Modelling of Magic: Shamanic NLP (The)

One rainy day in the early eighties, we were in a university library sifting through the scientific literature on group hypnosis, when we hit upon an interesting article by Dr. David Akstein from Rio de Janeiro. It was entiteled: 'Terpsichore Trance Therapy, a New Hypnopsychotherapeutic Method' (Akstein, 1973). In this article, Akstein decribed how he had translated the ritual trance practices of the Umbanda- and Candomble-religions of Brazil into a more Western form of hypnotic psychotherapy. This method, called Terpsichore Trance Therapy (TTT) after Terpsichore, the Greek muse of the dance, involved concentration on a desired state ('mono-ideism'), followed by hyperventilation and extatic dancing on fast drum rhythms. Highly interested in this innovative method, we started experimenting with it and our first experiences were quite encouraging. We remember, for instance, how during our first trial session with TTT an anorgastic client experienced her first orgasm. Furthermore we could verify, as Akstein had stated, that during a TTT session a large number of known trance phenomena occurred, ranging from sensory distortion and age regression to dissociation and posthypnotic amnesia. Over the next decade or so we had many exciting and productive encounters with David Akstein and we embarked on a long modeling-voyage that led us to diverse trance rituals in Brazil,

Morocco and the USA. Somewhere along the way we realized that magical practices are the dominant psychotherapeutic method on the planet, both culturally and historically speaking. For what does a person do when they have psychosocial problems they cannot solve? In our culture they go to see a therapist or a doctor. But if we look beyond the limits of our own time and culture, we see that the more common pattern is to take it higher up. People with problems turn to a priest, a shaman or a witchdoctor in order to enlist the help of spirits, demons, ancestral souls or other powerful non-material entities. The global pattern of goal-directed psychosocial change is not one where a therapist or a doctor speaks with a patient. The dominant pattern is one where a priest or a shaman performs a ritual in order to regulate cosmic energies to the benefit of his client. And this regulation, viewed from the belief systems belonging with it, ensures that the sick will heal, the insecure will gain confidence, the unemployed will find work, marital conflicts are settled, businesses find new customers, unruly children will do what his parents tell them, et cetera. Our own Western culture is one of the few cultures where this is, to an important extent, otherwise. When we look through the ages and across cultures, we find that people who want to turn their life around in a major way, will seek religious solutions of a magical (meaning: goal-directed) nature. From this perspective we started modelling magic (although this term may not be anthropologically proper for some of the practices we studied). In other words: we started approaching the magical powers of priests, witchdoctors and shamans with the classical NLP-question: 'How does he (or she) do it?'. This entails our going to Brazil to observe Candombl p[osession rituals, for instance, or to Morocco to observe Gnawa dancers. Based on our direct experience and our dissociated observation, we endeavour to define the beliefs, the mental strategies and the overt behaviors of both

priest/shaman and believer/client. Subsequently, we translate these 'pragmagical patterns' into structured techniques adapted to our own culture. By using them in our 'Pragmagics'-workshops in Europe and the USA, we further adapt and refine these techniques. Our mission with pragmagics then, is one of transmission: our aim is to translate the magical practices of traditional cultures into procedures that Westerners can benefit from, just like David Akstein once did with the trance rituals of Umbanda.

This article is the second in a series of four. In an earlier article entitled 'Exploring the Spiritual Panorama' (Derks and Hollander 1996), we described our conceptualization of 'possession trance' as a strategy for releasing resources that need to be strongly contextualized. We also presented our views on the submodalities of spiritual experience and the authoritarian relationhips between some gurus and their followers. In the present article we discuss the place of Gods and spirits within NLP. We also describe a pragmagic technique called the 'Associated Oracle' and its underlying principles. In the two articles following the present one, we will discuss the transfer of cultural resources, the relationship between magic and religion. We will give a detailed example of a pragmagical 'expedition', an overview of current pragmagical techniques and we'll discuss our view on the essential elements in religious-magical practices, based on our analysis of Umbanda and Candomble.

It's easier talking to a God than to a molecule

What is magic? The dictionary definition is that magic is 'purporting to produce supernatural effects'. Another definition states that magic is 'the combination of incomprehensibility with effectivity' (Derks, 1992).

