

# The teachings of Carlos Castaneda

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## Abstract

This paper examines the spiritual teachings found in the writings of Carlos Castaneda. While he presents them as the wisdom of a Yaqui Indian called don Juan Matus, the attribution is not considered essential to this analysis. Some background is provided regarding the Castaneda controversies, concluding that it may be impossible to know the extent of the fiction within the Castaneda corpus, by which is meant not just his writings but also works by those close to him and even his detractors. By dividing the teachings into exoteric and esoteric headings it is possible to see both what is universal to the spiritual life and what is unique to shamanism in the teachings of Carlos Castaneda.

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## Introduction

Some forty years ago I returned from a walk in a meadow by the Thames in Oxford. I shared a house with yoga practitioners and spiritual seekers and mentioned to my yoga teacher that I had sensed a spirit guarding the meadow. "Oh, you are an animist," she remarked. I had never heard of the term before but it set me on a course of reading that continues today. Indeed in preparing this essay I was surprised to find what an extensive range of material on animism and shamanism I have on my bookshelf. (I will use the term "shamanism" from now on to include animism.) Amongst those books were three by Carlos Castaneda, a man now relegated to the New Age crazes of the 1970s. Some say he developed into one of the

worst types of abusive guru typical of the period, though it is safer to say we reliably know very little about him and hence we cannot know the extent to which his works are fiction. Despite that I believe his work is an important contribution to our understanding of the spiritual life in general and shamanism in particular.

The importance I attach to shamanism does not come from books but from personal experience like in the Oxford meadow. Book-reading helps me understand the global and historical context of such experiences and helps me answer the question, what in a single word might be the real significance of shamanism today? My answer is simple: *animals*. I find in shamanism a spiritual tradition in which our relationship to animals – and the rest of Nature – is most deeply understood and best expressed and without which we have no chance of dealing with our coming environmental crisis. Put simply the shamanic traditions show us that the animals, and hence all of Nature, live within us. The work of Carlos Castaneda includes this special relationship to animals though does not greatly focus on it. His books were part of my shamanic reading in my late twenties and revisiting his work now has convinced me again of the value that lies in it.

## Part One. Background

### Why Castaneda?

Castaneda's works have not aged well, being now largely dismissed as hippy-era fiction or downright fraud. While he received the anthropological stamp of approval at the time – his third book earned him a doctorate – academics have since put this down to an aberration in scholarly discipline, perhaps understandable in the hippy culture of the time but now cited with horror as an example of failed methodology in the field of anthropology or ethnology. Castaneda's anthropological field notes were never submitted in support of his "research," an omission now unthinkable.

Whether the teachings emerge only from Castaneda's mind, or whether they were genuinely the teachings of a part-Yaqui Indian named don Juan Matus, is not ultimately important. Either way a considerable archaeology of the spiritual life is required to dig out these teachings from the surrounding story-telling and wider controversy, an archaeology I have practised once before in digging out Socrates – as mystic – from underneath Plato.<sup>1</sup>

I take my cue here from Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho), an Indian spiritual teacher who suggested in 1975 that one percent of the Castaneda corpus amounts to important spiritual teachings. He said:

Carlos has come across a being superior to himself, he has come across a being who knows some secrets. Maybe he has not realized them, maybe he has stolen them, maybe he has just borrowed them from someone else. But he has met somebody who has somehow got some facts of spiritual life and Carlos has been able to create imagination around it.<sup>2</sup>

Osho also suggests that spiritual fiction is far harder to write than science fiction, though it may take a great deal of research to find what is genuine in such work, a little like the effort required to retrieve what is valuable from the circumlocutions of G. I. Gurdjieff. "If you can find the diamonds in Gurdjieff it will be a great training for you," says Osho. "And then you can find in Carlos Castaneda what is true and what is not true. Otherwise you can become a victim of a fiction." This is my strategy here, based on the prior effort I have put in to find exactly those diamonds in Gurdjieff and other great mystics. Osho adds: "Every age has its own fictions, romances; one has to pass through them. You will have to read. You cannot escape Carlos Castaneda." Indeed, every age does have its fictions, its unique cultural moment, and Castaneda was central to the cultural moment of the New Age in the 1970s through to his death in 1998. He met or influenced key figures of the age in the arts, philosophy and spirituality, including Gore Vidal, Timothy Leary, Aldous Huxley, Alan Ginsberg, Oliver Stone, Federico Fellini, John Lennon, George Lucas,

William S. Burroughs, Andrei Tarkovsky and Janis Joplin. Just as an example John Lennon told *Playboy* magazine in a 1980 interview how he viewed Yoko Ono:

It is a teacher-pupil relationship. That's what people don't understand. She's the teacher and I'm the pupil. I'm the famous one, the one who's supposed to know everything, but she's my teacher. She's taught me everything I fucking know. She was there when I was nowhere, when I was the nowhere man. She's my Don Juan [a reference to Carlos Castaneda's Yaqui Indian teacher]. That's what people don't understand. I'm married to fucking Don Juan, that's the hardship of it. Don Juan doesn't have to laugh; Don Juan doesn't have to be charming; Don Juan just is. And what goes on around Don Juan is irrelevant to Don Juan.<sup>3</sup>

Lennon rightly assumed that people would understand his reference to don Juan and that it would clarify how he saw Yoko Ono. After his first four books everyone who was anyone wanted to meet Castaneda, and director after director wanted the movie rights, including Dino de Laurentiis, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Alejandro Jodorowsky.<sup>4</sup> Jim Morrison of The Doors, a rock musician with an interest in shamanism, met Castaneda, "attempting to secure the film rights to *The Teachings of Don Juan*, only to be told that they were too late."<sup>5</sup> Fellini tracked Castaneda down to a hotel in Rome at a time when Castaneda had taken many steps to disappear from public view. Later he met him in Los Angeles but never succeeded in making a film about don Juan.<sup>6</sup> The American director Oliver Stone was so impressed with Castaneda's work that he named his film company Ixtlan Productions after the title of Castaneda's third book. The Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky long held a plan to make a film based "principally on Castaneda," noting in his diary on 27 January 1979:

Reread Castaneda's *The Lessons of Don Juan*. A marvellous book! And very true, because –

1. the world is not at all as it appears to us.
2. under certain conditions it could well become different.<sup>7</sup>

Castaneda was described by *Time* magazine as the "Godfather of the New Age." His wife said: "... in the early 1970s Castaneda was just about the only God around."<sup>8</sup> These are just a few reminders of the scale of the don Juan phenomenon and Castaneda's undeniable influence in his time. Here I attempt to rescue what is timeless from his work.

## Why shamanism?

The spiritual teachings in the Castaneda corpus belong in the first instance to the world of shamanism, and essential to that is the idea of a spirit world or "separate reality" that Castaneda calls the "nagual." In this system our ordinary reality – the "tonal" – is constructed in childhood through the concepts we learn from our par-

ents and society, and maintained through our internal dialogue. By shutting off this dialogue, along with a range of other techniques, the separate reality of the *nagual* can be experienced, in which specialised knowledge and spiritual power can be gained. Don Juan tells Castaneda that the proper understanding of the *tonal* and the *nagual* is the “lid that closes everything I have taught you.”<sup>9</sup> While much of this is familiar from the shamanic literature, Castaneda’s version is presented in a unique manner making it an interesting addition. More than that, however, are the teachings regarding the proper life suited to this endeavour. Many of them would be recognisable from strictly non-shamanic systems like Zen Buddhism, while many exchanges in the relationship between Carlos Castaneda and don Juan are similarly reminiscent of a pupil with a Zen Master. Hence Castaneda’s contribution is potentially both to our understanding of shamanism and to the wider spiritual life.

But why is shamanism so important? Not long ago it was regarded as primitive superstition. The anthropologist Mary Douglas was an early supporter of Castaneda and wrote in 1973 that the don Juan stories had given her a new perspective: “The adage about primitive religions being this-worldly and world religions other-worldly can never again carry the same convictions.”<sup>10</sup> No anthropologist today would use the term “primitive” for ethnic religions but nonetheless Douglas is saying something interesting. Over the last hundred years people have become more interested in religions that are “this-worldly,” rather than Catholicism for example (Douglas’s religion) with its emphasis on the afterlife, or Buddhism which in its origins at least is not at all “this-worldly.” There is now a movement for “engaged Buddhism,” for example, and so the mood exists to reconsider shamanism with its roots in the natural world. However the move to “engaged” world religions creates nothing like shamanism but a religious life that is *politically* engaged and a service to its community in physical terms. “Liberation Theology” is born for example out of a meeting of Marxism and Catholicism in South America and happens to be the religious background of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, appointed Pope in 2013. Normally shamanism serves its community through divination and healing, but Castaneda’s don Juan has no community and nobody comes to him for healing. He is not a “curandero,” as shaman-healers are termed in Spanish-speaking South America. The significance of Castaneda’s don Juan does not lie there, and most definitely not in the political sphere either. It lies in its account of the *structure* of the shamanic world and the personal discipline to master it.

## Ethnography or fiction?

Castaneda’s first book was submitted as his Master’s submission in anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), while his third book earned him his doctorate. Castaneda claimed that he obscured the location and identity of don Juan and other “sorcerers” to protect their identities and for that reason never made public the field notes. This could equally have been a fictional strategy.

Because of the uncertainties over don Juan I take the Castaneda corpus as a text rather like *The Hermetica*, the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Gospel of Thomas*, the authorship of which is unknown or disputed. In other words the status of the text conferred to it by tradition, science, academe or any other route is to be discarded in favour of the content alone. However the efforts of researchers over decades allows a highly provisional conclusion to be drawn on the provenance of the Castaneda texts. Here I draw mainly on two key researchers, Richard de Mille, and F. Lawrence Fleming. De Mille's work on Castaneda is the most widely quoted today and concludes that Castaneda perpetrated the greatest scientific hoax since Pilt-down Man. De Mille's first book in 1976 relies on collating the dates of Castaneda's field trips as found in the third Castaneda volume against the dates in the first two to show that one or other series is fictional. On that basis all of it is, declares de Mille. While aware of twelve pages of field notes given by Castaneda to the respected ethnomycologist Robert Wasson – which could be evidence for the existence of don Juan – de Mille dismisses them as likely forged by Castaneda to discourage Wasson from further probing.<sup>11</sup> Fleming takes the opposite view, that the field notes are genuine because Castaneda would have had neither the time nor the ability to forge them.<sup>12</sup> Hence he believes that don Juan was real, though he may have died long before 1973 when Castaneda claims he magically left the world.

