CASTANEDA AND DON JUAN: 
SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

In this paper I would like to begin following up a suggestion made informally in conversation by Professor Mircea Eliade that someone with an interest in phenomenology of religion take a serious look at the writings of the American anthropologist, Carlos Castaneda. Since the appearance of his most recent book two years ago, there has been a growing bibliography of commentaries on and interviews with this scholar. To my knowledge, however, no one has yet attempted to bring to bear on his works some of the insights derived from the comparative approach of a phenomenology of religion. This paper will only be a step in that direction. It is intended in the first place to set some relatively new material before a group of scholars in order to invite comments from various special disciplines. Throughout, it is prompted by my own personal curiosity and informed, for better or worse, by my own developing understanding of the aims and procedures of a general phenomenology of religion.

As Carlos Castaneda is not a well-known figure outside of the United States, it might be helpful first to provide some background details. His first book, entitled \textit{The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge},

\footnotetext[1]{This paper was first presented at the annual meeting of the British Section of the International Association of the History of Religions, held in London, 24–25 September 1974.}

\footnotetext[2]{Professor Eliade's remark was made during a casual conversation with me at the I.A.H.R. Study Conference on Methodology, at Turku, Finland, August 1973.}


\footnotetext[4]{It would seem that the aims and methods of phenomenology of religion have been discussed sufficiently elsewhere that I may be excused from further mention of them here.}

\footnotetext[5]{Grateful appreciation is owing to the first audience of this paper for their helpful comments and remarks.}
appeared in 1968. Its sequel, entitled A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan, followed in 1971. These in turn were completed by a kind of interlinear entitled Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan, published in 1972. Together, these three books have transformed the author and his subject into cult figures: an anthropologist named Carlos Castaneda and a mysterious old Yaqui Indian from Sonora, Mexico, known simply as Don Juan Matus. As is often the case with holy men, there are virtually no biographical details of Don Juan. Moreover, in keeping with the teachings imparted to him by his master, Castaneda has striven consistently to obscure his own past. In the rare interview when he has been pushed to speak of his life, he has projected a kind of classic scenario, enacted on the mysterious terrain of South America, and more recently the familiar locale of Southern California. In outline, it is the story of a spirited young man who moves from the sterile and inhibiting background of academia toward revitalisation in the world of a Yaqui sorcerer.

The putative facts about Castaneda are decidedly less exciting. According to reliable sources, he was born in Cajamarca, Peru on Christmas day, 1925. He was educated at the local high school, and in 1948 moved to Lima where he studied painting and sculpture at the Colegio Nacional. In 1951 Castaneda emigrated to the United States, and from 1955 to 1959, was enrolled as a pre-psychology major at Los Angeles City College. In 1959 he began to develop an interest in anthropology, and the following year went to Arizona with the intention of studying the use of medicinal plants among the Yaqui Indians of northern Mexico. Since Castaneda was about to enter post-graduate studies in anthropology at the University of California at Los Angeles, the visit was prompted in part by his desire to begin his academic career with at least one scholarly publication on the subject.

Through the offices of an old friend, Castaneda was introduced to an aged Yaqui holy man, Don Juan Matus, in an Arizona town somewhere near the Mexican border. Although the details of this meeting are less than precise, the encounter itself is classical in form; for it epitomises the type of relationship which would obtain during the subsequent ten years. Eventually it assumed such a paradigmatic or mythic significance that Castaneda felt compelled to obscure, embellish and generally rewrite the details of his life up to that point so as to emphasise its true conversional quality. In part, the encounter is described as follows:

5 Journey to Ixtlan, pp. 17-18.
'I understand that you know a great deal about plants, sir,' I said to the old Indian in front of me.

A friend of mine had put us in contact and left the room and we had introduced ourselves to each other. The old man had told me that his name was Juan Matus.

'Did your friend tell you that?' he asked casually.

'Yes, he did.'

'I pick plants, or rather, they let me pick them,' he said softly.

We were in the waiting room of a bus depot in Arizona. I asked him in very formal Spanish if he would allow me to question him.

I said, 'Would the gentleman (caballero) permit me to ask some questions?'

'Caballero', which is derived from the word 'caballo', 'horse', originally meant horseman or a nobleman on horseback.

He looked at me inquisitively.

'I'm a horseman without a horse', he said with a big smile and then added, 'I've told you that my name is Juan Matus.'

I liked his smile. I thought that obviously he was a man that could appreciate directness and I decided to boldly tackle him with a request.

I told him that I was interested in collecting and studying medicinal plants. I said that my special interest was the uses of the hallucinogenic cactus, peyote, which I had studied at length at the university in Los Angeles.

I thought that my presentation sounded very serious. I was very contained and sounded perfectly credible to myself.

The old man shook his head slowly, and I, encouraged by his silence, added that it would no doubt be profitable for us to get together and talk about peyote.

