlight that such trends are most commonly found in

combination rather than in isolation, with each group leaning more towards one while incorporating the other two to a lesser degree.

The first one is constituted by the groups which teach and spread the indigenous peoples' traditions. Although they often portray themselves as having a focus on one specific tradition, in most cases they soon branch out to include more indigenous traditions. For instance, Where the Eagles Fly, the association founded and led by Costanzo Allione, started out with a focus on Siberian shamanism, aiming at spreading its tradition by organising workshops and events led by, among others, the Buryat shaman Nadia Stepanova. However, over time Allione travelled throughout South America and has produced a few documentaries which illustrate shamanic traditions and practices from different parts of the globe. Tawantin is another example of this typology. Established by Roberto Sarti, Roman counsellor and book author, Tawantin aims at spreading the knowledge and practices of Andean Shamanism, with a special focus on the Peruvian traditions (Sarti and Belloli, 2009). On its website, Tawantin provides information on the Q'ero people and videos of the trips to Peru the association has conducted in the past (Tawantin, 2020). Sarti often presents as a speaker, both for Tawantin and hosted by other active groups on the peninsula, and organises talks and ceremonies led by Peruvian shamans. There are a few eclectic elements which emerge from Sarti's talks as Andean shamanism is tackled alongside the symbolism of Tarot cards and the Jungian concepts of Self and Shadow whereas the *despacho* or *haywarisqa* is considered 'the Andean equivalent' of the *maṇḍala* found in Indian traditions, as stated in the advertisement of an event occurred on the 26th of January 2020 and hosted by the Associazione Crimalis (Crimalis, 2020).

Amici di Wiraqocha ('Wiraqocha's friends') is the Italian section of the international Wiraqocha Foundation. According to their official website,

the Wiraqocha Foundation is a non-profit educational and charitable organisation established in 1996 for the preservation of indigenous wisdom and knowledge systems, and to promote human collaboration with Nature worldwide (Wiraqocha Foundation, n.d.).

Founder of this organization is Elizabeth B. Jenkins, teacher of the Andean traditions and author of best-selling books such as *The Fourth Level: Nature Wisdom Teachings of the Inka* and *Journey to Q'eros: Golden Cradle of the Inka* (Jenkins, 2009b, 2009a, 2013). Albeit affiliated to the international foundation they stem from, Wiraqocha Italia hosts independent events, beside trips to Peru and workshops led by Jenkins. For instance, they have advertised on their website gatherings for all solstices and equinoxes in 2020 as well as workshops led by other teachers of the Andean traditions, such as Dario Astengo or Juan e Ivan Nuñez Del Prado (Amici di Wiraqocha, n.d.).

Although many groups engaging with trans-cultural shamanism organise 'experiential trips' (*viaggi esperienziali*) to have first-hand experiences with indigenous shamans, some shamanistic associations are mainly centred around such a scope. Examples of this strand of groups are Ayahuasca Travel Italia, a tour operator specialised in trips to the Colombian Amazon to undertake rituals involving the entheogenic plant Ayahuasca, and Shamanic Travels, which organises similar trips to Peru (Ayahuasca Travels, 2020; Shamanic Travels, 2020).

Another trend found among trans-cultural groups is offering shamanic practices in combination with other holistic techniques which are currently popular within New Age networks. For instance, cultural associations like Il Cerchio Sciamanico ('The shamanic circle') or Le vie della Guarigione ('Healing paths') host a number of events ranging from shamanic retreats based on a trans-cultural tradition to ayurvedic therapies and a shamanic interpretation of the family constellations. These groups embed shamanism into healing techniques of various nature, providing shamanic interpretations for those which were not originally rooted in shamanism. The latter is a common trend among solitary practitioners as well, those who are not affiliated to any specific group or tradition and only on occasion – if ever – attend organised events.

In conclusion, these traditions are trans-cultural in the broadest sense, not only do they combine indigenous imported traditions with the Italian culture but also combine shamanism with other traditions related to the New Age, new religious movements and Paganism. This is evidenced by the wide variety of

groups and associations currently active on the peninsula and underlies the belief that shamanism is not only seen as a set of techniques but also as a perspective, a new lens whereby to interpret and tweak existing spiritual practices to make them more connected to the natural world as well as to a perceived original source from which all religious systems have stemmed. The latter choice imbues new practices with an ancient flavour, legitimising their validity in the eyes of practitioners.

4.6 Trans-cultural Cosmology and Shamanic Journeying

When compared with either the dominant religion or the widespread rationalistic worldview, the stark difference in how the world is constructed and conceptualised in trans-cultural shamanism is rather apparent. The characteristic nature of the shamanic engagement with the spirit world and the perceived existence of a non-ordinary reality require a coherent theoretical framework within which such occurrences may consistently arise. It would be indeed arduous to integrate such a different worldview in the lives of Westerners without embedding it in a coherent cosmology. And it is, in fact, a shamanistic representation of the world the one that practitioners construct; one that substantiates their practices within a consistent cosmological scaffolding.

It is necessary to premise that the cosmological views presented in this section will be mainly based on the information conveyed by Core Shamanism practitioners and the three appointed teachers on the Italian peninsula. However, with the exclusion of those who exclusively follow an indigenous form of shamanism, most of the eclectic practitioners in the country endorse the same views proposed by Core Shamanism. A shared cosmological narrative emerged from discourses produced across different trans-cultural communities as surfaced during my interactions with trans-cultural practitioners over the course of four years.

According to practitioners' publications, interviews and participant observation conducted with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, the first foundational belief to emerge is the existence of two 'realities'. The Ordinary Reality is the one people experience on a daily basis when going to work or

interacting with other people. It is the reality connected to the body, the rational interaction with the surroundings and the survival; this is the reality most people would believe to be the only one it is for people to experience. According to practitioners, human beings have also the possibility to enter a Non-Ordinary Reality, where it is possible to enter in a dialogue with spirits, emotions, other people on a spiritual level and act to change the Ordinary Reality by means of healing, retrieving souls or acquiring knowledge and power to aid someone's daily life. This terminology was first introduced by Carlos Castaneda in his first and most popular book *The Teachings of Don Juan* and readapted by Michael Harner in his *The Way of the Shaman*, shifting the attention from a dichotomy of realities to the idea of two states of consciousness (Harner, 1982; Castaneda, 1968). Harner refers to them as an Ordinary State of Consciousness and a Shamanic State of Consciousness where the difference between the two is rather the same entailed by Castaneda's categories yet highlighting the concept that the two are states of consciousness belonging to the same reality rather than two separate realities altogether. I will, from now on, choose to use Castaneda's categories as they are the ones most used by practitioners, including the ones following Core Shamanism.

Trans-cultural practitioners usually enter the Non-Ordinary Reality by doing Shamanic Journeys. The Shamanic Journey is the foundational practice in Core Shamanism as well as in all the various eclectic currents which stemmed from the Harnerian tradition. Shamanic Journeying is the means whereby practitioners enter the worlds belonging to the Non-Ordinary Reality. As I mentioned, it can be said there are four worlds in total as one would belong to the Ordinary reality – for no further articulations of the latter are usually offered - and three worlds available for exploration in the Non-Ordinary one.

A shamanic journey is embarked on through altering the state of consciousness of the practitioner. As I was instructed during the basic and advanced workshops I undertook with the Foundation, the person intending to 'travel' needs to create some kind of physical isolation from the Ordinary Reality. To do so, the teachers will remove all the sunlight coming in by closing carefully all the curtains in the room and limit as much as possible external

noises by choosing a secluded place immersed in nature to conduct the workshops. In preparation of every shamanic journey, all participants were asked to lie down in a comfortable position and cover their eyes to remove any input left from the ordinary world they are in the process of 'departing from' through the journey. All shamanic journeys are entered with a purpose in mind, whether it be finding your Power Animal (*animale di potere*) or healing somebody or finding answers to significant questions. Once the purpose is clear in the person's mind the journey can begin, signalled by the teacher and his/her helper who will start playing drums and rattles at a monotonous yet varying speed to accompany all the stages of the journey.

Once the shamanic journey has started, there are three worlds in the trans-cultural shamanic cosmology where the practitioner can travel to: Lower, Middle and Upper World. The Lower World is believed to be entered by a hole in the ground or a crevice in a tree trunk moving downward as the idea is to visualise yourself going underneath the surface of the earth. This is the first world Core Shamanism teachers teach you to travel to as they claim it will be the easier and the safest of the three. This is the world where animal spirits and power animals reside as well as the spirits of plants and anything connected to nature. They believe it to be the best world to seek healing from for it is nurturing and supporting. The Middle World hosts all the elements of everyday life on a spiritual level. It is entered by visualising yourself walk on a natural flat surface. In this world, the practitioners believe they can heal relationships by encountering the spirit of the relationship as well as travelling to the past and the future to retrieve events occurred or see those yet to come and travel to the planets. The Middle World is the one where practitioners travel to the least and, during my attendance at the workshops conducted by the Foundation, no single journey had engaged with this one. The Upper World is the hardest to enter, as I was instructed by informants and Core Shamanism teachers, and it is even possible to not being able to enter it if the time is not right for the individual practitioner. The Upper World is entered by visualisations which lead the practitioner to move upwards, as in climbing a tree or a mountain or walking on a rainbow towards the sky. The idea is to go above the visible sky through overcoming a barrier that the practitioner will perceive when attempting such a task. If the barrier is surmounted the Upper

World will present itself as an ethereal place, made of multiple floor-like levels, where angelic beings and Gods can be encountered. According to the teachers' instructions, this is the World where the traveller can find answers to the bigger questions regarding their life, such as the person's life purpose or the bigger picture or teaching underlying a situation the person is entangled into.

The ontology of the shamanic experience is, according to Core Shamanism, based on a relativist phenomenological approach. Although in the Ordinary Reality there is an inter-subjective experience which is verifiably shared, within the realm of the Non Ordinary Reality every person's experience is deemed equally valid and real for every shaman gathers from his or her experiences a different image of the creation (Harner, 1982, p. 58). This element was confirmed by Nello Ceccon, as he explained – during one of our interviews – the primary importance given to the individual experience, which is considered to outweigh belief systems and other people's experiences alike. In Nello's words,

In core shamanism there are no beliefs, what matters is your experience. You don't need to believe in spirits, if you meet them you have them (as allied in your practice) if you don't meet them they don't [...] Even if Michael Harner says shamans believe spirits are real, the practitioner needs to experience it as shamans seek out a worldview of the universe for themselves. In traditional shamanism a certain cosmology is culturally inherited but - at the same time - the shaman has the duty to explore this cosmology and develop their own. Sandra Ingermann talks about the Mohave and how they exchange their own views of the cosmos. There's no conflict between different cosmologies. There isn't even a conflict between the Catholic and the shamanic cosmologies.⁷⁶

This cosmology generates a dualistic view where Ordinary and Non-Ordinary Realities are differently constructed. The Ordinary Reality works through inter-subjective interactions and values as real what is socially agreed upon whereas the Non-Ordinary Reality has a solipsistic element of self-validation

⁷⁶ From an interview occurred on the 5th of May 2017. *Translation is mine.*

according to which everything the practitioner 'sees' is true for the sheer reason that the person experienced it. This dualistic view poses the theoretical challenge of how the two realms of reality may interact given how differently they are believed to work. Both Harner and the teachers appointed by the Italian division of the Foundation have highlighted on multiple occasions that the aim of the shaman is to serve the community but how can such service occur when there is such a stark discrepancy between the reality where the community lives and the one where the shaman travels to and gathers irrefutable knowledge? Can a self-validating knowledge translate coherently into a realm of reality where any information holds a strong inter-subjective component to its validation?

I was not able to gather a direct answer to these questions from spokespersons of trans-cultural shamanism, yet I can infer that theoretical questions of this sort would be left unanswered in favour of a direct experience and the consequent phenomenological individually-based conclusions as to whether this happens or not; whether the communication between two differently constructed realities actually occurs and manifests in the healing of ill people. Corroborating my conclusion is another aspect of shamanic healing, as explained by Nello Ceccon, who highlights that there is no standardised healing in shamanism. It is not ideal to adopt standardised techniques as every person and every illness need to be treated differently. The best way to know how to proceed on each occurrence is to engage with the spirit world and seek advice from one's allied spirits. Both Nello Ceccon and Sara Tenaglia agree that the techniques taught in the workshops of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies are to be seen as starting points, as the first steps into a personal engagement with the spirit world from which the practitioner will move on to develop his or her own set of techniques connected to the allied spirits with whom they have established a relationship. As a consequence, every shamanic practitioner will specialise in the skill they are more inclined to develop, whether it be divination or dream work or other forms of healing.

A binary view is likewise present in the conceptualisation of diseases, how they form and how they are healed within the human body. As explained

by Nello Ceccon during one of our interviews⁷⁷ and by Lorenza Menegoni in her lectures during the advanced workshop of the FSS, there is the belief that the illness is something 'negative' which enters the body and needs to be extracted, in the worst cases exorcised (*de-possessione*), or - conversely – that something 'positive' needs to be retrieved after having been lost, like a power animal or parts of the soul. This can be seen again as a dualistic view, where beneficial ('positive') and harmful ('negative') elements cohabit in a dialectics that will determine the health of an individual depending on which polarity prevails.

Followers of either Core Shamanism or any other trans-cultural tradition manifest rather plainly a concern for the environment and themes related to eco-activism. Movements such as Zero Waste and 'Zero Kilometre' (*chilometro zero*)⁷⁸ are popular across communities engaged with shamanism. This is possibly the result of the animistic worldview that sees the environment just as alive and sentient as the human and animal realms. During my attendance at Core Shamanism events, I was able to witness participants hugging trees and engaging into different form of conversation with what they believed to be the spirits of the plants. Nello Ceccon explained to me⁷⁹ that, as shamanic practitioners, there is a responsibility towards nature and the environment that needs to be acknowledged. For this reason, there are specific rituals and techniques which aim at retrieving the soul of a place or of a specific natural element which has lived through a traumatic experience. The underlying belief here is that every single element in the manifested world has a spirit and everything is connected, meaning that the sufferings of the environment will translate into suffering for humankind.

⁷⁷ Here I refer once again to the interview occurred on the 5th of May 2017.

⁷⁸ *Chilometro Zero*, also referred to as *A Chilometri Zero*, which translates as '(At a distance of) zero kilometre' is an economic trend which favours products produced at the nearest possible location. This aims at reducing how long foods and other goods have to travel and, therefore, reduce the environmental impact.

⁷⁹ From the interview occurred on the 5th of May 2017.

4.7 Are Trans-cultural Traditions Authentic Forms of Shamanism?

I have identified a recurring theme across the numerous altercations occurred in the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy', which – as of August 2020 – counts around 3300 members, that would be the rather heated matter of 'authenticity' of shamanic practices. This is undoubtedly the primary cause of debates both in the group and in real life among practitioners, one which led me to intervene as a moderator on multiple occasions to delete and ban from the Facebook group those resorting to personal insults in their attempt to prove the other party wrong.

The debate over authenticity can pertain to the individual as a shaman, to the tradition someone follows as shamanism or to both. There seem to be very different ideas of what gives authenticity to a shamanic practitioner or to a form of shamanism but some common themes were clearly identifiable. Despite the different arguments endorsed by individual practitioners, I was able to identify two types of approaches to the debate over authenticity in shamanism, the 'gatekeeping' versus the 'relativist' approach. Those falling into the first category have a strong opinion of what constitutes 'real shamanism' and whatever or whomever does not fit that outline will be deemed as an impostor. Those following this approach do not abide by the same guidelines. Some of them believe authentic shamanism comes solely from indigenous peoples, some from findings evidenced by anthropological research, others from a personal direct and decades-long experience with shamanism, just to name a few. Regardless of the individually selected criteria, this approach leads the practitioner to engage into heated discussions with other followers of the gatekeeping approach as well as the relativist one. As for the latter, relativists tend to believe that shamanism is whatever the person believes it is and hence will not debate with other relativists but only with those adopting a gatekeeping approach.

The very persistence of this recurring debate prompted a further inquiry into why an acknowledgement of authenticity appears to be so important for transcultural shamans. This theme re-occurred over and over in my four years of field study. I witnessed numerous altercations on the matter, to which I was

called into question as a judge due to my status of an anthropology researcher by some and yet deemed unfit for such an evaluation by others for that same reason, as anthropologists only understand the theory without being wholeheartedly involved in the practice. Yet, that seeking for validation of their own shamanic practice as 'real shamanism' was there in most cases.

As Jeroen W Boekhoven points out in his book *Genealogies of Shamanism: Struggles for Power, Charisma and Authority*, the quest for authenticity is a central and defining feature among - what he calls - 'shamanists' and 'New Agers'. Boekhoven argues this to be the product of modernity and its offer of more avenues for the creation of authentic realities. As a result, the social validation of one such construct becomes essential to make it 'real' for the individual by means of its inter-subjective acknowledgement (Boekhoven, 2011, p. 303). Boekhoven also highlights that,

To become an authority in the field, and in order to be believed, respected and distinguished, shamanic practitioners need to authenticate their practices. Authentication is thus a form of power. It can be a product of strategic political processes and has to be crafted and staged in accordance with the logic in the field (Boekhoven, 2011, p. 304).

As I was able to observe within the Italian communities, there is a direct correlation between the degree of personal involvement and the yearning for social recognition, at least this appeared to be the case for those shamanic practitioners who publicly disclose their affiliation. In some cases, it seems to be related to the identity and the life's purpose of the practitioner, who already has the dominant culture and religion to oppose their beliefs and would hence wish for an inter-subjective agreement at least in the alternative cultural space opened up by shamanism. In addition, validation is particularly sought when there is some economic interest involved. In my experience, the large majority of those who get involved in the harsher confrontations are those who make a living or part of their living from shamanic training, courses or other such related events. As an example, M. C. advertises her shamanic workshops with the following words, as posted on the Facebook group on the 2nd of January 2020,

There is a profound confusion between traditional shamanism and new age shamanism, between shamanism and magic and between the use of energies and shamanism. If you want to grasp the nuances between all these practices, here is the workshop for you.⁸⁰

As a consequence, and due to the absence of an external validating institution, social recognition becomes of pivotal importance for both their spiritual path and their work. This becomes particularly evident when former students become teachers after a relatively short training, which reoccurs as an identifiable and common trait in trans-cultural traditions. When such an occurrence happens, the teacher usually shows resentment towards the former disciple. For instance, M. Capasso and M. Chiacchio both saw former students starting their own training programmes to their discontent and disappointment, which they shared with me. Even when the student had undertaken years-long training to become a teacher of shamanism, I could still detect a trend on the part of the former teachers to highlight that said person used to be one of their students. I believe this is particularly evident when both teachers and former students appeal to the same audience to gather trainees for their programmes. This scenario instigates some kind of competition where highlighting the extent of one's experience may be necessary to stand out from a cluster of shamanic teachers, some of whom have only undergone a couple of weekends of training.

Another element which might play a role and emerged from a few interviews and posts in the group is that shamanism is now the 'hottest trend' (*più alla moda*) within the spiritual and New Age community, just as Wicca used to be in the 2000s.⁸¹ As R. M. writes in a comment to a post on the 23rd of July 2017,

⁸⁰ 'Vi è una profonda confusione tra sciamanesimo tradizionale e sciamanesimo new age, tra sciamanesimo e magia e tra l'uso delle energie e lo sciamanesimo. Se vuoi cogliere le sfumature tra tutte queste pratiche ecco il seminario che fa per te'. Real name anonymised, *translation is mine*.

⁸¹ Both Hagal Mancini from the OBOD Italy and Vanth SpiritWalker, president of Pagan Pride Italia, expressed such a view in our interviews and conversations. It also reoccurs in comments to posts on the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy' and was uttered by a few attendees at the workshops I undertook with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies Italy.

First they were all witches or sorcerers, then all priestesses and priests, after that all druids, now all shamans... the commodification of spirituality.⁸²

To which, G. B. replies, confirming that shamanism has now become a trend and highlighting the positive outcomes of such a state,

However, not all evil comes to harm. In this specific case, religious 'trends' have had and still have the merit of spreading what until a few years ago were secret practices and traditions out of reach. Perhaps, without the 'trend' of shamanism, many of us would never have been able to learn about it, practice it or even get in touch with it.⁸³

All the aforementioned elements emerging from discourses surrounding what constitutes 'real shamanism' and a 'true shaman' do not offer a conclusive answer to those precise questions but rather an account of the community's need for validation. Such a need grows stronger the more the practitioner has invested of his or her life in the practice of shamanism, whether it be because shamanism provides them with a living or with a life purpose.

Still, trans-cultural traditions can indeed be seen as authentic forms of shamanism, whose authenticity lacks a shared and static definition and seems to be rather a moving target promoting kindred and contrasting narratives which all equally contribute to the debate. It is, in fact, in the liveliness of this debate – which narrates of beliefs and experiences – that the authenticity of these traditions may lie. What shamanism is goes beyond agreed-upon definitions, brought to life by an increasing number of practitioners who - for some reason or another - call their chosen path 'shamanism'.

⁸² 'Prima erano tutti streghe o stregoni, poi tutti sacerdotesse e sacerdoti, poi ancora tutti druidi, ora tutti sciamani....la mercificazione della spiritualità.' Real name anonymised, *translation is mine*.

⁸³ 'Tuttavia, non tutto il male vien per nuocere. Nel caso specifico, le 'mode' religiose hanno avuto e hanno ancora il merito di diffondere quelli che fino a non troppi anni fa erano culti e tradizioni segreti e lontani da noi. Probabilmente, senza la 'moda' dello sciamanesimo molti di noi non avrebbero mai potuto imparare a conoscerlo, a praticarlo o anche solo entrarci in contatto.' Real name anonymised, *translation is mine*.

Chapter 5

The Tradition of *Segnature*. The Indigenous Shamanism of Italy?

After having covered shamanism in contemporary Italy and its relation to new religious movements in chapter 3 and the various forms of trans-cultural shamanism in chapter 4, the present chapter will tackle the folk magic traditions which have existed throughout Italy for centuries.

I will analyse what are their traits, whether there is an underlying unity emerging among the regional variations and how such traditions, deemed as a type of witchcraft, relate to shamanism. In addition, I will cover the conceptualisation of 'indigenous', the difference between indigenous people and indigenous religion, and how the term will be employed in the present study. The aim of this chapter will then be to clarify foundational concepts in my argument, such as 'indigenous', the relevance of labels, the conceptualisation of superstition and the survival of magic in a secular age. I will then conclude by answering the research question leading the whole chapter and explain whether and why folk magic may actually be the indigenous shamanism of Italy.

5.1 The Tradition of *Segnature*

'Tradition of *Segnature*' is the label I will be using in the present study to identify and systematise a set of folk magic practices that are found throughout the country. From numerous interviews, a survey, participant observation, texts and material produced within the communities, I will be able to draw the contours of this set of practices and allow their strong commonalities to converge into a unified understanding. By analysing these folk magic practices, I will argue that they are all part of the same tradition for they share a common core in the use of *Segnature*, words of power and modes of initiation. I will then tackle how are they cohabitating, hidden in plain sight, with a dominant religion and a worldview that obstruct their very existence (Seppilli, 1983, p. 4). The matter of syncretism will also be addressed, highlighting the

stark change in syncretisation occurred between the old generation, who merge these practices with Catholicism, and the new generation, more inclined towards Paganism. In addition, I am answering the question regarding what does the survival of such magical practices and the conceptualisation of superstition tell us about the contemporary society and how the enduring belief in magic reshapes the belief system of the analysed community.

It would be extremely difficult and not the aim of the present study to trace back the history of such practices. However, it is interesting to point out that Carlo Ginzburg uncovered one such tradition dating back to the sixteenth century which he found to resemble a form of shamanism (Ginzburg, 2013; Sato, 2005). Ernesto De Martino, the twentieth century Italian ethnographer, also studied magic and its manifestations in the South of Italy (De Martino, 1982, 2007, 2015). In contemporary Italy, these traditions appear to be still widespread, not only in the South, but throughout the country and can be found with minor variations in every region (Bartolucci, 2016; De Bernardi, 2015; Magliocco, 2009). Not only did they overcome the difficulties generated by the obstructive presence of Catholicism but also defined or redefined the belief system for those who acknowledge their existence.

Despite having a strong common core, said practices are not unified under any common label but rather characterised as a set of heterogenous rituals to which mainly outsiders try to attribute a name. Upon analysing the data collected, I concluded that there is a propensity in the community towards the understanding of such practices as part of one folklore. Following this trend and attempting to foster a better understanding as well as a re-evaluation of a set of practices now relegated to the realm of superstition, I will systematise them under the label of *Tradition of Segnature*.

5.2 The role of Labels in Heterogenous Contemporary Traditions

Folk magic in Italy has been long concealed from the public acknowledgement and yet it appears to be widespread throughout the country. A survey⁸⁴ conducted in September 2018 with a hundred respondents, revealed that more than 80% have had a direct or indirect experience with vernacular healers, meaning that they had been either healed themselves or somebody close to them has sought help for some form of illness.

Vernacular healers elude the use of labels; it is up to those who recognise their role to try and categorise them. People usually identify them with specific names, often related to the local folklore and with variations from region to region. Thus, there are *Janare* in Campania or *Masca* (female) and *Mascun* (male) in Piemonte and even *Maggiara* in Sicily. These terms are usually linked to a certain lore which does not usually depict said figures in a good light (Natale, 1829, p. 76).

As an example, I will tackle the *Janare* in the Campania region. The etymology of the word *Janara* is unclear but it is believed to have its roots in the Latin *Janua* (door) or *Dianara*, which means follower of the goddess Diana (Piedimonte, 2016, p. 18). There have been a lot of stories surrounding the *Janare*, the most famous of which located in the city of Benevento, also known as the 'city of witches' for the age-old lore that surrounds the city (Borgia, 1763, p. 212). The *Janare* are believed to commune with the devil, from whom they draw the power of life and death. Legends suggest that during the *Sabba* (also known as *Sabbaths*) these witches would anoint themselves with a specific ointment that would allow them to 'fly' to the sacred walnut where they would gather with the other witches and dance with the devil himself

⁸⁴ The survey entitled 'Shamanism in Italy' was conducted on SurveyMonkey and counts 100 responses. The referred question was 'Are you aware of any forms of Folk Magic on the Italian territory (e.g. a relative or friend who has had the Evil Eye removed or someone you know - yourself included - who received the Segnature, healings, divinations, etc?)' The three offered answers were 'yes', 'no', and '(yes) Please, tell your experience'. 85% chose the affirmative answers.

(Piedimonte, 2016, p. 125). The incantation chanted while using the ointment was the one that follows:

Italian	English translation
Unguento unguento	Ointment Ointment
portami al noce di Benevento	Bring me to the Benevento's Walnut
sopra l'acqua e sopra il vento	Over rain and over wind
e sopra ogni altro maltempo	And over every bad weather

As this brief overview of the legend surrounding the Janare suggests, these would not be characters with whom you would like to be associated, for they are rooted in the popular imagination with a negative and harmful connotation. According to my informants from Campania, *Janare* are not the evil witches depicted in spooky stories, but mostly healers and midwives that help people in their local community.⁸⁵

Celeste B,⁸⁶ a young woman initiated by her grandmother, explained to me during an interview that culturally the vernacular healers in Campania are associated with the *Janare* but no healer would identify as one. She was very open in saying that her grandmother was well versed both in rituals to remove and cast the evil eye (*malocchio*) but she was very reserved and did not reveal her 'power' to people outside the family as talking about it might lead to losing that power.⁸⁷

Thus, *Janara* is interchangeable with *witch* and both words are culturally used to recognise the vernacular witches in the Campania region.

⁸⁵ In my research, I have also collected testimonies affirming the existence of certain witches whose craft almost exclusively consists of casting curses on their enemies or on the enemies of people seeking their aid. Such account emerged from interviewing Franco from Benevento as well as from conversations in the provinces of Naples, Benevento and Avellino. However, this kind of witchcraft appears to be a minority compared to the practice of healers and will not be the subject of the present study.

⁸⁶ The real names are hidden behind pseudonyms to preserve the informants' privacy.

⁸⁷ More on this topic will be addressed in the next sections.

As categories for a broad understanding, these labels are applied but they would not be used to address the individual who performs such rituals. This is due to the negative connotation compounded over the centuries and because the healers prefer to keep their practice secretive. Only if you are a member of the community, or trusted by one of them, would it be possible to acknowledge their existence. As Celeste said, you would not say, 'There is a witch in X town who can help' or 'We have a *Janara* that removes the *malocchio*'. The advice would rather be phrased as, 'There's a woman in X town who helps people with Y problem'. When the real individual comes into the picture, all labels are removed and only their actions for the community are spoken of. As Sabina Magliocco states,

The word *Strega* (witch) was never used in reference to these practitioners, except to insult them. They were known as *curator/curatrici* (curers), *guaritori/guaritrici* (healers), or simply as *praticos* ('knowledgeable ones', akin to the English cunning-folk (Magliocco, 2004, p. 162).

A similar pattern is to be found across the country in regards to traditional vernacular witches. A more recent tendency, fostered by the spreading of Neopaganism, shows an increasing inclination towards self-defining as witches, in folk traditions as well as in new religious movements. Paganism and Wicca have fostered an active battle for the reclamation of their religious identity and the related magical practices, which entail the acknowledgment that the negative connotations associated to witchcraft are to be removed. This process of re-evaluation may be helped by systematising this heterogenous tradition under a common label, for when there is a name an identity follows and only identities can gain the related rights.

An illuminating description of the role played by certain labels was offered by Vanth Spirit Walker, president of Pagan Pride Italia, during an interview. Vanth explained that,

The concept 'pagan' only makes sense in reference to civil rights rather than from a spiritual point of view. The reason being that such a term stems from defining what you are not rather than what you are. It merely says that you are not a Christian. Even the

Parliament of world's religions is now adopting the definition Indigenous European Spirituality.⁸⁸

According to the president of Pagan Pride Italia, albeit being a Pagan does not comprehensively define your spiritual identity and what your personal practice involves, the very existence of this label is beneficial to the community and it is helpful for people to identify as such for the social implications of acknowledgment and the consequent entitlement to rights reserved to a spiritual/religious group.

This process of identification under a common label occurred for Italian Pagans in the early 2000s (Howell Ciancimino, 2008), is still ongoing for the vernacular witches. Such process has been confirmed by several interviews. Paola from Messina in Sicily has reported that the term *Segnatura* was not in use in Sicily decades ago but it is becoming more known now due to the internet and the need of people from all over the country to understand the subject matter through the use of a common term.

Following and fostering an existing trend within the community, my research aims at helping this process of systematisation by gathering under a significant label the common and yet varied manifestations of what appears to be a uniform tradition.

5.3 The Meaning of *Segnatura*

Segnatura (singular) or *Segnatura* (plural) literally mean 'Signs, gestures' and refer to the symbols drawn by hands along with words of power by the *Segnatore* (singular) *Segnatori* (plural), the performer of such gestures (Bartolucci, 2016, p. 18).

In literature, this label has been used mainly in reference to the region Emilia Romagna (De Bernardi, 2015) for it is mostly in that region that the term

⁸⁸ From an interview transcription, 'il concetto di pagano ha solo un senso da un punto di vista di diritti civili e non da un punto di vista spirituale perché è un termine che nasce per assenza, per dire cosa non sei e non cosa sei. Nasce per dire che non sei Cristiano. Anche il Parliament of world religions ormai utilizza il termine 'Spiritualità indigene dell'Europa e della mezzaluna fertile o loro riattualizzazioni o rivisitazioni modern.' All English translations are mine.

is used to refer to their local witches. Differently from other regional definitions, such as *Maggiari* in Sicily or *Masche* in Piemonte, the label used in Emilia Romagna appears to be the most representative of the Italian folk tradition as a whole. This is due to the *Segnature* being the common denominator found across different regions. The act of drawing symbols, usually crosses, over the ill part of the body or over oil and water to remove the evil eye, seems to be the core practice that designates the healing performance.

