

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

Volume 7, Number 11

November 1999

The Shaman Question: Revisited

by Richard Petraitis

While conducting research on the Taino Indians, I uncovered an intriguing record of shamanic deception, as chronicled by the Spanish conquistadors. According to the account, a Taino cacique (chief) convinced his subjects he had magical abilities because a zemi (the carved idol of a forest spirit guardian) located inside the chief's home had the supernatural power to speak. The suspicious Spaniards soon found the origin of the zemi's (and cacique's) power - a cohort of the Taino headman, hidden in the chief's dwelling, who spoke into a long narrow tube connected to the guardian idol. Neither the zemi nor cacique had magical power!¹ The Taino chief begged the Spanish not to reveal the source of his magic to the villagers. For years, the cacique had fooled the locals with his magician's ruse. This historical account begs the question, "Is shamanism the belief in magic delivered to adherents with a bit of legerdemain and showmanship?"

Recently, I have been taken to task by critics of my article, "The Shamans of Suburbia." (May 1997, Vol. 5, #5) David Bloomberg, the chairman of REALL, notified me he received



E-mail responses that took issue with my critique of Native American Shamanism. Some challengers were offended at my skeptical approach to the topic which relied on history, using primary and secondary sources. I believe a historically based skepticism can help many Americans counter the revived, societal enthusiasm for magical thinking. For the reader, I have listed the dissenting questions to my article from friend and foe. I hope to further build a case against a belief in magic by using

history to contest the revived, New Age romance with Shamanism.

1. The Native American shamans had the ability to see the future! How else can we explain the Aztec prophecy of "bearded white gods" from the sea and other Native prophecies about the coming of the white man?

Not true! According to the record of history, the supersti-

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Bennett Braun Case Settled

by David Bloomberg

The Illinois Department of Professional Regulation's case against Bennett Braun for his treatment of the Burgus family has been settled prior to the scheduled November hearings.

As discussed in previous issues (Vol. 6, #8-10; Vol. 7, #2, 6, & 7), the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation (IDPR) filed a complaint against psychiatrist Bennett Braun, a leader in the repressed memory movement, and two of his colleagues. One of those colleagues, Elva Poznanski, had settled her case a few months ago.

Somewhat surprisingly, the IDPR has now accepted a settlement with Braun as well. This settlement prohibits Braun from practicing for two years, and then puts him on a minimum five-year probation period that forbids him from treating patients having multiple personality disorder. It also includes a \$5000 fine and additional medical education.

When REALL last interviewed the lead prosecutor on this case, Thomas Glasgow, he said that he would only settle with Braun if such an agreement included the indefinite suspension of Braun's license to practice medicine. However, Glasgow has since left that position and gone into private practice. Tony Sanders, public information officer for the IDPR, said in a telephone interview that they looked at the long-term benefits of settling this case and decided this settlement was the way to

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Glasgow noted that it sends a "very powerful message" that doctors should not be practicing "hocus pocus psychiatry."

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

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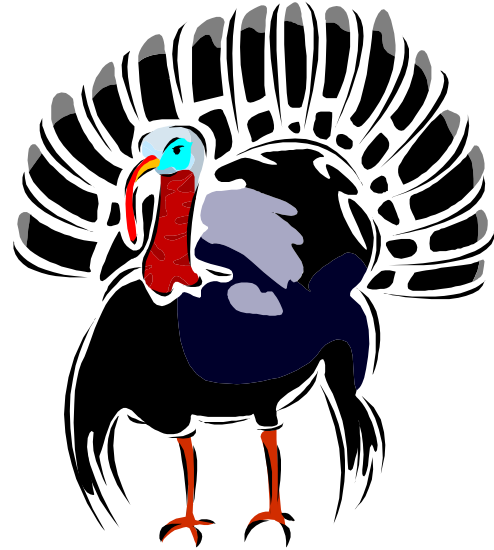
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Predictions

- Conspiracy Museum
- More Weird Web Sites
- Book Reviews
- Skeptic Music



From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

I'd like to thank David Gehrig for another great presentation! While I thought both of his recent talks (The Bible Codes a couple months ago and Holocaust Revisionism last month) went quite well, he told me he felt more comfortable this time – he said he didn't have to worry about stepping on any toes or offending anybody because they misunderstood where he was coming from. Indeed, while we had pro-code folks at his first presentation, there were no Nazis or revisionists at this one. (This was good news for our Vice Chairman, Jim Rosenthal, because I had informed him that one of the duties of his office is to throw his body in front of the Chairman if a riot should break out.) This may explain why we've been through more people in that office than any other...

