
Shamanic Language and Power on the Campaign Trail

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In his book *The Rulings of the Night*, Gregory Maskarinec tells the story of a Nepalese woman who goes to a local shaman for relief from headaches. The shaman, through chant, tells her the story of a secluded woman who lives far away. “From the eastern direction,” the shaman chants, “the ‘secluded one’ comes and stays, on a Jew’s harp she plays and plays” (192). As the chant continues, the shaman explains that it is the pulsating and insistent sound of the harp that causes the headaches. He then banishes the pain by covering up the harsh throbbing of the faraway harp with the soft, repeated brushings of his broom on the floor.

What is interesting here is that the shaman has such limited tools: a chant, a broom, a reputation. He has to treat every disorder with these same limited resources. But how does one banish a headache by telling a story? In Maskarinec’s terms, the shaman does more than simply weave a story or ask the illness to leave (although he does both). “With his words, which are his power and his tools,” Maskarinec writes, the shaman “creates the illness, creates the body of the patient, and creates the world in which his patient experiences relief” (193). The shaman cannot decide to prescribe this or that medicine. He cannot set up a research study to determine the causes of headaches, nor can he try several remedies to see which banishes the headaches. His only tools are his words and the shushing sounds of his broom, so he has only one recourse: to redefine reality such that headaches can be cured by chanting and brooms.

Candidates for President of the United States are in the same predicament as this shaman, and they make use of the same rhetorical methods. Maskarinec suggests that the shaman uses a “completely literal metaphor” in order to do his work (192): he literalizes the metaphor *the headache is a horrible instrument playing in my head* so that banishing the “instrument” and its sounds banishes the headache as well. Politicians do the same when they speak of “social ills”; essentially, they are literalizing the metaphor of the “body politic.” Moreover, they literalize this metaphor for the same reason the Nepalese shaman literalizes the metaphor of the woman’s pain: to gain power over the situation through diagnosis.

Even in societies that make extensive use of shamanic healers, though, these metaphorical cures are not used on every illness. When a western, biological

treatment is available, the shaman often encourages the patient to seek that care. It is only when such care fails, or when the disease is deemed to be of a kind not amenable to Western medicine, that the shaman is approached. In general, it is when the causes of a disease are unknown, when it seems to be mental rather than physical, and when it has not responded to Western medicine, that it is determined to be “spiritual” and therefore within the realm of the shaman. The Malay, for example, “speak of ‘usual’ (*biasa*) and ‘unusual’ (*luar biasa*) ailments”; the distinction is fluid, but “usual” illnesses are generally those easily attributable to specific causes (“accidents, poor personal or communal hygiene, a bad diet, overwork, and worry, among others”), while the causes of “unusual” diseases are less clear and tend to be related to imbalances among “certain components of Self” (Laderman 334).

Consider the parallels to American presidential politics. In the 2008 election, the war in Iraq, the economy, and health care were the primary “social ills” the candidates were meant to be able to cure. As illnesses, these are amorphous and vague; there is no political penicillin, no quick fix for these problems. Our language, when we use to refer to such social ills, reflects our sense that they resemble imbalances in the national “self”: we say that we suffer from a “crisis of consumer confidence” or that we are in an “economic depression.” The social ills which presidential candidates must address, then, are what might be called the psychosomatic illnesses of a country—the vague, abstract problems with murky origins and even murkier outcomes. Keep in mind that by “psychosomatic” we do not mean that these illnesses are not real or do not have real effects; rather, these are social ills with undefined causes that are more analogous to the kinds of diseases treated by shamanic metaphor than the kinds treated by Western medicine, even if the same shaman—or politician—is asked to cure both kinds, and with the same basic set of tools.

The result of this duality is that the candidate, like the shaman, must become a diagnostician. Moreover, bound on the one hand by his own history and abilities, and on the other by his party (and more than we’d like to think by the invisible hand of special interests), as well as by the system itself and the limited power of the office, the candidate must approach every social ill with essentially the same set of “tools,” just as the shaman does. Therefore, like the shaman, he must use his language to redefine reality such that the tools he has are the ones that will work.