The practice of *Segnature* has a very long history in Italy, difficult to trace back with accuracy. Using my fieldwork data and current literature, I am still able to find testimonies of these practices from the 1800s, by analysing the reports on initiation and lineage provided by my informants. Another aspect of this tradition that makes it difficult to study and date with precision is the secrecy exercised by those directly or indirectly involved with it. The reasons propping up such behaviour lies in the conflict with Catholicism⁸⁹ and social ostracism exerted by the current worldview and by representatives of the medical community (Seppilli, 1983).

The role of a *Segnatore* is that of a healer and protector of the community. There is no evidence that they actively opposed their role to allopathic medicine and have rather demonstrated cooperation with it (De Bernardi, 2015, p.9). An informant from San Potito Sannitico, in Campania region, shared with me during a *sagra*⁹⁰ the story of the town healer who used to live there and help people with illnesses, evil eye and other issues. Despite the fact that he was cooperative with the local doctor, the latter reported the healer to the authorities and sued him for practising medicine without proper training. The informant said that the healer decided to move out of the country and that they had never had any doctor as talented in curing illnesses ever since. Since this incident happened decades ago, I asked whether they had had another town healer. To this question, the informant gave a glance to his wife, who shook her head signalling him not to reply, and then he looked back

⁸⁹ To be addressed in more details in chapter 6.

⁹⁰ A *sagra* is a rural festival held in the open, centred around culinary specialities typical of the season and the geographical place, accompanied by folk music and social games. These are very common in Italy, especially over summer and in the countryside.

at me confessing that, no, they never had another healer ever since. This report is only one example of the ongoing conflict between vernacular healers and trained doctors, a sound motive to keep quiet about it.

Overcoming the reticence to speak was the main difficulty I encountered during my research. When introducing myself as a researcher, a preconception emerged that I was there as a judge, possibly siding with the scientific community. My fieldwork proved that the best way to find informants and gather data was to create a network of contacts based on trust. I worked my way in through close friends and family members first and then I would get a 'reference' and be directed to other practitioners, being introduced as a trustworthy person who deserved to get an interview. In addition, the increasing knowledge sharing through social media fostered the creation of online groups which adopt the label 'Segnature' and are dispensing experiences and rituals of folk magic. Facebook seems to be the largest breeding ground for these online groups, possibly because Facebook represents the most used gathering platform in Italy across different age groups (Fattori, 2014, pp.20–40). Through the analysis of the most popular of these folk magic groups, we can gather relevant data to understand the contemporary evolution of this tradition.

There are three popular groups⁹¹ who use '*Segnature*' in their name, two of which count almost three thousand members whilst the third amounts to about two thousand. These groups show a similar dynamic of sharing with other members the local rituals found across the country. The first contribution that these online groups have produced for the communities is the use of a shared language to describe their practices. As I mentioned, the name '*Segnature*' has been long used in Emilia Romagna in reference to the gestures and words of power used during rituals. In other regions, albeit these gestures and words are still performed with minor variations, they seemed to remain nameless in most cases. Now that thousands of practitioners or seekers are gathered from different areas, the need for a shared language

⁹¹ Listed from the most populated: 'Segnature sacre e profane', 'Le segnature di zia Checchina', 'segnature, esorcismi e benedizioni'.

emerged and the term ‘Segnature’ has become increasingly understood and adopted in different areas in the North and the South.

In all these Facebook groups, the majority of members share their physical or mental health issues or those of family members and friends. There is a core of *Segnatori*, usually admins of the groups, that will accept or reject the requests made by individuals. When one of the healers steps forward to help, the person in need is asked to send a private message with name, date of birth and a photo of the patient. Another common activity is the sharing of *Segnature*. Traditionally every lineage has one or two main illnesses they are able to cure but, through these groups, those who possess *Segnature* to heal a headache can exchange their knowledge with those who know how to treat a sprain. Such alteration of a tradition has led to an extension of the abilities that every healer possesses.

5.4 The Generational Gap

The Tradition of *Segnature* presents a significant disparity, in its manifestation, between what I will call the ‘new generation’ and the ‘old generation’. A generational gap has already been evidenced, with some variations, in a previous research (De Bernardi, 2015, pp.139–149). In the De Bernardi’s study, it is explained that *Segnatori* over the age of 40 tend to follow what they had been taught to the letter, without questioning or wondering what the reasons for performing a practice in a specific way might be. Differently, younger individuals are more eclectic and ‘personalise’ the practice, trying to find meaning in the ritualism they had been taught.

To convey the differences emerged from my data, I will categorise the two compared generations in a different fashion. By ‘old generation’, I mean practitioners roughly over the age of 60 and/or dwellers in the countryside. It encompasses people who had never shared their practice through social media or put it in the public domain. This generation is characterised more by the secretiveness associated with their practice rather than their biological age, though it so happens that such a reserved approach is mostly endorsed by those in an older age range. ‘New generation’ will refer to people below the age of 60 and/or dwellers of medium sized to big cities. Compared to the old

generation, they are defined by the openness whereby they share their practice and the use of social media or social gathering to share experiences and information.

A representative of the old generation is typically the town healer that everyone in the community acknowledges as the person you would go to when conventional medicine fails, in some cases even as a first choice. The healers often live in secluded areas and lead simple and private lives. Their ability to heal had been passed on from a close relative (usually from the grandmother) in a ritual that has to be performed in the period between the sunset of the 24th of December and the sunrise on the 25th, most commonly around midnight. As per tradition, the initiation (otherwise known as the 'Passage of *Segnature*') happens at midnight preceding Christmas day. The Initiatory procedures and the *Segnature* are uploaded at midnight and removed after a few hours. Everything described needs to be performed in those hours as that is considered to be the time when the embodiment of those abilities can occur. From that moment onwards, they know the gestures and how to perform them and they know the words of power to chant while doing the *Segnature*. Traditionally, only a blood relative can 'receive the *Segnature*' and only one member of the family can be initiated. The different rituals are performed using the local dialect and a strong syncretism with the Catholic pantheon, especially with the use of incantations that refer to the holy trinity and the saints.

The new generation shows typically an open and syncretic approach. They tend to mix aspects of the tradition with newer interpretations. Also, whilst in some cases there is still a syncretism with Catholicism, there is an increasing incorporation of Pagan traditions. For instance, some will still perform initiations on Christmas eve but not only with family members but rather with members of the group they lead. In some other cases, as Federica explained during an interview, they move the initiation date to the Winter Solstice to better suit their Pagan belief system. Another interesting discrepancy is the extension of the *Segnature*'s field of action. Whilst the old generation only used them for traditional purposes (healing herpes, falls, sprains, loss of objects and alteration of the weather), the newer generation is

incorporating, in some cases creating, *Segnature* to address newer necessities, such as anxiety or fear.

Another difference between old and new generations is that according to the tradition every healer only has the power to cure one or a set of illnesses whereas the new generation, more eclectic in nature, believes that it is possible to learn the *Segnature* for every issue, provided someone who has that knowledge shares it with you. This extension of the number of illnesses that can be cured is accompanied by a geographical extension for the healing performance itself. For the new generation it is not necessary to heal in person but they can now heal at a distance, ritualising over a photo of the person and/or the specific area of the body in need of healing sent via private message on Facebook or WhatsApp (Bartolucci, 2016, p.52). One last variation from what the tradition dictates, is the initiation process can occur at a distance and using social platforms. In this case, there is an interesting syncretism of traditional elements and newer additions.

5.5 Types of Rituals and Initiations

There is a considerable number of health issues that can be cured by the *Segnature*. The most traditional are: herpes, falls, sprains, loss of objects, evil eye removal and alteration of the weather. Although, as previously mentioned, the field of action of the *Segnature* has expanded.

The relation between the *Segnatore* and the person in need of help starts with a disease or an issue that the local healer is able to treat. It is most common to seek help from a medical doctor first and in the big cities this might also be the only option. In the countryside, however, there are towns where it is actually more common to seek help from a *Segnatore* than from the traditional medicine. This happens especially when the specific *Segnatore* has built a good reputation and he or she is well trusted by the community. Also, a situation of this sort can occur when the person has lost trust in the conventional medicine or has tried that route without getting the hoped outcome.

Once the person has decided to get this sort of treatment, they would contact the *Segnatore* and get a meeting. During the first meeting, the

Segnatore can decide to accept, decline or defer the person to someone else with more experience or a specific expertise on the illness.

Depending on the region, the *Segnatura* can be performed in different ways. The gestures performed are mostly crosses, drawn on the body part that needs treatment, in a number dependant on the condition and, usually, in a multiple of the number three or in a repeated fashion from the beginning until the end of the chanted prayer. These crosses can be drawn on the body directly with the fingers or accompanied by the use of an oil. While the *Segnatura* are performed, secret words are pronounced, often in an internalised manner so that the patient would not be able to hear them. These words are considered sacred and are passed on through the initiation process and hence cannot be revealed to another nor can they be written on paper to aid the initiate's memory. Those words are repeated numerous times during the Initiation until the neophyte healer has memorised them properly.

The force or energy that allows a *Segnatore* to heal has been often called *Il Potere* ('the power') by the vast majority of interviewees. Where this power comes from is most times not questioned by the old generation and interpreted in different ways according to the personal belief system by the new generation of *Segnatori*. This power is transmitted through initiation and seems to be linked with the secrecy of their practice. According to practitioners from the old generation, if you brag about your power or reveal it to others, you will lose it. The *Segnatore* is only allowed to disclose their ability if there is a purpose, such as a person in need of help. Most members of the new generations do not endorse this belief and it appears to be slowly disappearing from the belief system of younger practitioners.

The healers can be both males and females. The matter of gender can present variations from region to region and depending on whether the interviewee belongs to the old or the new generation of *Segnatori*. For instance, most members of the old generation believe that if you are a female you can only initiate a female whereas I have collected accounts from female members of the new generation who have gladly initiated men. Even so, the *Segnatori* still seem to be women in a larger number. This might be related to the role of women in society, the supposed connection that women have to

their body and the bodies of others might allow a preferential access to the mysteries leading to healing (De Bernardi, 2015, p.2).

The compensation method in the Tradition of *Segnature* appears to be rather consistent across different regions as well as between the two compared generations. All my informants uphold the idea that the healer must not ask for money, albeit some form of spontaneous recompense is deemed desirable by some and necessary by most. As Bartolucci clarifies,

The patient must make an offer, in cash or in kind, even derisory, and therefore symbolic, to the healer, who cannot refuse to accept but cannot even request it. The reason for this offer, as explained both by the patients and by the interviewed healers, is based on the certainty that, without it, the *Segnature* cannot have the desired outcome, that is, it is not complete (2016, p.76).⁹²

Interviewing Paola and Mariachiara, two Sicilian women who received the ability to perform *Segnature* from Zia Checchina⁹³ from Milazzo, provided a significant account on the matter. Paola stated that Zia Checchina ‘had a spirit’ that told her to never take money for the help she gave to people. So, when somebody gave her a gift in the form of goods or food she would accept whereas when they tried to repay her with money she would immediately go to the church and donate it to a charitable cause. None of the interviewees knew the reason for this deontological rule, just that this is what ‘the spirit’ told her and that is what she did.

After all, Zia Checchina used to tell Paola, ‘If you don’t do it from your heart, it is going to damage yourself and others’.⁹⁴ That is what Zia Checchina

⁹² ‘Il paziente deve fare un’offerta, in denaro o in natura, anche irrisoria, quindi simbolica, al guaritore, il quale non può rifiutarsi dall’acceptare, ma non può neppure richiederla. Il motivo di questa offerta, come viene spiegato sia dai pazienti che dai guaritori intervistati, poggia sulla certezza che, senza di essa, la *segnatura*, non può avere l’esito sperato, cioè non è completa’. *Translation is mine.*

⁹³ It could be translated as ‘Aunt Francesca’. In Italy – especially in the midland and in the South - it is common to address a person close to you or a benefactor as ‘uncle’ or ‘aunt’, even when there is no blood relation.

⁹⁴ ‘Se non lo fai col cuore, fa male sia a te che all’altro’.

used to say as a warning and an encouragement. Not to get money nor gratitude but to serve.

5.6 The Survival of Magic. Embedding illness into Myth.

Based on the tradition brought forward by the old generation, it is possible to identify three main realms under which the treatable illnesses fall: physical, psychical and environmental. Examples of issues related to the physical realm are shingles (called ‘Sant Antoine’s fire’)⁹⁵ and lumbago (‘the witch’s hit’).⁹⁶ To the psychical we can associate issues such as the sun stroke⁹⁷ and the evil eye⁹⁸ removal whereas ‘cutting the sea swirls’⁹⁹ may be related to the environmental realm.

In the Italian folk tradition some illnesses have a symbolic name, which often represents figuratively the effect produced on the body. All illnesses in contemporary Italy have names established by the medical community and yet those which are treatable with the *Segnature* appear to keep their symbolic descriptors. This discrepancy led me to investigate further what the reasons might be for the general population to hold on to a somewhat archaic way of labelling those specific diseases.

The first reason might be that those are common and age-old health issues, pre-dating a national health service only established in 1978 (Ascoli and Pavolini, 2012). The absence of a widespread access to medical help might have facilitated and even required the development of other forms of healing, especially in the countryside where the access to physicians was even more difficult. From that initial need, the *Segnature* developed and then had been passed on from generation to generation because, according to my informants, ‘they really do work, I’ve seen them work with my own eyes’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ ‘Fuoco di Sant’Antonio’.

⁹⁶ ‘Colpo della strega’.

⁹⁷ ‘Colpo di sole’.

⁹⁸ ‘Malocchio’.

⁹⁹ ‘Tagliare le trombe del mare’. *All translations are mine.*

¹⁰⁰ From an interview to Mariachiara G.

Secondly, to create a magical dimension that somehow overwrites the mundane framework, the disease itself needs to step into the ‘myth’ and become part of that dimension. Mythologising the disease and allowing the latter to become part of a dimension where magic can and will happen, help the healer and the healed to take part in a consistent narrative where a shift from the ordinary to the non-ordinary reality can happen.

This need to shift into a non-ordinary perception of the world is particularly relevant for a tradition that does not use other ritualistic techniques to enter such state. In the rituals of the Tradition of *Segnature* there is no temple, no special gowns, no circle casting. Practitioners use daily tools often in the same place where they cook and eat dinner.

To better understand the manifestation of these magical practices, I will illustrate a typical *Malocchio* ritual as explained by Celeste B. during an interview.

Celeste’s family is originally from Ceppaloni, a town in the province of Benevento but she now lives and studies in Naples. She was initiated by her grandmother, who taught her how to remove the Evil Eye (*Malocchio*). Concerns such as a series of unfortunate events or a persistent headache are believed to be signs of someone casting the evil eye on you. As Celeste



Figure 0-1 Malocchio Removal Ritual

explained, it is not necessary to perform a ritual to cast the *Malocchio* on someone, as it is believed in the folklore that envy or other detrimental emotions towards a person are sufficient to exert their damaging power. Thus, the first part of the ritual will be a divination. The *Segnatore* will, in the person’s presence, drip a few drops of extra virgin olive oil in some water that had been poured into a plate. If the oil dissolves in water the person is cursed whereas if oil and water

remain separate no Evil Eye has been cast on the person (see Figure 0-1). As Celeste pointed out,

It makes sense because the magical act that causes and reveals the existence of *Malocchio* is something out of the ordinary and it's not physically and chemically ordinary that oil dissolves into water whereas it is natural to have oil and water separated!¹⁰¹

In cases where the *Malocchio* is confirmed, the *Segnature* will be performed, in the form of crosses and prayers over the plate containing the dissolved oil. As this sample ritual shows, the ordinary world (a plate, cooking oil) is entangled with a non-ordinary interaction, yet no material setting outside of these objects was created to trigger this shift.

With such a setting to frame the ritual, the doubt arises as to what might distinguish the magical act from a mundane one; what separates the ordinary from the non-ordinary living. According to what the tradition manifests and how rituals are performed, there seems to be no separation for the practitioners. As Fabrizio Ferrari explains in his work on De Martino,

Magical practices are not extraordinary for those belonging to the cultural system that generates them. In fact, they are often not even considered magic at all (Ferrari, 2012, p.78).

Whilst the new generation tends to engage more with a speculative understanding of the *Segnature* and why they work, the old generation performs them as ordinarily as following a recipe for a cake given by their grandmother. Since vernacular magic does not contemplate a stark separation between a magical and a non-magical world, the two become intertwined and cohabit in the overlapping of mythical guises upon the otherwise mundane elements of reality.

This absence of alterity between the magical and the mundane may be analysed by looking at Ernesto De Martino's investigation of magic and its role

¹⁰¹ 'Che poi ha senso nel senso che l'atto magico che rivela l'occhio è qualcosa di fisicamente e chimicamente *out of the ordinary*. Cioè non è normale che l'olio si sciolga nell'acqua, invece è normale che l'olio si sciolga dentro l'acqua... e quindi uno dovrebbe avere sempre l'occhio'. *Translation is mine*.

in the Italian society of the twentieth century. Magic, for De Martino, is not a feature of a pre-rational era, as it is depicted in James G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* (Frazer, 2001). Previous scholarship had, in fact, intended folk magical practices in Italy as residues of a pre-Christian and primitive belief system on the edge of disappearance (Ferrari, 2012, p.78). In contrast to his predecessors, for De Martino magic constitutes an omnipresent element in human history, which constantly changes but never ceases to exist. As a historicist and Benedetto Croce's student (Croce, 1948), De Martino interprets every element of human endeavour in relation to the history of the specific time of its manifestation. Thus, there is no peasant (*contadina*) culture beyond history and suspended in a mythical time as it is described in the works by Carlo Levi (Levi, 2000), for every occurrence has to be interpreted as intertwined with its time and not as if it pertained to a legendary age outside of history.

Antonio Gramsci gives another interesting outlook on folk magic traditions and their relation to history (Gramsci, 1964). Sabina Magliocco explains that for Gramsci,

Folklore was not a 'survival' that was quickly disappearing, but an integral part of the cultures of rural Italian peasants, and a product of particular historical and cultural circumstances, and worthy of study in its own right alongside literature and history (Magliocco, 2004, p.155).

Likewise, magic's effectiveness needs to be comprehended within the historical context. As De Martino suggests, Magic represents a way to solve the 'crisis of presence' (*crisi della presenza*). This crisis occurs when the agency of the individual is threatened by a weakened subject-object dichotomy. Consequently, the subject (*soggetto*) goes from being acting (*agente*) to being acted upon (*agito*), from intentional acting to 'intentioned' acting (*intenzionato*). The person is not the agent anymore but rather a world's echo (De Martino, 2007, pp.74–75). According to Farnetti and Stewart,

In the crisis of presence individuals experience 'dehistorification.' Since everything is historical, losing presence – being cut off from synthesizing process of historical becoming – is equivalent to

losing history, or losing society [...] Like cauterizing a wound, the resort to ritual (or 'religious reintegration') exaggerates the initial crisis on the way to healing it. An unfortunate individual falling out of history is conscripted, through ritual, into a larger step out of history, which reopens the person to values, and enables the reacquisition of everyday historicity (Farnetti and Stewart, 2012, p.432).

Consequently, the role played by the magical world (*il mondo magico*) is not to understand or modify the surrounding world but to affirm its very existence (De Martino, 2012).

The survival of vernacular magic among Italian people appears then to be the product of history, fostered by two endemic driving forces within the cultural fabric: tradition (especially family tradition) and the rejection of authorities. Tradition leads to attributing value to everything 'ancient' and passed on through generations, which encompasses both the *Segnature* and the Catholic framework, whereas the rejection of authorities might be a clue to comprehend the reason as to why magic practitioners perceive no conflict between their practices and their identification as Catholics. Loose interpretations of dominant theoretical/religious frameworks appear therefore to be at the core of such practices' survival. Catholicism is incorporated by using the trinity, the prayers and the Saints in the rituals while the antagonism to the pervasive positivism that would portray magic as a mere delusion is resolved with a 'It's not true but I believe in it' (*Non è vero, ma ci credo*) (Magliocco, 2012, pp.3–13). The latter justification is the most adopted response that an Italian would give you when questioned on why do they read horoscopes when none of that 'is real' or why do they seek a tarot reading when 'such things do not really exist'. As Magliocco highlights,

The enchanted worldview does not exist in isolation from dominant discourses. As Ernesto De Martino makes clear in *The Land of Remorse*, his epic study on tarantism, each successive layer of interpretation, from Christianity to Enlightenment paradigms, leaves a trace on magical traditions (Magliocco, 2009, p.111)

In conclusion, the Tradition of *Segnature* seems to be characterised by an ingrained fluidity, where labels exist but are not used, the relation between

the theoretical and the practical is blurred and the religious affiliations are a matter of individual interpretation. The dimension these practices create eludes a structured grasp based on the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction while still evolving and getting reshaped by the new generation. In a framework where there is no distinction between a magical and a non-magical world, what endures is the practice itself; a set of rituals to help the community, whether it be made of two people or an entire region, regardless of it occurring in close proximity or at a distance, online or offline.

‘Being of service’ is what matters, Zia Checchina would say.

5.7 A Re-Evaluation of Superstition?

As discussed at length in this chapter, the practices associated with the tradition of *Segnature* are extremely popular and, although those who go to the vernacular witches to seek healing may or may not admit it publicly, the large majority of Italians are aware of their presence on the peninsula.

There is still a stigma associated with these practices, which retain a degree of secrecy and are mainly known among those who belong to the related community. This stigma is due to the contrast with the dominant religious system as well as the idea that such practices are a form of superstition (Porterfield, 1987, pp. 721–722). My work on the field uncovered this recurring idea when asking of non-practitioners and people opposed to such practices whether they knew anything about vernacular healers or *Segnatori* in the area. ‘It’s just a superstition!’ (*è solo una superstizione*), many have replied, surprised I was even interested in studying such a phenomenon. It appears thus of some relevance to address how superstition is positioned in relation to the tradition of *Segnatori* and how the Italian understanding of that cultural signifier can tell us about the contemporary survival of healers in the country.

According to Ernst Riess, the Latin term *superstitio* sees its precursor in the Greek δεισιδαιμονία (transliterated as *deisidaimonia*), literally ‘fear of demons’. Although at first it designated a devout worshipper of the Gods, it acquired the meaning we associate today with ‘superstition’ around the end of the fifth and the beginning of the fourth century BCE, when Menander used

the term with this connotation in one of his comedies called Δεισιδαίμων (transliterated as 'Deisidaimōn' and translated as 'The superstitious man'). As for the Latin noun *superstitio*, it first appears in Cicero, while its related adjective *superstitiosus* sees an earlier appearance in literature through the works by Plautus to refer to a man with prophetic powers. Later, *superstitio* became used by the Romans to designate any foreign religion, such as the Jewish and Christian faiths (Riess, 1895, pp. 40–41).

In contemporary Italy there are two main meanings popularly attributed to the term superstition (*superstizione*), one is a semantic signifier while the other is a justification. Superstition can mean an irrational fear, not associated with imminent tangible threats, which result in performing acts and gestures associated and believed to ward off misfortune or propitiate luck. Another popular use of the term among Italians is the one I will define as a justification of beliefs which do not fit into the dominant rationalistic paradigm. In such a case, a person may show an interest in horoscopes, get a tarot reading or seek help from a witch and still avoid public scorn by declaring *È solo una superstizione* ('It's only a superstition!') to imply that it is a game, rather than something the person strongly believes. This is connected to the idea of *Non è vero ma ci credo* ('It's not true but I believe in it') previously covered in the present chapter (Magliocco, 2012, pp.3–13).¹⁰²

To better understand how practitioners of shamanism frame superstition within their worldview I posted the question 'What is superstition in your opinion? How would you define it?' on the 15th of December 2019¹⁰³ in the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy', which counted over 1500 members as of that day. Among the different answers, there were specific themes emerging. The first one is fear, that superstition is drawn by a fear of irrational nature, not based on experienced threats or lived occurrences. The second theme is ignorance, whether it be that superstition is based on non-scientific understanding of reality or just defined as ignorance *tout court* (*ignoranza*). Albeit not openly asked to draw comparisons between

¹⁰² See the section 'The Survival of Magic. Embedding illness into Myth.'

¹⁰³ 'Che cos'è secondo voi la Superstizione? Come la definireste?' *Translation is mine.*

superstition and shamanic practice, some members tried to answer that unspoken question. Antonello explains his point of view on how superstition relates to an actual religious belief as follows,

Perhaps superstition remains a step back from belief, it is more related to fear, or, in some cases, the idea of preventing something that hovers as a sort of threat or bad influence rather than being based on events, for the people involved. Belief does not harbour doubt in itself but uses doubt as a spur to knowledge and investigation, it does not fear confrontation or experience and - above all - it is not something customary but subjective, that is, everyone believes in their own way, based on what he/she lives and experiences, and not appealing to some sort of 'standard'. We may say that superstition is more passive, it is about 'enduring'.¹⁰⁴

Superstition is therefore seen as a passive abiding by external conventions, irrationally associated with avoiding threats or attracting luck. Belief is instead an active stance the person takes, which can be challenged and reshaped through personal experience and even lead to further investigate a person's understanding of the world. Antonello's view agrees with what most respondents argued. Clara also highlighted the element of passiveness connected to superstitious actions,

I see superstition just as a suffered custom, as a blind action and - as such - not only the victim of past and passed down ignorance, but also repeated and nourished consistently over time.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ 'Forse la superstizione resta un passo indietro alla credenza, è più un timore, o, in taluni casi, una prevenzione da qualcosa che aleggia come sorta di minaccia o cattiva influenza più che sugli eventi, sulle persone coinvolte. La credenza non nutre il dubbio in essa, ma usa il dubbio come sprono alla conoscenza e all'approfondimento, non teme il confronto o l'esperienza e soprattutto non sempre è consuetudinaria ma soggettiva, ovvero ognuno crede a proprio modo, in base a ciò che sente e vive, e non appellandosi a una sorta di 'manuale'. Diciamo che la superstizione è più passiva, si 'subisce' ecco.' *Translation is mine.*

¹⁰⁵ 'Vedo la superstizione proprio come una consuetudine subita, come qualcosa di cieco e - in quanto tale - non solo vittima di una ignoranza pregressa e trasmessa, ma anche reiterata e nutrita via via ogni volta.' *Translation is mine.*

Eugenio tackles more directly the relation between shamanism and superstition in his comment,

I believe that if you are practising shamanism or other spiritual/magical paths, you'd agree in considering superstition as rites not based really on the knowledge of the subtle worlds but rather stemmed out of fear and lack of knowledge, precisely that of the true laws [of the subtle worlds]. For this reason, I hope to stem the danger [of engaging into superstitious behaviours], which causes a loss of control of which a person may want to be deprived out of fear. That is why many shamans do not believe in our superstitions and advise against paying attention to them.¹⁰⁶

Eugenio's testimony represents well the majoritarian feeling that superstition is linked to fear and lack of knowledge. To this shared opinion, he adds how this relates to a shamanistic work, highlighting that indulging in such superstitious acts may lead to losing 'control' and hence not being anymore in charge of one's life, which is a pivotal part – he concludes - of following a shamanic path.

Thus, the three main themes underlying the understanding of superstition are fear, ignorance and passive 'belief' or behaviour. When such elements are put in relation to the shamanic practice, they are deemed incompatible with it for shamanism is based on active beliefs based on experience and hence subject to being reshaped accordingly. Also, shamanism dispels fear, if anything, it does not feed on it to reiterate automatic gestures and rites mindlessly. This is due to the link existing between fear, perceived lack of control and ignorance - preponderantly underlined by respondents - while shamanism is seen as a way of gaining power and knowledge through journeying and being in contact with the spirit world.

¹⁰⁶ 'Credo che se si è praticanti di sciamanesimo, o altri sentieri spirituali/magici. Si trovi in accordo nel considerare la superstizione come un rito nato non tanto sulla conoscenza del mondo sottile, ma generati più dalla paura e dalla non conoscenza, appunto delle vere leggi. Per questo spero di arginare il pericolo, che causa una perdita di controllo che l'uomo vuole negare a se stesso per timore. Ecco perché molti sciamani non credono alle nostre superstizioni e sconsigliano di dare retta.' *Translation is mine.*

It is thus clear that practitioners of trans-cultural shamanism deem superstition as an incompatible element with the shamanism practice. But what about those who follow the Tradition of *Segnatura*? How do the *Segnatori* position themselves in relation to superstition? From all discourses among practitioners, emerged on online forums and *vivavoce* discussions or interviews, *superstizione* has always been used as a way to distinguish between an authentic *segnatura* - or magical act based on a genuine orally transmitted tradition - and a groundless conviction which is believed to be both false and alien to what the Tradition of *Segnatura* encompasses. It is very common in these communities, as my field data confirms, for someone to ask a *Segnatore* or *Segnatrice* whether an act or a gesture they have heard of may fall under the realm of *Segnatura*. For instance, they often inquire about popularly known superstitions such as whether it is true that the four-leaf clover brings luck or that a black cat crossing your way leads to misfortune. To such questions the answer is usually, 'That's only a superstition, an ignorant/false conviction'¹⁰⁷

For the *Segnatori*, superstition becomes then an evaluating trope, a way of delineating the boundaries of what is versus what is not a *Segnatura*. This appears especially useful within the realm of folk magic, more so than with trans-cultural practices, for the magical act performed by the healer is intertwined with folk traditions and customs. The latter, strongly linked to the cultural framework and myths of the local area, may very easily be mistaken for superstitions unless the healer highlights the difference between the two. And a difference is indeed there, as the *Segnatura* are deemed to be active and empowering tools to better the life of people in the community. They are not mindless customary acts performed by fearful individuals but traditional rites guided by a 'power' that is believed to have passed down through generations aided by the help of religious figures, such as the Holy Trinity and the Saints. And yet the superstition does represent a cultural element that helps frame the outside boundaries of what is not a *Segnatura* while prompting

¹⁰⁷ I'm avoiding the use of 'belief' on purpose as most informants, as I have mentioned, would position a belief in a different category as the one driving a superstitious act.

targeted discussions which lead to a better discursive understanding of what a *segnatura* is within the communities of those who 'sign' or 'get signed'.¹⁰⁸

5.8 Can an Italian Tradition be Indigenous?

5.8.1 Indigenous Peoples versus Indigenous Religions

As Graham Harvey explains, the academic study of religions has mainly adopted three broad categories for religions: World Religions, New Religious Movements and the 'third inclusive category' of 'indigenous religions' (Harvey, 2000a, p. 6). Yet, the definition of what constitutes an indigenous religion and what its traits are, is still highly debated. To better understand the terminology and its connotations, it is necessary to investigate what do we mean by 'indigenous' and whether a cultural product, such as a religious movement, necessitates to be produced by indigenous people to retain that label.

The term 'indigenous' derives from the Latin *indigena*, which means 'sprung from the land, native', designating something or someone who has its birthing roots in one specific place, of which he/she/it would be considered native. In this sense, the place of birth will determine one's indigenous belonging as that is the land where you come – or sprung – from. For instance, I would be indigenous to Naples (Italy) as that is my place of birth, and so will be for a son of Nigerian immigrants who had equally 'sprung' from Naples and hence native of that territory. And yet, the way the category of 'indigenous' has been constructed in scholarship - when applied to peoples - does not refer to merely being autochthonous to a place but also belonging to a minority originating from a land conquered by a foreign settler. As Suzanne Owen highlights, when the term 'indigenous' is referred to peoples, it has now taken on a political connotation, denoting those who not only are native to a specific place but have also been colonised and, consequently, become a minority living among those who occupied their territory (Owen, 2016, p. 82).