This month, we'll feature another "David" speaking – me. With the recent attention on urban legends (see "REALLity Check"), it seems appropriate to address this subject at our meeting. These stories can range from the amusing to the injurious, and I'll address a wide variety of them, along with how they spread and why. I hope to see you all there.

The Benefits of Membership

A couple months ago, we received back a membership form from a long-time subscriber. On it he circled the part about the "benefits of membership" and asked what these were. A good question! So I thought I'd use a little space here to address it.

The main benefit of membership is, frankly, your support of REALL and all of our ideas and viewpoints. As a subscriber, you pay for your newsletter, period (actually, a recent look at our bills indicate that the \$12 might not even quite cover a year's subscription, but that's another issue). Members, and especially Patron members, allow us to do more than just put out a newsletter. Members allow REALL to exist and to fulfill its goals, including continuing to provide information to the largest number of people possible. They provide our funding to send out press releases, meeting notices, pay costs associated with speakers when necessary, and, of course, run any special projects (like our high school essay contest). As a matter of fact, we recently have added three people to our roster of Patron members, and I will take any opportunity (such as this one) to thank them and all the Patrons for their extra generosity!

Ok, but what about the tangible benefits? Well, the most obvious one is that you can vote for the officers who lead REALL (or even be an officer, for that matter), and thus help to guide our path. But being a member also means having access to whatever special deals we might offer (such as our occasional Prometheus Books sales) and also to our e-mail list, where you can get alerts on news of interest and discuss some of the issues we deal with. Of course, now that we're a 5013) non-profit organization, you can also deduct membership dues above the newsletter cost from your taxes.

From the Editor

Wally Hartshorn

Goodness, what a very full issue we have! We're in the pleasant position of having more material than could fit in this issue! In fact, we already have one article for December's issue, and we had to delete something like 75% of this month's "REALLity Check." Cool!

There are two feature articles in this issue. One is by Richard Patraitis, responding to some reactions to his May 1997 article about shamanism. The other is by David Bloomberg, reporting on the final resolution of the complaint brought against Dr. Bennett Braun. Both of them seemed like natural front-page articles, so that is why both are on page 1.

Well, that's all the room I have for this month! ☹

I hope that answers the question for anybody who might have been wondering. I hope everybody always feels free to ask about anything they'd like to know, whether by calling, writing, or e-mailing.

Essay Contest Under Way

Thanks to the work of our Vice Chairman, Jim Rosenthal, and the rest of our Essay Contest Committee (Dave McMaster, Malcolm Levin, Wally Hartshorn, and myself), this month we sent out letters, rules packets, and press releases for the First Annual REALL Student Essay Contest.

The contest is open to all Central Illinois high school students (except immediate family members of the Committee or REALL's Board). We only sent out letters to schools in and around Sangamon County due to cost and time restrictions, but if you live in other Central Illinois areas (like Champaign-Urbana or Bloomington-Normal, for example) and would like to promote the contest at your local high school, please feel free to refer interested teachers or students to our web page (www.reall.org), which contains the full contest rules. Since all students who plan to participate must register by the end of December, we will soon know how many potential entrants we'll have.

This is not some piddly little contest here. We're giving away a cash prize of \$250 to the winning student! I'm hoping we get a good response from teachers and students.

Breaking News

As we were going to press, the Chicago Tribune finally realized that the Illinois school science standards don't contain the word "evolution." In the October 24 paper, this revelation was the front page story. The State Journal-Register had a small AP story on the 25th. I've already sent letters to both papers and a follow-up letter to State Superintendent McGee. We'll keep you updated as things develop. ☹

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

Too little space for most of the stuff I had — just wait 'til next month!