It was at that moment that he lifted his head and looked at me squarely in the eyes. It was a formidable look. Yet it was not menacing or awesome in any way. It was a look that went through me. I became tongue-tied at once and could not continue with the harangues about myself. That was the end of our meeting.

Yet he left on a note of hope. He said that perhaps I could visit him at his house someday.

Castaneda did meet Don Juan again during the following year, and it was then that the old man explained that he was a brujo, a medicine man, a healer or sorcerer; and that having received certain clear indications, he had decided to pass on his secret knowledge to Castaneda. The young anthropologist was reluctant to enter an apprenticeship, but not wanting to pass up the opportunity of obtaining unique field experience, he decided to give at least the impression of accepting Don Juan's invitation. Under his tutelage, Castaneda experimented with several psychotropic plants, including *Lophophora williamsii*, the peyote cactus, which according to Don Juan revealed an entity named Mescalito, a powerful teacher who would show Castaneda a proper way of life. Another drug was the Jimson weed or *Datura inoxia*, which was described consistently as an implacable female presence. Finally, Castaneda smoked a preparation known as *humito* or the 'little smoke', which was made from a selection of herbs mixed with a species of the *Psilocybe* mushroom, and which was used for divination. In addition, Castaneda was required to carry out precise rituals for the harvesting of these plants, their preparation and use. At each stage, Don Juan
would explain the significance of the ritual gestures, counsel his apprentice how to behave while under the drug’s influence, and most importantly, question him at great length afterwards about each detail of his experience. Thus Don Juan patiently and carefully elucidated a highly detailed system of knowledge with foundations so alien that they set up a tension in Castaneda which lasted nearly the ten years of his apprenticeship.

The purpose of the hallucinogenic substances, explained Don Juan, was to give access to the powers or forces at large in the world, and which a man of knowledge must eventually learn to use. The drug-induced experiences, however, were profoundly disturbing for the young anthropologist as they threw him into one inexplicable ecstatic confrontation after another. At one time, after ingesting peyote, he encountered a black dog who became progressively more luminous, to the point of transparency. This was later identified by Don Juan as Mescalito, the great teacher. On another occasion, Castaneda had the impression of flying through the air and of soaring over high mountains. On still another occasion, having smoked the kumito, he watched crow’s wings sprout from what had been his cheekbones and a tail grow from his neck. With three other crows he then flew off for several days.

At the conclusion of each psychotropic experience there followed an extensive interview by Don Juan, and in turn, an almost ritualistic formula of questions by Castaneda. For example, being profoundly disturbed by the irrationality of his impression of apparent flight, Castaneda pressed Don Juan for an explanation which would accord with his inherited world view:

‘You see, don Juan, you and I are differently oriented . . .’
‘But what I mean, don Juan, is that if you and I look at a bird and see it fly, we agree that it is flying. But if two of my friends had seen me flying as I did last night, would they have agreed that I was flying?’
‘Well, they might have. You agree that birds fly because you have seen them flying. Flying is a common thing with birds. But you will not agree on other things birds do, because you have never seen birds doing them. If your friends knew about men flying with the devil’s weed (i.e., Jimson), then they would agree.’
‘Let’s put it another way, don Juan. What I meant to say is that if I had tied myself to a rock with a heavy chain I would have flown just the same, because my body had nothing to do with my flying.’
Don Juan looked at me incredulously. ‘If you tie yourself to a rock,’ he said, ‘I’m afraid you will have to fly holding the rock with its heavy chain.’

At length, it became possible for Castaneda to have such experiences without the aid of psychotropics. These feelings of dis-association from the world of his own rationality led eventually to his withdrawing from his apprenticeship to Don Juan. He organised his extensive field notes into a master’s thesis at U.C.L.A. and published them in 1968 under the title, The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge. The book was dedicated

1 Teachings of Don Juan, pp. 128–9.
to the old sorcerer, and when Castaneda returned to Mexico to show it to his teacher, he was persuaded to resume his apprenticeship.

The second book, covering a period of approximately two years, is truly a sequel to the first in the sense that here the author is no longer attempting to defend the outrageous assaults on rationality occasioned by his experiences with Don Juan, but is now trying to experience for himself the incomprehensible dynamics of the sorcerer's special world. Assisted by another brujo by the name of Don Genaro, Don Juan succeeds in getting his apprentice to 'see', that is, to have a bodily awareness of the world rather than a rational interpretation. Released from the restraints of reason, Castaneda begins to enter the contradictory world of Don Juan's disclosure, to such an extent that on one occasion his experiences prompt him to exclaim:¹

My mind refused to intake that sort of stimuli as being 'real', and yet, after ten years of apprenticeship with don Juan, my mind could no longer uphold my ordinary criteria of what is real . . . I began to weep. Tears fell freely. For the first time in my life I felt the encumbering weight of my reason. An indescribable anguish overtook me.