Furthermore, how to define being native to a place has also been the topic of academic examination in the past decades for being 'native' and being

¹⁰⁸ 'Sign' (*Segnare*) means to bestow healing while 'be signed' (*essere segnato*) means to be healed.

'aboriginal' to a place have often been associated. As James Cox argues, if we were to restrict the study of indigenous religions only to those peoples who are 'original' to the place, the field would only be concerned with the so-called disappearing populations, reviewing historical records and testimonies of missionaries encountering a population for the first time. Yet such a view of indigeneity overlooks the fact that all populations are formed by various migratory flows, even in the most secluded areas of the globe. Second, the difficulty of defining indigenous was exemplified by the Australian court battle over the term 'aboriginal', which similarly refers to people who have inhabited a place from the earliest times. This case demonstrated how difficult it is to prove such a claim by retrieving all lines of descent and hence how this methodology for defining the category is fallacious and based on claims which are not provable (Cox, 2016a).

Cunningham and Stanley highlight the presence of alternative terms to indigenous, which are often local labels favoured over the overlaying yet more internationally understood 'indigenous'.

A number of alternative terms are preferred to indigenous. For example, in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander is appropriate and acceptable. In Canada and the United States, the term First Nations is used to describe the Indian, Métis, and Inuit populations, whereas in Hawaii, native Hawaiian finds favour. Many groups prefer their own language. The Maori of New Zealand use 'Tangata Whenua' or 'people of the land' in preference to Maori used by the colonising Victorian English who, unaware of its meaning (ordinary or common), ironically deemed the indigenous population to be the ordinary inhabitants, rendering themselves extraordinary in the process (Cunningham and Stanley, 2003, pp. 403–404)

The process of superimposition of a universalising term is a recurring theme in the present study. As analysed in chapter 2, the same development occurred with the label 'shaman', which is now being used to overlay local terms for a wider understanding of what the practice entails. In both cases, when the Western observer had to evaluate foreign worldviews, a term was born to indicate that perceived 'otherness' and then universalised to label

similar other-than-Western occurrences from a Western perspective. The very idea of indigenous peoples as those inhabiting one place from the beginning of times - with an un-syncretised culture left out from any migratory flows – is, in fact, a biased Western-centric romanticised perspective. It is understandable that Europeans moving for the first time to a newly-discovered place which had developed its own independent society over the centuries, would deem those cultural structures totally ‘other’ and alien to the type of civilisation they had been exposed to. Yet, different does not imply ‘pure’ nor unchanging or un-syncretised. Just because the foreign European has not witnessed nor has had access to historical records showing those cultural changes, it does not mean they did not occur. This outlook on indigenous people is, I will argue, still a Western-centric colonialist perspective. The European continent has also seen numerous flows of colonisation over the centuries and yet there is little mention of indigenous people in Europe, except for the Sami. Arguably, the reason might be that in Europe both the colonised and the colonisers are Europeans and hence do not present that major trait of ‘otherness’ that has been culturally associated to indigenous people.

While the political understanding of ‘indigenous people’ is sensibly and rightfully applied to the native peoples of the recently colonised Americas, the definition is not satisfying from an anthropological standpoint as its semantics fails to overcome the inherited colonialist implications. In an attempt to subdue the latter, it might be pivotal to pose the inquiry around indigeneity in the European context and within the so-called Western culture. Can there hence be indigenous people in Europe? And, if so, will they be defined by their status of being native or by them being an oppressed minority in a newly-founded country? Do these traits constitute indigeneity only when the social structure is deemed as other-than-Western?

5.8.2 Conceptualising Indigenous Religions

In an attempt to delineate what might be the characteristics of an indigenous religion, James Cox identifies two main ones. The first being a focus on ancestors, which is found in beliefs, rituals and social practices. Consequently, kinship relations are of significant importance in such traditions. The second trait is the identification with one specific geographical area. This implies that

their rituals and practices are not universally applicable but rather contingent to the place within which they were developed and have generated their own specific cosmology. Key is also the means of transmission for knowledge and practices are passed on orally rather than via books (Cox, 2007, 2016b). Although Cox deems indigenous religions as those practised by indigenous people, I argue that such traits can be found in folk religions practised by those who might not be considered indigenous – in relation to the socio-political significance of the term – but are still native from or naturalised of the land of which they follow oral traditions based on kinship and passed on from one generation to another.

As with indigenous people, the conceptualisation of indigenous religions bears similar connotations hinting at primeval, un-touched and pre-colonial traditions as imagined by the evolutionary models of the nineteenth century ethnographers (Owen, 2016, pp. 82–83). Notably, founders of Anglophone anthropology, such as Sir James Frazer in his *The Golden Bough*, did equate - to a certain degree - the belief systems of indigenous peoples in the non-European world with folk religions in the European world (Frazer, 2001). They however did so with very different motives: to reveal both as equally deluded, primitive and contemptible, and hence to support the extirpation of both in a rational modern world.

The ethnocentric approach - based on a Western-centric and rationalistic perspective - applied to indigenous people, has thus shown to affect the understanding of indigenous religions (Geertz, 2003; Olupona, 2003). The fallacious assumption that indigenous religions are those belonging to non-Western cultures, leads to a double standard applied when similar occurrences happen within versus outside of Europe. For instance, when there is a sharing of traditions among non-Western peoples they are still regarded as indigenous while the same would not be said when a similar case occurs in the West. Suzanne Owen explains the complexity arising from the primitivist connotations attributed to 'indigenous' as follows,

Definitions of 'indigenous religion' are often primitivist, implying that they refer to pristine, pre-colonial, self-contained and unchanging oral traditions based on kinship. Among other things, this fails to

recognise the sharing of ceremonial practices that takes place. The form of sweat lodge practised today among First Nations in Eastern Canada originates from the Plains. Therefore, is the sweat lodge still an indigenous religious tradition when performed by Mi'kmaq? What if it is performed by Druids? In this case it would be regarded as an appropriation. Just as Mi'kmaq are adapting elements of the sweat lodge, some Druids perform what they call a Druid or Celtic sweat lodge, though still using a Plains Indian model (Owen, 2016, p. 81).

The 'self-contained' and 'unchanging' elements corroborate a misinterpretation of 'indigenous' in a colonist light, based on the assumption that the only historical developments occurred are the ones that the settlers have witnessed. Prior to the Western presence, no historical changes and migratory flows could have happened. This assumption that what they had not witnessed nor participated in did not take place gave birth to the semantic connotation of 'indigenous' as unchanging and pristine, with all the stereotypes the colonising culture attached to it. Hammer suggests that, although Eliade and Harner are considered by scholars as different kinds of sources, the two have a significant ground upon which they can be put in comparison, as 'Both have become instrumental in shaping the modern people's understandings of the spiritual legacy of indigenous peoples' (Hammer, 2015, p. 14) which corroborated the Western understanding of indigeneity in a romanticised light. Such stereotypes are interpreted differently in different ages and by different communities. The exotic interpretation of indigeneity has, in fact, been construed either as backwardly - for its being different from what the West regards as progress - or as a mystical immersion in a golden age where people are peacefully co-habiting with nature.

However, changes do occur on an ongoing basis among indigenous cultures too, as evidenced by data collected during my fieldwork in South America. During a field trip in Buenos Aires, Argentina, occurred between the 18th until the 28th of November 2019, I encountered Pachita. Pachita is a *machi*, a female shaman of the Mapuche tradition whom I had known for years. During a conversation on the survival of indigenous shamans in an urban context, she pointed out the central importance of change for survival.

In order to survive, she explained, shamans have to adapt to different conditions. In the past people lived in isolated areas and the communities were formed around the boundaries of that small living area. Now - even in Patagonia, she says - there are urbanised cities and people live in bigger and more connected places. As a consequence, the community gets reshaped. While once there was one shaman helping a small community of people, now – in a more urbanised context – they have formed a sisterhood of shamans to help people beyond the confinements of the place they live in. The community is not defined by geographical borders any longer but by human and kinship relations; the ones you love, you share blood or empathise with become the community the shaman serves.

Andrea Avaria, in her study on the Mapuche people in Santiago de Chile, highlights how the migration to different places and the diaspora they have faced in the last half of the century have not changed their identity which, albeit defined on an individual-basis, tends to be strongly associated to their traditional connection to place beyond the boundaries of one specific location. Avaria explains,

To be Mapuche not only links people to a place, but to a way of understanding the world. The earth itself circulates a way of understanding life, and how to live it. The earth connects one with memory, the mountains, the animals, all of life. Mapuche in Santiago live a different life, but they too transform their houses into homes, their yards into vegetable gardens. Leaving the community allows them to arrive at a new identity, to re-actualize their self-image. Although a migration to a city represents a de-territorialization from the limits of place, it is also a re-territorialization to place and time (Avaria Saavedra, 2017, p. 61).

The expectation that indigenous shamanism will remain organised in tribes living in secluded areas immersed in nature is another manifestation of a Western exoticised outlook on indigenous peoples. It relates to the idea that those traditions live in a suspended state - where space and time stand still - and all the changes occurring everywhere else in the world across would not affect them, so immersed they are in a perpetually unchanging and timeless society.

Rather than a static isolation between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures, what occurs can be described instead as a dynamic flow. Such a flow has been identified by Paul Johnson with the two categories of 'indigenizing' and 'extending'. By indigenizing, Johnson refers to the inclusion of outsider elements in a local tradition in such a way that the outer inclusion is reshaped and ingrained as part of the local tradition. On the other hand, extending suggests an openness on the part of the locals to export their local traditions and make them available to outsiders,

When priests of Candomblé (*pais*, or *maes de santo*) appear on Brazilian national television advising how anyone regardless of African descent, can practise the religion of the African gods (*orixas*) in the privacy of their own home, with or without initiation and a community of practice, this is an example of an extending move (Johnson, 2002, p.313).

This dynamic is not only present outside of the Western world but in Europe as well. Based on Johnson's category, Graham Harvey edited a book and a special issue – both including my own contribution - where a few of such occurrences are uncovered in the European continent (Puca, 2018b). When 'indigenous' is interpreted and analysed in a dynamic sense, devoid of misleading primitivist claims of pureness and immutability, it becomes clear how such manifestations of indigeneity and 'indigenizing' do very well occur in the Western world as well.

This is a small part of the possibility implied by the terms 'indigenous' and 'indigenising'. Rather than meaning 'true to history', or 'verifiably traditional', contemporary uses of 'indigenous' refer to the continuing evolution of worldviews and lifeways that make sense for peoples marginalised, and often oppressed by a domineering modernity, or 'the West', and centred around creative, respectful belonging to (if not in) specific lands. (Harvey, 2000b, p. 231)

In this sense, a European shamanistic practice still exhibits the role of a minority living within a dominant culture, yet – in this case – it is not represented by settlers but rather by a socio-theoretical framework which pinpoints shamanic practices as 'the other' from the norm. The domineering

paradigm in Western society embraces an underlying rationalism and positivism which dictates what is deemed to be real and what is left out of reality for only the measurables deserve ontological acknowledgment (Puca, 2018a; Hunter, 2015). Consequently, the possibility of interacting with the spirits of the Saints to heal a person or remove the evil eye by dropping oil into water are not the majoritarian view of what real-ness is set to encompass. This makes such practices appear as belonging to an anachronistic time and those who practise them as backwardly individuals who struggle to acknowledge 'what is real' or rather – drawing a comparison with indigenous peoples – to abandon their worldview to embrace the one that took over and settled down in the West.

Another significant way of employing the term suggested by Paul Johnson is that of 'indigenous' as a comparative trope, a usage already adopted in the study of religions. As he explains,

What would world religions be without local ones; or the secularization of modern societies without the cool, unchanging tradition of primitive ones? Or globalization and the religiously hybrid, without the bounded and homogenous? (Johnson, 2002, p. 310)

'Indigenous' might then work as a touchstone to better understand religions in their relation to the place where their practice occurs as well as the extent of syncretism – deliberate or not – employed in such practices. Although no such dichotomy of hybrid-versus-pure can be found in its absolute, as they are both to be seen as the opposites on a spectrum, such a spectrum is still useful to draw reference points to foster a debate around religions and unravel their contrasting traits.

The way I will employ the term indigenous in relation to the Tradition of *Segnature* will, therefore, be deemed unrelated to whether or not its practitioners are indigenous people but rather focused on the 'indigeneity' of the tradition itself. Adopting the term indigenous in this sense will help the category of indigeneity lose the colonialist Western-centric connotation it has mostly had until quite recently. To make this leap it is essential to start by premising a difference between indigenous people - as a political definition -

and indigenous religions, interpreted as indigenising movements moving away from a dominant secular and positivist worldview to embrace an alternative understanding of the human being, his/her interaction with the land as well as the means and the extent to which a change can be affected by one individual to another or to life events. If 'the West' is not a geographical place but rather a set of ideas constituting a secular belief system, then these indigenising movements do represent a disruption and a radical change of direction which, for the time being, is certainly to be seen as a 'minority'. A minority living underground – hidden in plain sight – alongside the 'oppressor', which would in this case be the majoritarian interpretation of reality and what is sensibly accepted to exist.

When a term has a long debate behind the boundaries and applicability of its semantics, there are often scholars who advocate against the adoption of the debated category and to rather identify cases on an individual basis (Cox, 2016a, p. 17). I personally disagree with such a theoretical approach, in most occurrences of the sort. As with the definition of 'shamanism', we encounter similar issues of disagreement over the semantics of other terms, such as New Age, animism, Paganism and – of course – indigenous. There are two main reasons as to why I advocate for keeping such terms in the scholarly debate.

The first being that these are 'living' terms, so to speak, as they are used in the common parlance of people who gravitate in those communities or are indirectly related to them. Timothy Fitzgerald would call these 'unstable terms', as he clarifies using the example of 'religion' and 'secular', which he cautions against their scholarly use for they produce binaries based on a 'metaphysical invention' (Fitzgerald, 2007, pp. 54–55). However, when a category is alive in the world, I argue in favour of its debate in a scholarly setting as it helps to understand all the social implications that such uses entail. The very evolution of a term and the contrasts its semantic application generate will inevitably tell us something about the historical and socio-cultural framework hosting the argument. This is why discourse analysis is such a valuable method because terms are unstable in meaning - as Fitzgerald suggests - and scholars can study these changes and what they can tell us about the communities hosting them.

Secondly, the debate is useful to academics to strive for finding new methodologies for interpreting such unstructured phenomena. Even when the term retains some kind of vagueness and does not help thoroughly understand the phenomenon on its own, it can still be coupled with other identifiers to narrow down its denotation further. The mere association of a geographical identifier will change the meaning of a term like 'indigenous'. Indigenous to the United States will denote something different from indigenous to Italy, as the histories of the two countries are completely different and so will their sense of 'indigeneity' be.

It took me some time and ponderings to decide whether to adopt the term autochthonous or indigenous to address the traditions presented in this chapter. At first, I leaned more towards 'autochthonous' for its clear undebated and specialist meaning but, after my four years of research and fieldwork – in Italy and in Argentina – it is clear to me that 'indigenous' is indeed the most suitable choice, exactly because of all the semantic baggage it brings to the discussion. The inquiry over the indigeneity of Italian traditions is forcing this study to dive deeper into matters such as exoticism, kinship, connection to the land and the community, syncretism and the matter of traditional and cultural belonging.

As a consequence, I endorse a distinction between indigenous and trans-cultural when talking about Italian Shamanism, as the first one entails a link to place and kinship through oral tradition while the second one is universalising, not linked to specific places nor local-based traditions and focussed more on techniques which can be taught by books and other means of mass communication on public display.

5.9 Is The Tradition of *Segnature* the Indigenous Shamanism of Italy?

Having discussed the major traits of the Tradition of *Segnature* and the conceptualisation of 'indigenous' in this chapter alongside that of shamanism and the related methodology in chapter 2, I can now draw my conclusions as to whether the Italian tradition of which I attempted a first systematisation can be – in fact – deemed the indigenous shamanism of Italy.

The Tradition of *Segnature* can be defined as a system of operative magic infused with religious behaviours and connections drawn by its practitioners and applied to their workings. On the matter of indigeneity, data emerged from my fieldwork which evidence the presence of the major elements which constitute an indigenous religious movement, as defined in the previous sections. The first trait of indigenous religions we can detect in the Tradition of *Segnature* is its locally based nature where there is a presence of regional variations related to the territory. Also, the community and the service to its members is central to the work of *Segnatori*, as Zia Checchina from Sicily used to remind regularly to her disciples. Differently from trans-cultural traditions, *Segnatori* do not perform their rites to find their power animal or get attuned with their higher self but mainly to help – sometimes even punish – members of the community. Although trans-cultural traditions also foster the use of shamanic practices to assist others, it does not appear to be the main drive which brings attendants to workshops and training, positioning trans-cultural shamanism as more individual-centred.¹⁰⁹

The transmission of knowledge within the Tradition of *Segnature* also fits the category of indigenous as the rituals and words of power are traditionally passed down orally and not taught through the means of books or workshops, as it happens with trans-cultural forms of shamanism. Kinship relations are also a key element to both indigeneity and to this tradition as, according to the custom, the *Segnatori* would initiate and pass down their power preferably to a blood relative or to someone otherwise related to the family, such as through marriage or adoption. Although this mode of initiation is still carried out by what I defined ‘the old generation’ in this chapter, there has been an ‘extending’ move – to adopt Johnson’s category - implemented by ‘the new generation’ of *Segnatori*, which suits and adapts the tradition to the contemporary changes in society and how knowledge is shared in our time and age. Despite this extending of the practice, the Tradition of *Segnature* still shows the significant core elements of indigeneity as the sharing of knowledge still happens within a selected community and from one person to one or more

¹⁰⁹ See chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion on the differences between indigenous and trans-cultural shamanism.

others. As much as the community may now be an online group where practitioners help each other alongside other relatives or loved ones, knowledge and power are still passed down on an individual basis, as opposed to through standardised workshops. Yet now the individual practitioner can live on the opposite edge of Italy and a transmission of *Segnature* can still take place. This significant change has taken roots in Italy due to the wide popularity of social media, which changed social interactions so significantly that even vernacular healers have been affected.

Nevertheless, I argue that this change does not compromise the indigeneity of this tradition as it still maintains all the elements of an indigenous religious movement, provided 'exoticising' interpretations are dismissed. As Pachita - the Mapuche shaman I encountered in Buenos Aires - highlighted, traditions evolve and their survival is what matters the most so that the benefits they offer to the community can live on. Thus, the community can move from being located in the town of residence to an online group, yet the service and help the shaman provides still stands. Kinship relations can be, for the new generation of *Segnatori*, flanked by friendship relations and yet there is still a transmission of knowledge on an individual basis. It is just that 'individual' and 'transmission' have taken different forms to reflect the time and age they are interpreted by.

Another element which hints at the indigeneity of the Italian vernacular tradition is its status as a cultural minority. The Tradition of *Segnature* is, in fact, a minority both in relation to the dominant religious system and the socio-theoretical framework. While Catholicism openly opposes such practices and encourages people to abandon them as leading astray from the faith, a scientific and positivistic mindset upheld by lay people deems them as sheer superstitions which only simpleminded individuals can still hold 'real'.¹¹⁰

Having clarified the reasons as to why I argue the indigeneity of the Tradition of *Segnature*, I will now proceed on presenting the traits which suggest it be a form of shamanism. The Tradition of *Segnature* is popularly

¹¹⁰ I address the matter of scientism and the positivist mindset in contemporary Italy in an article published on the *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* (Puca, 2018a).

perceived as a set of folk magic practices and not identified by Italians as shamanism. It has never been seen as one tradition either, not in literature nor in popular understanding, as my study constitutes the first attempt in this direction. A lack of a unified view which allows to gather under one label all the similar rites, alongside the underground nature of the latter, has so far prevented the average Italian from seeing all the various manifestations of this tradition and their underlying relations. Since traditionally every vernacular healer possesses one 'power' or two, depending on the family line, and every town used to – in some areas still do – have one of such magician 'in charge' of the town, a dweller of a place where its witch only casts and removes the evil eye will have no idea that there are other magicians elsewhere who remove the evil eye alongside fixing broken bones. The scarcity of openly circulated information on folk magic and the absence of a framework where to place the various practices to acknowledge their possible underlying unity, have let this tradition unacknowledged until recent years. By using social media, Italian magic practitioners have created online communities where a common terminology has emerged – that is, *Segnature* as a descriptor of the core of such practices – and an increasing number of practitioners from different Italian regions are acknowledging and adopting a unifying label thus revealing the unitarian nature kept out of sight by the underground condition whereby it manifests. Significant to highlight that this initial acknowledgement, which has begun taking place only in recent years, solely occurs on the part of those who are actively involved in the Tradition and not as much on the part of the Italians who do not perform the *Segnature* themselves but have perhaps been exposed to them, either for they received help or have an awareness of their existence.

My data suggests that the Tradition of *Segnature* cannot be seen as either folk magic or shamanism, as it presents elements of both categories and there is no legitimate impediment for a phenomenon to fall under both categorisations. The scholarly literature shows that the definition of witchcraft may vary and appears dependant on the time and place where the term is used, besides being sought mainly in conjunction with witch hunts and trials, occurrences when accurate definitions may be crucial (Eves, 2013; Kieckhefer, 2011; Mesaki, 2009). Yet, I will here adopt the primary definition

provided by the Cambridge Dictionary, which mirrors quite closely the popular understanding held by Italians on the topic. Witchcraft can be seen as the use of magic with the aim of helping or harming people (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). It is relevant to notice that an overlapping between folk witchcraft and shamanism is commonly found across the numerous forms of indigenous shamanism. Pachita, the Mapuche shaman from Patagonian Argentina, uses interchangeably 'shaman' and *bruja*; which is not to be seen as an isolated case. The most popular author on shamanism in the Western world, Carlos Castaneda, continuously uses the word *brujo* in his books and clarifies that being the terminology adopted by his Mexican shaman teacher Don Juan. This juxtaposition of the concepts of witch and shaman is not surprising for – as debated in chapter 2 – the term shaman is of recent invention and has always worked by superimposition on local specific terminology. It is mostly transcultural shamanisms of Western origin which insist on remarking a stark difference between the two. Yet, variations and translations of 'witch' have operated in a similar fashion, albeit not superimposed by scholars but rather by inner and outer members of the community. According to Robert Wallis, the difference between shamanism and sorcery is created to romanticise and set the first apart from the second (Wallis, 2003, p. 62). So that shamanism is allowed to practise the good magic of the wise ones whilst sorcery or witchcraft keep being loaded with centuries of negative connotations. I have addressed specifically how the terms 'witch' and 'shamans' are employed in discourses in a dedicated article and what emerged from my data analysis is in accordance with Wallis' perception (Puca, 2018b). Practitioners are slowly favouring the use of the term shaman to convey that their workings are for beneficial purposes as well as to avoid incurring in the stigma which surrounds the term 'witch' and its related 'witchcraft'. It is of relevance, however, that the understanding of 'shaman' is not only new to Italians but also as much loaded with stereotypes as 'witch' is. The difference is that the shaman is seen as a mystical inherently-good figure, in contact with nature, worshipping no God – which might clash with the Catholic faith as perceived by the people – and

was even praised by the Pope during the Pan-Amazonian Synod in 2019.¹¹¹ I can, therefore, conclude that shamanism can be seen as a form of witchcraft, albeit specifically a folk type of witchcraft, which is locally-based and community-centred, with significant importance attributed to kinship relations.

But is the Tradition of Segnature a form of shamanism? As Sara Tenaglia - teacher of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Italy - explained, when answering this question,

The contacts are there because there is the central theme of healing, a spiritual healing from a spiritual point of view. There is a double vision of the human being, the physical and the spiritual one, and hence working from a spiritual point of view to take care of the soul as well as how it affects the physical body. In folk traditions, there is more direct contact with the body, as it happens with the *Segnature*, but there is still a component of spirituality, of invocation, of calling the holy spirit or the spiritual masters, depending on the local traditions. In my opinion, yes yes, there is indeed a continuity [between shamanism and Italian folk magic], absolutely! In the sense that you go to the other world and you heal. So, the process is the same. It's still based on the ability to move from one reality to another. From ordinary to non-ordinary, then contact the spiritual forces and get something to help others. I see that everywhere [in folk magic].¹¹²

¹¹¹ The case study on the Pan-Amazonian Synod as well as relations and contrasts between shamanism and Catholicism are fully tackled in chapter 6.

¹¹² 'I contatti ci sono perché c'è il tema della cura, quindi della cura spirituale dal punto di vista spirituale. C'è una visione doppia dell'essere umano, quella fisica e quella spirituale, e quindi di dire sì noi lavoriamo dal punto di vista spirituale quindi curiamo l'anima e tutto quello che riguarda l'anima e i riflessi che ha sul corpo. Nelle tradizioni popolari si va più direttamente sul corpo, anche con le Segnature, però la componente della spiritualità: dell'invocazione, del chiamare lo spirito santo piuttosto che i maestri – in base poi alle tradizioni locali – secondo me, sì sì, c'è una continuità (tra sciamanesimo e magia popolare italiana) assolutamente. Nel senso che vai all'altro mondo e curi. Quindi l'iter è sempre quello. Della capacità di spostarsi da una realtà a quell'altra. Da quella ordinaria a quella non ordinaria, contattare le forze spirituali, farsi dare qualcosa per aiutare gli altri. Quello lo vedo dappertutto (nella magia popolare).' From an interview occurred on the 2nd of July 2019. *Translation is mine.*

Sara continues, in the same interview, to say that the *Segnatori* are indeed shamans and the only issue in acknowledging this is of linguistic nature, as ‘shaman’ is not yet well understood in Italy.

The Italian vernacular healing does manifest most of the key traits which are commonly found across different forms of indigenous shamanism and can, I argue, be defined as shamanism by academics and seen as it by practitioners. Such traits have emerged from discourses produced within the Italian community and collected through means of interviews, conversation, participant observation, a survey and polls on the Facebook group I created *ad hoc*. The First shamanic element pertains this tradition’s involvement with a set of rites devoted to healing people seeking of help, hence showing – as a leading purpose – the service to the community, especially considering that most *Segnatori* agree on performing these rituals without asking for any compensation. The *Segnature* are also significantly performed through the intercession of the Saints¹¹³ and the Trinity, which is in alignment with contacting ‘the spirit world’ as well as creating alliances with spirits which aid the shamanic practice. The fact that these spirits come from a Catholic belief system is a coherent reflection of the place and cultural framework where these shamanic practices are rooted and practised.

Another element which mirrors many indigenous shamanic traditions is an unusual illness the shaman-to-be has to go through and heal himself or herself from, in order to become a *Segnatore*. The existence of such a pattern has been reported by most of the informants who had been initiated within the family line¹¹⁴ while only a few of those in the new generation of *Segnatori* reported the same experience.¹¹⁵ Sometimes the illness began shortly after the initiation although, in the majority of the cases, its onset is prompted by

¹¹³ When mentioning the Saints in relation to the Tradition of *Segnature*, I intend to show that to modern Italian shamanic practitioners, Saints can be (and are) dealt with as shamans deal with spirit helpers. I am not suggesting that Saints and spirits are the same and I acknowledge that Christian theology denies such an equation.

¹¹⁴ Examples are Celeste B., whose experience is reported in the present chapter, as well as Maria Capasso’s and Michela Chiarelli’s addressed in chapter 7.

¹¹⁵ In chapter 7 I will tackle two case studies where experiences of this sort are illustrated.

the passing of the family member who initiated the new *Segnatore*. The field of action of the *Segnature* goes beyond the healing of the physical body as a number of rites are devoted to forms of 'spiritual' healing. This happens to be the case for practices such as *L'erba della paura* ('The herb of fear'), fully described by the Sardinian Maria Capasso and illustrated in chapter 6, which is aimed at retrieving a part of the person which has been lost during a past trauma. Albeit with a different name, this appears to be extremely similar to a practice of soul retrieval, found in a number of shamanic traditions and adopted by the transcultural ones as well (Lindquist, 2004; Sandner and Wong, 1997).

When Italians who engage with trans-cultural forms of shamanism do not acknowledge the Tradition of *Segnature* as a form of shamanism, they offer as explanation one of the abovementioned traits which appear to them to clash with a shamanic tradition. This was evidenced by the survey 'Shamanism in Italy' (*Lo Sciamanesimo in Italia*) created via SurveyMonkey on the 16th of August 2018. Out of 100 responses, 85% declared to be familiar with folk magic and the *Segnature* on the Italian peninsula while 64% believe there is a difference between Italian vernacular healing and shamanism. However, when trans-cultural practitioners have the chance to interact and cross-reference different local healing practices, they lean more towards the idea that the *Segnature* are a shamanic practice. This trend appeared on multiple interactions on the Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy' and became particularly clear due to a poll I opened in the group on the 30th of January 2020 (see Figure 0-2), asking whether the Italian practice of *Segnature* can be considered a form of shamanism¹¹⁶ and offering as answers either 'yes' or 'no', inviting to motivate their choice in the comments. While at first, the majority of respondents favoured 'No' as an answer, after a long debate in the comments where other members highlighted various elements

¹¹⁶ 'Le pratica delle Segnature italiana può essere considerata una forma di Sciamanesimo?' *Translation is mine.*

of their local *Segnature*, the trend changed and turned the community's final judgment to a majority of 'Yes'. Out of a total of 103 responses - 48 voted 'No', 48 voted 'Yes' while 7 selected an option added by Manuela C. which stated,

Praticanti di Sciamanesimo in Italia created a poll.
Admin · 30 Jan · 📷

Buongiorno a tutti,
Domanda importante per voi, amici.

Le pratica delle Segnature italiana può essere considerata una forma di Sciamanesimo?

Spiegate la vostra motivazione nei commenti, se vi fa piacere! 💜

Option	Votes
NO Added by Praticanti di Sciamanesimo in Italia	48 votes
SI Added by Praticanti di Sciamanesimo in Italia	48 votes
solo se chi la pratica ha doni sciamanici e lo dimostra Added by Manuela C. [redacted]	7 votes

+ Add a poll option

deemed the practice of *Segnature* as a shamanic practice.

Since it is still very common for trans-cultural shamans to see a stark difference with their folk healing tradition, I will thereafter cover the most commonly believed dissimilarities between indigenous shamanism and the Tradition of *Segnature* and demonstrate how they show either a lack of knowledge with regards to the adopted terminology as well as the wider national picture of the Tradition of *Segnature* or a romanticised understanding of shamanism which adheres more to a stereotype rather than a malleable phenomenon manifested

Figure 0-2 Facebook Poll

in and responsive to its cultural framework.

The first reason as to why trans-cultural practitioners argue against defining the Tradition of *Segnature* as a form of shamanism is the alleged absence of trance or ecstatic states. Some of my informants, when the matter of trance emerged in our discourses, speculated that the monotonous repeating of words of power, which some healers engage in while performing the *Segnature*, may be seen as a light form of trance. Most, however, agree that this element is absent in the tradition. This understanding of shamanism as having trance states at its core is heavily based on Mircea Eliade's portrayal of the shaman as a mystical figure who masters of the techniques of ecstasy, an interpretation of the shaman which is still dominant and leads a

romanticised understanding of the shaman's role (Porterfield, 1987, pp. 721–722). In Italy, Eliade is still considered by practitioners as the highest authority on the matter of defining shamanism, so much so that my sheer mention of more recent sources from different scholars has provoked debates regarding Eliade's status. Yet, this perception on the part of trans-cultural practitioners does not represent what shamanism is but rather what they fantasise it to be. As Roberte N. Hamayon highlighted in her study inquiring whether 'trance' and 'ecstasy' are appropriate concepts in the study of shamanism, the use of such tropes has proven to be ineffective in the research on shamanism. The main reason Hamayon provides is the lack of descriptive accuracy and the main reliance of these two concepts on the individual interpretations of those who employ it. In addition, she remarks that 'shamanistic societies do not make use of terms homologous to 'trance' nor do they refer to a change of state of consciousness, as if the mere concept was irrelevant to them (Hamayon, 2004, p. 245). To summarise what 'trance' really stands for, Hamayon writes,

The shaman's behaviour, called 'trance' by observers, is qualified by shamanistic societies with reference not to a specific physical or psychic state, but to the shaman's being in direct contact with the spirits (Hamayon, 2004, p. 246).