Three things follow from this. The first is that politicians’ speeches become diagnostic statements that attempt, in shamanic fashion, to shape the reality of the illness and the patient. The second follows from the first: if political speeches have some fundamental commonality with shamanic metaphorical diagnostic language, then we can apply some concepts of shamanism to better understanding some motives of political speech. The third is that this unveiling of shamanic

elements in political speech can provide us with a new way of conceptualizing increasingly vehement partisan discord within the two-party system. Although we examine small samples of Barack Obama's and John McCain's 2008 campaign speeches to demonstrate these concepts, the goal is to propose a theory that can be more fully tested in the future.

The most important understanding to be gained from a shamanic critique of political speech is that the defining act of the politician is not suggesting new ways of addressing existing problems but redefining those problems, and the very reality in which they exist, in order to make them fit the limited tools the politician has available. The purpose of such a move, in politics as in shamanism, is to create a philosophical and moral system in which the disease makes sense rather than to propose any specific cure.

Brad Huber and Alan R. Sandstrom elaborate on this point in their *Mesoamerican Healers* when they argue that "In general, shamans are healers who specialize in symbolic healing" (66) and that "a model of how the world works lies behind shamanic healing" (71). In other words, the shaman heals through symbol-making, and his symbols work because they simultaneously represent and create a model of reality, not because they suggest a medically recognized cure. The shaman diagnoses disease by defining the disease to fit the existing shamanic worldview. What is particularly interesting is that whereas Westerners generally conceive of their method of diagnosis as the opposite of "traditional" methods—as a building up of evidence (symptoms) into a coherent, logical whole divorced from the practitioners' worldviews—in fact the two are very similar. Just as a shaman may "accept" that disease is caused by sorcery and diagnose the particular ailment to fit that understanding, Western doctors "accept" that disease is caused, for example, by microorganisms, and they diagnose particular ailments in ways that fit that different understanding. Western doctors and shamans alike, for example, tend to view medicine as "warfare," according to James Childress, and this view "shapes much of our conception of what is and should be done.... The physician as the captain leads the battle against disease, orders a battery of tests, develops a plan of attack" and so on (185). In both cases, diagnosis actually proceeds from accepted worldview to the symptoms of the case, and the very nature of the disease itself is determined from the outset by the assumptions of the practitioner. The same is true of the "diagnosis" of political ailments—social ills—by politicians, the shamans or medical practitioners for the body politic; they appear (as Western doctors do) to start with the facts of the case and to move logically to objective solutions, whereas in fact they start with a party-inflected, communally-agreed-upon set of assumptions about reality, and these determine how the problem itself

is defined. Thus the diagnosis of social ills by politicians in their speeches works to reaffirm the group's (or party's) worldview, rather than to propose new, fact-based solutions to objectively identified problems.

The story of an indigenous man who went to a Western doctor for an appendectomy will demonstrate just how important it is that diagnosis reinforce worldview. The man did not recover even though the surgery went well. "Instead of recuperating, he lay like a dead man with his eyes wide open, not saying anything to anyone." He lay like this until a shaman was called. The shaman's treatment, an imaginative reliving of the operation in which the patient was again cut open and the surgery performed by spirit beings, was successful. The man revived. According to Henry Munn, who presents this example in his famous essay "The Mushrooms of Language," "one of the reasons he hadn't recovered was his conviction that materialistic medicine was incapable of really curing since it was divorced from all cooperation with the spirits and dependence on the supernatural." The shaman's job was not to heal the infection or remove the appendix; the Western doctors had done that. His job was to redefine the disease and the treatment such that they fit within the patient's—and the shaman's—understandings of reality. Only then could he accept the treatment and recover. Not just the healer and the sufferer but the entire community must accept, reinforce, and modify the reality in which a specific disease exists and is healed.