Yet this experience of breaking out of his inherited world view was only transitory, momentary. Castaneda did not see, but only glimpsed. He failed to enter fully the sorcerer's world, and thus the second book ends somewhat like the first, on a note of frustration and disappointment.

The most complete account of Castaneda's experiences with Don Juan comes in his third book, Journey to Ixtlan. Although it covers approximately the same period of field study as does the first, this work suggests Castaneda's growing precision of interpretive vocabulary. Moreover, it reflects a radical reorientation. The first two books were based on the assumption that the teaching points in the process of learning to be a sorcerer were primarily the states or experiences produced by the ingestion of psychotropic substances. Now, the author asserts, looking back over the experience of ten years with the new vision of a completed apprenticeship, these plants served only to break Castaneda out of his own world view, however momentarily, in order for him to glimpse and begin to comprehend the description of the world as fostered by Don Juan. Reviewing his field notes of those earlier years, Castaneda realises that the essentials of Don Juan's teachings were contained in their encounters from the very beginning, wedged as it were, between reports of hallucinogenic experiences. Thus the third book recalls the teachings of those early days and completes them by an account of Castaneda's ultimate experience of achieving the sorcerer's vision in his own right.

Before proceeding to a description and interpretation of the central

¹ A Separate Reality, p. 315.
themes contained in these three accounts, it may be helpful to make one or two general comments regarding methodology.

Not surprisingly, Castaneda’s books have prompted a variety of reactions, popular and professional.1 Yet irrespective of the sector from which they originate, the critic and the would-be convert seem agreed in recognising one element in Castaneda’s works which mark them off from the mainstream of anthropological reporting, viz., the author’s own determined involvement in this almost mythic scenario of modern rationalistic neurosis and ancient existentialistic cure. The participant-observer role which Castaneda assumes is indeed a double-edged sword. On the one hand, coming so much as he does from the same world as his reader, the author is able to embody many of the scepticisms and reservations which would spring so quickly and naturally to mind were the reader to be placed in similar circumstances. Yet for precisely this same reason we become suspicious; for there seems to be a certain measure of artificiality in the fact that everything fits so well. To be sure, the events, experiences and interpretations given in these books compare favourably with accounts of sorcery in other cultures and traditions. However, the personal prominence assumed by Castaneda in their recording raises what one commentator has described as the perennial methodological problem that anything supernatural seems incredible, even when it happens to us, and more so when it is reported to us by another.2 Thus the reactions to these books range from charges that they are unacceptable as anthropological documents to commendations that they are brilliant literary achievements; from scepticism regarding the historical authenticity of Don Juan Matus to unquestioning acceptance of him as a new guru for our time. There is no question that the books are provocative. They challenge the layman to accept the authenticity of the experiences undergone by Castaneda and to assent to the possibility of a world where ‘space does not conform to Euclidean geometry, time does not form a continuous unidirectional flow, causation does not conform to Aristotelian logic’, and ‘man is not differentiated from non-man or life from death . . .’.3 At the same time, they challenge the social scientist to accept a highly personal, experiential and wholly unverifiable set of events. It is not surprising, therefore, that to date most of the comments regarding Castaneda’s works have been of a technical nature (that is, concerned primarily with establishing an independent verification of Don Juan’s existence) rather than interpretative.

In response to the critic’s quest for the historical Don Juan, Castaneda replies disarmingly that he has taken all possible precautions to preserve the anonymity of his teacher at his own request, and that moreover, coming

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1 Burton’s article reviews briefly some of the comments and reactions of Castaneda’s teachers and colleagues; cf., esp. pp. 32–5.
2 Ted Hughes, ‘Sorcerer’s Apprentice’ (A review of A Separate Reality), The Observer, 5 March 1972.
3 From Walter Goldschmidt’s ‘Forward’ to The Teachings of Don Juan, p. 9.
as he himself does from the European intellectual tradition, it would be highly unlikely that Castaneda would be led to invent such a character, much less make the accommodations in his life style which his experiences have required.¹

However tantalising these questions and criticisms may be, to follow each of them to conclusion would take us away from the main concern of this essay. It is fair to say, I think, that the student of comparative religion is occasionally required to deal with testimony at least as questionable as this. For those who would reject completely the objective status of Castaneda’s account there is still the possibility of engaging in a thematic study of the books after the fashion of certain creation myths or heroic narratives.