De Mille's second book is an edited collection of papers by a wide range of experts who largely back his opinion of fraud. Crucially, a paper by Hans Sebald, professor of sociology at Arizona State University, shows that much of the descriptive passages of the Sonora Desert in Castaneda's books are fictive, because the climate, flora and fauna in the books do not match the reality on the ground.<sup>13</sup> Sebald concludes: "If the field is fake, how can the fieldwork be genuine?" However Castaneda's wife is adamant that he did undertake extensive field trips to the Sonora Desert and Mexico: "Carlos's years in the field had generated several hundred pages of field notes, some photographs, a brief 16-mm film and some tape-recorded interviews, most of which he later denied having."<sup>14</sup> His absences were so extended that she asked him for a divorce after only six months of marriage.

Castaneda's early supervisor, the archaeologist Clement Meighan, is quoted as saying, "The sort of things he is coming in with are too damned good. Even to fake it, you'd have to study anthropology for ten years in order to provide the kind of convincers or data he comes up with."<sup>15</sup> Here is his opinion on don Juan:

One of the problems with Don Juan, and one of the reasons there is criticism of him as an informant is that he himself is a unique individual. He is not really a member of any tribal society. His parents were not members of any tribal group, so he's lived part of the time among Californian Indians and part of the time among Mexican Indians. He's not pure Yaqui. And, moreover, he is the type of in-

dividual who raised himself to be an intellectual. I've met other Indians like this, but they are rare.<sup>16</sup>

My concern here is not about ethnography, which by definition is the study of *groups* of people sharing a common culture. Don Juan, or whoever Castaneda's "informant" was, is clearly a unique individual, and in Castaneda's books has no cultural grouping receptive to him as officiate of ancient ritual. He is a loner. So, when Castaneda's doctoral supervisor, Walter Goldschmidt, begins his foreword to Castaneda's first book by saying "This book is both ethnography and allegory," I am sceptical of both claims. De Mille and other detractors have proven beyond doubt that Castaneda's work is not ethnography and I see no reason to disagree. However if, as Goldschmidt says, it is mere allegory, then I would not be writing about it either. I am concerned here to evaluate and rescue the important spiritual teachings in it.

Having said that there remains a strong possibility that the teachings do have a location within an ancient spiritual tradition of Mexico or the wider region. I think Castaneda's claim in his later books that the teachings are Toltec, and the observation by others that they relate to South American "Nagualism," are worth exploring, though not in this essay.

## Castaneda's sources

For Castaneda's detractors don Juan never existed and Castaneda's "fieldwork" was done in the university library, drawing on ethnography of the region and a wide range of spiritual writers. His books were just a pastiche culled from such reading. This is the theme of de Mille's criticism and that of most of the authors who contributed to his second volume on Castaneda. De Mille uses the example of common imagery between passages by Yogi Ramacharaka (in reality an American called William Walker Atkinson) and Carlos Castaneda to illustrate his conviction that all of it is borrowed. De Mille says, "How many stylistic echoes would be needed to prove that don Juan's teachings and Carlos's adventures originated not in the Sonoran desert but in the library at UCLA?"<sup>17</sup> A lengthy "Alleglossary" is provided in de Mille's second book, listing terms in alphabetical order, each entry purporting to show Castaneda's "stylistic echoes." Some entries, such as "table" and "ladder" are absurd, while the entry "speed" – taken from a passage in *A Separate Reality* – elicits only "No source found" from de Mille. One wonders why he didn't include the whole dictionary on that basis.

The "table" entry refers to a book by UCLA anthropologist Douglas Sharon who compares the systems of don Juan with a known Peruvian shaman, Eduardo el Curandero. However the shaman's table or "mesa" is a portable altar or medicine bundle in Peruvian tradition, only loosely referred to as a "sacramental table," being more likely to consist of a number of stones, animal parts, feathers etc wrapped in

a woven cloth. De Mille wants to turn this into an ordinary restaurant table, complete with four legs, table-cloth and condiments, as vividly present in a crucial scene in *Tales of Power* where don Juan gives Castaneda the “sorcerer’s explanation.” The “ladder” entry attempts to link the use of the word in Wittgenstein with Castaneda’s use, again in *Tales of Power*, and with just as spurious a connection. For me Castaneda has no more debt to Wittgenstein than Plotinus to Plato, or restaurant tables to cloth bundles of sacred objects.

Some of de Mille’s entries are worth further examination, but if Castaneda’s work is a fictionalised account of a real encounter then as a writer he would have drawn on imagery from many sources. There is not space here to deal with this subject in more detail, other than to mention the one contributor to de Mille’s second volume best placed to assess its mystical content, Agehananda Bharati. Although professor of anthropology at Syracuse University for over thirty years he was also ordained into a Hindu sect and wrote a work on mysticism that was one of the set books for my Master’s course in mysticism. He offers only a contemptuous dismissal:

There is nothing in Castaneda’s mysticism that you cannot also find, sometimes in nearly the same words, in Hindu and Buddhist tantrism or in the official Patanjali yoga, which is perfectly exoteric and comprehensible to Westerners. ... As a bona fide mystic, I am entitled to an entirely non-anthropological opinion, which is that all of Amerindian mystical and ecstatic lore, north, central, and south, compares with Hindu-Buddhist traditions about as a country choir compares with the B-Minor Mass.<sup>18</sup>

Whether I have studied more mystics and mystical traditions than Bharati I cannot know, and for him to claim that he is a “bona fide mystic” is solely up to him, but it cannot give him special authority on the subject. I completely disagree that you can find don Juan in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, for example, despite some interesting parallels. They belong to different spiritual universes. Bharati doesn’t deign to back his assertion with any details as de Mille at least attempts. More importantly, anyone who dismisses the shamanism of any region in the world so lightly, as Bharati does, has most definitely not understood its meaning.

The positive response from Mary Douglas is summed up in her comment on Castaneda’s first three books: “In itself the philosophy of ascetic mysticism, so gradually pieced together, is enough evidence of truth in the tale.”<sup>19</sup> I would agree that there is a “truth” to this tale, and half agree about “ascetic mysticism.” Castaneda includes a passage from St John of the Cross – an ascetic Christian mystic – in the front of *Tales of Power*. While parallels can be found, as with Patanjali, St John of the Cross belongs to a different spiritual universe again, one which had long set its face on any kind of shamanism. However, Douglas’s remark shows that it will be useful to separate out those teachings of don Juan that can readily stand with those of St John of the Cross or other ascetic mystics, from those that are exclu-



sively shamanic. I call the former “exoteric” teachings and the latter “esoteric” teachings.

## Understanding Castaneda

When I read Castaneda’s books in my late twenties I read them from a British perspective in which he was simply an “American.” For example, I saw the violence in his personality as American, standing out as it does against the more peaceful temperament of my European heritage. Reading what is now known about his life I realise that it is better to see his personality as essentially *Latin*. It is believed that he was born in 1925 in Peru of parents of mixed Spanish and Portuguese descent. Castaneda provides glimpses of his early life in the first series of books but it is not until *The Active Side of Infinity*, published in the year of his death in 1998 that he provides more probably fictional but instructive passages about himself. Now writing in his seventies, two things emerge. Firstly we discover Castaneda’s deeply Latin temperament, shown in the continuous swings in mood from elation to despair, elation to despair, and secondly a literary mind steeped in the South American tradition of magical realism. These are utterly alien to the stolid Anglo-Saxon milieu I grew up in, though my Hungarian background helps me relate to a life ruled by profound and sudden mood-swings. Magical realism as a genre has been defined as “what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe” – a good description of the Castaneda material. It is usually, though not always, associated with South American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende and Jorge Luis Borges, and is arguably a fictional form that emerges under oppressive regimes. Again, arguably, Tarkovsky’s oeuvre – produced under Communist censorship of the arts – is also a form of magical realism, hence his interest in Castaneda. What Castaneda presents in his last book is an early life which, by all Western suburban standards, appears quite extraordinary. It is chaotic, wild, tutored within a wealthy family home by various bizarre relatives and acquaintances, all fictionalised to a degree we shall never know, but quite consistent with Castaneda’s literary interests and the broader context of magical realism.

It is worth repeating one story that Castaneda tells about growing up in Brazil. His grandmother rescues a local Indian accused of sorcery who had been strung up in a lynching on her property.<sup>20</sup> She tends to the wounds on his neck, and out of gratitude he became her valet, major-domo and counsellor. He recommends she adopts an orphan boy who turns into a handsome and athletic man who succeeds in his literary efforts only through plagiarism, including the farewell poem he writes on the occasion of her final departure. In her old age the sorcerer-counsellor tells her to cash in her stocks and hand over the money to this man, after which she departs, terminally ill, with the Indian, never to be heard of again. Castaneda, as a boy hiding under the staircase, witnesses his grandmother’s departing. The ba-

roque details of such family life, and the style in which it is told, are perhaps emblematic of all his work. It is likely that this story is pure fiction, but this alleged grandmother's home transforms into an increasingly fantastical sorcerer's house in his later works, and – most bizarrely – in two books by female disciples.

In the books we gradually discover that don Juan is as cultured as Castaneda (Meighan's "intellectual Indian"). Don Juan tells Castaneda at one point: "Poets have no firsthand knowledge of the spirit. That is why their poems cannot really hit the center of true gestures for the spirit. They hit pretty close to it, though."<sup>21</sup> He then asks Castaneda to read a poem by Juan Ramón Jiménez Mantecón, a Spanish poet who controversially applied the term "magical realism" to poetry. Amy Wallace was one of Castaneda's followers and lovers and in the account of her life with Castaneda she says: "Of the great Latin American authors, he spoke warmly of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes."<sup>22</sup>

### Castaneda's journey

In the outline of Castaneda's system below I draw principally on two books, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan* (1972) and *Tales of Power* (1974), which are the third and fourth respectively. I consider the first two books, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968) and *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan* (1971), not so important because the emphasis in them is on drug-induced experiences, while the degree of fictionalising probably grows with each book after the fourth. In *Journey to Ixtlan* Castaneda makes clear that the book presents a reprise of those teachings that are drug-independent. In *Tales of Power* the "lid" is placed on the teachings and at the end of the book Castaneda's two teachers, don Juan and don Genaro, disappear.