Anthropologists have defined magic as the practical, results-oriented side of religion and have pointed out the enthnocentric way in which the term has often been used, as in: "Our spiritual beliefs are religion, while their spiritual beliefs are just magic and superstition". Within an NLP-framework, we can define magic as the 'goal-directed communication with non-material entities' which is, as we already stated, the dominant psychosocial change modality on the planet. It is also, by the way, structurally similar to the common NLP-practice of 'communicating with parts'. The global magical pattern is: having an expert communicate with gods and/or spirits in order to secure a desired change. This change can be social, psychological or physical in nature. Most cultures that actively use magical procedures, we have noted, don't seem to distinguish very sharply between these three categories.

Given their tenacity through time and space, there must be a whealth of useful patterns to model from these practices. But what if we, as members of a materialistical Western culture, simply don't believe in Gods and spirits? How can we use magical patterns then? How can we work with entities that we don't even believe exist? Our position is that Western man can learn to think more magically if he so wishes. It is true that magical practices require what we call a 'magicogenic cosmology', i.e. a worldview that contains the elements needed to generate magical experiences, like spirits and spiritual energies. If you want to benefit from the spirits, you need to give them a place in your reality. But this is much easier than it sounds, especially when we look at Gods and spirits from the viewpoint of pragmatism, the philosophy which NLP is based on. If one agrees that the map is not the territory and that the value of an idea is best determined by the results it produces, then a map that contains Gods and spirits is no worse (or better) that a map that contains only matter in

movement. Molecules and electrons are not, pragmatically speaking, any more real than demons and ancestor-souls. When was the last time you observed a real live atom? And seen from a pragmatical viewpoint, reality isn't even the issue here (or anywhere else). What matters are the limitations and possibilities an idea produces. As Peirce, the father of pragmatism, put it in 1878: 'To examine the meaning of an idea, we must examine the consequences to which it leads in action; otherwise dispute about it will be without end, and it will surely be without fruit'. We see, teherfore, no problem with the representation of Gods and spirits in NLP, as long as their presence yields a positive balance between limitations and possibilities. 'But how about self-determination?', you may wonder. If someone believes that supernatural entities determine their fate, won't they loose the sense of self-determination that a materialistic world-view offers? At this issue too, we propose to look through a pragmatist filter. Someone who believes he can improve his well-being by approaching spiritual entities, is not nescesarily worse off than soemone who believes it is determined by biochemical processes in his brain. A depressed patient for example, who believes in the pharmaceutical industry and expectantly takes the latest anti-depressive drugs, has no greater (or lesser) self-determination than his partner in distress who offers a goat to Ogun. Both can access new psycho-physical resources, be it by different means. And if the desired results don't materialize, one gets new drugs from his psychiatrist and the other has the priest make another offer to Ogun.

A spirtistic and a materialistic map of reality both have their own unique advantages and disadvantages. Our impression is, that where the symptoms are relatively simple and the causes are observable, like an infection with germs that are observable through a microscope, the

materialistic worldview holds the better cards. When symptoms are complex however and underlying causes are difficult to pinpoint, like when someone is depressed, one may be better off with a spiritist map of the world. One advantage that a spiritist worldview has over a materialistic one is that its metaphors seem more 'natural'. Metaphors, we believe, tend to be more powerfull when they are closer to the everyday experience of primal man. Natural phenomena like trees, flowers, the sun, the moon, the stars, landscapes, animals, men, women, children, fire, a river, the wind, et cetera seem to have a greater 'projective power' than more abstract technological images like chemical reactions, molecules, electrons, mechanical forces, chemical formula's, electrical currents, et cetera. In other words: for most of us it is easier to talk to a God than it is to talk to a molecule and it is easier to imagine what a spirit might want than what a biochemical reaction desires. In that respect a spiritist worldview may even result in a greater sense of control and self-determination that a materialistic one.