Similarly, the politician is simply not able to propose "new" or unique solutions because of this same problem of diagnosis. Even the most obvious, logically sound approaches will never work on "the patient" (the body politic, the citizens, the nation) if it is rejected by them, and it will be rejected if it does not reinforce their view of reality. Unfortunately, this encourages partisanship. A two-party system tends to create opposing camps at opposite ends of the spectrum on any issues, and these reinforce themselves by rejecting solutions that do not fit their collective worldview. The two parties tend, as a result, to move farther apart ideologically, just as Western medicine, which grew out of traditional and shamanic traditions, has tended to move away from those origins and position itself as a polar opposite. The problem, in short, is that any solution to any individual "social ill" that is proposed by a politician is not merely a solution to that problem but a restatement of the group's (the party's) identity.

Claude Lévi-Strauss alludes to this issue of identity-creation in his seminal *Structural Anthropology*. "In contrast with scientific explanation," he writes, "the problem here is not to attribute confused and disorganized states, emotions, or representations to an objective cause, but rather to articulate them into a whole system" (182). He expands on this theme in his discussion of the ways in which

psychoanalysis often takes on shamanic elements: “when this happens,” he says, “the value of the system will no longer be based upon real cures from which certain individuals will benefit, but on the sense of security that the group receives from the myth underlying the cure and from the popular system upon which the group’s universe is reconstructed” (183). Shamans, he suggests, go far beyond the use of a particular cure to reduce or remove the symptoms of a particular illness. Instead, they simultaneously redefine and reinforce the very reality-construct of their culture through diagnosis. A world in which the appendix bursts because of infection and must be removed by knives necessitates Western doctors and a culture of science. A world in which the appendix bursts because of spiritual imbalances and must be removed by mushroom fantasies necessitates shamans and shamanic cures.

In similar ways, political candidates use their speeches to diagnose social ills, redefining the reality of the listeners in ways that necessitate their own existence. This becomes more and more a part of their job as they move farther outside the circle of political actors to make their appeals directly to the people, a trend Elvin Lim identifies in presidential speeches in particular. The presidency, Lim writes, has made “a significant transformation” since the beginning of the 20th century, shifting from “a traditional, administrative, and unrhetorical office into a modern, expansive, and stridently rhetorical one in which incumbents routinely speak over the head of Congress and to the public to lead and govern” (329). As they move outside of the sphere of “political insiders” to address the community (the nation) as a whole, the importance of creating, defining, and reinforcing group beliefs through their diagnoses of social ills becomes even more important.

Barack Obama is a particularly good example of this trend. A candidate who spoke directly to the people through television and his official website as well as on social networking sites and other “populist” media, and as a candidate whose very candidacy required that he strongly emphasize certain shared concepts of the American worldview (unity, diversity, and freedom), Obama began his shifting of emphasis in America’s definition of itself and its problems in his earliest speeches. Even as early as the speech in which he formally announced his candidacy, Obama was already taking on his most important task as a candidate: to take advantage of dissatisfaction with George W. Bush by creating an alternate reality opposed to that which Bush had created. He did not have to propose truly new solutions to America’s “ills”—in fact, as I suggested above, it might well have been disastrous for his candidacy to do so. Rather, he had to remake the world such that the particular methods of Bush and of the Republican party were no longer viable and such that his own particular skills were necessary. But in doing this, he could not step outside the cultural and historical construct of the Democratic party and its

communally defined meaning and methods. He managed this double bind in the very way we have identified as the shamanic method of metaphorical diagnosis: he redefined the American illness so that it fit his worldview. In the George Bush reality, America's problems were caused by external enemies (terrorists), and in that reality, Barack Obama's particular skills and biography were not necessitated. He was far from the perfect shaman for that universe. So he created a new one.