A trance state is, therefore, the act of entering in a state of consciousness – altered or not, with visible alterations or not - whereby enter in contact with the spirit world and draw power from it. This does seem to occur with the *Segnatori* as they usually call upon the Saints and the Trinity to ask for help in their endeavour and, even if that does not appear as a formalised dance on the beat of drums, it still represents a moment in these people's day when they exit their ordinary affairs to perform something out of the ordinary, at least according to the dominant framework of interpretation of ordinary.

Another aspect which has been considered non-shamanistic is the casting of curses. Not all *Segnatori* heal or exclusively heal the people in their community, some also cast curses – or the Evil Eye – on people, as well as working with binding spells to create and destroy couples. This darker aspect of the practice, which appears to be a minority, does not invalidate the

shamanic nature of these traditions. As well reported in literature, numerous indigenous shamanisms around the world incorporate harmful workings (Stépanoff, 2009; Turner, 1989; Porterfield, 1987) and it is solely in the romanticised interpretation of Westerners that the shaman is a purely beneficial doer (Wallis, 2003; Johnson, 1995; Atkinson, 1992).

There have also been a number of comments mentioning that shamanism is more spiritual, coming from foreign cultures, non-subject to syncretism, less superstitious, less religious (compared to Catholicism) and with fewer ritualistic elements compared to the Tradition of *Segnature*. All elements which are still attributable to romantic and Eliadian interpretations of shamanism. Another reason as to why trans-cultural shamanic practitioners do not acknowledge the shamanic elements within their own folk tradition is to be found in the lack of a wider understanding of what this tradition entails accompanied by an exoticised perception of shamanism. Being a known, yet underground tradition, most of its facets are obscure to the average Italian. This is also shown in the stark contrast between what practitioners of trans-cultural shamanism deem to be shamanism, which – as shown in chapter 4 – is subject to a strong romanticism and exoticism, and what those belonging to the Tradition of *Segnature* believe on the matter. It is noteworthy to report that every single informant who belongs to the Tradition of *Segnature* and has a good understanding of what shamanism is, even from a transcultural perspective, declared that the practice of *Segnature* can be seen as a form of shamanism. Those who deem otherwise are either transcultural practitioners who do not belong to the Tradition of *Segnature* or *Segnatori*, mainly of the old generation, who have little to no understanding of what shamanism is.

Moreover, the very struggle to acknowledge this tradition as a form of shamanism is a typical feature of shamanic traditions in itself. As a superimposed category, it needs to be ingrained in one's vocabulary in order to relate it to a practice which pre-dates the very birth of such a category. The reading key is here found in the notion of stereotype. An unbiased understanding of shamanism has been hindered by the exoticism brought forward by 19th-20th century Western ethnographies which portray shamanism as a phenomenon belonging to Other-than-European cultures alongside the popularisation operated by Eliade, who depicts the shaman in a mystical light.

These have become underlying assumptions, taken for granted by trans-cultural shamans, which hinder the discovery of nuanced variations of a phenomenon which would be simplistic to reduce to one uniform stereotypical manifestation.

At this point, the reader may beg the question, why does it matter if the Tradition of *Segnature* is a form of shamanism? Why enter such a controversial debate just to adopt this contentious label? I argue in this study that using 'shamanism' in reference to the Italian vernacular healing is meaningful for two main reasons. The first one is a re-evaluation of folk magic in the country and the second one is to foster a re-assessment of the definition of shamanism itself.

On the first remark, it seems significant to highlight that the Tradition of *Segnature* is – and has been - a cultural patrimony whose immense value has been neglected for ages due to the attached stigma of a superstition for the contemporary rationalistic society or, worse, of an evil unholy endeavour for representatives of the Catholic church. Since shamanism does not have a history of contrasts with the Catholic church and is not socially associated with harmful rituals, it represents the best trope against which vernacular healing can be re-evaluated. Before the advent of shamanism, there was no term other than witchcraft to categorise such practices and the sheer association with such a heavily loaded identifier has contributed to keeping these folk practices underground and shrouded in secrecy. With the rise of Paganism and the more positive outlook on witchcraft provided by its most popular tradition, that is Wicca, a first wave of emergence to the fore of these rites had begun. Detecting this trend, among the Italian communities engaging with witchcraft – as already evidenced in a previous study - has reinforced my conviction that an association with shamanism could give a voice back to these healers,

Commonly described as 'A person who is elected by the Spirits to be the link between the physical and the spiritual worlds to alleviate

the suffering of human beings'¹¹⁷, the Shaman is believed by many to have power only as long as it is used to help and heal others. Differently, a witch might do harm or give help depending on the moral code of the individual. As a result, practitioners have often introduced themselves saying 'I practise shamanism, I'm a good witch' or described someone they know as 'She is a Shaman. Or rather a witch, one of the good ones' (Lioni, 2016) utilizing the term Shaman as a sign marking the goodwill of the witch, a way to guarantee his or her goodness (Puca, 2018b, p. 279).

As a proponent of labels – even controversial ones like 'indigenous' and 'shamanism' - I have argued in this chapter their relevance in religious studies discourse even when they present challenges in relation to previous scholarship, for those challenges prompt a conversation and may raise the very issues which bring the scholarly understanding of a phenomenon a step forward. The issue is not the adoption of the label 'shamanism' *per se* in defining religious phenomena which manifest the major traits associated with shamanism, but rather turning this label into a stereotype with fixed elements moulded upon non-Western societies and cultures. As every other social product, shamanism is also shaped by the cultural framework from which it originates. Consequently, Nepalese shamanism will not look like Italian shamanism just as much as the Nepalese government won't look like the Italian one. And yet, despite the different manifestation, it is still easily acknowledgeable as a government in both instances.

Likewise, 'shamanism' needs to lose its exotic and stereotyped connotations and be investigated as a blueprint which can or cannot be found across different cultures, including European ones, and expected to mirror its culture of birth rather than an ideal non-Western model.

¹¹⁷ *'Una persona che viene designata dagli Spiriti a essere il tramite tra mondo fisico e mondi spirituali per alleviare le sofferenze degli esseri umani'*. Anonymous answer to the Survey *'Lo Sciamanesimo in Italia'*

Chapter 6

Relations and contrasts with Catholicism

Catholicism is an integral part of the Italian life, embedded as it is in the cultural framework underlying the daily experience of individuals. With national television constantly conveying the Pope's words and broadcasting the Sunday mass, the crucifix hanging on public schools and buildings' walls and the continuous reference to Catholic themes in daily discourses, Catholicism has – as it will be discussed in this chapter – moved from being perceived as a religion to a religious element linked to the national identity for the majority of Italians.

In previous chapters, I have contextualised shamanism in Italy (chapter 3) and tackled the two main types of shamanism currently practised on the peninsula, trans-cultural forms (chapter 4) of shamanism as well as its indigenous counterparts (chapter 5). This chapter will tackle the relation and potential contrasts between shamanism and the dominant religious system in Italy. I will start by addressing how the perception of Catholicism has changed in a progressively more secularised Italy as shown by the self-identifying labels of 'practising Catholic' (*cattolico praticante*) and 'non-practising Catholic' (*cattolico non praticante*) used by Italians in discourses to position themselves in relation to the Catholic faith. I will then proceed to cover how this contemporary perception of Catholicism interacts with the perceived understanding of shamanism, covering first the trans-cultural forms of shamanism and then the Tradition of *Segnatori*. The element of 'perception' will be key in my analysis as it will not be the purpose of this study to compare Catholic theology with a scholarly theory of shamanism. The object of my inquiry is the experience and perception that Italians have of both systems and how the two may or may not cohabit. I will thus examine whether, how and under which conditions the two have been integrated into the lived experience of people who are - to this day - significantly influenced by a religion so distant in its underpinning to what shamanic practice is bound to entail.

6.1 Contextualising Catholicism in the Life of Italians

Although Italy is by constitution a lay country (Galeano, 2012, p. 128), the presence of Catholicism is engrained in the cultural life of people as, according to the statistics, 87.8% of Italians self-identify as Catholic. The last national survey¹¹⁸ from which this data emerged was conducted in 2006 by the EURISPES and focused on the relation between Italians and Catholicism.¹¹⁹ The survey, conducted on a sample of 1070 interviewees was carried out between the 22nd of December 2005 and the 5th of January 2006, later published on their official website on the 15th of January 2006 where it is still available to this day (Eurispes, 2006). The survey showed that, although the number of Italians who deem themselves Catholics had increased by 8%, only one-third of them would classify as a 'practising Catholic' (*cattolico praticante*). My field data shows that it is common parlance among Italians to speak of 'practising Catholic' and 'non-practising Catholic' (*cattolico non praticante*) to quickly explain to their listener what their stance on belief and affiliation are. A practising Catholic is a person who endorsed the belief system of Catholicism as well as recognising the authority of the Church and its representatives. As a consequence, they would regularly go to church and follow to the best of their abilities its religious precepts. Conversely, a non-practising Catholic is someone who upholds the belief system of Catholicism but challenges to various degrees, based on individual judgement, the ascendant position that the Church holds on their religious lives. Non-practising Catholics do not often go to church, if at all, and might only attend for baptism, communion, marriage and/or attend mass only at Christmas and Easter. They prefer to tailor their Catholicism upon themselves and hence will in most cases pick and choose which rules to abide by and which ones to ignore. For instance, they might judge negligible to maintain celibacy until

¹¹⁸ There are more recent surveys that have been conducted on this matter but none (that I was able to find) were from a national, non-confessional and scholarly source.

¹¹⁹ EURISPES is the Institute for the Research of Italians (*Istituto di Ricerca degli Italiani*), previously known as Institute of Political, Economic and Social Studies (*Istituto di Studi Politici, Economici e Sociali*). Since 1986, the EURISPES is a research body affiliated with the MIUR, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (Eurispes, n.d.).

marriage or to confess their sins to a priest but might acknowledge as essential to their Catholic identity getting married according to the church customs. The CESNUR¹²⁰ calls this phenomenon ‘believing without belonging’ (*credere senza appartenere*) borrowing and translating Grace Davie’s definition in her work *Religion in Britain since 1945* (CESNUR, 2014b; Davie, 1994).

Upon analysing the data showing such a significant increase in non-practising Catholics, the Sociologist and EURISPES president Gian Maria Fara, summarises what emerged from the 2006 survey as follows,

The data emerged from the survey delineate not a crisis of religion, but of religiosity. As for the Catholics, the result is the image of a ‘faltering’ religion, far from the idea of an authentic religious revival able to make the Catholic both an individual and a collective force able to interact with society and create genuine hegemonic values [...] And yet it would be impossible to speak of a secular or Zapaterist Italy, lucidly aware of the need to separate the public sphere from the confessional one. This is because, in the light of the historical journey of the Italian people, Catholicism seems to represent one of the few possible identity collectors, even more so after the crisis of ideologies; in this sense, the Catholic roots constitute for Italians a flag more felt than the state one. They function as cultural glue, though not necessarily as a religion (Eurispes, 2006).¹²¹

¹²⁰ ‘Center for the Study of New Religions’ (*Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni*) based in Italy and established in 1988. Its managing director is Prof Massimo Introvigne.

¹²¹ ‘I dati emersi dall’indagine delineano una crisi non della religione, ma della religiosità. Per quanto riguarda i cattolici, si profila l’immagine di una religione ‘vacillante’, lontana dall’idea di un rilancio religioso autentico, in grado di fare del cattolico una forza individuale e collettiva capace di immettere nella società nuovi valori e di farli diventare veramente egemoni [...] E tuttavia sarebbe impossibile parlare di un’Italia laicista o zapaterista e lucidamente consapevole della necessità di separare la sfera pubblica da quella confessionale. Questo perché, alla luce del percorso storico del popolo italiano, il cattolicesimo sembra rappresentare uno dei pochi collettori identitari possibili, a maggior ragione dopo la crisi delle ideologie: in questo senso, le radici cattoliche costituiscono per gli italiani una bandiera più sentita di quella patria e funzionano come collante culturale, anche se non necessariamente religione.’ *Translation is mine.*

This shift from Catholicism as a religion to Catholic behaviour as a cultural identity emerged from my research as well from my direct experience as an Italian. The majority of parents baptise their children, even when they are agnostics or non-believers. The same happens with weddings, funerals and any other 'rite of passage' linked to a sacrament. An example of this trend is shown by the available statistics on the choices Italians make when it comes to their wedding ceremonies. According to a report on weddings and marriages conducted by the ISTAT - the national institute of statistics - in 2015, 45.3% of weddings (88,000) are celebrated with a civil ceremony, an increase of 8% compared to the previous year. Although, these are either second or subsequent marriages in most cases (93%) and marriages with at least one foreign spouse (87%). The choice to celebrate the wedding with the civil ceremony is increasing even in the case of the first marriages for Italian couples and yet it still remains overall the minority of the population. On a national average, it goes from 20% in 2008 to 30% in 2015 (ISTAT Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2016, p. 4).

Interviews and conversations with my informants also helped me unravel the rationale behind the majoritarian propensity for Catholic ceremonies. When I asked Natalia why she had baptised her children despite deeming herself an agnostic, she explained she was afraid of their sons getting bullied or isolated at school for not having been christened. This concern was not new to me, as I witnessed myself in the mid-nineties the only non-Catholic peer in primary school being isolated for that reason. The two other common reasons as to why an Italian would choose to have a Catholic ceremony despite non-identifying as Catholics entail paying respect to either their parents (or other relatives) or to the tradition as if a wedding in the church were perceived as an Italian institution rather than a religious one.¹²²

Another instance hinting at the 'Italianisation' of Catholicism comes from the recurring political debates over whether or not crucifixes should be removed from the walls of public buildings, such as schools and councils. The dispute periodically re-emerges in the Parliament, usually raised by a left-wing

¹²² Data collected through conversations in 2019. My personal experience growing up in Italy confirms what these conversations suggest.

politician, and soon after closed or postponed due to the conclusion that the crucifix is not a religious symbol but an Italian one. The most recent of such incidences occurred in October 2019, when the matter was brought to the attention of the Parliament and the president of Forza Italia party, Maria Stella Gelmini, reminded in an interview that the crucifix is not a furnishing element but the testimony of the roots of our country (la Repubblica, 2019a).

Previously, in 2006, the *Consiglio di Stato* ('Council of State')¹²³ responded to a legal recourse prompted by the 'Union of Atheists and Rationalist Agnostics' (*Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti, UAAR*) challenging the presence of the crucifix exposed in public schools. The response of the Council, identifiable as 556/2006 and available to read on the University Roma Tre website, states,

It should be noted, however, that the principle of secularism is not compromised by the exposure of the crucifix in classrooms. In fact, the crucifix is also a historical-cultural symbol; it represents a sign of national identification; it represents, along with other forms of collective living and thinking, one of the paths of formation of our country and generally of most of Europe (some national flags of northern Europe contain the sign of the cross and not by chance, perhaps, they have been the subject of recent episodes of retaliation in countries of Islamic religion), whose Christianity or Catholicism cannot be erased, above all as a sociological *datum*, from the aforementioned principle of secularism, to which Christianity is accompanied as an element of integration and development and certainly not as an element of opposition or, much less, discrimination (Consiglio di Stato, 2006, p. 4).¹²⁴

¹²³ The *Consiglio di Stato* (Council of State) is a, according to article 100 of the Italian Constitution, a legal and administrative body which protects the legality of public administration (Segretariato Generale della Giustizia Amministrativa, 2011, p. 2).

¹²⁴ 'Va osservato, tuttavia, come il principio di laicità non risulta compromesso dall'esposizione del crocifisso nelle aule scolastiche. Il crocifisso costituisce, infatti, anche un simbolo storico — culturale; esso rappresenta un segno di identificazione nazionale; esso rappresenta, insieme ad altre forme di vita collettiva e di pensiero, uno dei percorsi di formazione del nostro Paese e in genere di gran parte dell'Europa (alcuni vessilli nazionali del nord Europa contengono il segno della croce e non a caso, forse, essi sono stati oggetto di recenti episodi di ritorsione in Paesi di religione islamica), la cui cristianità o il

The whole document, the essence of which is well summarised by the aforementioned extract, is not without contradictions. On one hand, it firmly states that the crucifix is mostly a cultural symbol linked to the Italian national identity and, therefore, does not compromise the secularisation and plurality of religious beliefs. This is due to assimilation of Catholic elements in such a way that the religious component subsides in favour of what is perceived to be the Italian culture. It is hence not a matter of religion anymore but rather of national identity and cultural belonging. On the other hand, there are plain religious elements breaking through, such as the reference to Islamic retaliation as well as the idea that Catholicism (as a religion) 'cannot be erased'.

This dual perspective of Catholicism as a religion as well as a cultural feature emerged from my fieldwork to be the most prevalent among those Italians who identify as Catholics, leading me to dive deeper into understanding what the underlying rationale may be. What most of all surfaced from discourses is a difference between what I will define 'Religion' and 'Religious', to refer to the two categories emerged from the narratives produced by my informants. I argue that such categorisation is key to understanding the complex dynamic intertwining national identity and the perception of Catholicism as one such element.

The category of 'Religion' in this context is comprised of all the elements that make the institution of one religion. In the case of Catholicism, religion would include the Catholic theology, the Pope, the members of the clergy, the bible and all other elements which set the boundaries of what is Catholicism. These are the foundations that set the layout for the institution of Catholicism as a religion, the main terms of reference and comparison. On the other hand, 'Religious' will henceforth represent the cultural translation and interpretation of the 'religion', what Catholicism means to Catholics.

cui cattolicesimo non possono essere cancellate, anzitutto come dato sociologico, dal ricordato principio di laicità, al quale il cristianesimo si accompagna come elemento di integrazione e sviluppo e non certo di contrapposizione né, tanto meno, di discriminazione.'

The moment religion infiltrates the cultural fabric and the lives of people represents the onset of an unspoken negotiation. When a religion accounts for a community or national identity a bridge becomes necessary to reconcile the individual identity with that of the community. If being an Italian becomes synonymous to being a Catholic, it will be easier for someone's identity to redefine Catholicism in their own terms rather than renouncing it outright. Thus, the available options are either to go through a process of redefining the concept of 'Italian-ness' or to negotiate what the current terms of being a Catholic are. Such a pattern has been uncovered by Kathryn Rountree in her study on Neopaganism and how it is getting integrated in a Catholic country such as Malta. She explains,

Because of the intimate connections in Malta between (Catholic) religion, social and political life, national and cultural identity, ideas history and heritage, and the annual cycle of religio-cultural festivals, Maltese are disinclined, and have no need, either to contrast themselves with Catholicism, strive to create a specifically Maltese Paganism incorporating local folk traditions, which are, in any case, already a taken-for-granted component of Maltese life broadly and not thought of particularly as 'Pagan' by either Catholics or Neo-Pagans'(Rountree, 2011, p. 849).

Even though in Italy this dynamic does not occur in relation to Paganism,¹²⁵ it describes accurately how shamanism has infiltrated the cultural fabric of those who deem themselves Catholics. Given that Catholicism is not only associated with belonging to the Italian culture but also to the family of origin and hence to 'the tradition' (*la tradizione di famiglia*), the option of negotiation presents much less friction as long as the core identity of 'I'm a Catholic' or 'I'm a believer' is maintained. It is also worthwhile to mention that negotiating religion is what most Catholics in Italy do anyway, making this process straightforward, socially accepted and in most cases unknowingly brought about. As a result, what Catholicism is to Catholics has

¹²⁵ Paganism in Italy does show a contrast with Catholicism. Although the topic will not be fully tackled in this research, the general outline can be inferred by the section 'the interaction between Paganism and Trans-cultural Shamanism' in Chapter 3.

become increasingly malleable and fluid, more an individually tailored and community-based religious tradition than a dogmatic standardised religion (Tomasi, 1996).

Franco Garelli, sociologist at the University of Turin, explains the Italian perception of Catholicism in the age of pluralism,

In Italy, compared to other national contexts, 'faith without religious belonging' (the expression of an autonomous religious quest that excludes – and also criticizes – references to a religious group or Church) is much less frequent, whereas belonging to Catholicism without any religious involvement is much more common. This is the case of those who declare themselves Catholic more by tradition than by conviction, re-evaluating the prevalent religion in the Italian social context for cultural and symbolic reasons (reflecting expressions of Italian history and memory) rather than for purely spiritual motives. [...] These are forms of adhesion to 'Catholicism' that are in a certain harmony with the values held by religious groups, but they do not imply the acceptance of Church religion (Garelli, 2012, pp. 2–3).

According to my direct observations across the region of Campania, in big cities Catholics tend to employ this re-negotiation of Catholic precepts on a more individual basis or, alternatively, in accordance with the values passed on by the family of origin. In towns and in the countryside, the role played by the community is significantly bigger, which means that the Catholic principles to abide by become the ones acknowledged by the dwellers of a specific town. In both cases, individual-led and community-based, the point of view expressed by the local church or priest are outweighed and overthrown. An example of such a trend is evidenced by Rita, a self-professed devout practising Catholic from Marano di Napoli (Campania). Rita has two sons and hopes one of them will one day become a priest. In late October 2019, her sons were told by a priest that they should not celebrate Halloween as it is a satanic festivity which would turn them away from their faith. Rita and her neighbours had already organised a Halloween party, she just laughed at the priest's words and concluded that it was just silly and untrue. This occurrence, representative of a recurring tendency, shows what the community perceives

as acceptable for a Catholic has a bigger impact on people's perception than what the church and its representatives say. I also witnessed Concetta, from Grumo Nevano (Campania), have a number of discussions with her friends from the neighbourhood assessing and evaluating the words of the town priest at the mass they attended as if the final verdict on their validity was indeed up to them rather than the representative of the local church.

Another sociological study on Catholicism in Italy, by Marco Marzano of the University of Bergamo, reviews past scholarship which upholds the idea that Italy is far from being secularised as the presence of Catholicism is still very strong (Garelli, 2011; Abbruzzese, 2010). Surveys conducted in the past thirty years on the number of 'practising Catholics' (*cattolici praticanti*) in Italy would suggest that their number has not changed significantly (Garelli, 2011; Burgalassi, 1996). Marzano challenges this data and, attempting a quantitative census of the regular Churchgoers, concludes that there is, in fact, a decline in the involvement with religious ceremonies such as the Sunday mass. In his view, the increasing estrangement pertains the Church and its positions rather than the faith itself (Marzano, 2012).

As all the referenced studies and field data show, the majoritarian perception of Catholicism among Italians is that of a cultural tradition, regarded more as religious than as a religion. This reshaped understanding of Catholicism fosters the inclusion of a movement like shamanism. Shamanism is, in fact, not seen as a religion but rather as a movement that can embrace a variety of belief systems, malleable enough to be perceived by practitioners as compatible with other religious systems, including monotheisms,

Shamanism may coexist with world religions, or be an important element within animistic belief system (Bowie, 2006, p. 175).

In this sense, shamanism also falls under the category of 'Religious' as opposed to 'Religion', albeit in a different fashion to how Catholicism is perceived in Italy. While Catholicism is now a religious-cultural identity for most Italians, shamanism represents a new toolkit to interact with the sacred which can be easily combined with a Catholic worldview as it presents no competing higher being to be worshipped. This was also evidenced by my

experience with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, in both the basic and the advanced training I attended.¹²⁶ In these workshops, the teachers explained to the participants that there was no adverse interaction between them being Catholics and the techniques we were about to learn and experiment. Among these participants, there were people self-identifying as Catholics, Pagans or Spiritual and they all seemed to welcome that idea and deemed shamanism as an adjunct to any belief system the practitioner may adopt in their personal religious view. On those occasions, when we were asked to do a shamanic journey to the upper world – the one where you can encounter divine beings – there was a wide variety of encounters that practitioners shared afterwards. Several participants had seen Jesus or the Holy Mary whilst others had reported chatting with Isis or Ogun. What was considered shamanistic was, therefore, the shape and outline of the practice whereas its essence would be determined by the religious contents with which each individual would relate it. This process of integration of shamanism within a Catholic framework is also made easier by the absence of a history of antagonism with the Catholic church, as it happened for witchcraft. As a consequence, even though witchcraft could also be easily seen as a set of techniques easily integrable with any religious system, centuries-long contrasts with Catholicism have banned it as evil, linked to satanic worshipping and overall leading the person astray from their path towards the Catholic god (Puca, 2018b).

I can thus conclude that inasmuch as shamanism is interacting with that majority of Italian Catholics who identify as ‘non-practising’ and/or acknowledge Catholicism as a religious tradition shaping the Italian culture rather than a religion *per se*, there appears to be no significant contrast between Catholicism and shamanism in the Italian context. What is then left to be analysed is what would be the relation and whether there might be a contrast between shamanism and the Catholic institutions as well as the ‘practising Catholics’; those who see Catholicism as a dogmatic religion beyond the bounds of delineating a national identity. Trying to fill this gap, I

¹²⁶ More details on these training/workshops are provided in the next chapter on trans-cultural shamanism.

will proceed to tackle the matter using a case study drawn from a chain of events occurring in late 2019.

6.2 Case study – Pan-Amazonian Synod and the Rejection of the Pachamama

From the 6th to the 26th of October 2019, Vatican City hosted a meeting for the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian region. The main aim, as declared during Pope Francis' Angelus on the 15th of October 2017, was to evangelise the indigenous people of that region by helping them build a better future through a better ecological awareness (General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, n.d.).

In the Preparatory Document for the Synod, there are a number of paragraphs tackling the cultural identity and spirituality of the indigenous peoples who live in the Amazon. As the Document reports, Pope Francis said,

‘Their worldview and wisdom have much to teach those of us who do not belong to their culture [...] Their diverse spiritualities and beliefs motivate them to live in communion with the soil, water, trees, animals, and with day and night. Wise elders – called interchangeably ‘payés, mestres, wayanga or chamanes’, among others – promote the harmony of people among themselves and with the cosmos.’ (General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2017).

This extract exemplifies well the sentiment shown through the whole of the document and echoed in other statements uttered by Pope Bergoglio throughout the duration of the synod. There is a plain admiration of the indigenous Amazonian peoples and their cultures and religions to the point where Christians are encouraged to learn how to interact with ‘Mother Earth’ from them. Despite the intended evangelisation agenda, a colonialist attitude is openly condemned in favour of mutual exchange, building a bridge between the two different religious approaches. As a result, the message conveyed is not hinting at the superiority of the Catholic religion nor the idea that indigenous religions and Catholicism are mutually exclusive. Quite the opposite indeed, as the Pope and the Synod assert the value of those peoples’

beliefs and exhort the Church to adopt the ones that might help build a better ecological awareness alongside aiding a mutual understanding on equal terms. These points are also evidenced by the final document drawn up by the synod of bishops for Pope Francis, whose original version is in Spanish and available on the Vatican Press website, for it states,

In the Amazon, interreligious dialogue takes place especially with indigenous religions and Afro-descendant cults. These traditions deserve to be known, understood in their own expressions and in their relationship with the forest and mother earth. Together with them, Christians, based on their faith in the Word of God, engage in a dialogue, sharing their lives, their worries, their struggles, their experiences of God, to deepen each other's faith and act together in defence of the 'common house'. To achieve this, it is necessary that the churches of the Amazon develop initiatives of encounter, study and dialogue with the followers of these religions. Sincere and respectful dialogue is the bridge towards the construction of the 'good living'. In the exchange of gifts, the Spirit leads us more and more towards truth and good (Synod of Bishops, 2019).¹²⁷

Individual interviews with the attendees confirm the synod's goals set by the Pope, albeit also highlighting the challenge that such a religious exchange might face. Father Dario Bossi, in an interview published on 'Vatican News – Italiano', the YouTube channel funded by the Vatican City Government, explained,

This synod carries the richness as well as the challenge of a Church increasingly plural in its structure and, at the same time,

¹²⁷ 'En la Amazonía, el diálogo interreligioso se lleva a cabo especialmente con las religiones indígenas y los cultos afrodescendientes. Estas tradiciones merecen ser conocidas, entendidas en sus propias expresiones y en su relación con el bosque y la madre tierra. Junto con ellos, los cristianos, basados en su fe en la Palabra de Dios, se ponen en diálogo, compartiendo sus vidas, sus preocupaciones, sus luchas, sus experiencias de Dios, para profundizar mutuamente su fe y actuar juntos en defensa de la 'casa común'. Para ello es necesario que las iglesias de la Amazonía desarrollen iniciativas de encuentro, estudio y diálogo con los seguidores de estas religiones. El diálogo sincero y respetuoso es el puente hacia la construcción del 'buen vivir'. En el intercambio de dones, el Espíritu conduce cada vez más hacia la verdad y el bien.' *Translation is mine.*

that strives and walks in a spirit of unity. We are wondering how to make it so that the Church has an Amazonian face as well as a sound engagement with the universal Church. This is not always easy but we can see that leaving space to indigenous peoples, to women and to calling of Mother Earth that comes from the Amazon are opening new doors to let the Church embrace these new challenges. Thus, the very first expectation is that the synod will succeed in building a bridge with everything that has been said (Vatican News, 2019a).¹²⁸

From this account, which is far from being an isolated case, what emerges is an acknowledgement of the struggle that the Catholic Church may experience in putting into action a religious reconciliation with such different belief systems while maintaining - and not losing in the process - their own distinctive identity.

What was mainly identified as a challenge by the clergy, has instead been perceived as a threat by the most fundamentalist Catholics, as the following events will display. To demonstrate the willingness to build this bridge, an exhibition of Amazonian art had been organised in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria in Traspontina. Among other art pieces, there were three statues representing the *Pachamama*, shaped as pregnant women. On the 21st of October, these statuettes were stolen and thrown in Rome's Tiber River and the gesture filmed and uploaded on multiple YouTube channels with apparent pride on the part of the man whose face was cut out of the frame (la Repubblica, 2019b).

On the morning of the 22nd of October 2019, I found a post in need of approval on my Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy' by a man who introduced himself as a priest and an exorcist. In that video, he

¹²⁸ 'Questo sinodo ci porta la ricchezza ma anche la sfida di una chiesa sempre più plurale nella sua costituzione e, allo stesso tempo, che si sforza e cammina in uno spirito di unità. Ci stiamo chiedendo come fare in modo che la chiesa abbia allo stesso tempo un volto amazzonico e una pienezza di partecipazione, naturalmente nella chiesa universale. Questo non è sempre facile, però vediamo che gli spazi lasciati ai popoli indigeni, alle donne e all'appello della madre terra che ci viene dall'Amazzonia sono spazi che stanno aprendo porte nuove perché la chiesa si apra a queste sfide nuove. Quindi la primissima aspettativa è che il sinodo riesca a fare il ponte con tutto ciò che è stato detto.' *Translation is mine.*

proudly claims to be the one who tossed the statuettes in the Tiber. In his words,

It was me, the deacon exorcist father David who launched into the Tiber those Pagan, idolatrous, satanic statues placed in the basilica of the holy virgin. We should stop these satanic rituals and focus on the transubstantiation of Jesus Christ in bread and wine, the only rite, the only faith, the only truth. I take on all the responsibilities before the eyes of God and before the eyes of men. In the name of the father, son and holy spirit. May the peace be with you and so be it.¹²⁹

I decided to not approve his post with the video but posted it myself on the group, letting the other members know what happened. A couple of weeks later, another person claimed as his own the act of tossing the statuettes in the Tiber river. This is not a private video posted on somebody's YouTube channel but an interview hosted by Prof Roberto de Mattei¹³⁰ and posted on 'Corrispondenza Romana', a weekly online newspaper linked to an official YouTube channel, whose director is de Mattei himself. The interview, titled 'I threw pagan idols into Tiber river', is introduced by de Mattei, who publicly thanks the Austrian Alexander Tschugguel 'for the courageous and symbolic gesture' and proceeds to state that it expresses 'the *sensu fidei* of millions of Catholics worldwide.' Then Alexander's words follow, to explain the reasons behind his act,

¹²⁹ 'Sono stato io, il diacono esorcista Padre David a lanciare nel Tevere quelle statue pagane, idolatre, sataniche, messe nella basilica della santa vergine. Smettiamo con questi riti satanici e pensiamo alla transustanziazione di Gesù Cristo nel pane e nel vino, unico rito, unica fede, unica verità. Me ne assumo tutte le responsabilità davanti agli occhi di Dio e davanti agli occhi degli uomini. Nel nome del padre, del figlio e dello spirito santo. Che la pace sia con voi e così sia.' *Translation is mine.*

¹³⁰ Roberto de Mattei taught Modern History at the University of Rome La Sapienza, the University of Cassino and at the European University of Rome (2005-2015), where he was the coordinator of the Faculty of Historical Sciences. Between 2002 and 2011 he was vice president of the National Research Council (CNR) and a member of the Executive Council of the Historical Institute for the Modern and Contemporary Age. He currently chairs the Lepanto Foundation and directs the magazine 'Radici Cristiane' and the information agency 'Corrispondenza Romana' (de Mattei, n.d.).