In the two books that follow Castaneda is left with fellow-pupils to complete his training, while at the same time he becomes the "new nagual." Using the word "nagual" now to mean a fully-fledged sorcerer leading a group of novitiates, Castaneda is progressively transformed into the teacher. However, the books that follow continue to recapitulate the earlier period with don Juan, making additions to the teachings and introducing new ideas, such as the technique of "recapitulation" to free oneself of buried memories. Castaneda's final book *The Active Side of Infinity* (1999) reprises once more his apprenticeship with don Juan and adds autobiographical material not previously mentioned, all possibly fictional.

In real life Castaneda separated from his wife and bought a large house where he lived with a group of female followers, known as his "witches." Two of them, Florinda Donner-Grau and Taisha Abelar, published books in which Castaneda is or will become their teacher or *nagual* alongside don Juan, mostly all known by aliases. While their style is different, the sorcery is the same. The women who joined Cas-

Castaneda were doing nothing more than “helping Carlos fabricate documentary ethnology,” according to Fleming,<sup>23</sup> though I doubt anyone considered any of it as academic ethnology. As mentioned above both women describe a magic house in which their sorceric training is completed, similar to the *nagual's* house in which don Juan is trained according to Chapter 5 of *Power of Silence*, and with its fictional origin possibly in the likely fiction of Castaneda's grandmother's house in Brazil. It is not unfair perhaps to describe any attempt to delve into this in search of veracity as a journey down a rabbit-hole.

Castaneda justifies the continued reprisal in his books of the formative teaching period by saying that so much happened to him during altered states of consciousness that he did not remember them immediately afterwards. Only slowly did memories surface, often in brilliant intensity, which then formed the material for his new books right up to his death. All I can assume is that this may be partly true but is also the door by which many of Castaneda's own inventions probably enter the material. The first reprisal occurs in *Journey to Ixtlan* which he introduces by saying:

My original assumption about the role of psychotropic plants was erroneous. They were not the essential feature of the sorcerer's description of the world, but were only an aid to cement, so to speak, parts of the description which I had been incapable of perceiving otherwise. ...

I had discarded those parts of my field notes in my earlier works because they did not pertain to the use of psychotropic plants. I have now rightfully reinstated them in the total scope of don Juan's teachings and they comprise the first seventeen chapters of this work. The last three chapters are the field notes covering the events that culminated in my “stopping the world.” (p.5)

Also found at the beginning of *Ixtlan* is a point about a shift in “membership” from the world of ordinary people to the world of sorcerers. Castaneda's original intention had been purely to research the use of “power plants” amongst indigenous peoples in Arizona as fieldwork for his Master's degree. That would have meant amongst other things that he retained “membership” of the world of his university faculty and his discipline, anthropology. His books convey a gradual realisation that his relationship with his teacher was not an ethnographic apprenticeship but one of a spiritual disciple engaged in the transformation of self. Hence he makes a journey away from “respectable” academe, though not before it awards him his doctorate.

Castaneda's remaining six books recapitulate the period from 1961 to 1973 in various ways. The books are: *The Fire From Within* (1984), *The Power of Silence: Further Lessons of Don Juan* (1987), *The Art of Dreaming* (1993), *Magical Passes: The Practical Wisdom of the Shamans of Ancient Mexico* (1998), *The Wheel of Time: Shamans of Ancient Mexico, Their Thoughts About Life, Death and the Universe* (1998) and *The Active Side of Infinity* (1999). In the foreword to *The Power of Silence* Castaneda says:

My books are a true account of a teaching method that don Juan Matus, a Mexican Indian sorcerer, used in order to help me understand the sorcerers' world. In this sense, my books are the account of an on-going process which becomes more clear to me as time goes by.<sup>24</sup>

Some ten years later, in his last book, Castaneda appears to be still engaged in processing the early momentous period. Sometimes familiar events are described in slightly different ways, sometimes we learn of quite new conversations not present in the earlier works. What Castaneda often presents as key new concepts are not found in earlier works, while key early ideas often disappear. For example in *Tales of Power* don Juan tells Castaneda, "The moths have been the intimate friends and helpers of sorcerers from time immemorial ..." <sup>25</sup> We learn that moths carry knowledge and are the guardians and heralds of eternity. Yet thirteen years later in *The Power of Silence* there is not one mention of moths. Our only route out of this perhaps is don Juan's insistence that it is "not altogether accurate" to call them moths in the first place. We are in a world perhaps of metaphors offered and then discarded by an enigmatic spiritual teacher. Alternatively we are in the world of pure fiction in which case it is odd indeed that such inventiveness over forty-one years is constrained to the compulsive retelling of a single fictional story.

## Castaneda's life

After considerable research into the life of Carlos Castaneda I have come to the conclusion that what we know about him mounts up to very little and certainly of no use in examining the teachings in his books. Perhaps the most comprehensive account of Castaneda's life come from his wife of eleven years Margaret Runyan Castaneda, but they separated early in that period and she was party to nothing about his later life. At the same time her own spiritual interests are not developed enough to help us. There is also an extensive account by Amy Wallace, one of his female followers and lovers, of the post-Margaret period, but there is very little to corroborate her story of Castaneda as an abusive and sexually predatory cult leader known to the group as the "Nagual." Pretty much the only other account of Castaneda as cult leader is from a German follower called Felix Wolf, who claims to have been Castaneda's simultaneous translator and have translated some of his works into German. I can find no record of such translations and no mention of a Felix Wolf from Amy Wallace. Wolf anyway claims that his name was originally Paul and that Castaneda gave him the name Felix after Wolf's parrot of that name. Even more curious is his claim that Castaneda met him in Bandarawela, Sri Lanka, under the alias "Dr. Miguel Pereira," where he was introduced to Felix the parrot.<sup>26</sup> I can find no corroboration of any of this. As to Castaneda's alleged descent into an abusive cult leader, all that Wolf offers is that a man called "David" set out all the damning details for him after Castaneda's death. Wolf writes: "I had been well aware that the Nagual maintained intimate and sexual relationships with most of his

closest female cohorts, while preaching abstinence and celibacy to us.”<sup>27</sup> The revelations from “David” causes Felix a huge “cognitive dissonance” which was however “magical and powerful” for him. We are not party to any details of “David’s” revelations however beyond this:

When David put it all together, however, and it was all fleshed out with facts and details, it became an entirely valid and comprehensive story of its own. In this story, conventional ethics had consistently been violated, and from a conventional point of view, not much good could have possibly come out of an association with Carlos Castaneda. Period.<sup>28</sup>

Better documented is the house Castaneda bought in Pandora Avenue, Westwood, Los Angeles, which he shared with three women known as his “witches:” Maryann Simko (Taisha Abelar), Regine Thal (Florinda Donner) and Kathleen Pohlman (Carol Tiggs). Wikipedia records:

In April 1998 – shortly after Castaneda’s death – Abelar disappeared, together with four other close associates of Castaneda (Florinda Donner, Amalia Marquez (also known as Talia Bey), Kylie Lundahl, and Patricia Lee Partin). Partin’s sun-bleached skeleton was discovered in Death Valley by hikers in 2003. No trace of the other four women has been found.<sup>29</sup>

The *New York Times* reported on the legal battle over Castaneda’s estate: “The man he used to call his son says Castaneda died while a virtual prisoner of cultlike followers who controlled his last days and his estate.”<sup>30</sup>

I have made extensive studies of gurus in the same period,<sup>31</sup> many of whom taught lofty principles but seemed to betray them in their own lives, most notably using their position to have sex with as many attractive pupils as they could. Osho, Sangharakshita, Andrew Cohen, many Tibetan Masters; the list is long, though not all were hypocrites about sex and not all were sexual predators. Castaneda’s later books, and the books by his two “witches,” Taisha Abelar and Florinda Donner, increasingly insist on celibacy, something not present in the early accounts of don Juan’s teachings. Wallace’s dependency on Castaneda’s judgements delivered on her, sometimes high praise, sometimes damning condemnation, made for neurotic insecurity only assuaged by passionate love-making with him, all fitting the classic scenario of the corrupt guru. However, Wallace’s book may be yet more fiction.

If don Juan was real – “a being superior to himself,” as Osho puts it – then Castaneda may have learned nothing from him; it is entirely possible that the teachings fell on stony ground. If don Juan was imagined then that poses a far greater puzzle. Can one really imagine a moral universe that one does not inhabit in the slightest? It is easy enough to twist every element of a moral teaching into something self-serving, but can one present those elements in a coherent system in all their purity in advance of corrupting them? Osho thought Castaneda’s work to be spiritual fic-

tion of the first order, citing Lobsang Rampa's as third rate in comparison (Rampa was born Cyril Henry Hoskin and claimed that a deceased Tibetan lama had taken over his body). However I simply know of no other proven spiritual fiction that matches Castaneda's. At the same time damning accounts of Castaneda's personal life may also be fiction. A rabbit-hole indeed.

## What don Juan does not teach

Spiritual teachers are sometimes criticised because their teachings appear so different to others. Questions over the authenticity of don Juan can take this form, meaning that his system appears to lack elements considered essential in other systems. We need therefore to be clear what don Juan does not teach. Firstly, this is not a teachings of religious love. The anthropological literature tells us that the Yaquis were converted en-masse to Catholicism and that they adapted their religious system to it. Don Juan is clear however that his system goes back not just to the period before the Spanish but further back before other invasions imposed servitude on Mexican Indians. His teachings therefore have no tinge of Catholic devotionality. Secondly, this is not a teachings for a family setting, as for example in Judaism. Don Juan is quite separate, not just from other Yaquis who appear to largely regard him with contempt, but from his former family life. Thirdly, his system is not a form of nature mysticism as found for example in the American Transcendentalists, or in the works of John Muir or Richard Jefferies, nor is it touched in any way by concern for the environment. Nor does it have any political dimension.

## Reading Castaneda

With these introductory remarks in mind I will now explain my approach to reading the Castaneda material. Firstly I will take the position that it is a fictionalised version of some actual encounters with living shamans, principally a character named don Juan Matus. Secondly I make a division between "exoteric" and "esoteric" teachings, the former requiring no assumption about a spirit world or "separate reality," while the latter does. Thirdly I assume that Castaneda himself may not have lived up to the teachings in their moral dimension. Fourthly I do not assume that he did in fact experience any kind of separate reality. He may have imagined it or been affected by the ingestion of hallucinatory (entheogenic) plants.