In this new universe, "the failure of leadership, the smallness of our politics—the ease with which we're distracted by the petty and the trivial, our chronic avoidance of tough decisions, our preference for scoring cheap political points"—these constituted the new reality of America's illness. This move is akin to the one made by the shaman called in to help the appendix patient. Like that patient, America was feeling a vague sense that what had been done hadn't worked. Our ills were still with us. And so, like the shaman, Obama changed the reality underlying the illness. The doctors told the patient that his disease was caused by infection; the shaman told him it was caused by spirits. Bush told us that our problems were caused by enemies; Obama told us they were caused by our own inability to get along.

This difference is neither trivial nor obvious. In shamanic terms, Obama has managed to remake our national headache into the playing of a distant mouth harp so that his gentle brushings are both welcome and necessary. And despite Republican claims that Obama manipulated language and others did not, McCain used the same tactic. He had no choice. Faced with a public awash in vague, undefined ills with no clear solution, and restrained in the methods and skills he could bring to the solving of those problems, he had no other options: if he wanted to get elected, he had no more important job than to create a reality more convincing than Obama's.

Obama's and McCain's election-season speeches have been analyzed by others in many contexts, but it is useful to see these moves in shamanic terms because shamanic language is specifically expected to change the reality of the patient and the illness. This is not analogy ("it's *as if* reality is changed"); neither is it a thought experiment or a means of conceptualization. In shamanic terms, reality actually is changed: the patient moves into another universe in which his disease has a different identity and a different cure, and in which that identity and that cure are the only identity and cure. Just as modern Western medicine necessitates a belief that, for example, cholera is caused by microorganisms in water and not—not sometimes, not possibly, but never—by bad odors (as the 19th-century miasma theory of disease held), Obama's speeches necessitate that we live in his (and his party's) universe. It is important that we see political speeches in these shamanic terms because they change the reality of their auditors, remaking America through

diagnosis of social ills. The two specific elements of shamanic language that are regularly adopted by American political speech are “defining the enemy,” and “shamanic biography.”

The definition of the enemy is the central act by which the shaman constructs illness, and it is the central act by which candidates construct political reality. (Even Bill Clinton, giving his State of the Union address in 1997 during one of the most prosperous, peaceful decades in American history, framed his speech by saying, “We face no imminent threat, but we do have an enemy.”) In shamanism, the most common form of healing is “sucking,” during which process the shaman sucks “harmful power intrusions” out of the patient’s body. These “power intrusions” are small objects (such as feathers, thorns, or splinters) that are said to have been embedded in the body and which caused the illness (Harner 130). These objects are generally believed to have been remotely inserted into the body by sorcerers, those who use shamanic powers for evil purposes or to make money by carrying out grudges. “Sucking,” as a mode of healing, contains within it a definition of enemy and a definition of self: if illness is the result of a remote power intrusion, it can never be innate. Rather, illness is externally created and eradicable while the self is naturally pure and disease-free. The shaman’s job, then, is to “heal a patient by restoring beneficial or vital power, or by extracting harmful power” (Harner 21). American politicians, no matter which party they represent, accept this same assumption about social ills, and all of their “definitions of the enemy” are predicated upon it.

Both McCain and Obama, for example, referred repeatedly to the goodness of the American people and the fact that their problems were caused by external agents—most often, these agents are other politicians (as when Obama said in Wisconsin that he was going to “a Washington where politicians like John McCain and Hilary Clinton voted for a war in Iraq,” among other things). Both candidates repeatedly use the word “restore” (as in McCain’s Wisconsin speech and Obama’s October speech in Philadelphia), and both claim that “politics” and “politicians” have caused the otherwise good, hard-working, innately unblemished American people to suffer harm. Like the shaman, the politician thus defines the disease as external to the patient in order to promise a “return to purity,” to suggest that with the right powerful man in charge, a natural state of purity can be recovered and all ills removed. As a shaman is the only one who can combat the sorcerer because they are so similar, the politician’s definition contains the idea that only another—better—politician can combat the bad ones currently in power.