On the surface at least, Castaneda’s writings give the impression of scientific respectability, and even suggest a self-consciousness on the author’s behalf of the many objections which may possibly be raised against them.²

Taken together, the three books cover a period of nearly ten years, from June 1961 to May 1971. During that period, Castaneda took voluminous field notes both of his conversations with Don Juan as well as the experiences brought on by the psychotropic substances. In addition, certain material was tape-recorded. All of the conversations were conducted in Spanish, as Don Juan and Castaneda both had a thorough command of that language. The notes and tapes were eventually translated into English. The material was edited extensively, and occasionally re-arranged sequentially so as to present a gradual development of experience and teaching. The material thus presented has solely to do with Castaneda’s viewing Don Juan as a sorcerer, and with his acquiring membership in that art. The terms ‘sorcerer’ and ‘sorcery’ were used, the author explains, because Don Juan employed these categories himself. No attempt is made at any place in Castaneda’s writings to import recognised anthropological terminology into his direct reporting, although a rather unsuccessful step in the direction of a structural analysis of Don Juan’s teaching was made in the second half of the first book.³

Finally, it must be noted that Castaneda makes no attempt to place Don Juan in any cultural milieu. The fact that the holy man is a Yaqui Indian, and that he is regarded highly by those who know him, presumably from his own tribe, does not at all suggest that the sorcery practiced by him personally is either known to or practiced by the Indians of that tribe generally.⁴ In fact, with the exception of the person of Don Genaro who

¹ Cf. Keen, op. cit., p. 92.
² This is especially true of Castaneda’s remarks in his ‘Introduction’ to A Separate Reality, pp. 9–25.
³ Most reviewers and commentators are in agreement that the ‘Structural Analysis’ contained at the end of The Teachings of Don Juan adds little to the reader’s overall understanding. For example, see Roszak, op. cit., p. 185.
⁴ Apart from the question of the historical authenticity of Don Juan, this is the most-frequently raised objection against Castaneda’s method. For instance, the Madsens write: ‘Castaneda’s work,
figures occasionally in the second and third books, the appearance of individuals other than Castaneda and Don Juan is rare.

The method of Castaneda's exposition is primarily dialogical, with occasional narrative passages; and his method of interpretation is self-consciously phenomenological. He acknowledges that the events selected and the explanations provided are the result of personal choice, and that another author with different expectations and goals might have isolated different elements for consideration. Most importantly, however, Castaneda has striven to suspend judgment regarding the value of the content of his accounts and yet, by entering into the logic of the system of knowledge imparted to him, has attempted to provide an interpretation of his experiences in terms which are proper to that system. In my judgment, this method would only need to be complemented by comparison with other accounts of similar data to qualify as a true exercise in phenomenology or typology of religion.

In many ways, the spirit of the teachings of Don Juan can be summed up in the statement of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that 'Man is in the world and only in the world does he know himself'. Taken together, Castaneda's three accounts of the knowledge imparted to him by Don Juan constitute a kind of religious epistemology; for they are concerned primarily with distinguishing between 'looking' which is the mode of being of ordinary man, and 'seeing' which is the characteristic of the man of knowledge. The basic premise of sorcery as presented by Don Juan is that for the warrior that is, for the individual who is striving to become a man of knowledge, the world of everyday life is neither real nor 'out there' as we are accustomed to believe; but rather, what we take to be real, or the world which we think we know is only a description. Castaneda's three books record the gradual process of apprenticeship whereby he is led first by means of psychotropic substances to question the existential value of his inherited world-view, then without the use of these substances to admit the possibility of an alternative system of interpretation, and finally, to bring the two systems into such sharp opposition simultaneously that each reveals the relativity of the other, and thus the subject is permitted however briefly, to apprehend the world without any interpretation, that is, to have the experience of pure wondering perception.

however, cannot be judged as ethnography because it is not placed in a cultural context. He does not actually describe the Yaqui Indian way of life or the Yaqui philosophy of life. Rather, he gives a subjective account of his relationship with a man who, although he was a Yaqui, did not belong to the Yaqui community, and was feared by them.' Madsen, op. cit., p. 80. On precisely this point Castaneda differs from most anthropologists, for example, James S. Slotkin, who studied the peyote cult as practiced within the Native American Church, and who eventually became a full-fledged member of that community. Accordingly, his report, while based in great measure on his own experiences, does not fail to provide a complete cultural setting for them. See James S. Slotkin, The Peyote Religion, Glencoe, Illinois, 1956.

1 See A Separate Reality, p. 25.
These concepts, of course, are not presented in such abstract form; for it is precisely the rejection of intellectualisations which Don Juan shares with certain varieties of Buddhism which impels him to scorn Castaneda’s unexamined reliance on question and answer and explanation as means to knowledge. Instead, Don Juan contrives a series of experiences ranging from those which are induced by hallucinogenics to those brought about by his pupil himself, to convey these insights. In order to illustrate both the content and technique of Don Juan’s teaching, I would like to consider three episodes taken from different stages in Castaneda’s apprenticeship.