Heaven and hell are in our nervous system

In our pragmagical work, we have learned to foster a multiple perspective. Not only do we believe that two perspectives together generate more widom than one perspective alone, we have also found that it is very difficult to do pragmagical research from a single perspective. In the beginning, when we started studying the trance rituals of Candomble, we struggled with this. We seemed to notice this in some anthropologists too. We could remain dissociated observers, in which case we gained verifiable data, but we never experienced the full impact of the rituals we studied. The resulting observations felt 'dry'; they lacked emotion and sensations. The alternative is to immerse yourself in the

ritual, to truly participate. This however, involves adopting the underlying religious beliefs, at least to some extent. For a ritual is an expression of the these beliefs and it loses much of its meaning, it becomes like an empty shell, without them. By truly participating in a ritual one gains experiential knowledge. But at the risk, as some anthropologists can confirm, of becoming a true believer, resulting in alienation from one's own culture. We call this, perhaps quite unproperly, the 'anthropologists trap'. The dilemmma conjures up romantic images of haunted anthropologists, caught forever on lonely borders between cultures. Undercover agents are said to have a similar problem. Maybe John Grinder can comment on this... We believe that a multiple perspective helps, in this case, to have your cake and eat it too. We want to analyse a magical ritual from a rational social-psychological viewpoint and also be fully immersed in it. If we can not do these two things simultaneously, then at least we can do them successively. Mapping over submodalities of reality and unreality is an NLP-technique that greatly helps us with this. We call it 'operators of reality' and we'll describe it later in some more detail.

When we teach pragmagical patterns, we attempt to offer a similar multiple perspective. We will, for instance, help participants to be as fully immersed as possible in extatic trance experiences or communication with spirits. And in the same session we will present a rational analysis in terms of brain fysiology, submodalities, trance phenomena or placebo effects. We may notify the participants, for instance, that we have declared certain oracular processes 'secret knowledge' and refuse to talk about them, while at the same time pointing out that holding secrets is an important placebo factor in many magical traditions.

At times we can even see an event from those two perspectives simultaneously. An example of this happened during a re-imprinting one of us (JH) did around childhood experiences with his grandfather. He could view a certain belief about manhood ('Men don't cry') at the same time as a message from his grandfather and as an angry tribal spirit of the Frisian people. Quarrelling with this spirit was simultaneously working through the effects of his grandfather's state. Likewise, we can view a spirit entity simultaneously as coming from a different reality and being a positive hallucination projected from the unconscious. Seen from a Korzybskian standpoint both 'spirit' and 'unconscious mind' are created by our nervous system. Philosophically speaking one is no more real than the other, so there is no reason why we should not entertain these two perspectives simultaneously.

As we stated earlier in this article, we find communicating with non-material enities useful. We do believe they exist, only we do not believe them to reside in the same location where true believers position them. According to traditional cosmologies, non-material entities reside in heaven, in the realm of the dead, in the underworld, in a separate reality, et cetera. We award spirit entities a different abode. We believe they reside in our own nervous system, or to be more precise: in our own bio-psycho-social system. Heaven and hell are located in our own brains. Along a similar vein we believe that magic can happen thanks to magical structures in subjective experience. We have conceptually collapsed, so to speak, the 'other reality' of traditional cultures inward into our own psychological universe.

Defining and transfering magical experience

Gods are as 'real' as our subjective experience. And spirits are no more intangible than 'personality traits' or 'communication patterns'. Magic comes into being when we think, feel and act in a magical manner. This point of view has several consquences, one of them being conflicts with true believers who have invested in the idea that the 'other world' is 'objectively real' or 'unmistakably true'. We maintain strained relations with religious fundamentalists, be they native or exotic. One Dutch vicar even wrote a book on NLP (Matzken 1996) of which a substantial part is devoted to the condemnation of pragmagics. Another consequence is that that magical practices can be modelled just like any other human capability. They can be defined, analysed, practiced and transferred to other people and other cultures. Pragmagics applies itself to this very goal: to define and transfer useful magical experiential patterns from one culture to the other. We approach the daily practice of wizards, priests and shamans with the question: 'What exactly do they do, mentally, emotionally and behaviorally and how does that make a difference for the people they work with?' We believe that their capabilities are human capabilities based on experiential structures that can be acquired directly by other people, given sufficient motivation and exertion. We believe this to be the case even when the original user of these structures himself believes otherwise, for instance when they believe that it requires many years of studying the vast content of their belief-systems or even a special birth-condition to catch a glimpse of their understanding.