Obama does this particularly effectively with his “they-you” dichotomy, referring in his candidacy-announcement speech to “the cynics, and the lobbyists,

and the special interests who've turned our government into a game only they can afford to play. They write the checks and you get stuck with the bills, they get access while you get to write a letter." This speech defines the existing order as the enemy, a move that does two very convenient things. First, of course, it derides those in the opposing party. But on a subtler level—on the shamanic level at which Obama is trying to create a new reality—it does something more. It suggests that the American people (the patient/s) are by nature unblemished, that their disease is no part of them, that they can "spit it out" and be done with it. It suggests, in other words, that by giving themselves over to a new shaman, they can actually bring about the universe his diagnosis assumes, a universe in which their poor economy and lack of health care are external problems caused by bad politicians, rather than complexities innate to a large and heterogeneous democratic system.

Again, it is significant to note that McCain made the same moves. This is not a form of manipulation attributable to one party or the other; this is the basic shamanic reality of the politician. He must define the enemy, and he must define it such that the society's ills are neither innate to nor caused by the people. There must be, in other words, a sorcerer out there somewhere causing the illness, so that the existence of the politician-shaman himself is necessitated. Like the shaman, then, the politician defines the enemy as an external agent, acting intentionally, separate from any innate characteristics of the patient (the "people" or the nation), and this allows him, as it allows the shaman.

The second element of shamanic language used by politicians is the shamanic biography. The notion of ethos has existed since at least the Greeks, and the necessity for a speaker to be believable surely predates that concept, but the shamanic biography goes beyond the construction of an appropriate or appealing life story. As Huber and Sandstrom put it, "Each shaman has a personal myth that explains how he or she began to cure and how that power was acquired" (93). The shaman cannot do his work until he has constructed, to the satisfaction of the patient and the community, a personal myth by which he can claim special powers. This type of biography is remarkably consistent across cultures. Of the Guajiro, Michael Perrin writes that "Each Guajiro shaman has a specific way of recounting the events that brought her (him) to the practice of 'shamanery'" (103), and of the South American *curanderos*, Donald Joralemon similarly notes that "the idea of special selection is operative in the stories our informants tell us of their lives, of childhood or early adulthood experiences that foretold an unusual talent for curing" (158). In a surprisingly high percentage of these cultures, the shamanic biographies include the same two primary elements: the notion of "calling" and the centrality of suffering, and perhaps not so surprisingly, Americans are not so different. In fact, the miniature political

biographies American political candidates construct in their speeches include the same two elements, which suggests that what we want from our politicians is almost precisely what other cultures seek from their shamans.

Both Obama and McCain present themselves as having been “called.” They never offer images of themselves plotting to become president dreaming of power. Rather, they present themselves as instructed or chosen—almost unwillingly—to accept this work. After presenting the story of his suffering at the hands of the Viet Cong, for example, McCain said in his speech at the Republican National Convention: “I fell in love with my country when I was a prisoner in someone else’s.... I was never the same again. I wasn’t my own man anymore. I was my country’s.” Not to make light of his horrible suffering, but the presentation of the biographical material in this speech almost suggests that McCain had to be tortured into running for president: only after suffering pain at the hands of America’s enemies did he realize the importance of public service. Laderman notes a similar pattern among Malay shamans; typically, she writes, “Malays are reluctant to assume such responsibilities until a loved one is afflicted and they find themselves standing by, powerless to help” (333). Shamans are not self-selecting, in other words (at least not typically); they are people who have gone through or witnessed such suffering that they needed a way to control and manage that suffering, and the acquisition of shamanic power was that way. McCain’s biography, with its emphasis on his suffering in Vietnam and his subsequent desire to acquire political power, is highly analogous to a shamanic biography.