Shortly after their first encounter, and in response to Castaneda’s urging that Don Juan test the authenticity of his desire to learn about medicinal herbs, the old man set him a problem. The two had been sitting and talking on Don Juan’s front porch. At one point the old man called attention to the fact that Castaneda has been sitting on the floor for a very long time and that he must be quite tired. He suggests that the proper thing would be for Castaneda to find a spot on the floor where he could sit without fatigue. Not understanding Don Juan’s directive, the young man changed position, assuming a place closer to his teacher. The author thus relates:  

He protested at my movement and clearly emphasized that a spot meant a place where a man could feel naturally happy and strong. He patted the place where he sat and said it was his own spot, adding that he had posed a riddle I had to solve myself without further deliberation.

Castaneda makes a few brief attempts to locate his ‘spot’, fails and begins to argue against the absurdity and foolishness of the exercise. At first Don Juan reacts by becoming annoyed with his pupil. The text continues:  

After a while he calmed down and explained to me that not every place was good to sit or be on, and that within the confines of the porch there was one spot that was unique, a spot where I could be at my very best. It was my task to distinguish it from all the other places. The general pattern was that I had to ‘feel’ all the possible spots that were accessible until I could determine without doubt which was the right one.

Again, the apprentice attempts to elude the challenge by argumentation. Don Juan warns that these objections are irrelevant, and that the test may take days, but that because he himself knows where the correct spot is, it would be foolish for Castaneda to cheat. After efforts lasting several hours, the young man still had no success, and Don Juan counsels him that he has not been proceeding correctly, that is, he has not been using his eyes. With the eyes, Don Juan explains, one can feel things on the condition that the eyes are not looking directly into things. After extensive experimentation, Castaneda begins to discern different shades of colour associated

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1 The Teachings of Don Juan, p. 31.
2 Ibid.
with various spots on the porch. Eventually isolating one of the more obvious of these, he sits on it several times, each time having sensations of anxiety and discomfort. In reaction, he takes up an opposite position where he feels comfortable, and soon falls asleep. He awakens to finds his teacher commending him for having located his place. Don Juan then explains that the good place was known as the *sitio*, while the other place was called the ‘enemy’. The very act of sitting on the *sitio* created superior strength in one, while sitting on the other weakened a man and might even cause his death. The exercise, Don Juan continues, might be performed anywhere, and that the proper way to distinguish the two places was by ‘feeling’ with the eyes.

The second episode I wish to consider took place nearly seven years later and involved the use of humito or the hallucinogenic smoke made from the mixture of ground herbs and a variety of the Psylocybe mushroom. Prior to smoking the mixture Castaneda was instructed in the proper procedure for gathering the ingredients, preparing and using them. Don Juan explained that the *humito* was an ally, that is, a power which could be manipulated to serve particular ends. He described *humito* as a female presence which could give useful insights and these so gained would lead to the acquisition of personal power.

Castaneda was forbidden to eat prior to the smoking and was told that the *humito* would give him a vision of the keeper of the other world. The substance was prepared and smoked. Shortly thereafter Castaneda had a truly remarkable experience which he described in the following way:

> . . . then, all of a sudden, I felt as if I had stood up. There was a very puzzling sensation that deserved some pondering, but there was no time for that. I had the total sensation that I was looking straight onward from my usual eye level, and what I saw shook up the last fibre of my being. There is no other way to describe the emotional jolt I experienced. Right there facing me, a short distance away, was a gigantic, monstrous animal. A truly monstrous thing! Never in the wildest fantasies of fiction had I encountered anything like it. I looked at it in complete, utmost bewilderment.

The object of Castaneda’s vision was a giant insect, perhaps a hundred feet high, covered with tufts of black hair, and having two large wings and enormous white eyeballs. The insect circled twice around him and then drew closer, to a point where its wings beat against him, causing the most excruciating pains.

The experience ended almost as suddenly as it had begun, and the next realisation the apprentice had was of being awakened from a deep sleep. Questioning Don Juan about his apparition, Castaneda was simply told that he had seen the sentry of the other world. There then followed an exchange between master and pupil which is typical of those which took place after similar such visions:

> 1 A Separate Reality, pp. 143–4.  
'But what was it, Don Juan?'
'The guardian, the keeper, the sentry of the other world,' Don Juan said factually.
I intended to relate to him the details of that portentous and ugly beast, but he disregarded my attempt, saying that my experience was nothing special, that any man could do that. I told him that the guardian had been such a shock to me that I really had not yet been able to think about it.
Don Juan laughed and made fun of what he called an overdramatic bent of my nature.
'That thing, whatever it was, hurt me,' I said. 'It was as real as you and I.'
'Of course it was real,' (he replied) 'It caused you pain, didn’t it?'
'What was the point of making me see that monstrosity, Don Juan?'
He became serious and gazed at me.
'That was the guardian,' he said. 'If you really want to see you must overcome the guardian.'