As space is limited I have focused on what I think are some key teachings of don Juan and other sorcerers in the stories, mostly derived from the third and fourth books. The way that they are received by Castaneda is also important however. He portrays himself as a slow learner, rather as Arjuna is portrayed in the *Bhagavad Gita* as he receives the teachings of Krishna, or in another parallel, as Ouspensky receives the teachings of Gurdjieff. Don Juan is forced, as Krishna and Gurdjieff are, to not just repeat the teachings but continuously employ new ways of explanation.

The difference here is that only Castaneda remains after his teachers disappear and we are forced to – or are possibly invited to – ask if he really underwent the personal changes demanded of him.

## Part Two. A summary of the teachings

### Exoteric teachings

#### 1. Erasing personal history

Don Juan makes clear that Castaneda's apprenticeship entails arduous spiritual practice. Like in many other traditions some practices appear to be both a path to a goal and also the desired end-result. "Erasing personal history" and "losing self-importance" are key spiritual practices that don Juan explains a number of times and are the subject of complete chapters in *Journey to Ixtlan*. Despite the intellectual appeal of erasing one's personal history, Castaneda is at first bewildered why anyone would wish to do so. Don Juan explains:

"It is best to erase all personal history," he said slowly, as if giving me time to write it down in my clumsy way, "because that would make us free from the encumbering thoughts of other people."

I could not believe that he was actually saying that. I had a very confusing moment. He must have read in my face my inner turmoil and used it immediately.

"Take yourself, for instance," he went on saying. "Right now you don't know whether you are coming or going. And that is so, because I have erased my personal history. I have, little by little, created a fog around me and my life. And now nobody knows for sure who I am or what I do."<sup>32</sup>

Castaneda is both attracted to what the old man is saying and "deadly afraid of him." He tells don Juan that surely he must know who he is. "You bet I ... don't," the old man retorts and rolls on the floor laughing. Castaneda finds this threatening and waits for the anticipated confession that of course the old man knows who he is. But the response is quite different.

"That is the little secret I am going to give you today," he said in a low voice. "Nobody knows my personal history. Nobody knows who I am or what I do. Not even I." ... "How can I know who I am, when I am all this?" he said, sweeping the surroundings with a gesture of his head.<sup>33</sup>

This is the classic answer from all mystics. They have exchanged their identification with self and its history for identification with the entire universe. However for Castaneda it had already been a habit of sorts to obscure his own history, though not as don Juan explains it. In his first dealings on entering the USA Castaneda had erased his personal history of birth in Peru in 1925 to a jeweller, in favour of a fictional history of birth in 1935 in Brazil to family of literary achievement. (This fiction was exposed in his *Time Magazine* interview of 1973.<sup>34</sup>) Don Juan's erasure of per-



sonal history left him with nothing, not a fiction constructed to make him look better in the eyes of others. His aim to be “free of the encumbering thoughts of other people” may not have been Castaneda’s personal goal however, at least not to start with. Castaneda may for example have invented his Brazilian background because he thought it would better impress the universities he applied to in the USA.

## 2. Losing self-importance

The companion to erasing personal history is the practice of losing self-importance. Neither of these are unfamiliar from other religious traditions, but one aspect of this that belongs more properly to shamanism than any other religious form is to lose it in favour of other living things including animals and plants. In the early stages when Castaneda gathers plants, don Juan forces him to thank them in advance. “The world around us is a mystery,” don Juan says, “and men are no better than anything else. If a little plant is generous with us we must thank her, or perhaps she will not let us go.”<sup>35</sup> Castaneda finds this hard at first because, never mind plants, he even thinks himself superior to don Juan, as when he confesses that, “I felt ridiculous trying to get into a philosophical argument with an old Indian who obviously did not have the ‘sophistication’ of a university student.” When don Juan asks him if they are equals he replies, “Of course we’re equals.” Castaneda confesses however that he “was, naturally, being condescending.”<sup>36</sup> Don Juan’s retort is humiliating: “We are not equals. I am a hunter and a warrior, and you are a pimp.”

In his books Castaneda changes his mind on his assumed superiority to the Yaqui Indian, and slowly also about animals and plants. However in real life Castaneda did not seem to have any interest in animals. After his second book was published in 1971 he was invited to speak at the University of Washington. According to his wife his first words in a packed room to his eager audience were, “Can’t we get some of these dogs out of here?”<sup>37</sup> Hippies of the day had turned up with their canine friends in great numbers but it seemed that Castaneda wanted them out. Why? Was he too important to give a lecture with an animal audience? A person on a shamanic path is more likely to welcome animals than in any other spiritual tradition.

## 3. Taking responsibility

Don Juan introduces a third spiritual practice: “taking responsibility.” This is not in the first instance responsibilities such as parenthood or public office, though it could include them. Rather, it means abandoning all resentment against circumstances whether forced upon us by nature or other people. Don Juan tells Castaneda:

One day I found out that if I wanted to be a hunter worthy of self-respect I had to change my way of life. I used to whine and complain a great deal. I had good rea-

sons to feel shortchanged. I am an Indian and Indians are treated like dogs. There was nothing I could do to remedy that so all I was left with was my sorrow.<sup>38</sup>

This is an example of the many times that don Juan tells his pupil that when he started out he was no different, full of self-pity, though possibly with far more reason than Castaneda. "Taking responsibility" for don Juan meant the arduous discipline of abandoning blame – whether heaped on one's parents, the white man, on one's ill-health or whatever – and acting in the world without doubt or remorse. This is not a variant of "positive thinking," however, but manifests in how we make decisions. "You are complaining," don Juan says softly to Castaneda, who has been talking about his father. "You have been complaining all your life because you don't assume responsibility for your decisions."<sup>39</sup> Later on don Juan elaborates:

"It doesn't matter what the decision is," he said. "Nothing could be more or less serious than anything else. Don't you see? In a world where death is the hunter there are no small or big decisions. There are only decisions that we make in the face of our inevitable death."

But does Castaneda himself make progress with this difficult spiritual practice? Can one "take responsibility" in some abstract spiritual form, informed by one's inevitable death, while avoiding it in the mundane sphere? For that, it seems, dogs Castaneda through his life. For example – according to Margaret Castaneda – he decides to adopt his wife's son by another man, and indeed seems to love this boy very much. But according to her account, Castaneda's ambition leaves him very little time for the boy, continuously breaking his promises to see him. In the will he write before he dies he insists that nothing will be left to him, though as we saw the *New York Times* tells us that Castaneda's adopted son believes that the "cult" around him held him prisoner and presumably forced him into signing the will. Frustratingly, it seems impossible to adjudicate between these two versions of events, or indeed any "facts" of Castaneda's life, so all we are left with is the didactic device in the books which portrays Castaneda as weak in contrast to the strength of don Juan's character.

For example in *Power of Silence*, the eighth book in the series, don Juan tricks Castaneda by appearing to age at an incredible rate. He becomes so frail and incoherent that Castaneda thinks he may have had a stroke. Here is his response:

My discomfort was at its peak. I was afraid that the stroke don Juan had suffered was more serious than I thought. I wanted to be rid of him, to take him to his family or his friends, but I did not know who they were. ... The more I thought about my predicament, the sorrier I felt for myself. Don Juan was finished. I had a terrible sense of loss, of doom. I was going to miss him, but my sense of loss was offset by my feeling of annoyance at being saddled with him at his worst.<sup>40</sup>

Castaneda consistently makes himself out to be an unreliable selfish man in his books; here he has no compassion or normal concern to look after don Juan, a man he is so indebted to. Is it just a literary device to make don Juan look saintly? Perhaps not, given the accounts of Castaneda by those who knew him, unless of course they were all lying or in on the trick. But trick or no, the teachings of don Juan are brought into brilliant relief against Castaneda's portrait of himself as a deeply unreformed individual. We all think, on reading such passages, why were those teachings wasted on Castaneda instead of me? Although I can find no record of it, Amy Wallace claims:

Perhaps his greatest charm as a writer was to make his readers feel that they would have made superior sorcerer's apprentices. William S. Burroughs, Beat icon and author of the groundbreaking novel *Naked Lunch*, remarked to journalist Adam Block, "Why didn't don Juan pick me, instead of that idiot Carlos?"<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. Death as the teacher

Chapter 4 of *Journey to Ixtlan* is titled "Death is an advisor." The ordinary person, don Juan tells us, thinks they have all the time in the world to achieve their desires and all the decisions they make are taken in the light of this belief. This weakens us because such decisions have no urgency to them and can be easily abandoned. "Intent," then is crucial and has to be honed. After a difficult exchange between them don Juan sums up the issue:

"Yes," he said softly after a long pause. "One of us here has to change, and fast. One of us here has to learn again that death is the hunter, and that it is always to one's left. One of us here has to ask death's advice and drop the cursed pettiness that belongs to men that live their lives as if death will never tap them."<sup>42</sup>

While one can extract an entirely exoteric teaching from this, there remains a crucial esoteric part to it, where don Juan talks of death as a "person." We are familiar with this anthropomorphism of death as the grim reaper, portrayed imaginatively in the visual arts. However for don Juan death has a presence that is not confined to his last moments but can be continuously sensed to his left; a figure with hollow eyes. Castaneda challenges him on this, saying one's culture would inform how one envisions death, and in don Juan's case that culture would be of the Yuma and Yaqui Indians. Don Juan denies this, saying it is an entirely personal matter, perhaps confirming again that it is pointless to read the Castaneda material as ethnography.<sup>43</sup>

#### 5. Being inaccessible

An essential part of the personal transformation that don Juan wishes to see in Castaneda is a better marshalling of his energies. Although not usually put in terms of energy, it is a universal in the spiritual life that for real transformation one has to

put aside worldly concerns, at least for a period. Anything that drains one's physical, mental, emotional or creative energies is a barrier to spiritual development. Don Juan puts it like this, as translated from his Spanish idiom:

"You must take yourself away," he explained. "You must retrieve yourself from the middle of a trafficked way. Your whole being is there, thus it is of no use to hide; you would only imagine that you are hidden. Being in the middle of the road means that everyone passing by watches your comings and goings."<sup>44</sup>

This is not meant in a monastic sense however, because hiding from others while still concerned about their opinions still drains one. He sees Castaneda's problem as a form of clumsiness in which his energies are dissipated and in which he harms others as well as himself, as in this exchange after hunting quail:

"To be inaccessible means that you touch the world around you sparingly. You don't eat five quail; you eat one. You don't damage the plants just to make a barbecue pit. You don't expose yourself to the power of the wind unless it is mandatory. You don't use and squeeze people until they have shriveled to nothing, especially the people you love."