I even talked to them [the Amazonian people at the Synod] about if the people in the Amazon get baptised from the missionaries and they told me no, they normally not because it's not part of their culture. So, I was very upset. [...] After all the visits and everything I heard, for me it was totally clear. This is against the first commandment, it is something wrong, it is a fertility goddess, Mother Earth, and the first commandment [says] 'I am the lord your god. You shall not have other Gods beside me, you shall not bow down to any graven image'. And then I saw the video of them bowing down in front of this particular graven image in the Vatican gardens (Corrispondenza Romana, 2019; *'Ho gettato gli idoli pagani nel fiume Tevere!' / 'I threw pagan idols into the Tiber River!'*, n.d.).

As a consequence, he decided to go back to Rome with some friends and, as soon as the church of Santa Maria in Traspontina opened, he entered and grabbed five statuettes to throw them into the Tiber. Alexander goes on to say how delighted he was to receive 'millions of rosaries', a huge amount of prayers and gratitude from Catholics all over the world. In only one week, as of the 12th of November, the video counts 253 comments expressing support to Alexander's gesture and sending him blessings and prayers for what he had done.

The point of view of the Vatican was in stark opposition with the one expressed by this group of Catholics. Only a few days after the incident, on the 25th of October, Pope Francis informs the public that the statuettes have been retrieved from the Tiber river undamaged. He also sends heartfelt apologies to those who took offence from this gesture (Vatican News, 2019b).

This case study brings more to the fore a contrast between two factions within Catholicism rather than between Catholicism and Shamanism or what indigenous religions represent for the Church. As the Pope and the clergy adopt a more inclusive perspective on how Catholicism should move forward, there are groups of Catholics who disagree with this openness and would rather maintain a more dogmatic approach based on the commandments and other revealed scriptures.

Even though there are no statistics showing the numbers of Catholics who are pro or against the inclusiveness expressed by the clergy during the Synod, it can be inferred from the data that those Catholics fervently against it are noticeably the minority of Italian believers. This can be inferred from the data we do have regarding Catholicism in Italy. As the previous section highlighted, the large majority of Italians who self-identify as Catholics are 'non-practising Catholics'. As a consequence, they believe in God and Jesus Christ but tailor their religion upon their personal needs and beliefs, engaging very little with what the Church or the Vatican has to say. I personally asked ten non-practising Catholics what were their thoughts on the Synod and the message it conveyed and none of them were aware that a Synod had recently taken place nor did they have a clear answer to what a Synod even was. Since there is also a lack of knowledge regarding what indigenous religions and shamanism are, unless the person is actively involved in one of such traditions, no strong opinions were registered regarding the matter of building a bridge between the different belief systems. This is in accordance with the sociological studies referenced in the previous section of the chapter, which show that the very involvement of non-practising Catholics with their religion is limited and the majoritarian perception hints more toward a cultural-national sense of religious belonging without the need of diving deeper into the theology or the religious debates taking place. Non-practising Catholics show much more interest in entering such debates when the matter involves and may alter the society in which they live, topics such as euthanasia, surrogacy, homosexual marriage *et similia*. Since shamanism is not deemed to be a religion nor is it perceived as altering the Italian society at large, there is no opposition that the average non-practising Catholic feels with their belief system.

However, a contrast between Catholicism and a shamanic practice does emerge when the respondents self-identify as Pagans or hold strong feelings against the Catholic institutions. This was evidenced by a poll I opened in my Facebook group 'Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy' on the 13th of November 2019, asking whether a Catholic can practise shamanism. In the poll, I only offered two options, yes or no, and the chance of explaining their choice in the comments. Out of 48 respondents, 28 believed that a Catholic

can practise shamanism while 19 thought it was not possible as the two are not compatible. Just one respondent added his own option 'They are not compatible' (*Non sono compatibili*). Therefore, the majority were favourable to such syncretism, which in the comment section was articulated as dependent on the open-mindedness of the individual Catholic whether it is possible to combine such a religious belief with shamanism. To better understand the aforementioned data, it needs to be clarified that the members of this Facebook groups are mostly non-Catholics, as emerged from a poll on religious affiliation opened on the 14th of November 2019 and fully discussed in chapter 2. No one selected the option 'Catholic', albeit some members had introduced themselves as non-practising Catholics in previous posts or comments on the Facebook group. It is, therefore, safe to assume that there are either no practising Catholics among the group members or they are not active at all in any of the discussions occurring among members.

Thus, I was not able to register any stark contrast between trans-cultural shamanism and Catholicism in Italy where by Catholicism I mean the one the majority of Italians identify with (non-practising Catholics) as well as the current position upheld by the Vatican. Catholicism is mostly lived by Italians as a cultural-national tradition, albeit acknowledged as a religion. Shamanism, in its trans-cultural understanding, is seen as not dependent on any religious system but rather combinable with any of them, as it represents a toolkit to interact with the sacred on an individual or community base. As a consequence, there is no detectable friction between the two for the time being. However, the strong identarian role played by Catholicism might be compromised in a future scenario where shamanism becomes more widely spread, to the point of having a stronger impact on the Italian perception of their cultural identity. If such a case were to occur, I suspect a conflict might indeed arise between Catholicism and shamanism if the latter would become a 'threat' to the *status quo* and, as such, encounter the same animosity faced by other non-Catholic religions or non-Catholic social and ethical stances. This has been shown to be the case with the folk magic practices encompassed by the Tradition of *Segnature*, which have a longer history of practice in Italy and are also linked the cultural tradition of the country.

6.3 Catholicism versus the Tradition of *Segnature*

As I have discussed at the beginning of the chapter, Italians' lives have been affected by the Catholic religion for centuries (Garelli, 2007). Yet, in more recent times and with the decline of interest on the part of young people, scholars have wondered whether Italians can still be regarded as Catholics. Enzo Pace adopts Benedetto Croce's viewpoint in affirming that Italians cannot see themselves as other than Catholics because they cannot envision themselves outside the socio-cultural boundaries defined by a long history of Catholicism (Pace, 1996, p. 389).

Folk magic traditions also seem to have been part of the social fabric for longer than we can determine, despite them being in opposition with what the Church deems acceptable for someone who identifies as a Catholic. The main stance made by representatives of the Catholic church is that magic stems from the desire to gain superhuman powers. As a consequence, all practices related to magic, including horoscopes and fortune telling, will make people deviate from their religious path (Pasqua, 2007, pp. 26–28).

The popular journal *Famiglia cristiana* ('Christian family') addresses the popular use of elements linked to the Catholic beliefs for magical purposes, such as a home blessing with holy water to remove negativity. It is made very clear that no such things exist and that nobody should believe themselves able to perform any form of magic because even the most benign would entail some sort of communion with the devil.

The 'pagan' who is always latent in each of us, in the face of the adversities of everyday life, tends to discharge the responsibilities on uncontrollable hidden forces and to solve problems through the illusory shortcut of 'magic' rather than with personal commitment [to faith]. It is the ancient temptation described in the Genesis where we tend to transfer the disastrous consequences of our own claim to be like God on the snake. This world is not the kingdom of Satan, let alone other unidentified negative forces. There are no 'cursed places'. We are the ones who, with our wickedness, allow the evil one to be present and active, making this world 'hellish' (Rizzolo, 2010).

Nonetheless, there are priests and ordained members of the Church that perform rituals to ward off evil forces such as demons. The most renowned example is that of Gabriele Amorth, best known as Padre Amorth, a famous priest who has allegedly performed over 160,000 exorcisms in his lifetime. Padre Amorth has also declared in numerous interviews that what drives the exorcism is the power of faith and hence it is the intercession of God that makes the ritual effective (Tosatti and Amorth, 2010; Amorth and Rodari, 2012). Although framed within a Catholic worldview, these practices still appear somewhat 'magical' to the average Italian, so much so that most of my Catholic informants who perform the *Segnature* use exorcisms and other 'miracles' performed by members of the Church as examples of magical practices that are Catholic in nature.

An interpretation of this phenomenon is provided by De Martino. Citing Theodor Trede (Trede, 1899, pp. 321–339) and his research on religious and social life in the reign of Naples, he concluded that it was not Catholicism to win against Paganism but rather the other way around. Pagan traditions and beliefs have survived and are now just masked under a different label (De Martino, 1982, p. 124). De Martino then continues to explain these folk traditions, often labelled as superstitions, as not to be found exclusively in Naples but everywhere in Italy. Consequently, what happens is a syncretisation of Catholicism and Paganism where the one provides the theoretical framework and the other the applied interpretation affecting daily life.

An example of such syncretism is found in the conceptualisation and practices surrounding the saints. According to Sallmann (1979), the church itself has increasingly empowered - from a spiritual point of view - the worshipping of saints and what the collected testimonies suggest is that saints are perceived as the keepers of balance within a community that might be threatened by adversities of different nature. The saint is believed to possess powers that affect the natural order; a saint can calm down a storm at sea and help struggling ships. He or she can induce or dissipate rain if needed and foretell the future. But what all saints are best known and get most worshipped for is their ability to heal illnesses, to the point where their importance is proportional to the efficacy shown on such matter (Sallmann, 1979, p. 593).

Since Saints operate within a Catholic theoretical framework and still perform 'magic' in the form of miracles, they represent the best role models for vernacular healers, who believe that by using Catholic symbols (the crosses) and prayers while performing their rituals, they are doing nothing that would be considered in opposition to their identity as Catholics.

Luca Trombetta, in the attempt to analyse the discrepancy between what the Catholic church says and what Catholics actually do, explores what he calls the 'Post-modern condition'. Such condition opens the individual to the possibility of a religious experience not dictated by institutions, for there is an increasing acknowledgement of the radical limitations of both language and rational understanding. This makes Trombetta wonder whether we are facing an 'epistemological rupture' in a Foucauldian sense, where a new relation between words and things would not allow us to draw conclusions that were once considered the only consistent inference (Trombetta, 2004, pp. 8–12).

If this is the case here, such disruption has begun long before post-modernism and perhaps the advent of such a paradigm has rather allowed the emergence of occurrences that were once concealed because they were deemed unacceptable. Now the matter of acceptance has met the post-modern fluidity between theory and practice that reshapes the way practitioners frame and interpret their practices.

What emerged from my fieldwork and interviews is that all the *Segnatori* of the old generation are Catholics and do not perceive any discrepancy between their religious beliefs and practices. None of the interviewees showed any concern about it and most of them were actually surprised by my question. As for the *Segnatori* of the new generation, they tend to be either Catholic or Pagans or even 'spiritual'. None of the Catholic practitioners of the new generation feel that you need to be a Catholic to perform the *Segnature*. Yet, as Paola from Messina explained, it helps because the prayers and gestures are drawn from Catholicism. Nonetheless, if a non-believer feels comfortable using them she believes they would work just the same.

In conclusion, the most significant aspect emerging from the analysed cases is the perception and interpretation of practitioners, which can vary significantly from the dogmatic doctrine conveyed by the Catholic Church.

There are numerous elements at play; post-modernism and the rupture between words and things, secularism as well as the importance traditions and national identity bear to people may be recognised as the three main ones. As a result, the relation between Catholicism and shamanism varies depending on whether it be a trans-cultural form or an autochthonous one, as the latter poses more of a threat to the role Catholicism plays as a bonding agent to the national identity. Despite the relational fluidity between Catholicism and different forms of shamanism, there is no significant contrast to the mind of practitioners. Whether representatives of the church manifest or not their dissent towards this or that practice, Italians who identify as Catholics – being mostly of the non-practising kind – will not let it affect their involvement with shamanism but rather frame it to make the two systems cohabitate by adopting their own interpretation of Catholicism.

Chapter 7

Italian Shamanism and Contemporary Syncretism

After the overview of shamanism in contemporary Italy in chapter 3 and the analysis of forms of trans-cultural shamanism modelled after imported traditions in chapter 4, I have tackled autochthonous shamanism with the Tradition of *Segnature* in chapter 5 as well as how all the aforementioned traditions relate to the dominant Catholic religion in chapter 6.

The present chapter will hence consider more closely two practitioners who situate themselves within the Tradition of *Segnature* whilst also claiming their practice to be a form of shamanism.

The aim of this chapter is to present two case studies on practitioners whose use of syncretism is key to understanding dynamics and patterns spread widely across Italian communities. With the Tradition of *Segnature* I chose to analyse the somewhat organic development from one generation to another, based on historical changes, the advent of social media and the weakened power exercised by the Catholic Church over people's beliefs. In the following cases the alterations and development examined are the result of more individual preferences.

Michela Chiarelli and Maria Capasso are, to my knowledge, the only two who deem themselves representatives of an Italian shamanism¹ explicitly stated as such and they were both initiated in what I call 'The tradition of *Segnature*'. Michela conveys what she purports to be an indigenous shamanism rooted in pre-Christian beliefs. Such tradition, defined by Michela as animistic in nature, includes the use of 'pre-Catholic' and 'post-Catholic' *Segnature* and prayers to Etruscan deities as well as Catholic saints. In contrast, Maria's practice is strictly connected to the Sardinian healing tradition, which she considers a form of shamanism under certain conditions.² Maria also incorporates other

¹ Maria also uses often the definition 'Sardinian Shamanism' (*sciamanesimo sardo*).

² See section 'Maria Capasso's Sardinian Shamanism'.

healing techniques, such as reiki and core shamanism, to her practice and sees value in such approaches.

The collected data presented in this chapter will help identify patterns found in Michela's and Maria's traditions which are also detectable across other shamanic communities, where the pursuit of an individually-tailored belief system and practice is becoming increasingly common. The present chapter will offer the narratives as offered by Michela and Maria during interviews and participant observation. As a consequence, their stories and the beliefs emerging from them are their own and will not constitute an endorsement on my part.

7.1 The 'Italian Shamanism' of Michela Chiarelli

During the first months of my research, when my study was still limited to imported forms of shamanism, an informant suggested I should read a book whose title translates as 'The ceremonial Initiation into Italian shamanism' (*// cerimoniale iniziatico nello sciamanesimo italiano*) by Tatiana Longoni (Longoni, 2016). The title itself was intriguing as I had never contemplated the possibility of a form of autochthonous Italian shamanism. After reading the book and confirming that there was, in fact, a claim that an Italian shamanism existed and was currently practised, I contacted the author and asked her to be interviewed. Tatiana politely declined and redirected me to her spiritual teacher, saying that she was the most knowledgeable person on the matter, and the keeper of this tradition. Thus, I approached Michela Chiarelli via social media and proposed an interview. Michela seemed rather amenable to take part in my study and invited me to stay at her house for a couple of days, so that we could meet and discuss in person the features of her tradition.

I then spent two days with Michela and her family on the 2nd and the 3rd of May 2017. On that occasion, I collected approximately seven hours of interviews and participated in a few *impromptu* rituals. Since that encounter, we have had numerous online exchanges and a Skype interview. Michela also sent me the most relevant of her fifteen published books and almost fifty files encompassing articles and written considerations emerged from our

conversations as well as the content of the ‘magic course’ (*corso di magia*) she leads, otherwise reserved to her students, which she encouraged me to make use of in my research. One of her motives for doing so was to gain academic recognition, requiring me to explain the nature of this research more clearly. In any case, based on all the data at my disposal, I will draw the traits of Michela’s tradition and analyse it in relation to the wider context of the Tradition of *Segnature* and contemporary trans-cultural shamanism.

7.1.1 Michela, ‘The Last Italian Shaman of a Hereditary Tradition’

Michela, also known as Eriche Alchemilla,³ introduced herself to me as ‘The last Italian shaman of a hereditary tradition’⁴ and a seventh-generation shaman, for she is the seventh in her familiar lineage. Born in 1976, Michela is originally from the region Calabria, in the south of Italy. She lives with her husband, two sons and in-laws in a town in the countryside province of Turin.

Michela’s spiritual journey began with her grandmother, who raised her, and from the age of three she had been exposed to the making of potions, concoctions and the different modes whereby her grandmother used to aid childbirth and perform healing and other magical practices. Michela regards herself as a Christian, because she honours the figure of Jesus Christ. She said that she was baptised and received all the sacraments as it is what people do to align with what society requires. Based on all of our interviews and conversations, it was clear that she does not hold the Catholic Church in high esteem. This type of affiliation is usually summarised by the popular label ‘non-practising Catholic’ (*cattolico non praticante*),⁵ which may have been in use since the XIX century (Zovatto, 2002, p. 484). This disassociation from the Church, its precepts and rites emerged when Michela clarified that she did not baptise her sons. This is quite uncommon in Italy, for baptising children is a rite of passage ingrained in the cultural tradition to the point where even non-Catholics baptise their children to avoid social ostracism. As a consequence,

³ Eriche Alchemilla is the anagram of Michela Chiarelli and includes two plants which she deems to have a special connection.

⁴ ‘L’ultima sciamana italiana di tradizione ereditaria’.

⁵ See chapter 6 for more details on this cultural identifier.

deciding otherwise is perceived as a statement of disengagement from the Catholic Church.

In her narrative, there were pivotal moments in Michela's life that led her to become a shaman. When she was two and a half years old her parents' house burned down and they 'forgot her in the flames'.⁶ When I asked what she meant, she became emotional and replied that she really does not know how to explain it but her parents were able to save one child each, her two siblings, and then left her there, perhaps because they thought they could not have saved her. The people who found her were surprised by her unmarked condition. At six years old, a tidal wave swallowed her and that is when she had her first encounter with the element water and its elemental manifestation. Around the age of eight, she went into a coma during a surgery and had her first out-of-body experience. Her grandmother perceived all these experiences as signs and told her, 'You were grabbed by fire, you were grabbed by water, you were grabbed by air, now it's time for the earth.'⁷ In order to aid this initiation, the grandmother brought her to the Sila in Calabria, a national park. They walked for a long time to find the proper place, where they built a fire and by watching at its flames, Michela saw creatures that brought her to the depths of the earth. This was her first initiation, at the age of nine, and the first 'elemental journey' (*viaggio elementale*) where she was required to control the element. Achieving this control was particularly important because her grandmother taught her that the element earth is the most dangerous to travel through and hence required to master the proper technique.



Figure 0-1 - Michela and her grandmother. Photo supplied by Michela and used by permission.

⁶ From an interview occurred on the 28th of April 2019.

⁷ 'Ti ha preso il fuoco, ti ha preso l'acqua, ti ha preso l'aria. Adesso ti prenderà la terra'. *Translation is mine.*

At age twenty-five, Michela experienced a loss in motor skills, which was at the height of a difficult time, particularly from a financial point of view. In that time of desperation – according to her narrative - she called upon the higher forces (*quelli di lassù*) and asked for help. During the forty days from that moment she started having a significant number of clients, whom she took care of even with her mobility difficulties. Later on, when she was about to turn thirty, she found herself unsatisfied and sought more fulfilment in her life. Entering a book store, a book entitled ‘The book of magical wands’ (*Il libro delle bacchette magiche*) fell on her head (Tenca, 2003). Finding this book was a turning point in her life that led her to a new career as a writer. She was, in fact, impressed by the content of the book on magic wands and contacted the author, who inspired her to work on her first publication (Chiarelli, 2016a). Michela deems this experience to be proof that when you follow the flow of life, things will manifest.⁸

Michela refers to her grandmother as *nonna Malva* (‘nana mauve’) after the flower/plant to which she was most connected, though her real name was Mariangela. Some of the experiences that occurred while growing up with *nonna Malva* are reported in a book that was first published with the title translatable as ‘A Magic Summer with *Nonna Malva*’ (Chiarelli, 2010) and recently republished as ‘At the Shaman's School. A summer of initiation into Italian shamanism’ (Chiarelli, 2018a).⁹ Although most of Michela’s shamanic techniques appear to derive from *nonna Malva*’s teachings, in a few conversations she has mentioned another healer named Mammaruzza, who taught her a *Segnatura* linked to the Etruscan goddess Uni, and several trips across different Italian regions where she has met other vernacular healers who shared their knowledge with her.

The full initiation to the tradition happened at the age of sixteen, when her *nonna* took her into the forest to be tied 'like an animal' to a tree in a place

⁸ ‘Quando mi sono messa nel fluire, le cose si sono manifestate’. *Translation is mine.*

⁹ It is interesting to notice that the Italian *A scuola dalla sciamana* (‘At the shaman’s school’) is the title of a known book for ‘urban shamans’ (King, 2014) and very similar to *A scuola dallo stregone* (‘At Sorcerer’s School’) which was the title of the first Italian translation of *The Teachings of Don Juan* by Carlos Castaneda (Castaneda, 1970b). This phrasing appears to be popular in the trans-cultural shamanic community.

situated between the regions of Basilicata and Campania. On this occasion, her grandmother accompanied her up to a certain point and then a small group of young men brought her to another woman. This lady was her grandmother's assistant and led her on a walk that lasted for days. They did not speak for the entire walk and when they arrived at the place that the lady deemed suitable, she was gagged and tied hands and feet to face 'what she had to face'. As Michela clarified, the Italian shamanic journey is the one that derives from the dehumanisation occurred due to extreme physical circumstances. She was, to this purpose, left in the forest without food or soap or shelter to stink and - as she put it - 'to defecate and menstruate on herself', to being lost wandering alone in the woods. She also reported that, after having survived a few days in the woods, she experienced her first encounter with her spirit animal. A physical encounter with a bear and overcoming the fear resulting from its sight, represented a stepping stone in laying the foundations for a bond between them that has persisted over the years.

Key points emerging from Michela's initiation story, to be further analysed later in the chapter, are the importance of overcoming the mundane perception of the self to reach a fusion with the animal and natural realms and to put the body under extreme conditions to trigger a detachment from it. These elements are not new in the literature on shamanic experiences as the employment of dehumanising methods and enduring extreme physical conditions to trigger a shift in consciousness are well documented as cross-cultural features defining shamanism (Winkelman, 2015; Vitebsky, 2000; Eliade, 1972). In addition, Michela emphasises often the importance of physically experiencing the journey into the natural world as well as the contact with the animal guide. This is another common element found in indigenous shamanisms and often mentioned in contrast to trans-cultural shamanisms, deemed more focussed on visualising rather than experiencing (Wallis, 2003; Jakobsen, 1999; Johnson, 1995). All these elements give a significant contribution to understanding what Michela's view of shamanism is and how her tradition can be positioned in relation to trans-cultural shamanism.

Michela has given a few definitions of shamanism over the years and across different conversations. She also wrote an article that tackles her views

on the topic in details after one of our exchanges on the matter (Chiarelli, 2019a). A shaman has an animistic approach to the world, she says, for everything has a soul and nothing is inanimate, not even a disease or a ritual or a concept. As Michela explains,

Shamanism is not a religion nor a sect, it is a set of techniques that manifest themselves in the realm of the mind. In our Italian tradition - comprised of walkers, harvesters, seafarers – we would literally move with our bodies. People would face pilgrimages, physically move to become something else.¹⁰

Another element in Michela's tradition that chimes with existent literature on the topic is the idea that not anyone can become a shaman (Thao, 2015, p. 62; Jakobsen, 1999; Taussig, 1991). Michela highlights that there is a tough initiation process essential to those wanting to become one. First and foremost, a shaman has to lose his or her 'margins' as a human being (*confini*), cease to exist as an individual and see themselves as the main reference point. As a shaman – Michela highlights - you are an instrument guided by the cosmos for the sake of the many. Nowadays, she continues, it is difficult for people to not allow their ego to take over. Such behaviour hinders the task of a shaman, which is learning how to move within the fabric of cosmos, life and the creation even when this might put their life at risk.¹¹ In order to achieve these abilities, shamanic journeying is pivotal. The purpose of the shamanic journey to Michela is 'ceasing to exist' (*smettere di esistere*). In order to do so, it is necessary to place oneself in a condition where the

¹⁰ 'Lo sciamanesimo non è né una religione né un culto, è un insieme di tecniche manifestate nel regno della mente. Nella nostra tradizione, fatta di camminatori, raccoglitori, naviganti, noi ci muovevamo proprio fisicamente. Si affrontava questo pellegrinaggio, ci si spostava fisicamente per diventare qualcosa altro.' From an interview occurred in May 2017.

¹¹ 'Uno sciamano prima di tutto deve perdere i suoi confini, deve smettere di esistere e fare riferimento a sé stesso sempre e comunque. Sei solo un mezzo guidato dal cosmo per il bene di molti. Al giorno d'oggi è difficile non far emergere l'ego. Uno sciamano è colui o colei che sa come muoversi nel cosmo nella vita e nella creazione e se necessario sacrifica la sua stessa vita.' *Translation is mine.*

person disengages (*si astrae*) from their body. For example, 'being naked in



Figure 0-2 - Michela Chiarelli. Photo supplied by Michela and used by permission.

the woods at minus ten degrees leads the body to a state of terror, inducing it to stop resisting and overcome fear'. It is necessary to experience such a state with the physical body in Michela's view. Shamanic journeying in the natural world is essential to desensitise and no longer be the body. To alter the state of consciousness, we must stop resisting, she

says. Whether it is hot or cold, the initiate must embrace it without resistance to then learn how to 'move like an animal, poop in the woods, provide food by finding out what's there'.¹² The idea of losing yourself as the identity you had been identifying prior to your shamanic path is a recurring theme in Michela's definitions of what a shaman is and what shamanism entails. This path is fundamentally connected to nature and its cycles as she describes herbs and their seeds as the most sacred elements on the earth for they never damage anything yet support each living being. To achieve such a level of connectedness and work with the energy of plants, the boundaries dictated by the mundane ego must be removed as the shaman embodies something that goes beyond the human experience.

¹² 'Lo scopo del viaggio sciamanico nella natura è desensibilizzare e non essere più il corpo, essere nel corpo talmente tanto da non esserci più. Per alterare lo stato di coscienza, bisogna smettere di resistere. Se fa caldo te la metti se fa freddo te la becchi. Muoversi come un animale, fare cacca nei boschi, scoprire quello che c'è'. *Translation is mine.*

Since in her view shamanism requires such a deep connection with nature and a process of dehumanisation, Michela questions the effectiveness of other practices that label themselves as shamanic. She heavily criticised those falling under the umbrella of trans-cultural shamanism and defines them as 'shamanism in a room' (*sciamanesimo in una stanza*), which she believes to be in opposition to what shamanism 'really is'; the utter union with nature that leads to being free and purely instinctive. It is a process that deconstructs the person's identity and brings the practitioner to their roots. She says no one can be detached from themselves with a thirty minutes visualisation in a room, without any actual immersion in nature. Watching the painting of a moon, Michela points out, will never be the same as being under the moon, looking at it and experiencing its light. Likewise, it is not the same experience to imagine yourself going on a shamanic journey and physically going into the woods or into a cave. Hinting at the Lower, Upper and Middle Worlds visualised in neo-shamanic journeys, Michela clarifies her view by saying,

The lower worlds are caves, the upper world is to be found on the mountains, the middle world can be a plain... but if you're not there with your body, you won't know them, you won't experience them.¹³

Michela still believes that the average person working in an office would benefit from this kind of trans-cultural practise but that it is not sufficient to make them a shaman or have a fair understanding of what shamanism is. This view applies also to the few groups¹⁴ that organise shamanic retreats in the woods bringing along all sorts of gadgets to make the experience more comfortable, such as their smartphone, compass, sun cream and so on. This attitude overlooks the importance of a total surrender to nature and the shift in consciousness that is triggered when body and mind face extreme conditions, when all fears emerge and there is no escape other than overcoming them by becoming something else, something beyond.

¹³ 'I mondi di sotto sono le caverne, il mondo di sopra sono le montagne, il mondo di mezzo può essere la pianura, ma se non lo sperimenti col corpo... non la conosci, non la sperimenti.' From an interview occurred on the 3rd of May 2017.
Translation is mine.

¹⁴ Michela mentioned a specific person whom I omit for confidentiality reasons.

7.1.2 Italian Shamanism and the Use of *Segnature*

During an interview,¹⁵ Michela expanded more on her concept of shamanism while answering the question on why she defines her tradition as shamanism and not as a form of folk magic. She started by addressing the concept of folk magic and how the label itself has been constructed after the inquisition. The concept of witchcraft (*stregoneria*) is post-Catholic, she explains, as there were no labels for describing magic before Catholicism had spread throughout the country. Common people - such as her grandmother - were the healers, midwives, herbalists, weather controllers. These are the kind of people that in other traditions of the world are defined as shamans. As a consequence, the concept of folk magic (*magia popolare*) is erroneous because it is shaped after a post-Catholic understanding of what those Italian women were doing. It would be better to call it the ancient worship of the Goddess, rather than folk magic. Michela deems the cult of the Goddess in Italy to have its origin with the Etruscan deity Uni and the Italian tradition to be originally based on the worship of the moon and the sun.

With Uni, the Etruscan goddess, there was the concept of one goddess which grows into an egg and pulls you away. It was all lunar based. The South American shamans also use the sun and the moon. How come their practices are shamanism and ours are witchcraft?¹⁶

Shamanism and folk magic are, therefore, essentially the same thing for Michela,

I call it shamanism because for other peoples what our women can do and what I can do is called shamanism. Folk magic is constructed around a series of confusing information that reached the masses (after the Catholic redrafting). They gave it a somewhat superstitious outlook, a certain belief system and added a whole

¹⁵ On the 2nd of May 2017.

¹⁶ 'Uni, la dea etrusca, avevano il concetto dell'unica dea che prende cresce diventa un uovo e ti tira via. Era tutto a base lunare. Gli sciamani sud americani usano appunto il sole e la luna. Perché il loro è sciamanesimo e il nostro è stregoneria?'
Translation is mine.

series of things which created this somewhat controversial magical mystic system.¹⁷

The difference was created when, after the inquisition, instead of healers those people were defined witches, instead of midwives they were defined women who had faculties that surely could not be divine – Michela states - for the power of women had to be stripped away at the time. Yet, while men were outside hunting, women were the ones who gazed at the stars, honoured nature and its cycles, were attuned with them.