The third episode took place in the second year of Castaneda’s apprenticeship and it is related in his third book, probably because, unlike the experiences recorded in the first, it did not involve the use of psychotropics.

While returning from an extended stay in the wilds of the western Sierra Madre, Don Juan instructed his student in what he referred to as the ‘gait of power’, viz., a distinctive style of jogging which was intended to render the warrior invulnerable while travelling at night. Castaneda’s first attempts to imitate his teacher’s run were unsuccessful. After repeated efforts, however, he began to catch on. Don Juan then explained that the purpose of the gait of power is to protect oneself from the alien and dangerous powers which roam in the night. While following his teacher out of the region in the pitch darkness, Castaneda encountered precisely the type of being he had been cautioned to avoid:

After a moment I noticed again a certain flicker or a wave in the darkness to my left. It was not a sight proper, but rather a feeling, and yet I was almost sure I was perceiving it with my eyes. It moved faster than I did, and again it crossed from left to right, making me lose my balance. . . . I suddenly became angry and the incongruency of my feelings threw me into true panic. I tried to accelerate my pace . . .

At that moment some gruesome thing came to my attention. There was actually something like an animal to my left, almost touching me. I jumped involuntarily and veered to my right. The fright almost suffocated me. I was so intensely gripped by the fear that there were no thoughts in my mind as I moved in the darkness as fast as I could.

A few moments later Castaneda again encountered the creature, this time it had a visible form, something like a large dark mass. It lasted for only a few seconds. Eventually he caught up with Don Juan who, to Castaneda’s great consternation and surprise, did not want to hear about the experience. The next morning, however, Castaneda was encouraged by his

1 Journey to Ixtlan, pp. 210–11.
teacher to give a full account of the previous night’s events. After listening to his pupil, Don Juan replied:\(^2\)

‘You stumbled on some entities which are in the world, and which act on people. You know nothing about them because you have never encountered them. Perhaps it would be proper to call them entities of the mountains; they don’t really belong to the night. I call them entities of the night because one can perceive them in the darkness with greater ease. They are here, around us at all times . . .’

‘But are they real, Don Juan?’

‘Of course! They are so real that ordinarily they kill people, especially those who stray into the wilderness and have no personal power.’

‘If you knew they were so dangerous, why did you leave me alone there?’

‘There is only one way to learn, and that is to get down to business. To only talk about power is useless. If you want to know what power is, and if you want to store it, you must tackle everything yourself.’

It would be possible to multiply experiences of these kinds, for the three books taken together contain at least twenty-five accounts of experiences of ‘non ordinary’ reality which were prompted either by hallucinogenic substances or by dramatic preparation and setting. These three episodes, however, are sufficiently representative of the others for me to make some general and preliminary interpretations.

Before doing so I wish to acknowledge the ever-present problem of establishing the validity of the experience. It is difficult to avoid the dilemma which arises when the scholar in considering the subject-object relationship between the one who has the experience and the object of his experience is limited to a consideration of human behaviour. For Castaneda himself, of course, these experiences had a substantial content, and while at the beginning of his apprenticeship he was inclined to regard them as projections of a sort, he comes eventually to insist upon their validity. It is relatively easy for the scholar to brand such experiences as directly or indirectly illusory. But to assume such a position is, in my judgment, to miss the significance of the content of the experience. Thus I shall not attempt to explain away or in any other sense account for the causes of Castaneda’s experiences either by pointing to the physiological effects of psychotropic substances or to the psychological results of cueing or preconditioning. Unquestionably Don Juan is a master of histrionics, with respect both to the preparation of his pupil for the experience as well as its subsequent interpretation. However, I shall hold the question of validity in abeyance, and turn instead to the issue of the themes which are represented in both the alleged experiences and the teachings surrounding them.

What is immediately apparent about the three accounts cited above, as well as the others contained in Castaneda’s writings, is the way they conform to a kind of formal outline. Preceding each personal excursion of the

\(^2\) Loc. cit., p. 213.
apprentice into the world of non-ordinary reality there is a period of preparation, usually involving a minimum of actual instruction, along with certain guidelines for behaviour and reaction. Then follows the experience itself. Afterwards, the apprentice is required to give a detailed report of all that has transpired, usually responding to precise questions set by the instructor. This, in turn, is followed by an almost ritualistic set of questions and answers whereby the apprentice seeks an explanation for what has happened. The teacher refuses to provide an explanation and instead gives an interpretation. The difference between the two is that the explanation is sought in terms which are intelligible to the apprentice, while the interpretation is outside his frame of reference and corresponds instead to the world-view which the teacher is seeking to impart to his pupil.