REALL Is Legendary

Reporter Sarah Antonacci, from the *State Journal-Register*, wrote an article on a couple of police-related urban legends that have been circulating recently (10/3). Unlike WICS a few years back, she debunked them rather than spreading them as truth (see “Legends in Their Own Time,” Vol. 3, #4, April 1995).

One of the legends was actually the same one that WICS reported — “Blue Star Acid.” It is passed around as a warning, in this case supposedly endorsed by a local DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) officer, saying that drug dealers are trying to hook kids by giving them lick-and-stick tattoos that are laced with LSD. The most common form of the tattoo is, of course, a simple blue star; but they can be cartoon characters instead.

The other is more recent, and claims that you should not flash your lights at night at a car driving with headlights off, because that car will chase you down and the driver will shoot you as part of a gang initiation.

Antonacci, who had reported on Matt Nisbet’s presentation to REALL earlier this year and also on the face in the tree last month, called us for comment on these urban legends. Through sheer coincidence, I had just submitted a book review about urban legends to be printed the day they ran her story. She quoted a few things I told her about urban legends and also quoted from a couple of good urban legend web sites I mentioned (in case you’re interested: www.snopes.com and www.urbanlegends.com).

All in all, a nice article that handled urban legends the way they should be — with a healthy dose of skepticism.

REALL Is Spirited

Kathryn Rem, also of the *State Journal-Register*, also contacted us about an article she was writing — on communicating with spirits of the dead (10/10). Unfortunately, in this case my quote was more the lone skeptical voice in the vast wilderness of true belief rather.

The article relates a number of anecdotes dealing with people who are certain the dead talked to them or at least communicated somehow with them. She says, “The most common form of after-death communication is simply sensing the presence of the deceased.” Hmmm. Well, the late Carl Sagan (while he was alive, in case you’re wondering) related how he occasionally “heard” his parents’ voices and all, but that doesn’t mean Sagan believed they were communicating with him. He recognized that when we miss people, we may think we hear or see them, even when they’re not there. In fact, the quote she used from me was, “If you are thinking about some-

body or miss somebody, even if they are alive, you might think you see or hear them. If they are alive, you don’t think they are trying to communicate with you. You just think you made a mistake. But if they have passed away, you know they can’t communicate so you think of an explanation. It’s basically your mind playing tricks on you.” I further noted that it was a comforting thought, but that there is no good scientific evidence to support it. And that was the extent of any skepticism in the article.

Indeed, the Rev. Elizabeth Hawkins, director of pastoral care at Memorial Medical Center, said, “The people who would say that it is a hallucination are people who tend to pooh-pooh spiritual strengths.” In other words, anybody who is skeptical can be ignored. (Incidentally, Rem told me about that quote ahead of time while interviewing me, so I wouldn’t think I was being set up.)

One person quoted said he saw an example of after-death communication. What was it? A butterfly landed on a woman’s shoulder. Now, we might be skeptical that this shows anything other than, well, an insect landing on somebody. But they believed it was “a joyful communication.” I guess we just pooh-pooh everything. ♡



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go. Glasgow, also in a telephone interview, noted that the indefinite suspension would have required Braun to apply to get his license back, but otherwise is similar to the settlement that was reached.

In addition to losing his license for two years, the probationary period of at least five years has other ramifications. First, Sanders said that Braun will have to apply after that five years to be removed from probation. To do so, he will have to meet the requirements laid out for him, and it is by no means automatic. While on probation, he will be required to give a packet of the complaint, his response, and the final order to all prospective employers. He must submit quarterly reports to the IDPR, saying where he is practicing, what he is doing, and what he is treating his patients for. He will not be allowed to supervise any health professionals, including, for example, nurses. According to Sanders, “In effect, he is out of commission in Illinois.” Who, after all, would want to hire a doctor who can’t even supervise a nurse?