How does this work in actual practice? What do we actually do with the ideas we just described? Well, we travel to a far away country, we find local practitioners of magical rituals and we model them. Theoretically we might just as well model Dutch or North-American magical practices, but we enjoy visiting exotic places and what is more, our local magic has

declined into folklore under the influence of Christianity. Although the remainders of it, the 'survivals' as anthropologists call them, can be found all around us. Why do we clink our glasses before we drink? Once that was to chase bad spirits out of our drinks. Why is the gingerbread man shaped like that? In Holland we have similar cookies depicting people, animals, hearts and wreaths. They are the last remnants of old sacrificial meals. And why do we knock on wood, which must be unpainted to be sure? It is a remainder of an old ritual where a human ailment or a curse was transferred to a living tree (De Joode, 1977). These little pieces of folklore attest to the rich variety of magical practces that must once have existed in our own culture. If we want to study magical rituals in 'full bloom' today however, we must turn to other, non-Christian cultures. This makes pragmagical modelling a form of intercultural modelling by nescessity. The conceptual hierarchy in which we place our pragmagical techniques starts with NLP, one aspect of which is modelling. One application of modelling is transcultural modelling, and one subject for transcultural modelling is 'magical practices'. Our transcultural modelling projects have yielded specific pragmagical techniques. We realize full well that others could come up with totally different techniques using the same principles and procedures.

We like to observe present day magical pactices 'in action', first of all by participating in them ourselves. Based on this direct experience plus behavioral observation and interviews with the practitioner and his 'clients', we formulate the structure of their subjective experience (beliefs, criteria, respresentations, strategies emotions, physiology and behavior). We try to distill the essential aspects from these practices. For those we seek new forms that are adapted to our own culture. We like to

emphasize that we do not believe in imitating rituals. We want to transfer the underlying structure rather than the concrete, explicit form. To be honest, we often find it quite ridiculous when people in the urban environments of Western Europe or the USA start imitating the ritual practices of traditional hunter-gatherer cultures. The Dutch 'shaman' who paints his face with ill understood symbols and plays his Native American drum while shivering in a Dutch wood (planted during the thirties), misses an important point as far as we are concerned. Magical practices, like any cultural phenomenon, are adapted to a given environment. In a different environment they will not function the same way, just like a whip that works great on a reindeer is useless for driving a car. We want to translate magical principles rather than imitate magical behaviors. Within the same analogy: the mental behavior of visualizing a path along which to travel, works just as well with a car as with a reindeer.

A concrete example

So what do we end up with when we model magic? What does it eventually result in? To answer this question, we will describe a technique we adapted mainly from a Gnawa ritual. The Gnawa is a mystical tradition within Islam, related to Sufi. We particpated in Marrakech, Morocco, in one of their 'djerdeba's. This is a ritual lasting from sundown to dawn in which particpants go into an extatic trance, using rhythmic dancing, fast and fierce drum or castanet rhythms and a slow monotonous, repetitive string or flute melody. During the resulting trance they are posessed - understood from their belief system - by spirit entities. From this posession they derive spritual energy which they then use to their own benefit or transfer to large shawls with which they

promote the healing of the ill.

We combined some patterns of the Gnawa with elements from two different, but culturally related Afro-Brazilian rituals: one Candomble ritual (or 'party') where several deities (Orixa's) are summoned simultaneously and one Umbanda ritual where 'posessed' mediums give advice to interested onlookers that have come to their terreiro (temple). To 'build' the technique, we used NLP concepts like pacing and leading, mapping over submodalities, association and dissociation. Some experimentation in different pragmagics groups resulted in the pragmagical technique of the 'Associated Oracle' ('KiTr-Ex/SpirPan/Rz/Orc-S+O/d/m/e/'Dr'>06').

The three main ingredients of this technique are:

1. *Kinetic trance induction*
   (Inducing an extatic trance using emotional/motorical synethesia and rhythmic movement on fast drum rhythms)
2. *Association with a non-material (spirit) entity*
   (Visualizing and entity, giving is submodalities of reality and stepping into it, i.e. going in second position with it)
3. *Oracular communication from a spirit state*
   (Observing another person from the 'entity-state' and giving them verbal, metaphorical advice or 'energy' through touch).

As we describe the technique the meaning of this pragmagical jargon will hopefully become more clear to you.