As the practitioner of a system of sorcery involving both abstract conceptions and patterns of practical behaviour, Don Juan attempted to initiate Castaneda into both simultaneously. Hence the importance of existential learning situations. At each stage in the apprenticeship, therefore, it was necessary for Don Juan to provide a conceptual framework in terms of which the experiences, hallucinogenic or otherwise, might be interpreted. As soon as Castaneda gave assent to this interpretative apparatus—however conditional or imperfect that assent may have been—then to that extent he was able to regard his experience in terms of it. Thus Castaneda's total initiation must be distinguished into a first transition from being an ordinary man or a 'stranger', to becoming an apprentice or warrior, and a second transition from being a warrior to becoming eventually a man of knowledge. It is only in the final three chapters of his last book that Castaneda suggests he is now in this last stage of initiation.

The outline of Castaneda's apprenticeship corresponds favourably with patterns of initiation discovered through cross-cultural study. As with other types of ritual transition, great importance is accorded the figure of the teacher or guide. From the very beginning this relationship with Don Juan dominated Castaneda's experiences. Although at first the young man was reluctant to enter an apprenticeship, Don Juan assured him that he has had clear indication that this is the person to whom he must commit his knowledge of sorcery. Moreover, the role of the old man in Castaneda's initiation was totally comprehensive, for from the outset it was clear there were no shared presuppositions. It was necessary for Don Juan to instruct Castaneda regarding the existence of sorcery, to tell him of the powers which are available in the world for manipulation, to indicate the proper disposition which he should assume in order to acquire these powers, and

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1 Castaneda has referred to such learning situations as 'gestures' or deliberate acts which are undertaken for the power that comes from making a decision. Cf. Keen, op. cit., p. 100. By this I understand him to be suggesting that the content of the action is irrelevant, and that what is crucial is how it is undertaken and executed.
finally, to dissuade him from his original intention of gaining an academic knowledge of psychotropic plants, and prepare him instead to encounter the teacher, Mescalito, who may be reached through the peyote cactus. Thus the instruction embraced the conceptual and procedural orders simultaneously.

Much like the world view of the shaman in traditional religious societies, at the basis of Don Juan's teaching was the distinction between the world as experienced by men ordinarily and the way it is experienced by the sorcerer. World, for Don Juan, was not equivalent to 'cosmos' in the Pythagorean sense of a universe or an ordered system. It was not a mental construct, a set of categories in terms of which individual experiences may be interpreted. Instead it was a mystery, an ever-changing flow of an almost Heraclitean type, which admits of no firm or final definitions. It was a world peopled by spirits, some capable of manipulation, others not, only there to be contacted providing the conditions were correct in every detail. The ecstatic experiences were interpreted as encounters with the latter; while the relationships with the various allies seemed to be more of a possession from without.

To stress the difference between ways of relating to the world Don Juan introduced the distinction between 'looking' or the way men usually apprehend the world and 'seeing' or the complex process, somewhat open-ended, of coming to terms with the world without any interpretative categories. Thus, even the alternative world view of sorcery which Don Juan sought to impart to Castaneda was not an end in itself. It served only to provide the apprentice with a radically different set of categories which, when brought into sharp, dramatic and occasionally violent opposition with his inherited world view, might cause him to intuit the arbitrariness of each and enable him to exist with the momentary wonder of pure perception.

If, for interpretive purposes, we regard the shaman as a specialist in the sacred, that is, as one who participates in the spirit world personally and more completely than other members of his community, then Castaneda's experiences bear all the obvious signs of a shamanistic-type initiation. In general terms, the shaman is the expert in establishing and maintaining contact with the deity or world of the spirits. In substance, his initiation is often characterised by one or many ecstatic or 'out-of-the-body' experiences, which then become the distinctive mark of his shamanistic practice. It is precisely this ability to leave his or her body at will—an ability first acquired and interpreted during the initiation—which some would point to as the peculiar feature of shamanism. Although the techniques of sham-

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Castaneda and Don Juan

anistic initiation vary from culture to culture, the goal of the apprenticeship seems remarkably similar, viz., ‘the complete dismantling and reorganisation of the entire sensory experience of the aspirant’.¹ In order to achieve this end, two stages seem necessary: first, the ecstatic instruction, constituted primarily by a single or a series of out-of-the-body experiences, or an experience of physical transformation; and second, the traditional instruction, which takes place at the hands of another shaman or shamans, and which usually involves instruction in shamanistic techniques. More importantly, this second stage provides a validation of the ecstatic experience, consisting of an interpretation or contextualisation in terms common to both the teacher and initiate. The alternation of these two postures, i.e., experience and interpretation, seems to be one of the most prominent features of Castaneda’s apprenticeship.