"I have never used anyone," I said sincerely. But don Juan maintained that I had, and thus I could bluntly state that I became tired and bored with people.

"To be unavailable means that you deliberately avoid exhausting yourself and others," he continued. "It means that you are not hungry and desperate, like the poor bastard that feels he will never eat again and devours all the food he can, all five quail!"<sup>45</sup>

In another example don Juan criticises Castaneda for attending a party "to kill time." Castaneda is a foreigner to both the Indians and Mexicans at the party and does his best to fit in, but at one point they all find reason to be annoyed with him and try to force him to drink and dance. Perhaps we have all experienced the embarrassment of not fitting in at a party when young, but for don Juan it is simply unforgivable to squander one's energies in a situation that would lead only to humiliation. "A warrior lives his life strategically," he says. "He would attend a party or a reunion like that only if his strategy calls for it. That means, of course, that he would be in total control and would perform all the acts that he deems necessary."<sup>46</sup>

Don Juan imposes a harsh discipline on his apprentice, making Castaneda cut his ties with his business, his friends and his normal life, all based on the principle of "tapping the world lightly, leaving hardly a mark." That does not rule out friendship or relationship however, but means placing such things on a spiritual basis far removed from neediness. Being inaccessible is another way of freeing oneself from the "encumbering thoughts of other people." In earlier times when religion – regardless of form – was at the centre of life this was recognised as important and had cultural sanction in such traditions as the hermit, the anchorite or the monk. In

the case of shamanic cultures we have many records of periods of search, or “vision quest,” alone in the wilderness. In an era of relentless urban materialism and secularism don Juan was advising Castaneda on ways to do this that have no cultural sanction, and so meant a more severe cutting-off from his former milieu. The principal “encumbrance” emanated from Castaneda’s university setting, despite the support given to him culminating in his doctorate. It seems that Castaneda followed at least some of this advice in real life, eventually withdrawing from the university scene where people did for a period flock to his lectures.

## 6. The body knows more than the mind

Don Juan’s training involves the body as a locus of intelligence, often more adequate to spiritual learning than the mind. Much of the period spent with don Juan requires Castaneda to walk distances he would formerly never have dreamt of. He is also taught physical skills and postures necessary to the task of learning, such as “the gait of power.” At one point don Juan tells Castaneda:

The reason you keep on coming to see me is very simple; every time you have seen me your body has learned certain things, even against your desire. And finally your body now needs to come back to me to learn more. Let’s say that your body knows that it is going to die, even though you never think about it. So I’ve been telling your body that I too am going to die and before I do I would like to show your body certain things, things which you cannot give to your body yourself. For example, your body needs fright. It likes it. Your body needs the darkness and the wind. Your body now knows the gait of power and can’t wait to try it. So let’s say then that your body returns to see me because I am its friend.<sup>47</sup>

The West has little tradition of bodily training as integral to the spiritual life, as found for example in the religious dance, hatha yoga or martial arts of the East. Most relevant perhaps is the Japanese system in which the centre of the body is neither head nor heart but “hara” – a location around the navel. The *hara* has spiritual significance as the place that the spirit enters the body, and, in *hara kiri*, where it leaves it under ritual suicide. During life the *hara* is the centre of spiritual balance and is to be cultivated with the right forms of physical exercise. Don Juan’s esoteric system centres around it, but there is no evidence of a borrowing here.

## 7. Not-doing and stopping the world

Don Juan’s “not-doing” covers a range of techniques, the most important one of which is stopping the internal dialogue (a subject left for *Tales of Power*). Chapter 15 in *Ixtlan* is devoted to the subject of not-doing, and introduced like this: “I am going to talk to you about not-doing, in spite of the fact that there is no way to talk about it, because it is the body that does it.”<sup>48</sup> This is not clear to start with because the issue appears at first to be one of language. “*Doing*,” as don Juan explains, is the process whereby the elements of our perceptual field are labelled, for

example “rock.” The labelling is not however the key thing but all the physical acts we carry out with rocks that make them “rocks.” Non-doing dismantles that because, instead of seeing the rock in the usual way, non-doing involves *seeing* (always in italics). This distinction between the two ways of seeing takes us into the esoteric teachings, examined below. Here we can just say that *seeing* involves the end of *doing* or involves *stopping the world*. All three italicised terms have special meaning in don Juan’s teachings, and further clue is given in this statement: “Doing makes you separate the pebble from the larger boulder. If you want to learn not-doing, let’s say that you have to join them.” In a still-life painting, for example, a shadow can be used to separate two objects like a pebble resting on a boulder, but in *seeing* the shadow becomes the glue which binds them together.

### 8. Peace, the infinite and eternity

Don Juan is at peace with himself and the world, in stark contrast to Castaneda who may long for such as state but cannot seem to take the steps required for it. Don Juan often comments on the violence in Castaneda’s personality.

He said I was a violent fellow that was capable of “frothing at the mouth” at the drop of a hat. I protested that that was not true; I had always had the idea I was rather congenial and easygoing. I said it was his fault for forcing me out of control with his unexpected words and actions.

“Why the anger?” he asked.

I took stock of my feelings and reactions. I really had no need to be angry with him.<sup>49</sup>

When confronted with his own anger Castaneda firstly denies it, as a child does when criticised, and then turns it on his accuser, saying it is don Juan’s fault for his behaving in an unexpected way; a good example of Castaneda not taking responsibility.

In *Tales of Power* don Juan says: “I’m going to utter perhaps the greatest piece of knowledge anyone can voice. Let me see what you can do with it. Do you know that at this very moment you are surrounded by eternity? And do you know that you can use that eternity, if you so desire?”<sup>50</sup> There is nothing explicitly shamanic in the idea that one can live from the sense of the eternal (or the infinite); it is found in the teachings of countless non-shamanic mystics. But what, we might ask, is the “use” we can make of it? I suspect it is just a figure of speech. When don Juan as a young man was fired from his job and ridiculed for it he nearly killed a man in his rage, but suddenly realised that his teacher (*nagual*) was right to tell him how stupid he was. He felt that the people mocking him were right. Because of his stupidity, “He had been at the portals of eternity and had been unaware of it.”<sup>51</sup> He survived the experience and went on to become a *nagual* in his own right. However don Juan’s *nagual* is not quite the same as the enlightened Zen Buddhist

for example; neither is it a typical Amerindian shaman. It has the appearance of something unique; hence my interest.

### 9. The path of the warrior

Don Juan describes the ultimate goal of the training in various ways. One is to become a "warrior," another a "man of knowledge," another is "sorcerer." In later books he adds "seer" and "nagual." While the choice of term "warrior" may well come out of the Yaqui history of warfare or Mexican native history, don Juan means it in an entirely non-violent way. His point is that a person engaged in warfare knows they may be killed at any moment, so all they can do is act "impeccably" – another term often used in the teachings. They have no time to blame anyone, least of all their enemy, because success for the winner entails death of the loser and one cannot predict which of those one will be. These are the terms of engagement. Death is not the outcome of failing to be safe in civilian life, such as when one sues a builder for being injured by a collapse. Don Juan tells Castaneda:

The self-confidence of the warrior is not the self-confidence of the average man. The average man seeks certainty in the eyes of the onlooker and calls that self-confidence. The warrior seeks impeccability in his own eyes and calls that humbleness. The average man is hooked to his fellow men, while the warrior is hooked only to himself.<sup>52</sup>

This clearly ties in with erasing personal history and making oneself inaccessible. It is the freedom from the opinion of others, and the *doing* that constructs the world according to convention. "Warrior" is therefore a metaphor, and as usual in the Castaneda corpus, the metaphors emerge, are expounded upon as critically important, and then discarded in later works in favour of a different metaphor.

### 10. Stopping the internal dialogue

The hardest discipline imposed on Castaneda involves stopping the internal dialogue, the continuous conversation in his mind. This is a familiar idea in Zen meditation for example and took Castaneda years to master. It is not mentioned in *Journey to Ixtlan* but appears 46 times in *Tales of Power*. One of the techniques that don Juan teaches Castaneda for achieving this is described:

At the beginning of our association don Juan had delineated another procedure: walking for long stretches without focusing the eyes on anything. His recommendation had been to not look at anything directly but, by slightly crossing the eyes, to keep a peripheral view of everything that presented itself to the eyes. He had insisted, although I had not understood at the time, that if one kept one's unfocused eyes at a point just above the horizon, it was possible to notice, at once, everything in almost the total 180-degree range in front of one's eyes. He had assured me that that exercise was the only way of shutting off the internal dialogue.

He used to ask me for reports on my progress, and then he stopped inquiring about it.<sup>53</sup>

Don Juan explains elsewhere that by walking with unfocused vision the visual field is so flooded that the internal dialogue is silenced. It must also be the case that walking for hours in the desert would anyway incline the mind to silence and doing so in the company of a teacher who had long mastered this practice would undoubtedly help. It is more than the shutting down of words however, because there are many non-verbal mental processes that can go on, for example a sculptor will think in terms of form without having to verbalise it, or a musician think in terms of melody, rhythm and harmony, without necessarily bringing in the word-based language of music. This is normally very difficult to shut down and can also be highly disconcerting when it actually happens:

I mentioned to don Juan that on that occasion I also became cognizant that stopping the internal dialogue involved more than merely curtailing the words I said to myself. My entire thought processes had stopped and I had felt I was practically suspended, floating. A sensation of panic had ensued from that awareness and I had to resume my internal dialogue as an antidote.