Michela's shamanism encompasses both the 'pre-Catholic' and 'post-Catholic *Segnature*'.¹⁸ Since she is the only practitioner I have encountered during my research to claim to be using pre-Catholic *Segnature*, I asked her to provide some examples and expand more¹⁹ on these kinds of *Segnature*. By pre-Catholic *Segnature*, Michela denotes a set of gestures and prayers (as with most known *Segnature*) which do not use Catholic connotations in the use of gestures or Catholic prayers to the Saints or the Trinity. These *Segnature* are, in fact, characterised by the use of symbolisms connected to the moon and the elemental forces.²⁰ So, if in need to perform one of these 'ancient *Segnature*' (*segnatura antica*), she would use a gesture drawing the moon and call upon 'the daughter, the mother and the *taranna*, the one who grows until becomes big/grown-up' (*la figlia, la mamma e la taranna, quella che cresce finché diventa granna*). The latter is the Italian version of what in Neopaganism is called Triple Moon Goddess, the three aspects of the female deity who manifest as Maiden, Mother and Crone, also associated to the three main moon phases: waxing, full and waning (Hutton, 2019, p. 201). The most known gesture used in the *Segnature* is the cross and, according to Michela,

¹⁷ 'Quindi lo definisco sciamanesimo perché gli altri popoli definiscono quello che le nostre donne sapevano fare e io so fare, lo chiamano sciamanesimo. La magia popolare è legata a una serie di informazioni confuse che sono arrivate ai più. Hanno messo un aspetto un po' scaramantico, un aspetto di credenze, un aspetto di tutta una serie di cose e hanno creato questo sistema mistico magico un po' controverso'. *Translation is mine*.

¹⁸ This phrasing has been used by Michela on multiple occasions.

¹⁹ Interview occurred on the 22nd of April 2019.

²⁰ The historical accuracy of the information regarding Etruscan folklore is not being addressed in this study. All the claims pertaining the matter are Michela's.

this symbol predates the Catholic syncretism.²¹ She believes that the use of crosses is connected to the worship of the goddess Hecate in the Mediterranean area. Hecate was connected to magic and to crossroads, the place where worshippers would go to make offerings, ask for help and encounter the deity. The two symbols drawn to resemble a crossroad in the tradition were the four moons and the cross.

Alternatively, these *Segnature* can summon Uni, the Etruscan goddess. Michela uses a specific invocation, which Mammaruzza taught her years ago. Mammaruzza was a vernacular healer from the Campania region and hence used a dialect close to the Neapolitan. In Michela's version, the dialect used is the Trebisaccese,²² from the area of the Calabria region she is originally from. The invocation used for the *Segnature* with Uni is,

Trebisaccese	Italian	English
G'uni ca crescd	Uni che cresce	Uni who grows
G'uni ch'è chijn	Uni che è piena	Uni who is full
G'uni ca s' svotd	Uni che si svuota	Uni who is emptying
E diventd niura niura	E diventa nera nera	Uni becomes black black

Alongside prayers to Uni or the Triple Goddess, the ritual involves the use of the elemental forces. Michela exemplified this by illustrating the ritual to cure Saint Antony's Fire. For this ritual, she uses a pot containing some water (element water) poured in for this purpose. Some salt (element earth) is blessed and thrown into the water alongside a piece of burning coal, representing the element fire. Then a cloth (element air) is prepared and immersed in the pot to extinguish the fire. Once the fire has been extinguished and all the elements combined, the cloth is applied onto the skin where the issue manifests, to clean and heal that area of the body.

²¹ Interview occurred on the 1st of May 2019.

²² Trebisaccese is the dialect spoken in the area of Trebisacce, a town in the province of Cosenza in the Calabria region of southern Italy.

Another pre-Catholic *Segnatura* Michela adopts is the ‘*Segnatura of the Thread*’ (*Segnatura del Filo*).²³ According to Michela, this is the most powerful of them all as the Thread²⁴ symbolises the ability that humankind gained to create their own destiny. Weaving and the use of thread was, according to Michela, introduced when people had conquered the adversities posed by nature and built shelters for themselves. This led them to have more independence from bad weather and became in charge of their own sources of livelihood when moved from hunting to farming. Before that, all the forces upon which survival was dependant were worshipped as gods, whether they be the sun and other weather-related elements or animals that unless hunted would have led to starvation. Thus, the Thread also represents the utter independence from any form of subjugation and any superior being, which makes it extremely powerful in its ritualistic use. Michela says she owns a *Filo* (*corda cardata*) that is two hundred years old, whose long history makes it valuable from a ritualistic point of view. In rituals, the Thread is utilised to diagnose, heal and protect. Different colours and types of threads are used for different purposes, though usually the first Thread is used to diagnose the issue, then a cut is performed to ward off the enemy. After the cut, a renewal of the energy takes place, using a colour suited to the purpose and the energy of the person. Lastly, a magical protection is created through the use of different types of threads and various colours.

The *Segnatura* can be passed on (*trasmettere o passare le Segnatura*) twice a year. Although Michela acknowledges the folk tradition of conducting the ritual on either Christmas or Easter Day, she feels that the right time is on the Spring Equinox and that is the only time of the year when she will pass on the *Segnatura* she knows. Michela appears to have a good knowledge of the different *Segnatura* performed in various regions and she often mentions the Sardinian tradition when talking about the *Segnatura* and, in some cases, her own Calabrian tradition. She also published all the *Segnatura* she has learned

²³ Sometimes she also refers to it as ‘Thread magic’ (*magia del Filo*).

²⁴ I adopt the singular capitalised ‘Thread’ in reference to the tradition that utilises threads in the explained manner. The term will not be capitalised and used in its plural form to intend the actual objects used in the rituals.

over the years in a book entitled 'the antithesis of the dawn' (*All'antitesi dell'alba*) (Chiarelli, 2016b).

7.1.3 Italian Shamanism and the Role of Magic

Michela's Italian Shamanism has its mythological roots in the Etruscan triad of deities Uni, Menrva (also spelled Minerva) and Tinia. These are the archetypes related to cyclical principles witnessed in nature and in the elements as well as the polarities manifested in nature. Michela conceptualises all deities as archetypes and prefers to define her tradition as animistic. According to her, these archetypes are useful guides that manifest in our lives when we need to improve on specific characteristics that the archetype brings about.

This tradition is articulated in three fundamental ways (*vie*) or arts: the art of healing, the art of beauty and the art of sound. They are all characterised by a set of techniques and rituals that the student will learn to achieve the related goals. The first art entails everything related to cure and healing, such as the use of crystals, ointments herbs and clays to heal the body. This way also includes celebrations related to pregnancy, wedding and childbirth. The art of beauty explores the sacredness embedded in self-care acts to beautify the body, skincare and specific makeup techniques. These are all rituals that will guide through rites of passage, for instance will help girls on their path to becoming women, wives and mothers. The art of sound teaches how to direct the personal power through singing, speaking or the use of musical instruments. Channelling the right vibrations through spoken words can help change the weather or heal a person or any other goal, so long as the initiate masters the technique of shaping reality through sound production. All three ways entail the use of magic and are believed to lead the development of magical abilities.

During the time spent with her grandmother, Michela developed a number of magical abilities. One of such skills is what she calls 'touch' (*il tocco*), the ability to perceive through her hands how well someone's body is functioning and what might need healing. The 'touch' was 'activated' only when *nonna* Malva passed away. Due to her training and the further

development of the aforementioned skill, she does not need to physically touch the naked skin to diagnose or heal the body but is able to operate over clothes. Michela's grandmother used to put a hair under fifty-nine sheets of paper to help her develop this ability, a touch that does not require physical contact for it is a non-ordinary sense that provides tactile knowledge without touching.

Magic is a constant presence in Michela's life, tradition and writings. Magic is for Michela a direct dialogue with the cosmos and it is not limited to performing specific rituals.²⁵ Rituals can help to create a contact with the source of the universe, especially when a person is at the beginning of their path, but over time they are not necessary to create magical results. Magic is, in fact, an inner state of being that is omnipresent and allows the person to stay in a constant dialogue and partnership with the universe, which manifests as a result of this dialogue. The rituals performed in her current practice are mostly devotions, acts of gratitude and celebrations. Magic enriches her life and the lives of those she is able to help through it. In some cases, it can be challenging when she gets visions of unavoidable events such as imminent deaths or tragedies about to occur in the lives of relatives or even wars in faraway countries.

The shamanic path is necessarily intertwined with the use of magic to Michela. As she explains, magic is the state of consciousness that leads to the utter connection and the gateway to the cosmos that grants access to the source of energy the shaman will use to heal and improve people's lives. There are a number of rules in the practice of magic, which Michela learned to master from a very young age. She describes magical working as the agency you employ by penetrating the fabric of reality. When entering the very framework whereby the universe is manifested, the shaman becomes able to move the threads and fix elements within people's bodies. Essential is to acknowledge that it is not really the shaman who heals or performs the ritual for the performer is a mere channel of the energy coming from the universe.

²⁵ Interview occurred on the 28th of April 2019.

This, Michela points out, distinguishes shamanism from 'pranotherapy' since the latter would employ as a source the individual's energy.

The shaman or magic practitioner is not omnipotent, there are limits to what they can achieve and if these limits are crossed the person will pay with the only two resources human beings possess: time and health. There is, according to Michela, a risk of shortening your life span or compromising your health when meddling with situations that surpass such boundaries. For instance, it is forbidden to interfere when death is approaching, unless the threat is sensed a long time in advance. In her case, she usually gets a premonition about two weeks before the event occurs. As Michela clarified,

There are contracts and exchanges between different dimensions to rewrite reality but when there are situations where you're not supposed to interfere, you'll pay a price. The only things we truly have to bargain are time and health and that's how you pay when you alter what doesn't have to be changed.²⁶

Another practice she does not recommend is seeking contact with a deceased person. An exception can be made when the dead is the one wanting to send a message to the person but it is always unadvisable to bother them by taking the initiative.

In Michela's view, it is also possible to heal yourself if you learn how to produce new energy. You should never take the energy needed from things or vegetables, she warns, because in that case you would create a damage and become 'something else', seemingly suggesting something non-human, potentially evil. Every cell of the human body has an energy storage, in both their manifested and non-manifested form, so that within the cellular space it is possible to generate new energy. Self-healing also presents the same aforementioned limitations and hence a shaman cannot cure themselves from

²⁶ 'Ci sono contratti e scambi tra le varie dimensioni e riscrivere la realtà. Quando ci sono situazioni in cui non dovresti mettere le mani ne paghi le conseguenze. Le uniche cose di cui disponiamo sono tempo e salute e con quello si paga quando si interferisce in cose che non si possono cambiare'. From an interview occurred on the 3rd of May 2017. *Translation is mine.*

any disease. Michela deems, in fact, conventional medicine to be valuable and integrable to the shamanic practice.

Overall, magic represents a core element in Michela's tradition, and she believes it to be an integral part of the shaman's endeavour. Magic is also believed to possess a set of rules and limitations that only the experienced practitioner can learn and master. The necessary experience is acquired over years of practice preceded by an initiation similar to the one she had experienced.

7.1.4 The Conceptualisation of Syncretism

The matter of syncretism has emerged on multiple occasions during interviews and conversations with Michela. It was especially intriguing to unfold the concept of syncretism that she was endorsing as it challenges its common perception.

During the time I spent with her, I realised that the traits of the Italian shamanism she was describing had many liaison points with forms of folk magic practised in the country. Thus, I inquired which were the differences between her tradition and other forms of folk magic. To this question she gave me a number of responses on different occasions, all of which contribute to a more nuanced comprehension. Initially, she explained that her tradition, differently from folk magic, remained unadulterated and was not syncretised with Catholicism. On another occasion, there was a mention of both 'pre-Catholic' and 'post-Catholic' prayers and gestures used when performing a healing. Michela also reported in an interview occurred in April 2018 that, as a result of my inquiry, she investigated folk magic traditions more in depth and travelled across different regions coming into contact with such practices. Her conclusion was that folk magic is, in fact, a form of shamanism.

What emerges from Michela's books, online articles and social media posts is that there is indeed a strong syncretism that has been incorporated in her tradition. According to her, the Catholic influence was carefully avoided whereas forms of neo-paganism appear to play a significant role in the way the tradition is conveyed. Other distinct influences are drawn from Buddhism, Celtic mythology and the New Age movement.

In the book *A scuola dalla sciamana* there are several examples of such influences. The spirits of nature are called *Deva* (Chiarelli, 2018a, p. 54) and there is an exercise involving the observation of thoughts, which resembles the *vipassana* practice in Buddhism (2018a, p. 60). In addition, the seasonal festivals are mentioned with both the Italian or Etruscan names and the Wiccan ones (2018a, p. 108) whilst the Celtic influence can be seen in the encounter of young Michela with

Merlin (2018a, pp. 32–40) and the recurring mention of the fairies (2018a, p. 204). Most concepts are phrased in same way they used to be worded in the New Age, Neopagan, Buddhist, Spiritual and Esoteric communities. Throughout the first decade of the 2000s,²⁷ some theories significantly shaped the belief system of those communities and became widespread. For instance, the power of positive thinking and the attempt to borrow from scientific disciplines, such as physics and biology, to prop up their outlook on reality (Chiarelli, 2018a, pp. 28–31). Also, the Law of Attraction depicted in

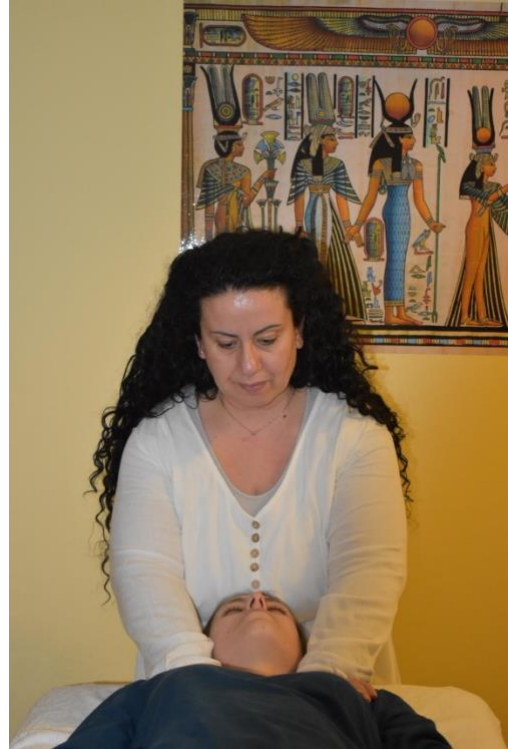


Figure 0-3 - Michela during her practice. Egyptian Gods are portrayed behind her. Photo supplied by Michela and used by permission.

²⁷ The first edition was published in 2010.

the film 'The Secret' endorsed the idea that a person will attract a reality that mirrors their thoughts (2018a, p. 42).

As the available data shows, Michela's tradition encompasses a range of syncretic elements coming from different sources related to new religious movements and following the trends that over the years manifest within such communities. This eclectic nature is in open contrast with the description that Michela presents of her practice, often defined as a pure and uncontaminated form of autochthonous shamanism. To understand the rationale underlying this discrepancy, I asked her to clarify further why she thought her tradition was not syncretic but rather a pure Italian tradition. From her response, two main explanations emerged.

The first one is that she believes some non-Italian traditions are essentially Italian. This was particularly clear when she was addressing the use of Wiccan elements in naming the seasonal festivals and in the ethical stances presented in her book (Chiarelli, 2018a, p. 42). Michela has cited the amateur folklorist Charles G. Leland on multiple occasions, both in interviews and on her social platforms, to demonstrate that Wicca has incorporated elements of the Italian shamanism. Leland is the author of two main books on Italian witchcraft, which he labels as 'Stregheria' (Leland, 2007, 2010). In these books he describes rituals and practices that he allegedly encountered in Tuscany. Sabina Magliocco deems 'the roots of Stregheria are entwined with those of Wicca' (Magliocco, 2006, p. 56) and Michela certainly concurs on the matter. Extending this correlation, Michela claims that Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca, borrowed several elements from the Italian tradition and hence there is no real syncretism since Wicca itself is rooted in the Italian Shamanism.

On the other hand, adopting an Eliadian view (Eliade, 1972), which was known to her, she explained that shamanism is not a religion but a set of techniques. Thus, the different religious overlays are not as significant as the practice itself. She often talks about the inquisition in Italy and how the threat that it posed reshaped folk magic practices. In order to be more acceptable, the vernacular healers had to embed their rituals in a Catholic framework and so they did, using the crosses as gestures and Catholic prayers as

incantations. Differently from other folk traditions that have completely forgotten the old ways, Michela claims that her knowledge is not limited to the Catholicised formulas for her grandmother also kept and passed on the pre-Catholic ones.

When Michela portrays her tradition as genuinely Italian and not syncretic, what my data suggests she might mean is that the techniques are autochthonous and the religious adjuncts need to be ousted from the frame of reference drawn by the tradition's core.

7.1.5 The Teachings of Michela

Michela explained that years ago she used to pass on her knowledge as much as she could. Aware that she is the last one of her lineage, for she has no female descendant and her bloodline only allows women to become shamans, nonetheless, she is unwilling to let that knowledge and heritage die with her and so she tried to instruct a number of practitioners to spread the tradition across the country. Michela tried to create 'clans' in different areas of the country, each having a 'matriarch' (*matriarca*) in charge.

She used to lead a study group of approximately twenty people which lasted for four years and was discontinued on the Autumn Equinox in 2016. On the day she decided to interrupt the study group, she realised that they had not been studying the material she was handing them in a long term. Michela also tested their knowledge on basic information that they should have mastered long before and only one of them was able to answer and prove her commitment to learning. Due to this lack of engagement, she decided to end the study group as well as the open seasonal



Figure 0-4 - Michela leading a shamanic ritual. Photo supplied by Michela and used by permission.

celebration. At the time of our interview in May 2017, she said that she was only celebrating the eight seasonal changes with a few selected practitioners, mostly older women as she found age played a role in how committed people were to the practice. Michela also believes that someone who practises shamanism should avoid any substance abuse, prostitution and be, first of all, thoughtful towards the closest members of their family as your personal life should mirror your spiritual evolution.

The status of her teaching appears to be ever-changing, as evidence suggests that she has started teaching and gathering students again. In August 2018, I received an email from her collaborator announcing that the School of Italian Shamanism (*Scuola di Sciamanesimo italiano*) was recruiting and classes would start in September/October of the same year. The email also states that said School will allow the participant to acquire the Diploma of Holistic Operator (*Operatore olistico*) according to the Tradition of Italian Shamanism, as such the person will be able to use the ancient 'magic' arts for healing and protection passed down from our ancestors and only known by few people.²⁸

According to the programme attached to one of the emails, and found on Michela's website (Chiarelli, 2018b), the course is taught over three years and each year is comprised of ten modules. Four of the thirty modules include the *Segnature* as a topic. The other modules cover several practice-centred topics related to the use of magic to become the active creator of one's fate. For instance, some modules tackle the elemental energies and the use of crystal, metals and herbs. The theory and use of energies and the creative power of the mind is also addressed alongside hydrotherapy, phytotherapy and the healing power of clay (*argilloterapia*) and massages.²⁹

²⁸ 'Ti ricordo che la formazione di questa scuola ti permette di acquisire il Diploma di Operatore Olistico secondo la Tradizione dello Sciamanesimo Italiano, ovvero un operatore in grado di usare le antiche arti 'magiche' di cura e protezione che usavano le nostre antenate e che finora solo pochissimi hanno conosciuto.' From an email received on the 11th of September 2018. *Translation is mine.*

²⁹ The cost of this school is variable. In April 2019, Michela said the cost of this school or a similar training will amount to approximately 1100-1400 euros per year. Some elements may lead to a fluctuation in the cost, such as if the students want to stay at her house or whether they come from faraway or from the nearby area.

In a few conversations exchanged in April 2019, Michela stated that the project of the aforementioned school was not going as planned and that the three-year programme was systematised by her secretary. Even though she has been training a few students attending that programme and she still intends to cover those same topics in her teaching, she prefers to adopt a different methodology now. Years ago, she had tried to pass down all of her knowledge to a potential apprentice but, after experiencing a disappointing lack of commitment on the part of the apprentice, she decided to cease the transmission of the tradition as a whole. Consequently, she distinguishes between student (*allievo*) and apprentice (*apprendista*) where the first will only learn the aspects of the tradition that will make them develop their innate skills and the second will follow a challenging process of initiation whereby the person has to learn all the techniques required, even if they will not suit the individual inclinations. For instance, if she deems a specific student to have telepathic abilities, she would only teach them techniques related to telepathy or to other faculties that the student openly expresses an interest for. The apprentice, however, is the only one that will eventually become a shaman and needs to endure extreme physical conditions during the initiation process. Michela believes, as already mentioned, that it is necessary to experience extreme circumstances in order to trigger a detachment from the body and a shift in consciousness. Most people living with the commodities provided by the Western civilisation would never be willing to be left for days or weeks naked in the woods or in a cave or buried until they reach that dehumanisation point leading to the shift of consciousness so pivotal for a shaman-to-be. At the moment, she only deems to have students and no apprentice, though she appeared hopeful to get one in the future.

Michela offered a few examples³⁰ of how in her teaching she brings her students to develop magical abilities. She trains them 'to see with their hands and feel with their feet' (*vedere con le mani e sentire coi piedi*). They are blindfolded and, deprived of their sight, need to 'perceive' the energies with hands and feet. For instance, they will have to walk on some colourful cards disposed on the floor and, through increasing their receptiveness, will

³⁰ Interviews occurred in May 2017.

eventually be able to identify the red one. Another exercise consists of taking another person by the hands to become acquainted with his or her energy and afterwards managing to identify an object belonging to that specific person. Michela also guides her disciples to experience and dive into the group consciousness.

A significant element that emerged from observing how Michela conveys her tradition is the stark difference between oral one-on-one transmission and the public portrayal she conveys through her books, the internet and social media. During our interviews and encounters, she explained in a clear fashion her tradition, addressing all the elements that embed it in an Italian autochthonous lineage. In her books and on her social media platforms, on the other hand, she implements all sorts of syncretism, especially with Wicca and other Neopagan movements. When confronted about this discrepancy, she seemed surprised by my question and, after having expressed her unawareness, she concluded that with her students she has more time to go in depth and explain the core aspects of her tradition while the limitations dictated by the internet make the use of certain syncretism a viable way to be more easily understood.

7.1.6 Research Impact and the Search for Validation

Constructing Michela's narrative has been a challenge because she is susceptible to influences and alters her narrative accordingly. As highlighted in various studies (Paerregaard, 2002; Ashkenazi, 1997; Richardson, 1975) anthropological research is never a one-way relation and, as much as the researcher can try and keep an analytical distance from what it is observed, his or her presence and inquiry is always going to produce some kind of effect on the community or person object of study (Lawlor and Mattingly, 2001; Cole, 1982, p. 59).

Although I experienced exerting a degree of influence throughout my fieldwork on most groups and informants taking part in the present research, Michela showed the highest-level of impact and therefore constitutes a significant case study to evaluate the phenomenon. As the previous section highlighted, Michela shows a stark discrepancy between how she teaches and

depicts her tradition in person versus how she advertises and portrays her practice in books and on social media. Due to the significant amount of eclecticism and the fairy-tale style³¹ she adopts in her writing, she and her tradition have been questioned by other practitioners in related communities.³² During our first encounter in May 2017 she asked me how was it I found her student first and I was not able to find her directly. To that, I replied that the reason was that her student was labelling her practice as ‘Italian Shamanism’ (*sciamanesimo italiano*) in a more searchable and better indexed way, whereas Michela was not indexing her works as clearly nor did she have a book with a main title stating that her tradition was a form of Shamanism.³³ A few months after our conversation, she changed most of her social media pages to include ‘Italian Shamanism’, she started using the hashtag ‘Italian Shamanism’ on Instagram and even added it to her name on the Facebook profile. In 2018 she republished her second book (Chiarelli, 2018a) this time including the term ‘shaman’ (*sciamana*) in the title and adding it throughout the book which was not present in its first edition (Chiarelli, 2010).

Michela asked me in an interview that occurred on the 19th April 2018 how to write (or co-write) a book addressing her tradition in an academic manner so that readers would be able to perceive a scientific validity to her heritage. I explained in response how academic research works and why it would not be feasible to divulge a tradition in an ‘academic way’. After only a few months, one of her students published a book on Michela’s tradition (Bellini, 2018) and, albeit not academic nor attempting to appear academic, this reaffirms Michela’s attempt to reach as many people as possible through different means and voices. During the same interview, she confirmed that she had altered her online presence by adding ‘Italian shamanism’ after our

³¹ This is a stylistic choice she openly acknowledged. So much so that her first published book translates as ‘Fable-made magic’ (*Favolisticamente Magia*) (Chiarelli, 2016a).

³² This information was provided by informants who preferred to remain anonymous to avoid any legal actions. On a few occasions, Michela herself complained about certain people not taking her seriously without referencing specific incidences nor names.

³³ She had used ‘Italian shamanism’ in a few subtitles to her books, which still appeared to be not enough for it to come up from internet browsing and searches.

conversation and seemed to assume from my questions that I deemed the use of that label to be too extensive. As a result, I noticed she had slightly reduced the use of that label on her social platforms.³⁴

Another incidence showing her yearning for academic validation is shown by her use of my academic affiliation to give value to her tradition. Michela wrote on her website (see Figure 5),

Italian shamanism is the ancient history of an eternal feminine, now lost, that is passed down from mother to daughter. My wish is to preserve [this tradition] also through the academic work by Leeds Trinity University. I'm the only custodian of this ancient knowledge, handed down for seven generations and I'll talk about it so that you may rediscover the power you (female) were born with, regain the strength and dominance belonging to your being and conquer your life (Chiarelli, 2017).



Figure 0-5 Michela's Website

In most interviews, Michela talks about the Inquisition as the key reason to explain a few inconsistencies emerging from her narrative. The overall idea is that after the Inquisition the original tradition had to survive through reshaping itself and yet those ancient elements can be recuperated in current times. This means that the apparent contradictions derive from overlays and camouflage which had to be applied over the ancient practices to make them less prosecutable. On the same day most of such interrogatives were addressed,

³⁴ For instance, she removed 'Italian shamanism' from her profile name on Facebook and added it in the description.

she posted on her Instagram public page (see Figure 6) a picture accompanied by the following text,

[...] Our women strived to preserve their roots, hiding them from the modern inquisitors. There are people who think they know everything about the spirit world and nature without having spent a night alone in the woods and under the rain...I saw and lived the greatness of women who'll never be part of any university thesis or anthropological study... and I simply honour them (Chiarelli, 2019b).



Figure 0-6 - Michela's Instagram post

Regardless of whether the post was addressed to me and prompted by our conversation, it is interesting to notice the ambiguous relationship that Michela shows with the academic world. On one hand, there is a clear attempt to validate her tradition through my work and the advice she seeks to improve the promulgation of her tradition. On the other hand, she reminds from time to time on her social platforms that only the initiate who has gone through the same type of experience she had, is to be held entitled to talk about 'spiritual' matters. As a confirmation of such trend, the day after this post, on the 10th of April 2019, she sent me an article she wrote tackling topics emerged from our conversation and she asked me whether she could include my name and academic role in the article. The version she sent me states,

I'm writing this article because, thanks to doctor³⁵ Angela Puca, anthropologist³⁶ at Leeds Trinity University, we're analysing the Italian shamanic tradition to additionally answer those who vehemently deem that in Italy there is no shamanism nor a shaman of hereditary tradition, that is me, due to the presence of Catholicism.³⁷

After my refusal to be mentioned in a misleading way, Michela removed my name and published the article on her website with the title 'Shamanism in Italy: yes or no?' (Chiarelli, 2019a).

It is also interesting to notice that she has tried to convince me to work with her by leveraging on my yearning for academic success, or rather her assumption thereof. On this occasion, she mentioned my refusal was depriving me of being mentioned by a 'famous woman' who would have published a translation of that article on her blog. Likewise, when she proposed to work together on a book, she mentioned her possible affiliation with a well-known university in Italy, openly suggesting that it would be beneficial to me had I wanted to move back to my home country. All the mentioned dynamics show how the complexity of the researcher-informant relationship that occurs while doing fieldwork and engaging with people. As Mary C. Lawlor and Cheryl F. Mattingly highlight,

Ethnographic research involves the creation and ongoing renegotiations of relationships between researchers and informants. These relationships are complex and uniquely constructed, drawing on elements of seemingly different types of relationships, such as those created through friendship, intimacy, family membership, and professionally bounded clinical

³⁵ In Italy, the title of doctor (*dottore, dottoressa*) is awarded by a university bachelor's degree.

³⁶ I never introduce myself as an 'anthropologist' but as a doctoral researcher in the field of anthropology of religion (*antropologia delle religioni*). Choosing that identifier may be a way of emphasising my authority on the matter.

³⁷ 'Scrivo questo articolo perché grazie alla Dott.ssa Angela Puca, antropologa presso l'Università di Leeds Trinity University, si sta analizzando la tradizione Sciamanica Italiana anche per rispondere a chi asserisce con tanta veemenza che in Italia lo Sciamanesimo e la figura di una sciamana di tradizione ereditaria, quindi io, non esiste a causa della presenza Cattolica.' *Translation is mine.*

encounters. Prolonged engagement contributes to the complexity as relationships deepen and shift over time and participants accumulate a substantial reservoir of shared experiences. Ethnographers struggle with enacting a researcher stance that simultaneously promotes interrelatedness and minimizes the extent to which their presence intrudes on and subsequently alters the everyday life experiences they seek to understand (Lawlor and Mattingly, 2001, p. 147).

Since Michela is the informant with whom I have had the most frequent and prolonged relationship, both because her tradition is so multifaceted and for the strong contradictions emerging from collected data, she is the most fitting case to address such a dynamic. She openly sought to be influenced by my knowledge as a scholar and tried to influence my research in turn. For instance, during our first encounter in May 2017, Michela knew that I would be attending a Core Shamanism workshop a few days later and she tried to put the work of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in a bad light, pushing the idea that I would have acknowledged that she was, in fact, the only legitimate Italian shaman. This attitude appears rooted in the misinterpretation regarding how academic research works which both Michela³⁸ and other informants have held as a biased framework when interacting with me.

Although each informant reacts in their personal way to my presence as a participant observer or interviewer, there are two main elements whose kind of reaction appeared associated to the status of the practitioner within the communities. That is, their stance on disclosing their name and the perception of the researcher as a validator/judge (Puca, 2018a, pp. 86–87). The pattern I was able to infer suggests that those who are leaders of a tradition or promoters of their practice want to be included in the study with their real names. This is due to the legitimacy and fame they believe could be achieved through my research, which would allow them to gain more paid clients or more attendants to their shamanic courses. The informants who practise in private or with a selected number of people and do not receive payments for

³⁸ It might be relevant to highlight that Michela and I are currently in friendly terms and the aforementioned exchanges did not impact negatively our relationship.

the rituals they perform are strongly in favour of anonymisation. As for the validating role of academic research, it manifests transversally in different ways. The practitioners attempting to gain a public reputation often ask for advice and opinions on their practices and modes of promulgation whereas the solitaries are more afraid of my judgement rather than seek approval. The latter can be traced back to the widespread positivist view that denies validity or ontological existence to anything beyond the realm of the measurable matter (de Ridder, 2014). This manifests at times in the fear some practitioners have that I might be judging them as lunatics or lacking a grasp on 'reality'. An incidence that let this tendency emerge occurred when a medical doctor showed his reluctance at my presence during the 'Advanced Workshop: Shamanic Extraction Healing' by the FSS Italy, which I attended on 19th and 20th of May 2018 in Casalfiumanese (Bologna province). On the first day, the teacher Lorenza clarified to the group that I was attending the training as a researcher and the doctor manifested his hostility at that prospect. As a result, he asked out loud with a disappointed tone whether they would have been observed as objects of study. Lorenza may have detected the discomfort expressed by that participant and replied that there were no observers in her shamanic training, only participants. She then asked me to move to the centre of the room and be the first one to do the shamanic journey in front of the group. My cooperation and full participation convinced all the other attendants that they could be relaxed around me and that I was, after all, part of the group. On the next day, I had lunch with that participant and he felt more at ease with me, which led him to admit his initial fear of being judged.