Step 1. **Representing the spiritual panorama**

The first step in this technique is for the participant (usually called the 'dancer' in pragmagics work) to form a representation of his personal spiritual panorama. In his mind, he creates an overview of all Gods, spirits, deities, ancestor-souls, cosmic energies, forces of nature, totem animals, universal principles, core states, ghosts or any other non-material entities that play a role in his life. As you can see from our listing, we leave the content entirely up to the participant. Pragmagics is non-sectarian, meaning that we don't presume to prescribe anyone which entities they must or must not represent although we do suggest an anthropomophic form, meaning the representation of the entity in the form of a person. Some people will have a well-populated spiritual panorama, while others will have a fairly barren one. This seems to depend simply on the extent to which they have given thought (and feeling) to spiritual matters in the past. Generally a participants spriritual panorama will become more densly populated as they do more pragamgics work. At first they represents the spiritual panorama where it is usually located spontaneously: high above (and sometimes deep below) themselves. Thereupon the participtant is asked to 'lower' his spiritual panorama, bringing it down the level where he is standing. This is the level where normally the social panorama is located. The participant now finds himself in the middle of his spiritual panorama with all his important spiritual entities around him. The metaforical message of this intervention is something like: 'You can communicate with these entities on a basis of equal merit'. It is also, in a sense, an integration the two great spriritual traditions. It combines aspects of the traditional spirituality of hunter-gatherer tribes, where a human traveler communicates with the spirits on a basis of equality, with the tradition of agricultural spirituality, where a worshipper's body is 'posessed' or 'ridden' by a spirit. It does not matter whether or not the participant believes these entities are 'real'.

The issue is representation, not reality. If the representation of the entities evntually releases new resources in the particpant, it is a good representation.

Step 2. Realization of the spiritual entities

In the next step in this technique, the dancer 'realizes' his entities. This may sound strange, but what we mean is simply that he gives his representation of the entities submodalities of 'realness'. There are submodalities that tell us whether something is real or not. Someone may experience something as real when it has colour, it moves visibly and he can touch it. He may experience something as 'unreal' or 'a dream' or 'a halicunation' or 'a phantasy', when it is less colourful, it doesn't move and he can not touch it. In theory the critical submodalities that distinguish 'real' from 'unreal' can vary greatly depending on the individual, but in actual practice they seem to be the same for most people, although the emphasis can differ:

- Real: strong, clear colours
- Unreal: vague, dull, pale colours or black-and-white images
- Real: moving visual image
- Unreal: stationary visual image
- Real: clear kinethetic experience, especially tactile
- Unreal: minimal or no kinesthetics
- Real: feelings of movement
- Unreal: no feelings of movement
- Real: close (location)
- Unreal: far away (location)
- Real: clear or vague smell
- Unreal: no smell

By giving the entities in his spiritual panorama submodalities of realty, the participant can literally 'realize' them, make them more real. The opposite is also true and also important. Some experiences with spirit entities lead to a less resourceful state. In that case the dancer can do the opposite and 'derealize' the enitity and all his communicatuions with it, by giving it submodalities of unrealty. This is one way out of the 'athroloplogitst' trap' we described earlier and it gives a participant freedom to experiment with pragmagical procedures. We have found that 'realization' and 'derealization' work especially well in hindsight. It is certainly possible to change submodalities of reality in 'real time', but it is easer to 'realize' or 'deralize' memories.

Step 3. Kinetic trance induction

In the third step in this procedure, the dancer goes into an extatic trance. It may sound odd when we put it that simply, but basically going into an extatic trance is not that difficult or complicated. The dancer simply concentrates on his spiritual panorama, registers his feelings and allows his body to let a a simple movement develop from this. This is emotional/motorical synesthesia: a feeling is translated into a movement. We have found, by the way, that uncommon synesthesias often play a role in ritual practices. We know a Hungarian shaman. for instance, who is adept in translating emotions into sounds. The movement the dancer develops needs to be easily repeatable, which means that has to be quite simple. In this technique the dancer works together with an 'auxilar', a personal helper who will catch and protect him if nescessary and who plays a drum for him. We often have a professional percussionist drum for the whole group simultaneously, distilling a general rhythm from all the individual rhythms produced by the auxilars. As soon as the dancer

starts moving, the auxilar, will beat his drum (or rattle his rattle) in the rhythm of the dancer's movements. He sets up a kinesthetic/auditory loop for the dancer, which is also a way of making rapport. The dancer keeps repeating the same movement to the rhythm of the drum. When the auxilar notices that he has rapport, meaning that the dancer follows slight variations in his drumrhythm, he increases the tempo, that is, he starts drumming faster and faster. This results in a trance state, a kinetic (movement-) trance in which all hypnotic phonomena known to traditional Western hypnosis can occur (we will list these in a later article). By this time, the situation in the pragmagical working space is quite reminiscent of a Gnawa djerdeba.