Another reason for accepting this settlement was outlined by the IDPR director to the *Chicago Tribune*, and essentially repeated by Sanders. If the IDPR had managed to get Braun’s license revoked indefinitely, Braun would have had the option to appeal to the circuit court — which might have allowed Braun to practice for at least three more years while the case went through the court system.

When asked how this would affect his status if he wanted to move to another state, Sanders noted that all states belong to

a Federation of State Medical Boards, and they are supposed to check for problems in other states whenever a doctor applies for a license. If he holds a license to practice already in another state (Sanders didn't think he did, but was unsure), that state will get a copy of the report. Sanders thought it unlikely that Braun would be able to pick up and move, especially given his notoriety.

Glasgow noted that this settlement does what it is supposed to do: it protects the citizens of the State of Illinois. Braun is losing his livelihood, and that sends a "very powerful message" that doctors should not be practicing "hocus pocus psychiatry." He added that there is not now, nor was there at the time of treatment, any scientific evidence that Braun's methods were accepted. He noted that doctors are supposed to be scientists, and Braun acted in an unacceptable manner. In fact, Glasgow said that it is his opinion that Braun "got a kick out of being the leader in the field."

While this settlement was not specifically approved by the Burgus family ahead of time, they were informed that a settlement was in the works. Burgus said, in a telephone interview, that she was satisfied with the outcome. He is 59 years old now, she noted, and won't be able to practice without restrictions until he's at least 66 – retirement age. "He's ruined his own life," she said. This also means neither she nor her family will have to testify in the case, but she said that was a small consideration, and they had been fully prepared to do so.

Burgus said there is also a pending ethics complaint against Braun with the Illinois Psychiatric Society. She testified at an ethics hearing this summer on her case.

While the cases against Braun and Poznanski have now been settled, one IDPR case related to the Burgus family remains – that against psychologist Roberta Sachs. Sanders said that her case is scheduled to go to hearing in January of next year.

Interestingly, Braun filed suit against his own insurance company this summer for allegedly settling the previous lawsuit against him without his consent. He also has claimed in this case that he only settled with the IDPR for monetary reasons – the cost of fighting the case – but claimed he could have proven he was in the right. He did not actually acknowledge wrongdoing as part of the settlement; he only admitted "that the Department could produce evidence of the facts alleged in the Department's case." And that is immediately followed by a statement saying, "The Respondent could produce evidence refuting the Department's charges but due to the Respondent's current plans and circumstances, the Respondent is seeking to resolve these matters without protracted litigation."

In other words, it seems he may have learned nothing and may still believe in the fantastic tales of huge satanic conspiracies that he elicited from Burgus and other patients. Burgus thinks he still believes in his conspiracies and his methods. Part of it, she thinks, is that he cannot admit to himself how much he hurt her and others; he has to maintain his stand to keep his belief system intact. There is something compelling about this description. Has the former patient diagnosed the doctor? Bennett Braun will have several years to ponder his beliefs and how they led him to where he is now. ♡

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tious Montezuma II had assembled a large group of sorcerers when he began receiving reports of strange men from the sea, as sent to him by the inhabitants of the Yucatan coast. Montezuma's court sorcerers failed to provide answers about these strangers, so the enraged emperor had the lot tossed into prison to starve to death.² One savvy magician, Martin Ocelotl, gained information about the Spanish who landed on the Yucatan, and he prophesied to Montezuma II about "men with beards" equating them with returning gods for the emperor's favor. Later, Ocelotl ran afoul of the Spanish Inquisition. Why? He unwisely bragged to the new rulers that he had been made whole again after Montezuma II had him cut in two!³ Ocelotl's career soon ended.

Some New Agers like to give credit for true prophecy to the first people who encountered Columbus, the Taino. Per the sixteenth century missionary, Friar Ramon, Taino chiefs claimed that their supreme deity "Being of Yucca" told them that "they would enjoy their domain for only a brief time because dressed people, very different, will come to their land and impose themselves." Did the Taino divine the future? But what of the Friar Ramon who recorded the chiefs as first using the prophecy to refer to the warlike Carib!⁴ Notably, the Taino prophets were quick to change the specifics of their ancient prophecy when a new adversary invaded their island world. Couldn't the "Being of Yucca" have been more specific?