Obama presents a similar story in his announcement speech. After discussing the poverty he witnessed as a community organizer, he says that he “went to law school, because [he] wanted to understand how the law should work for those in need.” Just like the Malay shamans, he presents himself as facing suffering and being unable to intervene, then seeking power as a way to help. A few lines later, he wraps up the biography of his young adulthood by saying, “It was with these ideas in mind that I arrived in this capital city as a state Senator.” Granted, this is not the moving story of a Marine in solitary confinement, but similarly shies away from suggesting that Obama planned to go to law school before he went to Chicago or that he had any idea that his running for office might be a good idea. In particular, his somewhat passive construction—“I arrived ... as a state Senator,” as if he had been made one by accident and without any volition on his part—is interesting. Like shamans, both Obama and McCain present themselves as men called to service, not as ones who sought it.

The second element of the shamanic biography, already evident in McCain’s speech, is suffering. The shaman always presents himself or herself as having

passed through great suffering that gave him the power to become a shaman. Even more than the notion of “calling,” it was this “suffering” element of the shamanic biography that became so contentious during the 2008 presidential election as the media worried repeatedly over the question of what experiences, exactly, count as suffering, and which of these experiences gives one the power to be President.

That McCain had suffered was evident: his treatment at the hands of the Viet Cong was elaborated in almost gory detail in many of his speeches. But Obama’s use of the suffering story was more interesting, and more elaborate. He did set up a story of individual suffering to a certain extent, describing the hard life of his single mother, for example. But more than that, he took on the entire suffering of black America as symbolically his own. Although he began the campaign with a certain reticence about explicit references to race, he in fact used the notion of a “post-racial society” or “race-blindness” (the idea that we were “beyond that”) as a way to indirectly refer back to the past sufferings that we were now “beyond.” In this way, he appropriated the historical suffering of the black community to himself. This took on added importance after the speech on race relations in which Obama described, among other incidents, his grandmother’s tendency to cross the street to avoid black men. In this story, Obama presented himself as privileged (loved, safe) but nonetheless allied himself with a suffering group. He had to walk a very difficult line, since presenting himself as suffering—in contrast to McCain and in light of his cosmopolitan and Ivy-League background—was problematic, but he nonetheless had to present some suffering in his past because we, like the patients of the shamans, demand suffering as a part of the biography of the powerful. In the 2008 election, this demand played out as a binary: as McCain embodied the kind of suffering that men experience in war, Obama embodied the kind of suffering that men experience in bondage. The question then became, which was the type of experience that created the power, knowledge, and ability necessary to the presidency.

The answer to that question, of course, depends on which reality you accept. If America’s enemies are external and militant, McCain’s suffering is the type that prepares a person to be president. If America’s enemies are within—if her illness was caused by political infighting and discord—then Obama’s was the appropriate type of suffering.

What is interesting about this is twofold. First, our desire to hear—and our frenzied debate over—the particular biographies of these candidates suggests that we, like those who listen to shamanic biographies, assume that the personal powers necessary to wield the highest office in our country are “neither innate nor hereditary,” as Perrin says of the shaman’s powers (105). Moreover, the fact that we seem to expect the same elements in our politicians’ biographies—the disavowal

of intent in favor of “calling” and the emphasis on suffering and passing through suffering—suggests that we do want from politicians what other cultures want from shamans. That is, we want someone who will reconstruct our reality through diagnosis in order to give a meaning to our national illnesses that will make them amenable to the solutions we have available.

On one level, this is completely understandable. The very fact that our political system and the spiritual healing practices of small tribes around the world have so much in common suggests that the urges that underlie those systems are nearly universal. To place vague discomforts and incomprehensible pains within a system that suggests that they are external to our true nature and therefore eradicable—and eradicable, moreover, with the tools we already have available—is certainly desirable. However, as useful as this model is for providing comfort and relief from illness in small, culturally homogenous indigenous communities, it is not appropriate to a system as heterogeneous or as large as the United States, and in fact it is potentially dangerous when applied to the two-party political system.