"I've told you that the internal dialogue is what grounds us," don Juan said. "The world is such and such or so and so, only because we talk to ourselves about its being such and such or so and so."<sup>54</sup>

It should be clear by now that all these elements of don Juan's teachings are inter-related. The goal is to end the normal construct of the world, learned from our culture since childhood and cemented over and over again by our rehearsing of its conventional framework in our internal chatter. Just to pick one related issue: if one loses one's self-importance then we don't require validation from others and we don't need to continuously rehearse the constructs of others. Don Juan continues by confirming the centrality of this:

"To change our idea of the world is the crux of sorcery," he said. "And stopping the internal dialogue is the only way to accomplish it. The rest is just padding. Now you're in the position to know that nothing of what you've seen or done, with the exception of stopping the internal dialogue, could by itself have changed anything in you, or in your idea of the world."<sup>55</sup>

In many meditation traditions the aim is similar, to end the discursive operations of the mind and become simply present. So on the one hand Castaneda could have learned this idea from many sources, including Patanjali, as Bharati suggests, or it could have come from the Zen Buddhism of Alan Watts, which Castaneda's wife tells us that he "practically memorized".<sup>56</sup> However I don't know of any tradition which emphasises that the world "is such and such or so and so, only because we talk to ourselves about its being such and such or so and so." Patanjali and the Zen Masters would perhaps readily agree if it was put to them this way, but don Juan's



presentation of it is unique. At the same time the shamanic purpose and context of it is quite different to either Patanjali or the Zen Masters whose systems have a cultural setting which long abandoned shamanism. Regardless of whether Castaneda had a source for “stopping the internal dialogue” other than a Native American – and it is odd that de Mille does not bother with an entry on it in his “Alleglossary” – Castaneda is a man utterly bound up with the world of words. Confronted with the ineffable he regularly has moments of elation when he can describe them in language. Don Juan just tells him that that to be so moved by words is another aspect of his foolery.<sup>57</sup>

### 11. Impeccability

It is quite possible that Carlos Castaneda bequeathed the term “impeccability” to an entire generation of spiritual seekers. It is found 43 times in *Tales of Power*, and is the essential characteristic of the warrior. We saw above that don Juan equates it with humbleness and disassociates it with the opinion of others. The only freedom of a warrior, declares don Juan, is to choose an impeccable life.<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere he uses it to describe how one “trims the spirit” meaning avoiding the indulgences we normally fall into. Most importantly, the *tonal* must be impeccable in avoiding the irrational and the *nagual* must be impeccable in avoiding the rational.<sup>59</sup> In any case the *nagual* cannot be witnessed by a warrior who is not impeccable and is not thoroughly empty (of indulgencies). Castaneda finds the concept difficult even after many explanations:

“We’re back again to my old question, don Juan. What’s impeccability?”

“Yes, we’re back again to your old question and consequently we’re back again to my old answer: ‘Impeccability is to do your best in whatever you’re engaged in.’”

“But don Juan, my point is that I’m always under the impression I’m doing my best, and obviously I’m not.”

“It’s not as complicated as you make it appear. The key to all these matters of impeccability is the sense of having or not having time. As a rule of thumb, when you feel and act like an immortal being that has all the time in the world you are not impeccable; at those times you should turn, look around, and then you will realize that your feeling of having time is an idiocy. There are no survivors on this earth!”<sup>60</sup>

Don Juan is again referring to having death as one’s teacher. If one believes that one has all the time in the world there is no urgency to act with precision and clarity.

### 12. The *tonal* and the *nagual*

Perhaps the most important teaching emerging in the fourth book is the description don Juan gives of the distinction between the *tonal* and the *nagual*, intro-

duced earlier. While the terms appear in the anthropological literature of the region, don Juan's explanation defines them in a new way. Carlos Castaneda and don Juan are in a restaurant in Arizona roughly half-way through *Tales of Power*. Rather dramatically don Juan explains that he has put on a suit in order to explain these ideas, though he tells Castaneda that in fact he already knows them.<sup>61</sup> He does not mean however the standard anthropological account which Castaneda repeats to him:

I knew that the "tonal" (pronounced, toh-na'hl) was thought to be a kind of guardian spirit, usually an animal, that a child obtained at birth and with which he had intimate ties for the rest of his life. "Nagual" (pronounced, nah - wa'hl) was the name given to the animal into which sorcerers could allegedly transform themselves, or to the sorcerer that elicited such a transformation.<sup>62</sup>

Castaneda continues to explain these concepts but when he has finished don Juan dismisses it all as nonsense. Again Castaneda's writings at this point indicate that he has parted company with academic anthropology. Don Juan's explanation does use the conventional definitions as a starting point, but, as mentioned earlier, explains that this is knowledge only known to sorcerers and is the "lid" to all his teachings. He begins by explaining that the *tonal* is not an animal that guards a person but it is a guardian in a sense, a protector, but that it turns into a guard. What should be our protector becomes our jailor, and it does this because it is effectively our *description* of the world, fixed from childhood and incapable of allowing us to see the world as it really is. Another name for it is our rationality, which don Juan explains as essential to our well-being and survival, but undergoes a change from a broad-minded and understanding entity to becoming a petty and despotic guard. "Anything we have a word for is the *tonal*," explains don Juan, indicating that language plays a key role in this. Castaneda finds the concept difficult, so don Juan explains:

"The *tonal* is everything we know," he repeated slowly. "And that includes not only us, as persons, but everything in our world. It can be said that the *tonal* is everything that meets the eye. We begin to groom it at the moment of birth. The moment we take the first gasp of air we also breathe in power for the *tonal*. So, it is proper to say that the *tonal* of a human being is intimately tied to his birth. You must remember this point. It is of great importance in understanding all this. The *tonal* begins at birth and ends at death."<sup>63</sup>

Whether an accurate record, a fictionalised account of a real conversation, or entirely made up by Castaneda, the twelve pages making up the chapter "The Island of the Tonal" in *Tales of Power* is perhaps the most important passage in all the Castaneda writings. Don Juan likens the table they sit at to an island which is the *tonal*, the sum total of everything describable in the world of the individual; the other tables representing the *tonal* of other individuals. The *nagual* is everything beyond that island. This exchange begins to pin it down, Castaneda speaking first:

"If the *tonal* is everything we know about ourselves and our world, what, then, is the *nagual*?"

"The *nagual* is the part of us which we do not deal with at all."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The *nagual* is the part of us for which there is no description – no words, no names, no feelings, no knowledge."

"That's a contradiction, don Juan. In my opinion if it can't be felt or described or named, it cannot exist."

"It's a contradiction only in your opinion. I warned you before, don't knock yourself out trying to understand this."

"Would you say that the *nagual* is the mind?"

"No. The mind is an item on the table. The mind is part of the *tonal*. Let's say that the mind is the chili sauce."<sup>64</sup>

Don Juan then compares everything Castaneda suggests, including thought, soul and God, to an item on the table, picking them up in turn and placing them in front of him. He summarises by saying "The *nagual* is not experience or intuition or consciousness. Those terms and everything else you may care to say are only items on the island of the *tonal*. The *nagual*, on the other hand, is only effect. The *tonal* begins at birth and ends at death, but the *nagual* never ends. The *nagual* has no limit." The section concludes with the theme that only when the *tonal* is swept clean, ordered and properly energised can the *nagual* become apparent, so they walk into town with the aim for Castaneda to spot a person with such a properly ordered *tonal*. Without that ordering the very noise of the *tonal* will entirely drown out or suppress the *nagual*.

## Esoteric teachings

In discussing the exoteric teachings found in the Castaneda material I have mentioned nothing that could be considered "supernatural" beyond introducing the *nagual*, a topic that properly belongs to the esoteric. However, shamanism is predicated on the supernatural to the extent at least that the "spirit" – or whatever term one wishes to use – is believed independent of the body and can leave it during trance or in an altered state of consciousness, or after death where it continues having experience, whether reincarnated in a new organism or disembodied in the spirit world. Many significant passages in Castaneda appear to describe supernatural events or experiences, all consistent with shamanism from many cultures, and the subject of an extensive so-called esoteric or occult literature. However, since Descartes attempted to describe how the soul is engaged in perception of the world (so-called "upward causation") and in action on the world (so-called "downward causation"), the ability of a non-material spirit to perceive or act on matter has been derided. Castaneda often describes magical events in which a sorcerer achieves feats not considered physically possible, and which lead many to dismiss his books. However it is possible to read the entire corpus from the point of view

that the sorcerer does nothing that is physically impossible. Instead they manipulate the viewer's perception so that they *believe* they have witnessed the impossible. We can call this hypnotism, but a more significant term is mesmerism after the German doctor Franz Mesmer. Amy Wallace reports that Castaneda told her in all seriousness, "The world should have followed Mesmer instead of Freud."<sup>65</sup>

In *The Power of Silence* Castaneda describes a physical impossibility performed by a psychic healer, corroborated by three witnesses he spoke to afterward:

I was able to observe that, using a kitchen knife, she cut his abdominal cavity open in the umbilical region, detached his diseased liver, washed it in a bucket of alcohol, put it back in and closed the bloodless opening with just the pressure of her hands.<sup>66</sup>

On recounting this to Don Juan he is told that nothing supernatural happened. Instead, the psychic had the ability that sorcerers possess to affect the perceptual processes of the witnesses, so that they believed what she told them took place, while at the same time engaged in psychic, not physical, healing. While this only shifts the implausible act from the physical to the psychic it does not necessarily violate the laws of physics. The whole of Castaneda can be read from this perspective.

In a climactic scene in *Journey to Ixtlan* don Juan and don Genaro play a trick on Castaneda by "magically" moving his car.<sup>67</sup> He has left it parked, returned to the two men who were nowhere near it, upon which don Genaro drives it away by sorcery without moving from the spot. They have to persuade him down the hill to look where he had parked it and in a stomach-jolting moment he realises it is gone. Clowning, they pretend to look for it without success. Forcing him to change his awareness he finally "sees" it some distance from where their investigations had taken them. Shocked, he gets in and drives them back to its former location, enduring the inexplicable hilarity of the two sorcerers. Much later don Juan says, "Genaro never moved your car from the world of ordinary men the other day. He simply forced you to look at the world like sorcerers do, and your car was not in that world. ... The reason we nearly split our guts laughing was because you really thought you were driving us back from where you thought you had found your car."<sup>68</sup>

It is roughly in this spirit that I think we can read the esoteric content of the don Juan material. Castaneda's sensory perception is "shifted," firstly with power plants in the first two volumes, and after that by the effect of one or more sorcerers on him. This approach only takes us half-way to shamanism however. Many of course will balk at the idea of mesmerism, in which case one is left with just the exoteric teachings as outlined above. While advocating an admirable life in itself, one could say, the exoteric teachings can be extended to include a form of mesmerism in

which – perhaps – people can be healed of physical or mental illness. One might not object to any of that. But don Juan’s explanation of both the “magic” of physically impossible liver surgery and automobile displacement implies much more. The separate reality that he teaches – recognisable from a wide shamanic literature – is one in which the spirit roams free of the body, can take the shape of humans or animals, and remotely affect the minds of others.