During their first encounters with white men, the historical evidence points at the martial unpreparedness of the Native Americans to deal with the invaders, despite the many prophets and seers among the Amerindians. The first sightings of sailing ships by the Amerindians were described as "temples on the sea."⁵ Surely, the shamans, with their ability to foresee the future, could have warned their different peoples that these "temples" carried settlers, soldiers, and cannon! Their reputed ability to foretell events notwithstanding, the shamans were unable to provide their people with more pragmatic information about these new strangers, the Europeans. Despite the shamans' claims to see the future, there was often surprise, not preparedness, displayed by the Amerindians during their early encounters with colonizers.

2. The Native American use of magical means to combat aggressors was much exaggerated in your article!

The four century old struggle for the Americas, as waged by the original inhabitants, often involved the use of magic. In 1519, when the conquistadors were encamped on the Mexican coastline, Montezuma's first attempts to thwart the white intruder were magical. The emperor's wizards infiltrated the camp of Hernando Cortes and attempted to use magic against the Spaniards. The spells of the Aztec wizards failed; they returned to Montezuma II and stated, "We are not equal contenders."⁶ Amerindian magic failed to stop the conquistadors.

The English colonizers also experienced Native American resistance by magical means. The early English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia, had its existence challenged by the powerful Powhatan confederacy. Powhatan priests were in the forefront of the conflicts because of their alleged ability to see the future, to discern secrets, to change the weather, and to use

magic to fight enemies.⁷ In 1611, a battle ensued between English arquebussers and Amerindian bowmen. An Amerindian priest saw arrows bounce off the English armor, and seeing that the English guns needed sparks to fire, he decided to help his side with magic. "The wonder-worker ran the length of the battlefield, rattle in hand, and attempted to invoke the rain gods. Unfortunately, the only rain observed by the English fell miles away, keeping the English powder dry, and the Amerindian bowmen at a most serious disadvantage!"⁸

In 1621, Nemattanew, a Powhatan war leader, claimed immunity from English gunfire, using a magic body oil. Nemattanew was fatally wounded, but to preserve the myth of immunity for his followers, he requested to be buried among the English.⁹ Despite the inability of magic oil to stop lead balls, the Powhatan belief in their shamans' magic remained unshaken, and belief in divining an enemy's intention was high. Ever slowly, as the colonists gained the upper hand in the Eastern woodlands, the shamans lost face in the eyes of their people because of their continued failure to combat European weapons and diseases. The shamans thought their magic failed because the English were "strange."¹⁰

The Amerindian use of magic in warfare continued until the end of the nineteenth century. The Western Apache employed charms to keep bullets from harming their warriors. The leaders of war parties believed that their protective charms, as they rode ahead of their men, would keep the bullets from going past them to harm the warriors bringing up the rear.¹¹ These practices weren't new among the Amerindians. Specifically, shamans were thought to be immune to bullets; they were even thought to have the ability to catch bullets!¹² However, magic charms couldn't protect Indian warriors from modern military arms.

The Amerindian belief in magic lost battles. During the summer of 1857, this was evident with a major Cheyenne defeat along the Solomon River. A troop of United States cavalry, three hundred strong, faced an Indian band of equal number. The commanding army officer expected the Indians to flee, but the mounted warriors had washed their hands in a magic lake. A shaman had promised that the lake's waters would protect the warriors from bullets. The cavalrymen charged with sabers and the braves fled the battlefield. Why? The magical water shielded the warriors from bullets, not the cavalrymen's unsheathed sabers!¹³

How much of the Amerindian resistance was driven by a belief in the magic power of shamans is the subject of heated debate. The historical evidence points to the inefficacy of the seers, and the shamans, to alter a tragic fate by the use of charms, or any other sympathetic magic. There can be no better example of the tragedy brought about by magical thinking than the 1890 American Indian battle at Wounded Knee. Nearly two hundred Indian men, women, and children were felled by the Hotchkiss guns of the U.S. Army, despite the alleged supernatural ability of "ghost shirts" to ward off bullets.