Step 4. Association with a spiritual entity

Once in a trance, the dancer oversees his spiritual panorama once more, as he has been instructed to do beforehand. He waits untill one of the entities approaches him. If this doesn't happen spontaneously, he invites an entity. We do not specify the manner in which he is to do this, but usually he will simply dance in the direction of an entity. At first he dances together with the entity and he asks the entity to give him advice about his goal (which he has defined at the beginning of the pragmagics session). Therupon he steps into the entity. He associates with the entity, goes into second position with it, becomes one with it. That is, if he feels this to be ecologically justified. Once associated, he dances with the movements of the entity. breathes the entities breath, perceives with its senses and understands with its understandings. Some new participants, especially if they have recently watched movies like 'The Exorcist', feel some apprehension about doing this. We interpret this as fear of representations within one's own bio-psycho-social system, but of course we will not force anyone to do this and consider just representing the

entity a valuable option too.

Step 5. The associated oracle

From second position with the entity, being the entity so to speak, the dancer ends his dancing and starts giving advice to other participants. The associated participants stay wherever they are standing or sitting in the room, while the auxilars (who are other participants who will later become dancers) seek them out to receive advice and guidance. The dancers identify the entity from which they speak, observe the other with whatever sensory filters they posses in their entity-state and give their advice. This is a direct, practical application of what we have described in our earlier article about posession trance. The dancer has access to resources they do not normally have entry to, and these resources are strongly contextualized, as soon as they step out of the entity, these resources are no longer active.

We sometimes have associated dancers give three different forms of advice:

1. *Direct suggestion*
   They give direct advice.
2. *Metaphorical suggestion*
   They tell a story that contains the message
3. *Energetic suggestion*
   They do not speak, but convey their message through touch and 'passes'.

In this stage of the procedure, the situation in the pragmnagical working space bears a strong resemblance to an Umbanda terreiro where mediums

posessed by the spirit of the 'Old Indian' or the 'Old Negro Slave' give advice to their (non-posessed) fellow believers.

Step 6. Dissociation from the entity

In this final step of the technique, the dancer thanks the entity and says goodbye to it. He steps out of the entity and represents it once more as separate from himself, visualizing it outside himself. The entity is invited to take its place in the spiritual panorama again and the spiritual panorama as a whole is lifted up to its original location high above (or deep below, as the case may be). Usually this is done with a meditative dance on a slow rhythm.

There are several possible issues that can be adressed in this final phase. One possibility is for the dancer to make arrangements with the entity about future cooperation outside the pragmagical space. Another possibility is to generalize and future-pace the different oracular recommendations the dancer has received (from his own entity and from other associated dancers). What is the common denominator in these different pieces of advice? This procedure is similar to the 'Resonance pattern' taught by Robert Dilts. A final issue is future pacing: how precisely will the dancer implement the recommendations he has received in the future? Should there be any disagreeable side-effects, negative emotional states, new limiting beliefs, or ecological problems, the dancer also has the option of 'derealizing' some or all of his experiences by giving them submodalities of unreality. We have also found that negative emotional states resulting from this kind of work are highly probable to disappear after a second round of extatic trance, although we don't understand why this should be so.

With this technique of the 'associated oracle' we have transferred to our own culture, on a modest scale to be shure, some of the magical patterns found in Gnawa, Umabanda and Candomble.

In the articles following the present one, we will discuss the transfer of cultural resources, the relationship between magic and religion and the principles of the 'pragmagical developmental cycle'. We will give a detailed, lively description of a pragamagical expedition and we will discuss what we see as the essential elements in religious-magical practices, based on our analysis of Umbanda and Candomble. We will describe the setup of our pragamagical working space (the 'Tyfac Terreiro') and give an overview of our current pragmagical techniques.

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