Castaneda’s encounters with ‘non-ordinary reality’ (as he chooses to call it), range from the relatively undramatic experience of sensory perception, for example, his view of place and landscape in terms of changing colours or fibres of light, to those in which he engages some supra-human being, such as the transparent dog with which he frolics on one occasion, or to the giant insect mentioned earlier, or to the contact with the human form of Mescalito, and finally to those experiences where he undergoes an ‘actual’ physical transformation. The most startling of this latter type was his metamorphosis from a human being to a crow, and his subsequent impression of prolonged flight. It is this last detail, viz., metamorphosis and magical flight, which compare most favourably with other descriptions of shamanistic initiation and practice. Other similar themes are present too: during one ecstatic venture Castaneda was led to the ‘place between the worlds’, a description in spatial terms of the point of reference between the Western intellectual Weltanschauung and that of the Yaqui sorcerer.² The similarity between Castaneda’s journey to that point and the shaman’s account of a visit to the centre of the cosmos is striking.

From his ecstatic experiences Castaneda derived personal power similar to that acquired by the shaman. From the Psilocybe mushroom he learned the techniques for assuming the form of an animal, particularly the crow, as well as the ability to fly at will. From the humito he acquired the power of divination, especially the interpretation of past events, as well as bodily movement. In each case the psychotropic substance was referred to by Don Juan as an ‘ally’, or more properly, as the medium for encountering the ally. The ally contacted through the humito was portrayed as female,
and characterised accordingly as possessive, violent, unpredictable, and having a deleterious effect on the character of her followers. On the other hand, the ally contacted through *Psilocybe* was male-like, and hence, dispassionate, gentle, predictable, a giver of ecstasy and generally beneficial to the personality of his followers. In both cases, the ally was a helper and was manipulatable as long as the techniques for encountering it were correctly observed. On the contrary, Mescalito, or the being identical with the power of the peyote cactus, was a teacher, a protector, who imparted knowledge of the right way to live. The object of Castaneda’s many experiences with the two allies was to develop a familiarity with them in order to gain eventual mastery.\(^1\) In his relationship with Mescalito, however, the purpose was to occasion and sustain frequent contacts with no expectation of domination.

It is Castaneda’s transition from being a ‘stranger’ to becoming a ‘warrior’ which corresponds in form and content to an ecstatic stage of shamanistic initiation. Here the central image seems most to resemble that found in accounts recorded elsewhere. The total crisis and hence the primary moment of the shaman’s initiation involves both the disintegration of the personality and the body, and may be symbolised by death, dismemberment or reduction to a skeleton, followed by a reintegration of the personality and body, symbolised by a return to life, the re-assembling of bodily members, the clothing of the skeleton with new, superhuman flesh, or the implanting in the body of crystals or stones which represent newly-acquired power. In each case the symbolism seems to be the same: the contact between the former person and the newly-initiated shaman is irreparably broken, owing to the complete metamorphosis of personality and body. It is interesting to compare Castaneda’s experience at this point. We would expect that since his body was already in the world of sorcery, all that was needed was a kind of psychological adjustment. But more was required of him. By calling on Castaneda to assume the posture of a warrior, that is to say, to erase all details of personal history; to cease to be self-conscious by stopping interior dialogue; to become inaccessible to the demands of others; to adopt an austere and disciplined life; and finally, to disrupt all routines of his former life, Don Juan in effect, brought about by the use of psychotropic substances and other forms of instruction, the complete reversal of Castaneda’s ordinary human situation. This was a metamorphosis as complete as any shamanistic initiation. The frequent warning by Don Juan that a less-than-perfect execution of an exercise would result in ‘death’, coupled with Castaneda’s self-admitted fear of permanent psychological disorienta-

\(^1\) The similarity between the allies of Castaneda’s accounts and the guardian spirits of the shaman seems especially strong. Cf. Hultkrantz, *op. cit.*, where he writes: the shaman is ‘... a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group members’, p. 34. The significant difference, of course, is that neither Castaneda nor Don Juan seems to be at the service of a community.
tion, again remind one of the psychological crisis suggested by some accounts of shamanistic initiation: a crisis so deep that it sometimes seems to border on madness.

To date, Castaneda's books leave off as he begins his traditional instruction, i.e. the validation and exercise of his newly-acquired personality. This is his transition from being a warrior (i.e. undergoing ecstatic experiences in order to accomplish a change of identity) to being a man of knowledge (i.e. of passing beyond the possession of a new and alternative world view, to the recognition of the arbitrariness of each). With this transition comes the personal power to confront and live with the unstructured nature of 'world' entailed by that recognition. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that shortly there will appear a fourth and final volume, entitled Tales of Power, in which Castaneda gives an account of his ability to carry on activities within the sorcerer's world while retaining 'an awareness that both the everyday description of reality and the sorcerer's description are equally detailed and arbitrary'. One can expect that with the addition of this final book there will be brought to completion a unique ethnographic document relating in part to the phenomenon of shamanism, which this paper has merely attempted to introduce and suggests areas of discussion.

4 This fourth volume, Tales of Power, is due to be published by Simon and Schuster, New York.