If we accept that individuals can influence the minds of others so profoundly that they can witness impossible things – and we can call this hypnotism or mesmerism – then the question remains, to what end? To what end do the sorcerers, as *naguals*, in the Castaneda books use this power? To what end does Castaneda as *nagual* himself at the end of his training use this power? Those who were part of Castaneda’s sorceric circle claim he abused that power, though also conceding that perhaps he taught something valuable. In the books however the sorcerers at no point use their power for personal gain, but to bring Castaneda into that separate reality. Their teachers had acted in this way to produce a new generation of sorcerers and so do they. We now briefly consider some of the esoteric teachings clearly central to the sorcery of don Juan.

### 1. A separate reality

Central to all esotericism, occultism and shamanism is the idea of a “separate reality” though couched in a variety of alternative terms according to tradition. “Spirit world” is perhaps the most common of these terms, as in when Rudolf Steiner says in his autobiography that up to the age of thirty he lived more intensely in the spirit world than the material one. As a term, “separate reality” appears in the title of Castaneda’s second book and throughout his work. It appears to be roughly what the *nagual* refers to when it isn’t the title bestowed on a sorcerer. In the table analogy it is everything beyond the language-ordered world of the table or *tonal*, but which can irrupt into that world and requires that the *tonal* be impeccably ordered to withstand it. In shamanism the ability to enter the *nagual* or separate reality or spirit-world – however one terms it – is the province of the shaman and has the purpose to return with knowledge or healing for individuals and community. Don Juan and his fellow sorcerers have no community other than their own party however and do not engage in healing practices.

The only really useful questions we can ask here of Castaneda’s account of this separate reality is how internally consistent is it within the teachings of don Juan and how profound a picture of it is painted. Triangulating it against other systems is a project for a different essay. The consistency of it is a simple matter, though the effort to demonstrate it may be an extensive one given the volume of the writings. Its profundity is more difficult to establish but hinges on whether powers gained in the training suggest signs of escapism in which the participant is promised personal gratification. These gratifications may be base, such as bloodlust,

sexual conquest, acquisition of valuables, or power over others to serve one's physical or egotistical needs. They may also be more refined, such as aesthetic or intellectual pleasure. Is the account of the *nagual* as a separate reality indicative of any such gratifications? Does it encourage escapism from ordinary reality, where such gratifications are hard to come by, into a separate reality where they are granted without any corresponding effort or comeback? In the Castaneda books there are repeated descriptions of astonishing "feats" performed by sorcerers like don Genaro, such as moving Castaneda's car. Are these feats observable in the physical world and could they gratify the desire to impress, or otherwise gain an advantage over those unable to perform them? The answer appears to be no, where Castaneda's teachers are concerned, but quite possibly yes, where Castaneda is concerned.

## 2. Power

A key term in much of the Native American literature is "power." Plants have it, animals have it, places have it and people have it. Wikipedia tells us that the Iroquois use the term "orenda" for spiritual power, "believed by the Iroquois Native Americans to pervade in varying degrees in all animate and inanimate natural objects as a transmissible spiritual energy capable of being exerted according to the will of its possessor."<sup>69</sup> Wikipedia adds:

Anthropologist J. N. B. Hewitt notes intrinsic similarities between the Iroquoian concept of Orenda and that of the Siouxan *wakd* or *mahopa*; the Algonquin *manitowi*, and the *pokunt* of the Shoshone. Across the Iroquois tribes, the concept was referred to variously as *orena* or *karena* by the Mohawk, Cayuga, and Oneida; *urenda* by the Tuscarora, and *iarenda* or *orenda* by the Huron.

When don Juan uses the term "power" it seems to be in this sense, though we never learn what Indian name he might have favoured for it. Of the 366 times the word appears in *Journey to Ixtlan* it is mostly when don Juan is explaining something, for example the significance of twilight: "At this time of the day, in the twilight, there is no wind. At this time there is only power."<sup>70</sup>

Clearly this is nothing like the normal concept of power in the history of Western thought which is normally understood as "power over" things, events or people. A moth in normal discourse has no "power," it being the frailest of entities in physical terms. However in spiritual terms the moth happens to be a creature with great significance for "power" in the apprenticeship of Carlos Castaneda. "Potency" might be the closest term, but this potency does not arise from the physical structure of the entity as understood in scientific terms but from its spiritual reality. Once again, the emphasis on the term "power" is uniquely shamanic and of the Native American traditions. It has no equivalent in Patanjali or Zen Buddhism.

### 3. *Seeing*

Don Juan uses the terms “*see*” and “*seeing*” in italics to distinguish an esoteric way of looking at the world from the normal one. It is the entry to the separate reality and is introduced in *Journey to Ixtlan*:

Don Juan stated that in order to arrive at “*seeing*” one first had to “stop the world.” “Stopping the world” was indeed an appropriate rendition of certain states of awareness in which the reality of everyday life is altered because the flow of interpretation, which ordinarily runs uninterruptedly, has been stopped by a set of circumstances alien to that flow.<sup>71</sup>

In other contexts *seeing* might be referred to as clairvoyance, or having a vision, or shifting oneself into the spirit world. When one “*sees*” people or animals they take on a new appearance; one learns new things about them; one interacts with them in a new way; and above all the normal order of things is suspended. In particular any illusion that the human being is a superior animal to any other is quite done away with, hence the power of the moth mentioned above.

### 4. *Dreaming*

The equivalent to *seeing* in the waking state is “*dreaming*” – again in italics – in the sleeping state. Don Juan introduces *dreaming* as essential to the path of the warrior because it is where power can be obtained. He says, “Dreaming is real for a warrior because in it he can act deliberately, he can choose and reject, he can select from a variety of items those which lead to power, and then he can manipulate them and use them, while in an ordinary dream he cannot act deliberately.”<sup>72</sup> Here lies exactly the danger I outlined above: the desire to manipulate reality, or an alternate reality, without consequences. In other contexts what don Juan is referring to is called “lucid dreaming” where one learns to control dream content. Castaneda’s response is interesting: “Don Juan’s premises always had appealed to me at a certain level. I could easily understand his liking the idea that one could do anything in dreams, but I could not take him seriously.” Castaneda is given the task of finding his hands in his dreams and over a long period of determined effort he masters this.<sup>73</sup> But to what end?

Lucid dreaming in don Juan’s world has a specific purpose which becomes clearer in the later books; it is related to the idea of the “double.” However we learn from some of Castaneda’s pupils that perhaps he took this to a new level in collective *dreaming*, hoping to construct a shared reality of his own design.<sup>74</sup> We can be sure however that if he or the group *designed* this reality it would be nothing more than escapism. In the books don Juan always answers Castaneda’s persistent enquiry as to why the separate reality is as it is by saying he does not know. It just *is*. It is not for designing according to one’s own whims.

## 5. The *double*

The *double* is introduced in *Tales of Power*. Don Juan tells Castaneda that he has only met the real don Genaro a few times.

"A double is the sorcerer himself, developed through his *dreaming*," don Juan explained. "A double is an act of power to a sorcerer but only a tale of power to you. In the case of Genaro, his double is indistinguishable from the original. That's because his impeccability as a warrior is supreme; thus, you've never noticed the difference yourself. But in the years that you've known him, you've been with the original Genaro only twice; every other time you've been with his double."<sup>75</sup>

Don Genaro explains that no sorcerer knows where his double is; don Juan adds that to come face-to-face with the double means death. De Mille finds a source for this in the work of psychoanalyst Otto Rank,<sup>76</sup> while Margaret Castaneda suggests the Irish classical scholar E. R. Dodds' work on the double in ancient Greece.<sup>77</sup> It is indeed an esoteric idea found almost universally, though not specifically mentioned as a *siddhi* (spiritual power) in Patanjali. However, what is its *purpose* in don Juan's system? A warrior must have succeeded in erasing his personal history, self-importance and routines by the time he has developed a double, according to don Juan. But Castaneda does not appear to have achieved this. He is obsessed with the idea that the double can perform acts in the world. He puts the question to don Juan, could one's double kill someone hundreds of miles away on one's behalf? Don Juan says, "You're filled with tales of violence."<sup>78</sup> Indeed Castaneda's idea that the double could act on one's behalf, thus saving effort, or in the extreme case carrying out murder with a cast-iron alibi, all boils down to his self-interest. In all the religious systems I know such self-interest would negate any spiritual advancement achieved through practice. The only legitimate use for any of these powers would be for healing or service to the community, not oneself.

As usual Castaneda persists in his questions to don Juan:

I was compelled to defend my point. I said that I was speaking in a hypothetical sense.

"There is no hypothetical sense when you speak about the world of men of knowledge," he said. "A man of knowledge cannot possibly act towards his fellow men in injurious terms, hypothetically or otherwise."

"But, what if his fellow men are plotting against his security and well-being? Can he then use his double to protect himself?"

He clicked his tongue in disapproval. "What incredible violence in your thoughts," he said. "No one can plot against the security and well-being of a man of knowledge. He sees, therefore he would take steps to avoid anything like that. Genaro, for example, has taken a calculated risk in joining you. But there is nothing that you could do to endanger his security. If there is anything, his *seeing* will let him know. Now, if there is something about you that is inherently injurious to him and his seeing cannot reach it, then it is his fate, and neither Genaro nor any-



one else can avoid that. So, you see, a man of knowledge is in control without controlling anything.”<sup>79</sup>

## 6. The luminous body

Perhaps the most memorable and also the most derided esoteric element of don Juan’s system is the idea that the sorcerer sees the human body as a luminous egg made up of luminous fibres.

“Men look different when you see. The little smoke will help you to see men as fibers of light.”

“Fibers of light?”

“Yes. Fibers, like white cobwebs. Very fine threads that circulate from the head to the navel. Thus a man looks like an egg of circulating fibers. And his arms and legs are like luminous bristles, bursting out in all directions.”

“Is that the way everyone looks?”