As my fieldwork shows, the relationship researcher-informant is complex by nature and more so when the engagement with a specific informant is prolonged over a long period of time. The types of reaction follow consistent patterns that vary depending on the role assumed by the informant into the communities.

7.2 Maria Capasso³⁹ on the Indigenous Healing Tradition in Sardinia

I belong to a family of Sardinian *maghiarji abrebadoris*, which is like saying shamans, isn't it? It's just that, depending on what you do and where you live, different names are used.⁴⁰

The Sardinian region in Italy has a long history and known presence of vernacular healers of various types (Turchi, 2016, 2017; Satriani, 1971; Wagner, 1913). This is also evidenced by the official website of the Region Sardinia, Department of Culture,⁴¹ which reports the current existence of folk medicine,

From a recent research conducted across all the cities in Sardinia, it appears that the folk healers still active are unquestionably over a thousand; that magic-therapeutic rites are still widespread alongside empirical therapies; that on some pathologies the empirical intervention produces healing results of considerable interest; that more than one hundred thousand people still use this treatment system' (Sardegna Cultura, n.d.).⁴²

During my research, I found a radio interview hosted by a Sardinian station based in Carbonia called Radio Star, with Sardinian folk practices as the main topic (Usai, 2016). The interviewee, Maria Capasso, was referring to such practices as 'shamanism', prompting me to contact her.

³⁹ The real name has been anonymised upon the informant's request.

⁴⁰ 'Io Appartengo a una famiglia di machigliarji abrebadoris sardi, che è come dire sciamani, uguale no? solo che a seconda di quello che fai e della zona in cui sei hai nomi diversi' from an interview occurred on the 9th of May 2019. *Translation is mine.*

⁴¹ Assessorato Beni Culturali, Regione Sardegna.

⁴² 'Da una recente ricerca condotta in tutti i paesi della Sardegna, risulta che i guaritori tradizionali ancora in attività sono sicuramente oltre il migliaio; che accanto alle terapie empiriche sono ancora molto diffusi i riti magico-terapeutici; che su alcune patologie l'intervento di carattere empirico produce esiti di guarigione di notevole interesse; che le persone che ancora oggi fanno ricorso a questo sistema di cura sono oltre centomila'. *Translation is mine.*

The use of the terms 'shaman' and 'shamanism' as well as other terminologies she adopts are borrowed from Core Shamanism. Her experience with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies caused her to absorb those terms and use them as synonyms to or in conjunction with traditional local ones. Even though in some cases she shows awareness of such borrowing, in others it is unclear whether she acknowledges this linguistic syncretism.

Maria agreed to take part in my study to explore her tradition and the reasons as to why she views certain folk healings as Italian shamanism. Thus, the collected data derive from a set of interviews and conversations started in May 2019 alongside material drawn from her social platforms, website, articles and public interviews.

Born in 1977, Maria Capasso is originally from Villaputzu in Sardinia but now lives in Florence, Tuscany. She was born in a family of *Maghiarjis Abrebadoris*, a Sardinian name for a type of sorcerer (Magliocco, 2009, p. 174; De Martino, 1982). Maria deems to be born in such a family an initiation in itself, for it gives you a good chance of receiving the shamanic calling. Initially, she was not able to accept or understand her calling. She had been experiencing a long period of illnesses that doctors were not able to cure and the 'answer' she kept receiving from her surroundings was 'shamanism'. As she reported, every time she asked herself why was she so sick, the word 'shamanism' kept appearing. At first, she thought she had to find a shaman but even that endeavour kept encountering difficulties. For instance, once she was about to send an email to a shaman and the computer stopped working.

Then Maria won a scholarship to fund her education into holistic healthcare. Since she could have invested that money in any form of holistic healing, she decided to undertake the workshops of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. This experience represented an awakening of a sort for she realised, by doing her first shamanic journey, that she had been doing that since childhood. Core Shamanism was hence a gateway to acknowledging that her family tradition was a form of Italian shamanism and that almost all the techniques taught in Core Shamanism were mirroring those practised by

her grandparents. 'The starting point and the goal are the same' Maria explains, 'only the way may differ'.⁴³

Maria publicly introduced herself for the first time as a representative of Sardinian shamanism during the 'Wesak del mediterraneo' in 2015 (Congiu, n.d.). From that event onwards, she continued her activity as a holistic operator using the label shamanism to explain what her practice entails. She incorporates different healing techniques and traditions in her rituals and teaching, such as Core Shamanism, RAM, Reiki and many others. Despite the diversity she employs in her practice, she firmly stated that her tradition is not open to syncretism. That is because the various methods she incorporates are considered to exist in a parallel fashion and there is no merging involved.

Maria mentioned as key to her formation her encounters with Costanzo Allione and Nadia Stepanova. Costanzo is the leader, together with Anna Saudin, of an Italian association focussed on Siberian shamanism, aimed at spreading its teachings for the benefit of people's daily life (Saudin and Allione, 1999, 2002).⁴⁴ In 2004, during her long illness, Maria contacted Costanzo, who was the first person to suggest and bring to her awareness that she might have been receiving the shamanic calling and sent her some videos featuring Nadia Stepanova. Nadia is a Buryatian shaman who has collaborated with Costanzo and spreads her knowledge on shamanism in Italy. She published a book on her experiences (Stepanova and D'Arista, 1999) and delivers seminars and workshops in Italy. During our interview, Maria kept referencing the Buryatian shaman as a validating authority and believes her teachings had a significant impact on her development as an Italian shaman. This indicates and echoes the perception, showed by the large majority of my informants, that traditional shamanisms with a longer history of anthropological study tend to be considered somewhat more authentic than those which are yet to receive any form of validation. This happens especially with Siberian shamanism, which was the first one to fall under the categorisation and inspire its creation.

⁴³ From an interview occurred on the 9th of May 2019.

⁴⁴ More details on the association Where the Eagles Fly in Chapter 4.

Since 2015 she began using the definitions ‘Italian shamanism’ (*sciamanesimo italiano*) and ‘Sardinian shamanism’ (*sciamanesimo sardo*) in her work as a holistic operator. She believes to be the first person to recognise folk practices as shamanism and was not aware of any other practitioner using that label with the same connotation.

7.2.1 Types of Healers in Sardinia

Maria explained that the Sardinian folk medicine is called *Sa mexina antiga* (‘the ancient medicine’) in one of the Sardinian dialects and encompasses the traditional rituals and healing methods passed down through generations in the island. Within this tradition, according to Maria, there are different words used in reference to vernacular healers. Although in most cases, the name differs to reflect the dialect of the related Sardinian region, a certain name seems also to signify a specific specialism.

A label that has become increasingly used in Sardinia is *Janas*.⁴⁵ In Sardinian myth and folklore the *Janas* are mostly evil fairies (Deledda, 2015; Atzori and Paulis, 2005, p. 106). As Maria explains,

Jana is being used more and more like shaman. [...] The *Jana* is a Sardinian mythological figure referring to a woman who dwells between the world of men and the world of spirits, displaying a thousand facets ranging from the fairies - like the ones in England and Ireland - to the weaver to the curator and other things.⁴⁶

However, in the past ten years the term has become increasingly popular to identify folk healers, especially after the publication of Dolores Turchi’s book on Sardinian shamanism (Turchi, 2017) and her shamanistic interpretation of the *Jana*.

⁴⁵ In Sardinian *Jana* is singular, *Janas* plural.

⁴⁶ ‘Janas sta diventando un po’ come sciamana [...] La *jana* è una figura mitologica sarda di donna che sta tra il mondo degli uomini e il mondo degli spiriti in mille sfaccettature che vanno dalla fata, come quella anglosassone, alla tessitrice alla curatrice e altre cose.’ From an interview on the 23rd of May 2019. *Translation is mine*.

This places the *jana-fairy-orca*⁴⁷ in direct communication with the world of the dead, giving her clear shamanic connotations (Turchi, 2017, p. 31).

Maria explains that years ago, during her time in Barbagia, she was taught that they are women of light who vibrate at a specific frequency.⁴⁸ From that moment onwards, she began to talk about the *Janas* in that fashion when leading workshops and seminars, backed by Turchi's work. The etymology is also uncertain, some say it comes from Diana and others from *Janna* which means 'door'. Maria endorses the latter, believing it might mean that the *Jana* represents the door between the worlds. *Jana* and *Janara*⁴⁹ have a similar spelling with different pronunciations in the two dialects; they also share the same two alleged etymological origins.

The most popular term used for folk witches in Sardinia is *Bruja*, spelled like the Spanish word for 'witch' but pronounced differently ('Bruja' is pronounced 'bru-ʒa' in Sardinian and 'bru-χa'⁵⁰ in Spanish). *Bruja* refers to a witch who can heal and help people but also cast curses and bindings. The term has a negative connotation and it would be offensive to address a local witch as such.

Abrebadoras (female, plural) and *Abrebadoris* (male, plural) refer to women and men in the Campidano area who use as key element in their healing practices the *brebus*, secret prayers and words of power passed down through the family lineage. In the Lugodoro areas the same prayers are called *Li paruli* ('the words'). The *Fizzas de luna* ('Moon daughters') are those who specialise in the use of herbs and amulets for healing and other magical practices. In addition, there are the *Maghiarjas*, sorceresses from central highland Sardinia who perform healing, divinations and sometimes experience possessions (Magliocco, 2004, p. 163).

⁴⁷ The meaning of 'Orca' is explained in this book as coming from *Orcus*, deity of the underworld. The three terms are connected by a dash to mean that they all refer to the same figure.

⁴⁸ 'con una certa portata energetica'.

⁴⁹ Folk witches in the Campania region. See Chapter 5.

⁵⁰ International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

It is significant to notice, for it coincides with other manifestations of the Tradition of *Segnature* in other regions,⁵¹ that Maria points out that these terms are known but not really used by those seeking help from a healer. As she states,

When people need to ask for help, they don't ask if you know an *abrebadora*, they ask if you know someone who performs the *brebus*. It's not the role that is important but the practice, what the person does. So, the question would be, 'Do you know someone who performs the *brebus*?' Or 'I have the Saint Antony's fire. Do you know someone who signs it?'⁵²

Maria defines herself as an *abrebadora* and a person who works with shamanism, avoiding to self-appoint herself as the latter, believing it should be left to the people in the community to recognise her as such. This attitude is typical of trans-cultural shamanisms⁵³ and it is noteworthy that Maria adopted their stance regarding self-labelling.

7.2.2 Maria's Definition of Shaman and Shamanism

After having explored the different names and specialisms of healers and witches in Sardinia, I will now tackle the matter of whether Maria deems all these healers to be shamans. Maria, in fact, believes that not every healer is a shaman. In her words,

There are healers who are *Segnatori* and there are healers who are *Segnatori* but also have the shamanic gift, that is, an ongoing communication with the spirits.⁵⁴

⁵¹ See Chapter 5.

⁵² 'Quando le persone chiedono non chiedono se conoscono abrebadori, chiedono se conoscono qualcuno che fa i brebus. Non si dà importanza al ruolo, ma a quello che fa. Per cui 'Conosci qualcuno che fa i brebus?' O 'Ho il fuoco di Sant'antonio. Conosci qualcuno che lo segna?'' Interview on the 22nd of May 2019. *Translation is mine*.

⁵³ See Chapter 4.

⁵⁴ 'La differenza sta nel fatto che esistono guaritori che sono solo guaritori e segnatori e esistono guaritori e segnatori che hanno anche il dono sciamanico, cioè un contatto con gli spiriti continuo.' From an interview occurred on the 9th of May 2019. *Translation is mine*.

Italian folk medicine has its roots in shamanism, Maria explains, for the spirits of the land and the ancestors are those who communicated in the first instance how to perform a healing, whether it be the use of prayer, an ointment or a ritual. After this first shamanic contact, these techniques have been passed down within the family and not every person who had received such knowledge has also kept contact with the 'invisible world'. Consequently, some healers are just healers because the Segnature do work helping people and yet are not shamans because they passively reproduce what they had been taught without any ongoing conversation with the spirit realm.⁵⁵

Maria deems the broad use of the label shamanism inappropriate, highlighting that this label is being applied to a number of practices that have different traits, techniques and specialisms. This leads to losing the diversities manifested in the Sardinian folk tradition to fit a label which she feels is becoming increasingly fashionable. In her words,

The problem with the term shaman is that we are using one name for a range of nuances, of works ... there are those who are good at removing the evil eye, those who can heal Saint Antony's fire. I'm like a switchboard operator working between this world and the spirit world. With the use of the term shaman the nuances of the names and usefulness of the various roles are being lost because all are shamans.⁵⁶

She argues that the term 'shaman' is therefore useful when applied to a healer in direct contact with the spirit world but it constitutes a homologating term when referred to all types of healers.

Maria believes that human beings are innately telepathic and able to receive messages from the spirits but those who are shamans possess a different 'energetic conformation' (*conformazione energetica*) that enables

⁵⁵ From an interview on the 28th of May 2019. *Translation is mine.*

⁵⁶ 'Il problema del termine sciamano è che noi stiamo dando un nome a un ventaglio di sfumature, di lavoro... c'è chi bravo a togliere il malocchio, chi a togliere il fuoco di sant'antonio. Io sono come una centralinista tra questo mondo e quello degli spiriti. Con l'uso del termine sciamano si stanno perdendo le sfumature dei nomi e dell'utilità dei vari ruoli perché tutti sono sciamani.' Interview on the 9th of May 2019. *Translation is mine.*

them to seek a dialogue, not just receive messages in a passive way, and even face spirits in battle. Referencing Nadia Stepanova's work (Stepanova and D'Arista, 1999), she highlights that not all shamans are 'shamans of light' and that some of them work with the 'darkness'. As a consequence, the shaman needs to be able to interact with allied spirits as well as facing evil spirits or even malicious shamans.

She says Core shamanism and other 'new age' shamanisms⁵⁷ teach everyone how to contact the spirits but the difficulty is not establishing a communication but rather surviving all the consequences deriving from it. Maria deems even incorporating your Power Animal, as taught in Core shamanism workshops, leads to physical issues to the person lacking the aforementioned energetic conformation. The latter is acquired through the shamanic training, a long and painful path mandatory to becoming a shaman. Maria also used the definition 'healed warrior' to designate the shaman, emphasising the importance of the training process as well as overcoming the illness that such initiation brings along. This will allow the healer to perceive 'beyond' the conventional limitations dictated by the five senses. In Maria's words,

Shaman is the one who sees beyond.⁵⁸ The one with the 'beyond senses', the beyond-eyes, the beyond-hands, the beyond-hearing.

It's not the calling that makes the shaman, it's the training.⁵⁹

Maria explains that her training is still ongoing and so it will be until she dies. The shamanic training she has undertaken started within her family, where the ethical aspect to the practice was highly emphasised. Her formation continued through a series of illnesses and somehow faced a pivotal moment when she experienced Core Shamanism. The workshops she attended made

⁵⁷ Maria defines 'New age shamanisms' the traditions initiated by anthropologists and/or without a lineage to back their practices.

⁵⁸ The most literal translation would be 'other' but I translated it as 'beyond' because that is the connotation conveyed within the context.

⁵⁹ 'Lo sciamano è colui che vede oltre. Quelli che hanno i sensi altri, gli occhi altri, la mani altre, l'udito altro. Non è la chiamata a fare lo sciamano ma l'addestramento'. From an interview occurred on the 9th of May 2019. *Translation is mine.*

her acknowledge the shamanic nature of her heritage for she realised that the journeying and communicating with the spirit world was precisely what she had been doing her entire life.

Maria described to me her shamanic calling as so challenging she 'would not wish it on her worst enemy' for she risked her life multiple times. Yet, after healing herself she is now able to help people, particularly those who manifest the same illnesses she had to overcome. Such shamanic training is the process whereby the healer learns the cosmic laws and the language spirits use. Maria also deems the task of the shaman to entail bringing order where there is chaos. Working with the spirits is a difficult endeavour and the shaman needs to understand how to ask for a specific result. Not asking in a way that accommodates the spirits might lead to numerous risks. It is possible to inadvertently offend a spirit or perform a ritual in a place where the land spirits will not recognise and help you.

The community is also of paramount importance for Maria. Since the role of a shaman entails many hardships and dangerous rituals, it is beneficial to establish a collaboration with other shamans, for each has a different gift. Traditional healers in Italy have different abilities depending on the family lineage and joining together benefits the people needing healing as well as the fields craving blooming.

Shamanism is animistic in nature for everything is deemed to be animated by spirits, she says.⁶⁰ There is shamanism in Sardinia, Maria explains, because people strongly believed in spirits and they still do. You are then a shaman when you communicate with such spirits and the community acknowledges your ability,

Italian shamans talk to the Saints, who are – in fact - spirits, energetic forms. And this is shamanism as shamanism is communicating with the spirits.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The relation between shamanism and an animistic worldview is discussed in Chapter 3 (see also Harvey, 2010).

⁶¹ 'Gli sciamani e le sciamane italiane parlano con i santi, che sono gli spiriti, sono forme energetiche e questo è sciamanesimo, visto che lo sciamanesimo è

Since working with the invisible world is core to the shamanic practice, Maria challenges the anthropologists' understanding of what shamanism is. She believes that an anthropologist will only be able to see the ritual, the external act, but will always be oblivious on what happens in the invisible realm while that rite is performed. It is not the technique, a specific ritual or certain clothing that identify the shaman but what he or she does while travelling in the spirit world and the changes occurred on the physical realm as a result. In addition, Maria thinks that a shaman is able to tailor the healing practice on the individual and will not just use standardised rituals. This occurs because it is not the shaman who decides how to perform the healing but the spirits and they will know exactly what a specific individual needs. Since human beings are all different so will be the rites to re-establish harmony within their body to allow the healing process to happen. As a consequence, the spirits might suggest to her to work with the crucifix and the Buddha for a certain person who might carry both heritages in their religious history. To the external eyes unable to pierce into the invisible world, it might seem like she is adopting syncretism in her practice while she is only acting according to the spirits' guidance, as a shaman should.

7.2.3 Rituals and Belief System

The primary components of healing rituals that in the peninsula are referred to as *Segnature*, in Sardinia are most commonly known as *brebus* (or *li paruli*). Maria deems this word choice an indication that in Sardinia people attribute more importance and power to the words and prayers rather than the gestures used to accompany them. *Brebus* mean 'words that cause an action/effect'⁶² and are recited in the local dialect. Most *brebus* are prayers that mention the Saints for the syncretism occurred over the years. Maria is also aware of some *brebus* that reference ancestors, the sun and the moon, but these are less common. Beside this clarification, in all our conversations she talks about *Abrebadoris* and *Segnatori* or *brebus* and *segnature* almost interchangeably.

contatto con gli spiriti.' From an interview occurred on the 9th of May 2019.
Translation is mine.

⁶² 'Parole che hanno un'azione'. From an interview occurred on the 9th of May 2019.
Translation is mine.

The *brebus* are linked to the family lineage and are traditionally kept secret, albeit some have been published, despite the disapproval of the 'ancient clans' (*clan antichi*). Such secrecy is due to the risks that the misuse of *brebus* may entail. These prayers are, in fact, considered very powerful and the same prayer can either heal or kill a person depending on the rhythm adopted in its recital. The modalities whereby the *brebus* are performed also change depending on the family; there may be rituals performed, signs of the cross made or the healer may turn around the person or mimic to spit. Some prayers can be passed down only on specific days and on family members while others do not present these restrictions. It is commonly believed that the healer loses power of using a specific prayer, after it has been given to someone else. Some *Segnature* will only work when the person is not being treated with traditional medicines while others can work even in combination with pharmaceuticals. Maria is glad to possess one of the latter for she strongly believes in the collaboration between folk and conventional medicine.

Maria believes that rituals originated in a country will work better when performed in that country and on its citizens. This happens because the person is embedded in the cultural framework where those practices arose and can receive help from the land spirits, better disposed towards people living in their territory. The shaman will also have more power in his or her country because of the added help from the spirits of the land, with whom a local tradition will have a long history of collaboration. Consequently, despite mastering techniques from different traditions, when a person is seriously ill, she will always rely on *brebus* for 'prayers that come from a lineage are more powerful, they possess an embedded allegiance.'⁶³

One of the rituals in the Sardinian tradition is the *Sa mexina de s'assichidu* ('the medicine of fear'), explained by Maria as the Sardinian equivalent of the soul retrieval found in other shamanic traditions. Every family has their own version of this ritual and hence it can be found with subtle variations. The core idea is that, following an intense traumatic emotion, such as fear, part of you is lost in the time-space where the event took place. For

⁶³ 'Le preghiere con una tradizione dietro sono più potenti, hanno un'alleanza dietro'. Interview on the 9th of May 2019. *Translation is mine*.

the ritual to be most effective, it needs to be performed within three days from the incidence causing distress. When the fear is particularly intense and there is a trauma involved, the person is usually brought to a cemetery to perform the ritual using the *brebus*. A similar ritual is found in Tuscany, around Pistoia and Bologna, where it is called *L'erba della Paura* ('the herb of fear') and it involves the use of herbs instead of just prayers as in Sardinia. The person will be washed for three days with a specific herb and if the person 'has the fear' the combination of water and herb will change consistency. This modality of diagnosing and removing a damaging element affecting the person's wellbeing is found across the country. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in Campania, the evil eye is diagnosed by checking whether the oil and water during the ritual merge together. Unnatural outcomes from the combination of natural elements in contact with the person always seem to hint at a disharmony within the individual that can be cured by the appropriate ritual.

Maria also clarified whether the shaman pays a price for the healing he or she performs, usually on their health and wellbeing. In this regard, she explains that it usually depends on the illness the shaman is trying to cure. Some illnesses require a battle on the invisible plane and can be extremely dangerous. For this reason, there are steps to take before the ritual as protective measures. Likewise, after the ritual is done, the shaman needs to remain connected (*restare in ascolto*) and gather whether everything unfolded as it should have and whether there is something to 'reposition' for the harmonious flux to be re-established. Sometimes it is necessary to work with other shamans and she has a network of trusted healers who help each other when necessary. Also, she is able to perceive on her body the intensity of the disease the person is enduring. Maria explains that when reciting prayers to treat the Saint Antony's Fire, she can feel how severe is the affliction depending on how far on her arm the sensation extends. After the ritual, she has learnt throughout her training how to unburden her body from the residues of the healing ritual.

To the question of whether a Sardinian shaman is or needs to be associated to a specific religion, Maria replied,

For someone like me who belongs to a specific lineage [from birth], it is not religion, it is not faith... it is who I am, my family, a reality that I have always known. So, calling it religion feels odd to me. It is a reality. Animism and shamanism are a reality.⁶⁴

Her grandmother and most *abrebadoras* are fervent Catholics and that is common because the healer needs protection, Maria states. She also believes that whether it be Allah, Jesus or Odin, what matters is to have allies. The New Age movement has persuaded people that they can do anything on their own but that is not really the case, according to Maria. Allied spirits are essential because certain rituals are actual battles where the shaman can get hurt without help. A scratch got during a shamanic journey can be found on your physical skin when the journey is over and that is why Maria insists on highlighting the dangers of unprotected or untrained shamanic experiences. She defines herself as an animist and not affiliated with any religion, although she respects them all. She used to have a conflicting relationship with Catholicism and had difficulties working with Catholic prayers and symbolisms. Then, after attending a lecture by Nadia Stepanova, she realised that the Saints are spirits yearning to help human beings in their hardships and that the religion and the Vatican are two separate entities.⁶⁵ That realisation brought her to make peace with Catholicism and made her feel at ease with using *brebus* and traditional prayers steeped in such religion.

7.2.4 Ethics in Maria's lineage

Maria highlighted on multiple occasions that ethics is the first and perhaps most important aspect of the shamanic training. Certain rules may vary depending on the family lineage, although most of them appear to echo, with

⁶⁴ 'Per me che appartengo a un lignaggio di un certo tipo, non è religione, non è fede... è come sono fatta io, è la mia famiglia, una realtà che ho sempre conosciuto. Per cui chiamarla religione mi fa strano. È una realtà, l'animismo e lo sciamanesimo sono una realtà.' From an interview occurred on the 9th of May 2019. *Translation is mine.*

⁶⁵ It is a common opinion among Italians that Catholicism and the church are two separate entities. This is due to the increasing animosity towards the Vatican combined with the persistence of the Catholic faith among people. See Chapter 6 for more information.

small variations, most lineages of vernacular witchcraft I encountered in my research.

The first and most important rule is to never do a working or *brebus* on someone, unless the person explicitly asks for it. It is forbidden to operate on a somebody who is unaware that a ritual is being performed on them. There are some exceptions to this rule, for instance, if the ritual is for children, people in a coma or experiencing mental health conditions that would affect their decision-making ability. In such cases, a close family member can ask for help on the behalf of the person. There are also occurrences where the person is not able to grasp what the ritual entails because of their cultural background. Maria told me the experience of a former boyfriend who, many years ago, had a serious condition in his stomach. Because of his cultural background, he was not able to understand what the *brebus* were and so she asked whether he would have been amenable to accept any kind of cure to heal his stomach. After receiving his consent, Maria asked her grandmother, a 'medicine woman' (*donna medicina*) who helped many during her life, to perform the ritual. Her former boyfriend had healed shortly after and never experienced the same condition ever since.

An awareness of what the person in need of healing or learning is able to handle is essential for the ethical shaman. Maria criticises the *Segnatori* that will openly tell who the person casting the evil eye was, possibly generating conflict or anxiety in their future human interactions. Likewise, forms of 'new age shamanism' will teach anyone how to do shamanic journey and incorporate their power animal when some people might be damaged from doing such a thing. The stress is put on customising the practice as well as what and how it needs to be said on the individual. Since the shaman is in direct contact with the spirits, Maria argues, they will tell the shaman what that specific person needs. There cannot be a one-ritual-fits-all in shamanism for people are all different and so are their necessities.

Another key ethical rule, which is found among almost all folk magic traditions in Italy, is to never ask for a payment. Some families would accept an offer while others would even refuse that and ask to bring the offer to the church instead. In Maria's case, when she performs rituals of the Sardinian

tradition *Sa Mexina antiga*, she will never ask for any compensation. Conversely, she will ask for a payment when delivering lectures or leading workshops on traditions she paid to learn, like Core Shamanism or RAM. This is necessary because in our Western contemporary society, the shaman does not have the support network created by the other members of the community and this isolation translates in the need to provide a living for yourself. Despite that, if a person needs help and is in financial difficulties, she will help them for free regardless of the practice employed.

7.3 Michela's and Maria's Shamanisms in relation to Folk Magic and Trans-cultural Shamanism

Michela and Maria both label their family traditions as 'Italian shamanism'. By comparing their traits with those found in the Tradition of Segnature there are evident overlaps. This prompted my inquiry towards understanding what distinguished these forms of Italian shamanism from all the manifestations of vernacular healing and trans-cultural shamanisms. In other words, are these two traditions fostering the development of Italian shamanism or are they re-labelling autochthonous and imported practices with the snappier word 'shamanism' through a process of appropriation and incorporation? My research on the field suggests that the answer is not that straightforward and manifests as too multi-faceted to be contained in one conclusive statement. For the purpose of exploring such facets, I identified a few key elements which characterise these Italian shamanisms: overlaying shamanism and folk magic, setting the conditions whereby one can coincide with the other, and adopting a distinctive kind of syncretism.

The first aspect emerging from Michela's and Maria's Italian shamanisms is that they are both rooted in the Tradition of *Segnature*, to which Michela and Maria have been initiated and that still shows a noticeable presence in their current practice. There is an open acknowledgement that folk healing is linked to shamanism, albeit not being shamanism *per se*. The shamanic roots are, in fact, not deemed sufficient for vernacular witches to be regarded as shamans, for there are certain essential conditions for the two to

coincide. These conditions vary, as for Maria the key requirement is the ongoing communication with the spirits while for Michela it is the link to the pre-Catholic Italian legacy. Yet, conditions are required in both cases, hinting at a distinction between shamanism and vernacular healing.

Both Michela and Maria were initiated into vernacular traditions that later they would identify as shamanism. As I explained in previous sections, the term 'shamanism' emerged at a later time when the two informants encountered other practices labelled as shamanism and realised that the term was fitting to describe what the family tradition entailed. The best fit, perhaps, as both informants clarified that the use of that label made more comprehensible to the community a set of practices otherwise difficult to categorise. It is, in fact, noteworthy to highlight that, although Michela and Maria clearly identified the differences between shamanism and folk magic as previously explained, in conversations they both used words referring to the two interchangeably and only when asked a direct question, the differences emerged again.

Since the main target in the diffusion of the two traditions appears to be the accessibility to as a wide audience as possible, elements of syncretism are clearly implemented for the purpose of making cryptic or unknown traits of folk practices more comprehensible. Most times the two informants appeared to be unaware of including such syncretism, in some cases even denying to do so when asked a straight question on the matter. This element leads to another significant feature emerged from the two shamanisms, that is the inclusion of logical contradictions which are not perceived as such by the tradition holder. There appears to be a distinctive way of intending and implementing consistency not sought amongst the various elements of a tradition but rather the consistency only occurs in virtue of a goal. For instance, when Michela claims that her tradition is genuinely Italian with no external influence and then celebrates the eight sabbaths as systematised in Wicca and advertised with the Wiccan names for them, she does not perceive this to be a contradiction at all. To her, the goal is to make an autochthonous tradition understandable to those who have never heard of it but have most likely encountered Wicca, allowing them to appreciate what the Italian seasonal celebration will entail. Therefore, she believes to be conveying her heritage

unadulterated, just adopting a few translations to be understood by the many to later tackle at length the teachings passed down from her grandmother. The goal being accessibility, no contradiction occurs to her between adopting Wiccan elements and divulging an autochthonous hereditary tradition.

One last question left to answer to conclude the present chapter pertains to these two traditions are to be considered the only Italian shamanisms because they openly adopt such a label. To tackle this enquiry, I need to tap into the origin and evolution of the use of the term 'shaman'. As discussed in chapter 3, the category of shamanism was created by European scholars and later applied to practitioners, especially among indigenous peoples, who previously had their own local terms to label their healers (Torri, 2015, pp. 90–105; Pharo, 2011; Atkinson, 1992). Only in recent years, the label has begun to spread and be understood, which led to its adoption by the practitioners themselves (Winkelman, 2010, p. xvii).

The term shamanism is, therefore, a label that overlays local definitions for the purpose of categorising practices that show core elements in common. This implies that to be able to adopt such label practitioners need to have a fair understanding of both the local practices and the somewhat international labelling (provided folk Italian practices are to be considered a form of shamanism). The combination of these two elements is still quite rare in Italy as there are either shamanic practitioners solely involved in trans-cultural traditions or vernacular healers who practise in the countryside unaware of what transcultural shamanism or even shamanism is. Although I have encountered a few practitioners of Core Shamanism who acknowledge the existence of folk healers, in most cases the latter are overlooked and never put in comparison to neo-shamanism,⁶⁶ which is another aspect to be considered when trying to explain why the two are still not associated by most shamanic practitioners on the Italian territory.

⁶⁶ When I asked to attendees of Core Shamanism workshop questions putting in comparison folk magic and the form of shamanism they were practising, they all told to have never posed themselves the question. Sara Tenaglia, a faculty member of the Italian FSS, confessed she had never thought about it and she recognised indeed many liaison points between the two.

Chapter 5 has shown that even within the Tradition of *Segnature* there was a lack of awareness of the cohesiveness that such tradition shows across the different regions on the Italian territory. Only in recent years and by means of social media, the term '*Segnature*' is starting to take roots in the vocabulary of Italian practitioners, providing a name to ritual gestures and prayers which were nameless in most regions or overlaying the local names to foster a wider understanding. This slow process of acknowledgement reveals the isolation vernacular healers experience, prompted by the social stigma reserved to practices deemed backwardly, anti-Catholic or even fraudulent.