Lévi-Strauss tells the story of an unusual tribe that represents the particular problems of shamanic metaphor in a mixed or diverse community. This particular tribe was unusual in that rather than the typical congregation of families who had known each other for generations, this tribe was made up of the remnants of two smaller groups, each one long-standing and relatively closed. Only recently brought together, the two remained essentially separate cultures. The chief of the tribes was from one group, the shaman from the other.

At one point, the shaman went missing for most of a day, and when he was found, he said that he had been carried off by the thunder, stripped of his garments, and returned. When he later brought out the garments he was supposed to have been stripped of, those individuals who were originally from the same group as he was were not concerned. They believed that the shaman was carried away by the thunder, or that he might well have been, so the small details didn’t matter. The other members of the tribe, however, those not from the shaman’s original group, began spreading rumors that he had not been carried away at all, that in fact he had been making a secret trip to see another tribe, possibly for nefarious reasons. They took the return of the garments as something like positive proof that the shaman was lying about being carried away (171).

This story demonstrates the problem of belief in a society with two governing parties, and it is particularly the problem in a society with *only* two governing parties. Because reality itself is being constructed the definition of the enemy and the shamanic biography (as well as other means)—because, as I say, reality itself is

being defined, the groups are unable to find common ground. In the case of the thunder-struck shaman, either he was taken away by thunder, or he was not. Now, this particular group was able, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, to “have both explanations in the back of their minds” because both agreed that both realities—the magical and the empirical—do exist (171). If either of the groups had simply not lived in a reality in which magic existed, each would have looked on the other as crazy, or dupes, or tricksters. And that is what is happening in our two-party system.

Both groups within the joint tribe had this in common: both believed that the magical explanation could have happened because both inhabited a reality in which magic was real; in a two-party political system, though, the tendency, once the parties begin defining themselves by the realities they inhabit, is toward complete incompatibility. Consider, as one quick example, the yellow cake uranium. It either existed at the time the United States declared war on Iraq, or it did not. These are not compatible realities. And the opposing political speeches made at the time actually encouraged the creation and opposition of these different realities because only in a world in which the uranium was real could Bush justify the war, and only in a world in which it was not real could his opponents decry the war as mere oil-grabbing. The two sides inhabited different universes, and the ways that they defined the “social ill” of terrorism and the Iraq war were driven by the assumptions of those universes and not, as both sides claimed, by objective analysis of fact.

What is dangerous about this division is that once parties begin constructing themselves as different reality systems, politics becomes an arena of *a priori* acts: one must believe in the reality created by a certain politician before any act of his can be accepted. Moreover, when one inhabits a particular reality defined by *a priori* diagnoses, any opposition seems like—well—insanity. The opposing groups are led to the conclusion that their opponents simply do not live in reality at all because the ways that they diagnose the “ills” of the country are simply incompatible with the “reality” constructed by their own side.

Consider, for example, what happens when Westerners see shamans working. They see the shaman place a feather, or thorn, or other object in his mouth *before* the ceremony. They watch the shaman present his chant (which generally includes some portion of his biography and his definition/diagnosis of the patient and disease). Then they see him “suck out” the same object he concealed in his mouth beforehand. The shaman spits it into his hand, presenting it as the physical form of the disease. The patient declares himself healed—and generally *is*. The Western observer, however, believes that he *knows* that the entire ceremony, because the object was in the shaman’s mouth from the beginning, was nothing but the interaction between a trickster and his dupe.

Perhaps a two-party system could work on the model of the two tribes that inhabit the same double reality and therefore can accept at least the *possibility* that the other's description of events is conceivable, but instead we are moving away from this model and toward one that is more like the Western observer and the shaman. On our own side, we see only reality, and on the other, only fraud—and we wonder how the opposing politician can possibly seem so convincing. In such a climate, it is important to begin to identify the shamanic, reality-constructing "diagnostic" elements of our politicians' speech because we cannot allow them to diagnose into reality two universes so incompatible that meaningful discussion and persuasion are no longer possible.

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