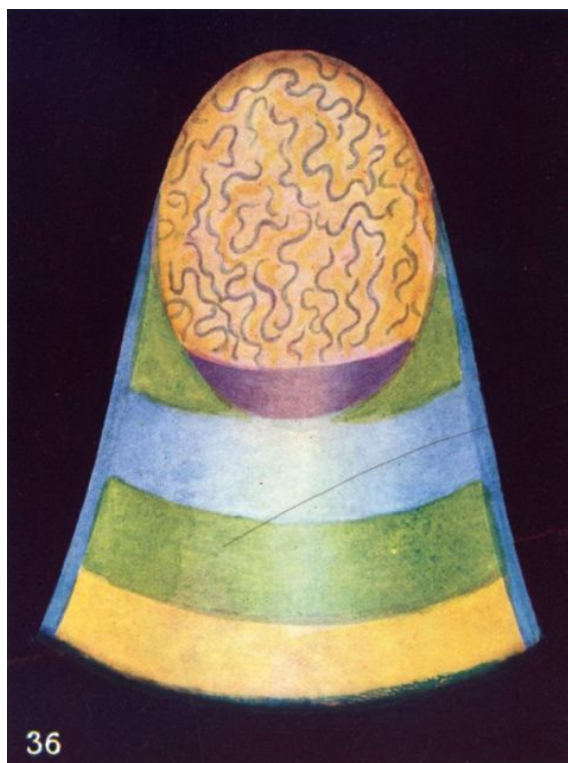
“Everyone. Besides, every man is in touch with everything else, not through his hands, though, but through a bunch of long fibers that shoot out from the center of his abdomen. Those fibers join a man to his surroundings; they keep his balance; they give him stability.”<sup>80</sup>

I mentioned the Japanese notion of the *hara* earlier, the energetic centre of the body around the navel; in don Juan’s system the region is similarly significant. De Mille cites Yogi Ramacharaka’s 1905 text in which this appears:

Like all other forms of the Aura, it extends from the body to a distance of two to three feet, depending upon certain circumstances which need not be mentioned at this place. Like all other forms of the Aura, it is oval or egg-shaped. (This shape common to the several manifestations of the Aura has caused some writers to refer to it as the ‘Auric Egg.’) ... to the psychic vision it appears to be ‘streaked’ by numerous fine lines extending like stiff bristles from the body outward.<sup>81</sup>

The common use of “bristles” in Castaneda’s and Ramacharaka’s writings does suggest that Castaneda may have used him as a source, but we cannot be sure that this is really one of de Mille’s “stylistic echoes.” There are only so many words in the English language to describe a cluster of long thin objects.

Similar ideas are found in Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater’s book on “Thought-Forms.” Here is thought-form number 36, complete with an egg-shape:



Once again we are faced with the perennial conundrum of Castaneda's work. On the one hand spiritual discoveries like egg-shaped auras crop up independently in different cultures. If don Juan was real and in an ancient lineage of spiritual teachers then his version of it is independent of Indian yoga. On the other hand the description, similar down to the use of "bristles," might suggest a borrowing ... or just coincidence. What is unique in Castaneda's system remains however, which is the presence of elements common to other systems where those systems have no shamanic context whatsoever.

### 7. The waterfall scene

A much debated feat of sorcery is demonstrated by don Genaro half way through *A Separate Reality* where he makes spectacular leaps across a waterfall. Castaneda, don Juan and don Genaro, and two of their apprentices have gone to the banks of a river from where they could see the bottom of a waterfall roaring down a hundred and fifty feet. It is a lesson to the pupils. Don Genaro climbs the rocks up the side of the waterfall, nearly falling at one point. He is still for a long time. Then he makes a spectacular leap across the waterfall, pauses, and then somersaults behind a rock and disappears. Don Juan, Castaneda and the apprentices return home without him. Later on don Juan said that the whole thing had been a lesson for those who could see the fibres of his luminous being. "Those fibers were the secret of don Genaro's balance and his lesson had nothing to do with acrobatic jumps across the waterfall. His feat of equilibrium was in the way he used those "tentacle-like" fibers."<sup>82</sup>

We can use this episode as a microcosm of the Castaneda debates. Firstly, how should we interpret it? It was a lesson that “had nothing to do with acrobatic jumps across the waterfall” and in any case Castaneda didn’t get it. We could therefore class it with the incidents described earlier of impossible surgery and impossible car-moving. The jump across the waterfall, on that basis, did not take place in the physical world but in the sorcerer’s world. The small group of apprentices, including Castaneda, could be easily mesmerised by don Juan into seeing anything. Alternatively this was a case of don Genaro’s double acting in a separate reality.

However the real controversy is over whether Castaneda stole this story from a fellow student of anthropology, Barbara G. Myerhoff, who had witnessed the shaman Ramon Medina Silva conduct such a feat at a waterfall with his apprentices watching. According to de Mille she told Castaneda of this in August 1966.<sup>83</sup> He responded in surprise: “Oh! That’s just like don Genaro.” He proceeded to tell Myerhoff roughly the scene that would appear in his book in 1971, which she took as validation of her anthropological fieldwork. De Mille seizes on the fact however that the first mention of don Genaro in Castaneda’s books is dated April 1968, nearly two years after the conversation with Myerhoff. Clearly, the dates given in the first three books are therefore all likely to be fictional. In de Mille’s interview with Myerhoff they agree that Castaneda must have responded to her story with the instant fabrication of his don Genaro counterpart, which then had to wait five years, until 1971, to see print. In the same year Castaneda was invited by Myerhoff to meet Ramon Medina Silva for the first time. They got on very well, according to her, as two “tricksters.”

We are none the wiser. Castaneda is not carrying out anthropology as Myerhoff is, despite both of them working towards a PhD at the time. But was he really able to invent such a story on the fly in order to validate her, to make her feel good, store it away and use it later on? Why no conversation with Ramon Medina Silva on the subject when he finally meets him? And is Myerhoff also a story teller when she recounts that Castaneda took Ramon to a “power spot” in the Santa Monica Mountains which Ramon used as a toilet because he didn’t want to use her WC or garden to defecate in? Here perhaps is the best clue to the deep appeal of the Castaneda material and its ability to shrug off all serious investigation into its provenance. It’s funny. And, as Myerhoff still insisted, “enlightening.”

## 8. Animals

For the general reader I would suggest that the exoteric teachings are both the most accessible and most significant of the teachings emerging from the Castaneda corpus. However the esoteric material is essential to locate the teachings as a whole in shamanism. What makes shamanism the proper context, rather than such

systems as the Kabbalah, Anthroposophy or Theosophy, is the repeated encounter with animals in their spirit form.

Castaneda “talks” at one point with a coyote and has an encounter with a moth; in response don Juan reminds him that he once “talked” with a deer.

“Your knowledge of the world told you that in the bushes one can only find animals prowling or men hiding behind the foliage. You held that thought, and naturally you had to find ways to make the world conform to that thought.”

“But I wasn’t thinking at all, don Juan.”

“Let’s not call it thinking then. It is rather the habit of having the world always conform to our thoughts. When it doesn’t, we simply make it conform. Moths as large as a man cannot be even a thought, therefore, for you, what was in the bushes had to be a man.

“The same thing happened with the coyote. Your old habits decided the nature of that encounter too. Something took place between you and the coyote, but it wasn’t talk. I have been in the same quandary myself. I’ve told you that once I talked with a deer; now you’ve talked to a coyote, but neither you nor I will ever know what really took place at those times.”

“What are you telling me, don Juan?”

“When the sorcerers’ explanation became clear to me, it was too late to know what the deer did to me. I said that we talked, but that wasn’t so. To say that we had a conversation is only a way of arranging it so I can talk about it. The deer and I did something, but at the time it was taking place I needed to make the world conform to my ideas, just like you did. I had been talking all my life, just like you, therefore my habits prevailed and were extended to the deer. When the deer came to me and did whatever it did, I was forced to understand it as talking.”<sup>84</sup>

Clearly one does not “talk” with animals in English or Spanish or whatever. In the shamanic world however a conversation takes place which is as significant or more so, a proposition every animal-lover or pet-owner might consent to. The step into shamanism is a big one however. It requires not just a belief in but actual experience of the spirit of the animal as a presence, and experience of a form of communication unmediated by anything science can describe. But what is Castaneda’s real relationship to animals? The few personal accounts of his life barely mention them, beyond his wife’s description of the lecture where he wanted rid of the dogs in the audience, as we saw earlier. His encounter with a puma – mountain lion – recorded in one of the early books is dismissed by Hans Sebald as utterly unlikely, both in terms of their rarity in the Sonoran desert and their behaviour.<sup>85</sup> In *The Power of Silence* Castaneda recounts a long and dangerous encounter with a jaguar and makes not one but two references to the extremely low probability of encountering it in Chihuahua.<sup>86</sup> One wonders if he had read the Sebald criticism to make such a point, and of course one wonders if the encounter actually happened in ordinary reality rather than sorceric reality. However, even if Castaneda himself

had little interest in animals his repeated description of such encounters locates the teachings firmly in a shamanic setting.

## Conclusions

Osho warned us: “don’t be a victim of fiction,” when it comes to reading Castaneda. However any attempt to establish what is fact or fiction in his work appears to be doomed, so perhaps we should take his books – and those by his followers, and even the earnest attempts to assess or discredit him – as spiritual fiction written by a spiritual trickster and by those drawn into his world as moths to a candle. This is not to denigrate Castaneda but to locate him amongst what are known as the “crazy wisdom teachers.”<sup>87</sup>

The respected anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff got “enlightenment” from Castaneda; the respected anthropologist Mary Douglas found “truth in the tale;” his disillusioned lover Amy Wallace wrote, “nothing, I believe, can subtract from the sincerity and beauty of his early works.”<sup>88</sup> However the respected anthropologist and self-appointed “bona fide mystic” Agehananda Bharati saw nothing in the Castaneda corpus but a fictional dungheap as it were. However I share Osho’s views that there are diamonds to be found in it and I hope I have outlined a method here for finding them, along with some useful examples. It is quite true that the Castaneda phenomenon belongs to the cultural currents of the 1970s, so does that mean it is only of historical interest? I don’t think so. For me there is much in it that is timeless, and possibly even of increasing relevance as our climate emergency grows in its impact. I regard shamanism in all its aspects as crucial to our response.

To extract what is valuable from the Castaneda corpus takes considerable labour however. I hope that my suggestion of separating the exoteric from the esoteric teachings is useful. I hope that acknowledging the contrast between the loftier goals of the teacher and the less noble response of the pupil throughout the don Juan-Castaneda dialogues is helpful. Above all I hope that by classing a spiritual teacher as a “trickster” in an entirely positive sense one can better negotiate their teachings and so not become a victim of fiction. If you meet one in real life you will certainly need your wits about you.

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