What collected data shows is that only the folk healers who have travelled through different Italian regions or have had contacts (online or offline) with practitioners from all over the country, acknowledge the cohesiveness of this tradition. Likewise, only those belonging to the aforementioned group who also have the knowledge or have undertaken any kind of formation with trans-cultural shamanism or other healing techniques, are able to draw a comparison between indigenous and imported shamanism. It is interesting to notice that both Michela and Maria are Southerners who moved to the north of Italy and have travelled and learned a lot from various healing traditions, including non-shamanic ones such as Reiki and RAM. I argue it is their eclectic inclination towards healing practices and the open-minded attitude generated from moving from small towns to different geographical and cultural context to prompt the re-appropriation of traditional heritage in different terms.

In conclusion, the two Italian shamanisms analysed in the present chapter can be seen as specific manifestations (conditions are applied) and revised (syncretic) versions of the Tradition of *Segnature*. Although these two traditions may become the founding points for an Italian shamanism, this is not due to the presence of unique shamanistic characteristics absent in the practice of other healers within the Tradition of *Segnature*. These traditions are instead the first ones to connect all the dots and grasp the cohesive nature of the Tradition of *Segnature* as well as the strict relation occurring between Italian folk magic and shamanism.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

8.1 Review of the Thesis

The present research began in October 2016 with the initial aim to study what I have here defined as trans-cultural forms of shamanism in Italy. My interest in the matter was sparked from realising, throughout my years-long attendance within Pagan and magic-practising communities on the peninsula, how significant shamanism had become for all those groups and individuals within new religious movements and alternative spirituality. Not only was shamanism spreading at a fast rate across the country but it was also impacting communities not directly engaging with its practice. All those movements which sought the living presence of other-than-human persons, to use Hallowell's phrase (1992, p. 63), appeared to have been mesmerised by shamanism.

The lack of previous literature on the matter further convinced me to pursue this topic to create my own first ethnographic map of the shamanic presence in Italy. Then, during my very first months of fieldwork, I encountered a self-proclaimed 'Italian shaman' which prompted me to wonder whether a genuinely Italian shamanism could, in fact, exist. The traits of this 'Italian shamanism', as described by Michela, were so similar to the vernacular healing tradition that I then began incorporating that as well to get a more in-depth understanding of the multi-faceted manifestations of shamanism on the peninsula.

I opened this study by providing a synopsis and the methodological approach to my investigation of Italian shamanism in chapter 1, along with telling the field-story which led me to include vernacular witchcraft and analyse it alongside trans-cultural shamanism.

In chapter 2, I covered the conceptualisation of 'shamanism' and all the controversies surrounding its definition. As there is no agreed-upon definition of what this label implies, I employed a combination of a deictic context-sensitive approach and discourse analysis to frame its meaning in relation to

the Italian context. 'Shamanism', I argued, is similar to terms such as 'here' and 'now', which only bear meaning in relation to their referenced context. In addition, employing discourse analysis allows to flank a contextualised understanding to a socially-constructed semantics of the term, where patterns of meaning arising from practitioners' narratives are to determine what 'shamanism' really is.

In chapter 3, I tackled how shamanism manifests in Italy, how and when it had begun spreading on the peninsula. As with all cultural phenomena, even shamanism was not born in a vacuum but through a network of related religious or spiritual movements, the most notable being Paganism and the New Age.

Chapter 4 was dedicated to trans-cultural forms of shamanism, those which are either imported and reinterpreted from indigenous shamanisms or are not linked to any culture at all, like Core Shamanism. Here I identify the typologies of trans-cultural movements currently active on the country, with a special focus on Core Shamanism, to then move on to address their belief system, practices and cosmology.

The Tradition of *Segnature*, the label I chose to systematise Italian vernacular witchcraft, was covered in chapter 5. I outlined its traits and the generational divide emerged from field data to then try to answer the question as to whether this can be defined as shamanism along with being an indigenous form thereof.

As my fieldwork was in Italy, it seemed relevant to address how both indigenous and trans-cultural manifestations of shamanism relate to the dominant religious system, which is Catholicism. Chapter 6 focused on this relationship and has shown how a lay understanding of the Catholic affiliation as part of the Italian national identity has allowed shamanism to avoid a strong antagonism with the Church.

Chapter 7 included two case studies of women who belong to the Tradition of *Segnature* and claim their practices to be 'Italian shamanism'. In these two examples, I demonstrated how vernacular healers enter the shamanic narrative and what kind of syncretism they employ to present folk

magic as shamanism to an audience engaging with a trans-cultural and often 'exoticised' perception of what shamanism is.

The present chapter completes my investigation of indigenous and trans-cultural shamanism in Italy by summarising my findings and drawing the related conclusions. I am also going to address the impact of my research as well as its limitations and further studies which might be needed to improve the scholarly understanding of the subject matter.

8.2 Classifying Shamanisms based on the Italian Case

The category of 'Shamanism' was originally acquired – as shown in chapter 2 - by Europeans to describe something they did not have at home: a dramatic public rite technique of the kind employed by Siberian shamans. Although it has now been extended to cover people who do not employ that technique, the semantic problem of arguing for the legitimacy of this extension is created entirely by that historical background. And yet, this category has been reshaped over time by its employment on the part of practitioners and evolved to encompass European practices, too.

Shamanism in Italy is a growing phenomenon which manifests itself in multiple forms, all of which can be categorised under the two main branches of indigenous and trans-cultural. It is essential to highlight that the two are not mutually exclusive and they can and do influence each other. While the trans-cultural forms of shamanism incorporate elements from foreign traditions or a set of techniques devoid of a local-based culture, indigenous shamanism constitutes an Italian tradition rooted in the territory and in the vernacular traditions of the peninsula, once syncretised with Catholicism and now – in some cases – with Paganism.

During my four years of fieldwork, I have encountered a few crossovers between the two. Maria Capasso, whose case study was tackled in chapter 6, realised her family tradition was a form of shamanism after attending a Core Shamanism workshop. Sara Tenaglia, the youngest and recently appointed teacher of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Italy, comes from a family of *Segnatori* and was initiated as one herself. During our conversations - when I attended the advanced training in May 2018 - and a later interview in July

2019, she asserted the compatibility between the two and my inquiry led her to conclude that the Tradition of *Segnature* is, in fact, a form of shamanism. Of the same idea was Federica, a participant at the same advanced workshop where I met Sara, who practises the *Segnature* alongside Core Shamanism and Pagan rituals. Conversely, Michela Chiarelli – who acknowledges her tradition as the only un-syncretised Italian shamanism – realised, as a result of my inquiry, that other folk magic traditions might be shamanism, too, albeit not as strictly rooted in the Italian pre-Christian tradition as hers, which she claims to come from the Etruscan heritage predating the advent of Catholicism.

The large majority of practitioners of shamanism in Italy, who use the label ‘shamanism’ to define their practice, follow some form of trans-cultural tradition and often adopt eclecticism to individualise the practice and make it as meaningful as possible to their personal worldview. Only a few of the practitioners of the indigenous *Segnature* acknowledge them as a form of shamanism as most of them have not been exposed to a shamanic practice labelled as such. Based on my interviews and conversations with *Segnatori*, all of those who had had some exposure to shamanism acknowledge what I call the Tradition of *Segnature* to be one of such manifestations. Most of them, however, have only an understanding of what witchcraft or folk magic is, making it the only framework whereby they can describe the *Segnature*.

This is in accordance with the literature covered in chapter 2 on the definition of shamanism. The label ‘shaman’ has always worked by superimposition over local identifiers and, being a Western-born category of the 19th Century, retains some degree of exoticism in its semantics. These traits are found in reference to the Italian context too, as every region calls their vernacular healers with a term sourced from the local dialect or parlance. It is also easier for trans-cultural practitioners to identify foreign practices as shamanistic than to acknowledge that what the town healer does may fall under the same category. This, I argue, may be due to the absence of romantic exoticism embodied by the next-door neighbour which a Lakota shaman may instead epitomise. Even when this acknowledgement occurs spontaneously on the part of *Segnatori*, it is purportedly the result of the person leaving their native place, thus creating an ‘exoticising’ distance.

In summary, there are four strands of responses to the inquiry on whether the Tradition of *Segnature* is a form of shamanism. The very few (such as Michela and Maria, in chapter 7) who identified the two on their own account and prior to my inquiry are Southerners who moved to the North and are well-versed in trans-cultural shamanisms alongside being initiated as *Segnatori*. The second kind of responses is that of practitioners who have also been exposed to both trans-cultural and indigenous traditions in Italy but never thought of comparing the two, until it came up during interviews. All the informants in this category live in their place of birth and after my interviews on the topic concluded that the *Segnature* can, in fact, be seen as shamanic practices. The third category is that of older practitioners of folk magic, those who have never been exposed to external ideas of shamanism; the *Segnatori* belonging to what I defined ‘the old generation’ in chapter 4. Since this latter category of informants lacks any knowledge of what shamanism is, I did not provide a definition for them to draw a conclusion as my intervention may have conveyed a hidden bias, especially in a case where the informant lacks any prior notion on the matter. The fourth strand of responses comes from trans-cultural practitioners, whose practice is eclectic and individualised, inspired to various degrees by reinterpretations of imported indigenous shamanisms. This latter category of practitioners is the most prevalent in the Facebook group I opened to gather data for the present research, called ‘Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy’ (*Praticanti di Sciamanesimo in Italia*). As a poll I posted on the 30th of January 2020 showed, trans-cultural practitioners have a fluid perception of the similarity between the *Segnature* and shamanic practices. The poll asked, ‘Can the Italian practice of Segnature be considered a form of Shamanism?’⁶⁷ offering as possible answers ‘yes’ or ‘no’ while leaving open the possibility to add further answers. The trend of responses has not been linear and appeared strongly dependant on the discussions occurring in the comment section. At first, two thirds of responses were endorsing a strong

⁶⁷ ‘La pratica delle Segnature italiana può essere considerate una forma di sciamanesimo?’ *Translation is mine.*

‘No’ but then Maria Capasso joined the group⁶⁸ and added a third option to the poll, ‘Only if the person performing (the *Segnature*) has shamanic gifts and is able to prove it’.⁶⁹ Maria also started a discussion explaining all the liaison points between Italian folk magic and an indigenous shamanism and – from that moment onwards – more and more respondents were selecting ‘Yes’ as an option. Out of a total of 103 responses - 48 voted ‘No, 48 voted ‘Yes’ while 7 selected the option added by Manuela. So, overall, 55 of the respondents thought that the practice of *Segnature* can be seen as a shamanic practice and yet such a trend only emerged after a performer of the *Segnature* herself made a case for this acknowledgement. There were also a few comments arguing against the view of the *Segnature* as shamanic practices. Those comments, however, showed either a lack of knowledge of the rites and modes of practices or an exotic and romanticised perception of what shamanism is.⁷⁰ This view of shamanism on the part of Western trans-cultural shamanic practitioners is in accordance with the literature reported in chapter 2. Overall, what the data show is a sound and unanimous picture as, provided the informant has a solid knowledge and practice in both transcultural and indigenous traditions, the overwhelming majority of interviewees concluded that the Tradition of *Segnature* is a form of shamanism.

Based on current research, data suggest that the commonalities between regional manifestations are remarkably stronger than their differences, which are mostly limited to the use of a local dialect for prayers and local terms for labelling. The minor ritual variations do not appear to be linked to regional belonging but most noticeably to the ‘generation’ to which the practitioner can be associated. Consequently, I conclude that these

⁶⁸ She later told me in a private message that she was not aware I was the group moderator.

⁶⁹ ‘Solo se chi pratica ha doni sciamanici e lo dimostra’. *Translation is mine.*

⁷⁰ For instance, Arianna commented on that poll by writing, ‘There is no traveling between worlds, there is no intervention of allied spirits. The signatures also include Christian formulas and prayers’ (*Non si viaggia tra i mondi, non vi è l'intervento di spiriti alleati. Le segnature inoltre prevedono formule e preghiere cristiane*). See Chapter 5 for further details on this poll. *Translation is mine.*

practices can indeed be regarded as part of one consistent, yet nuanced, tradition.

I expect this tradition will develop rather quickly toward acknowledging its underlying homogeneity and that a scholarly interest in the matter might foster such progression. From a socio-cultural point of view, vernacular healers are still seen as people acting out of delusion and victims of backward superstitious beliefs. This worldview, alongside the rejection from the Catholic church, has kept practitioners 'in the closet' and led the wider population to either dismiss these practices or acknowledge (and utilise) them in secret. It is likely that the academic interest and study of such displays of the Italian folklore, free from religious or judgemental implications, might pierce through the social stigma to shed some light on a meaningful feature of the Italian culture. As the case studies covered in Chapter 7 have shown, academic research unintentionally legitimize or endorse what they research. As academics, we need to be aware of how people see our work and - in my case - I envisage a beneficial effect on vernacular traditions, which might become more acceptable as a subject of study as well as in the community.

8.3 Research Impact and Further Research

The research on the Tradition of *Segnature* is still at its first stages and hence more data is needed to further investigate and fully comprehend this Tradition. The present research is the product of four years of field study and data collection but it is not exhaustive for more research is needed, both on my part and on those who would pursue this topic in the future, to improve a scholarly understanding of a phenomenon whose academic inquiry is still at its infancy.

I have made a beginning of a proper study of the newly appeared tradition of Italian shamanism, which shows trans-cultural elements in combination with indigenous practices. A more extended study of it would be welcome, as it is fast developing. To have a more detailed and in-depth understanding of this vernacular healing tradition, it would be necessary to investigate every single region on the peninsula to then compare and contrast the data emerged from the collection on the field. The regions where I was able to gather data are Campania, Sardegna, Sicilia, Calabria, Emilia

Romagna, Piemonte. Although I also gathered responses to surveys and interviews from other practitioners residing in most regions of the country, I am sure there are many regional variations which have not emerged - due to the scarcity of a regional focus - alongside others that have been made plain by the gathered information but had to be left out of this study. As a pioneering work trying to provide an ethnographic map of trans-cultural forms of shamanism and systematise the Tradition of *Segnature*, my aim here is to lay the foundations and provide a first framework for future studies to work upon.

My research might, therefore, be a starting point to uncover the existence of this Tradition and its cultural significance in relation to shamanism in Italy to then foster further studies on the possible commonality that may be found in other European vernacular healing traditions. My attendance to national and international conferences in the field of Religious Studies, allowed me to encounter scholars who have studied folk magic in other European countries and reported a striking number of similarities between the Italian tradition and the ones they had researched. Significant similarities in the rites as well as the initiation process and belief system were found in countries such as the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Switzerland and France. In addition, as a result of sharing my findings on the Tradition of *Segnature* on my YouTube channel, I received comments from viewers who highlighted that in their countries – Ireland, Brazil, unspecified parts of Africa - there are practices of Folk Magic which they reported to be extremely similar to the ones I was describing (Puca, 2020). The extent of these similarities and possible historical or cultural relations are unknown but their very existence shows the relevance of the Italian Tradition on the debate pertaining to vernacular witchcraft and shamanic practices both nationally and internationally.

The present research is impactful on different levels, both from an academic standpoint and for the community of shamanic practitioners. In relation to the scholarship in the field, this study fills an ethnographic gap on contemporary shamanic practices in Italy while uncovering and systematising folk witchcraft under a cohesive label. This journey also led me to offer new methodological approaches to defining ‘shamanism’ and ‘indigenous religions’, both attempting to drop ‘exoticising’ Western-centric perceptions of what shamanism has to be and what indigeneity implies when referred to a

religious phenomenon. As for the community of practitioners, both Paganism and shamanism have been reportedly influenced by their academic study (von Stuckrad, 2014). The Italian scene is no exception and - as chapter 7.1.6 has shown - even during fieldwork I realised that my study was unintentionally affecting the way practitioners perceived and portrayed their practices. I suspect that after the publication of the Italian translation of the present study - with the University of Rome Press – an ever greater influence on the community might be registered.

My hope is that the reception of my study will give a voice back to those vernacular healers who help their communities and whose work is too often dismissed as a backward superstition, unfit for the dominant worldview. As for trans-cultural practitioners, who invest their lives in shamanic practices, I hope my analysis will reassure them that there is no reference trope to seek validation against and that their traditions might just as well constitute forms of shamanism in their own right. I cannot predict what the response from the community and the academic field will be but – as previous literature and my fieldwork suggest – there will presumably be one as the debate on shamanism in Western countries, in all its shades and traits, has just begun. I, therefore, aspire for the present doctoral research to be only the first stepping stone for future research as the (academic) world truly needs more inquiries on religious outliers and magic-practising movements.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

A.1 Form Interview to Individuals

(è auspicabile ma non necessario che si risponda a tutte le domande. Quelle in grassetto sono le più importanti)

[it's desirable but not necessary for you to answer all the questions. Those in bold are the most important ones]

Parlami della tua biografia, della tua formazione e degli aspetti chiave nel tuo percorso sciamanico.

[Tell me about your biography, your formation and the key aspects of your shamanic path]

Quale tradizione segui? Illustramene gli aspetti, sia che sia una o più di una.

[Which tradition do you follow? Explain the traits, whether it's one or many].

Quali sono le pratiche che svolgi?

[What does your practice consist of?]

Quali sono le tradizioni di magia popolare che conosci in Italia? Sentiti libero di citare testi, autori o quello che preferisci.

[Which are the traditions of Folk Magic that you know in Italy? Feel free to cite books, authors or whatever you prefer]

Pensi ci sia differenza tra Magia Popolare e Sciamanesimo? Se sì, quale?

[Do you think there is a difference between Folk Magic and Shamanism? If yes, please explain]

Pensi ci sia differenza tra lo Sciamanesimo autoctono (esempio, quello delle popolazioni indigene) e lo Sciamanesimo contemporaneo (esempio, il Core Shamanism)? Se sì, illustrami tali differenze.

[Do you think there's a difference between autochthonous Shamanism (e.g., indigenous traditions) and contemporary Shamanism (e.g. Core Shamanism)? If yes, please explain]

Richiedi un compenso quando svolgi rituali per altri? Che tipo di rituali sono?

[Do you ask for a remuneration for the rituals you perform for others? What kind of rituals are they?]

Qual è il tuo Sistema di credenze? Ad esempio, la tua idea di divinità, di morale e di cosa accade dopo la morte.

[What's your belief system? For instance, your idea of divinity, ethics and what happens after death]

Chi è lo Sciamano e cosa lo definisce? Tu ti definisci Sciamano?

[Who and what define a Shaman? Do you consider yourself a shaman?]

Lo Sciamanesimo è una religione? Motiva la tua risposta.

[Is Shamanism a Religion? Please, explain your answer]

Lo Sciamanesimo può essere praticato in concomitanza con altre religioni?

Ad esempio, il cattolicesimo?

[Can Shamanism be practised alongside other religions? E.g. Catholicism.

Nel rispondere alla presente intervista dichiaro di essere a conoscenza che qualunque parte della presente potrà essere utilizzata a scopi di ricerca e sottoposta ad analisi da parte della ricercatrice e del supervisory team. La ricerca in questione si occupa di studiare ed esaminare le correnti di sciamanesimo (et similia) presenti in Italia. Se si desidera l'anonimato, si

prega di specificarlo. È in ogni caso possibile che alcuni passaggi possano essere resi anonimi se la commissione etica lo riterrà necessario. E' possibile revocare la propria partecipazione fino al momento in cui la produzione scritta risultante riceverà l'approvazione della commissione dottorale.

Tutti i dati presenti nell'intervista saranno custoditi seguendo le misure di sicurezza appropriate affinché nessuno possa accedervi senza il consenso della ricercatrice. Se dovessero presentarsi dei problemi, si prega di contattare la mia relatrice Suzanne Owen, all'indirizzo email S.Owen@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Data [Date] _____

Firma [Signature] _____

[I hereby declare, by answering this questionnaire, that any part of it can be used for research purposes and undergo critical analysis by the researcher and the supervisory team.

My research intends to investigate and study the forms of shamanism (et similia) currently practised in Italy. If you wish for anonymity, please specify that. It is, in any case, possible that some bits might be anonymised if the ethics committee deems it necessary.

It is possible to revoke your participation until the resulting thesis will be the submitted to the doctoral committee for the final approval.

All data will be secured according to the appropriate measures so that no one can access it without the researcher's consent.

Should any issue arise, please contact my supervisor Suzanne Owen via email S.Owen@leedstrinity.ac.uk]

A.2 Concepts to Cover for Semi-Structured Interviews

Trans-Cultural Shamanism:

- Practices
- Beliefs system
- What defines a Shaman and what Shamanism
- Perceived differences and similarities in comparison with indigenous forms

Individuals:

- Key aspects in their biography
- How they define themselves/affiliations
- Tradition practised
- Do you get paid for your practice?

Organised Groups:

- History of the association
- Biography
- Core principles
- Principal outcomes
- The view of payment and how it is used
- Age range Female/male of participants and if anyone may be put off for economic or other reasons
- Is there difference depending on age/sex?

Appendix B

Ethical Approval

B.1 Ethical Approval Form for Doctoral Research



APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW

This form is to be completed by PIs or supervisors (for PGR student research) who have completed the University Research Ethics self-assessment form and have decided that further ethical review and approval is required before the proposed programme of research can commence. The form can also be used by supervisors or module managers of undergraduate Final Year research projects as an alternative to the taught students' research ethics block approval form.

Office use only:

Application No:

Reviewing REC:

PART A: Summary

A1. Title of the research:

Indigenous and trans-cultural Shamanism

A2: Purpose of research: *(tick as appropriate)*

Staff research project

Postgraduate student research project

Undergraduate research project or module

If yes, module code & title:

Other (please specify)

A3. Principal Investigators, supervisors (PGR projects) or UG supervisor/module manager (UG projects) contact details:

Name: (Title/first name/family name)	Angela Puca
Position:	Principal investigator
School/Institute:	Institute of Childhood and Education
Work Tel No:	
University email address:	a.puca@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Name: (Title/first name/family name)	Suzanne Owen
Position:	Supervisor
School/Institute:	Institute of childhood and education
Work Tel No:	
University email address:	s.owen@leedstrinity.ac.uk

b. Co-investigator's or co-supervisor's contact details:

Name: (Title/first name/family name)	Graham Roberts
Position:	Co-supervisor
School/Institute:	School of Arts and Communication
Work Tel No:	
University email address:	g.roberts@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Name: (Title/first name/family name)	
Position:	
School/Institute:	
Work Tel No:	
University email address:	

c. Postgraduate student contact details (PGR projects only):

Name: (Title/first name/family name)	Angela Puca
Student No:	1606567
Course of study:	PhD
School/Institute:	Institute of childhood and education
Work Tel No:	
University email address:	a.puca@leedstrinity.ac.uk

A4. Estimated start date of research:

Estimated end date of research:

A5. Funding: *(List funding sources, including internal sources, and status of each)*

Funding body	Approved / Pending / To be submitted
Research Office	Approved

A3. Summary of research

Describe the purpose and background rationale for the proposed research, as well as the hypotheses/research questions to be examined and the expected outcomes. Do not simply reproduce or refer to the protocol.

*This section must be completed in **language comprehensible to the lay person**. Please explain any technical terms or discipline-specific phrases.*

There is a Mapuche shaman in Buenos Aires with whom I've been in contact. I hope to gather information and perhaps attend rituals with her as well as other indigenous shamans.

This would improve my understanding of indigenous shamanisms and give more depth to my thesis where I claim Italy has its own indigenous shamanism.

PART B: The research

B1. What are the aims of the research? *(Must be in language comprehensible to a lay person)*

My doctoral research focusses on studying indigenous and trans-cultural shamanism in Italy.

B2. Select from the list below to describe your research: *(You may select more than one)*

Research on or with human participants

Research working with the data of human participants

New data collected by qualitative methods

New data collected by quantitative methods

New data collected from observing individuals or populations

Research working with aggregated or population data

Research using already published data or data in the public domain

Research that constitutes scholarship, or increases knowledge and understanding of educational processes.

- Research that involves NHS patients, relatives or carers of NHS patients, NHS staff, NHS facilities, or tissue/materials or data from NHS patients. *(If your research involves any of these, then an application should be made to the National Research Ethics Service as NHS ethical approval will be required. There is no need to complete this form)*
- Research working with human tissue samples
- Research that has a significant environmental impact *(If yes, please give details)*

B3. Research methodology and design:

Please give a description of the research design and methodology proposed. Qualitative methods as well as quantitative methods should be included. Include what participants will be asked to do (e.g. number of visits, time, interviews etc). Must be in language comprehensible to a lay person.

At first, I will approach the shaman with whom I'm in contact, hoping she will agree to be interviewed. I will also ask to participate in shamanic ritual and meet the sisterhood she is part of.

At the moment the success of my overall plan is uncertain but if things go well I will also attempt a trip to Patagonia alongside the aforementioned shaman.

I will adopt interviews, conversations, participant observation and every informant will have to give me their consent to using the collected data.

B4. Vulnerable participants:

Will the participants be from any of the following groups? (Tick as appropriate)

- Children under 16. *Specify age group: 12 and 16 years of age (The young people involved will be deaf or hearing impaired)*
- Adults with learning disabilities
- Adults with other forms of mental incapacity or mental illness
- Adults in emergency situations
- Prisoners or young offenders
- Participants who could be considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator.
- Other vulnerable groups
- No participants from any of the above groups

Please justify the inclusion of the above groups, explaining why the research cannot be conducted on non-vulnerable participants

PART C: Recruitment and consent

C1. Recruitment:

Please state clearly how participants will be identified, approached and recruited. Explain each point and give details for each sub-group if appropriate. Include any relationship between investigator(s) and participant(s) (e.g. instructor-student)

Note: Attach a copy of any poster(s), advertisement(s) or letter(s) to be used for recruitment

I will start by approaching the shaman I already know for we are in friendly terms. Since I believe she deems me trustworthy, I hope she will introduce me to the group of shamans she works with.

C2. Participants as subjects of the research:

Describe the number of participants. How was this number decided? If you have a formal power calculation, please replicate it here

Specify any inclusion or exclusion criteria (e.g. age, gender, location, affiliation, level of fitness etc.). If you are excluding individuals, what is the rationale for this?

The number of participants is unknown. Most certainly, it will be fewer than 20 people. The only inclusion criterion is belonging to a shamanic tradition or practising shamanism. No exclusion criteria.

C3. Informed Consent:

Will informed consent be obtained from the research participants? Yes

No

If yes, please give details of how it will be done. Give details of any particular steps to provide information. Attach a copy of the participant information sheet or any other material used in the consent process, and a copy of the consent form. If consent is not going to be obtained, justify why not.

What arrangements will be made for participants who might not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information, or who have special communication needs? How long will participants have to decide whether or not to take part in the research?

*If participants are to be recruited from any of potentially vulnerable groups, **give details of extra steps** taken to assure their protection. Describe any arrangements to be made for obtaining alternative sources of consent. Include any permission / information letter to be provided to the person(s) providing the consent.*

n/a

C3. Deception:

Will the research involve any element of deception? Yes No

If yes, please describe the nature and extent of the deception involved. Justify why this it is necessary. Include whether, how and when the deception will be revealed, and who will administer this feedback.

C4. Participant withdrawal:

*Describe whether participants will be able to withdraw from the study, and up to what point? How will participants be informed of their right to withdraw? What will be done with the participant's data if they withdraw? If withdrawal is **not** possible, explain why not.*

Participants can withdraw until the submission of my doctoral thesis

C5. Compensation:

Will individual research participants receive any payments, fees, reimbursement of expenses or any other incentives or benefits for taking part in this research?

Yes No

If yes, please describe the amount, number and size of incentives and on what basis this was decided. If participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with this compensation?

C6. Confidentiality:

Please describe the procedures to be used to ensure anonymity of participants and/or confidentiality of data both during the conduct of the research and in the release of its findings.

If participant anonymity or confidentiality is not appropriate to this research project, explain why, providing details of how participants will be advised of the fact that data will not be anonymous or confidential.

All data will be stored on encrypted and password-protected devices.

Will interviews/ questionnaires discuss any topics or issues that might be sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting, or is it possible that criminal or other disclosures requiring action could take place during the study?

Yes No

If yes, please describe how you will deal with these issues

PART D: Research Data, Implications and Impact

D1. Data storage, access and disposal:

For how long will data be stored?

Describe what research data will be stored, where (e.g. secure server), the measures that will be put in place to ensure security of the data (including if data is to be transferred), who will have access to it, whether or how it will be shared or disseminated (including by publication) and the method and timing of its disposal.

20 years after the end of my PhD

D2. Significance or benefits of the research:

Outline the significance or benefits of the research

The project will be of significant benefit in contributing to the body of knowledge concerning the understanding of indigenous shamanisms.

D3. Risks of the research:

*Outline the potential risks to: a) participants; b) researchers; c) other individuals not involved in the research; d) Society; e) environment and the measures that will be taken to **minimise** any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap*

No known risks.

D4. Other ethical issues:

Are there any other ethical issues raised by the research? Yes No

If yes, please specify

PART F: Declaration:

In completing and submitting this form, I declare that I:

- Have answered all the questions truthfully and to the best of my knowledge and belief, and that I take full responsibility for these responses.
- Undertake to observe ethical principles throughout the programme of research
- Will submit progress reports or participate in audits if required
- Will report any changes affecting the ethical issues, or adverse or unforeseen events arising from the project to my School or Institute Research Ethics Committee.
- Agree to abide by the UK Research Integrity Office's code of practice for research, the University's research ethics policy and any other policies, procedures or guidance related to research conduct or integrity issued by the University.

PI/Supervisor/module manager signature:

Date:

Name:

B.2 Report Form for Fieldwork Abroad



POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS

REPORTING OF ANY PERIODS OF RESEARCH SPENT AWAY FROM THE UNIVERSITY

(Including fieldwork and split programmes)

CONFIDENTIAL

To be completed by all postgraduate research students who go overseas as part of their studies.

Note:

- (i) Tier 4 / non EU International student details are reported to the Home Office
- (ii) Research period away must not be used as holiday
- (iii) If you receive a studentship or other financial support from a funding body / organisation, you must inform them and ensure that permission is granted prior to departure and evidence of permission attached to this form.
- (iv) To meet tier 4 sponsor obligations, Leeds Trinity would expect monthly contact with supervisor(s) and progress to be documented.

Please consider the date of return carefully and ensure it is as realistic as possible. It is essential that the Research Office is kept updated in the event that a student's return to the UK is delayed. If a student attempts to re-enter the UK after the reported end date of their period away then they may encounter difficulties passing through border control.

If you are not returning by the date entered on this form, you need to contact your supervisor and arrange for a new form to be completed and returned to the Research Office.

If you do not return when specified and do not inform the Research Office and Student Administration, your visa will be withdrawn. The University will support a further visa application at a later date should you return to the University.

Please complete the details below

Your name: Student No:
.....

Programme of Study:
.....

Department / School:
.....

Nationality: Visa type:
.....

Start date of study period:

Date of return to University:

Details of study abroad

Location (place & country)	
Reason for period of study away, including writing up. <i>(eg archival research for PhD thesis)</i>	
Method of Progress Supervision <i>(eg Skype, email)</i>	

Emergency contact details at place of study abroad

(not your normal family / friend / other emergency contact information)

Name of Contact	
Institution / company name etc	
Telephone number	
Email address	

Approval**Supervisor**

If a Change of Circumstance report is made to the Home Office and it is subsequently questioned by the Home Office than you may be required to provide evidence that progress was made during the student's period of time away from the University.

Name of Supervisor (Printed)	
Supervisor signature:	
Date:	

Student:

I agree that the above information is accurate and I agree to comply with all the conditions:

Name of Student (Printed)	
Student signature:	
Date:	

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Office use only

Research Office: Date form passed to student records

.....

Student Administration: Date form received by student records:

.....

Reported on SMS portal (Student Admin):