3. Shamans acted within their worldview. The shamans of The Americas never resorted to trickery. They believed in the ability to use the power of spirit beings.

Au contraire! Yes, shamans genuinely may have believed

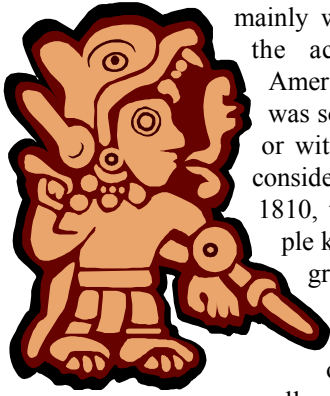
in their ability to communicate with spirit beings, but they resorted to magician's tricks to strengthen their people's belief in shamanic "powers." Shamans were known as conjurers extraordinaire! Shamans used ventriloquism, Houdini-like rope tricks, hypnotism, and other sleight of hand to convince those around them of their supernatural power. Audiences were often awed by the vomiting of blood; the shaman would fool his audience by swallowing a bladder filled with animal blood only to break the bag with his stomach muscles.¹⁴ During the winters, shamans wowed the audiences with knife swallowing, fire walking, and incredible contests against invisible shamans.¹⁵ Shamans were, and tend to be, great showmen.

Early colonists of New England noted the use of ruses by Powhatan "priests." These priests used the darkness of their temple buildings to animate the image of a chief Powhatan god - Okeus, by the figure's mechanical manipulation.¹⁶ Given a lack of light in the temple and a cloth draped over the idol, a priest, hidden behind the carved likeness of Okeus, was able to draw on the smoke of lit pipes placed in the god's mouth by worshippers. When English colonists uncovered the illusion, the Powhatan were more angry at the curious colonists than their priests!¹⁷ It was Okeus's image, called Okee by the English, that was carried into battle (not unlike the Biblical ark) by Powhatan warriors in the belief Okee would provide victory. In the early 1600s, a skirmish between English arquebussers and Indian warriors dispelled the myth of the god's supernatural power, as the battlefield bearers of Okee's image fell before English gunfire.¹⁸ Yet again, supernatural belief led to tragedy in battle.

4. Weren't the European colonizers of The New World also guilty of magical thinking? What about the witchcraft trials in Salem? The Native Americans never engaged in such superstitious nonsense!

It is true that the Europeans often displayed the same irrationality as those they subjugated, the Amerindians. Science was in its infant stage when the intrepid explorer Christopher Columbus attempted to exorcise a water spout threatening his ships during a voyage to the New World.¹⁹ Later, the conquistador Hernando Cortes would flee the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, losing six hundred men to the Aztecs, because of astrological belief. An expedition astrologer, Botello, convinced the Spanish that the retreat was a great idea. Why? Botello had told the conquistadors that spirits, conjured by his magical art, advised the Spanish to retreat!²⁰ Superstition soon reached its zenith among colonists in the New World with the witchcraft trials of the Puritans. In 1692, at Salem, Massachusetts, twenty people were executed as witches until colonial leaders stopped the panic. Reason was slow to overcome superstition.

However, as science eroded the chains of superstition for Western civilization, magical thinking remained entrenched in Amerindian societies. Witchcraft purges, and "smelling out witches," was prevalent among the Amerindian people. The Iroquois hunted witches with quartz crystals. (That crystals were used by the Amerindians to identify witches for execution should trouble all New Agers.) The Iroquois believed that disease was caused by witchcraft.²¹ The Carib killed sorcerers,



mainly women, using torture to execute the accused.²² Among the Native Americans, the belief in casting spells was so strong that a suspected sorcerer or witch would find his or her life in considerable jeopardy. In one year, 1810, the Delaware and Shawnee people killed fifty members of their tribal groups for alleged witchcraft.²³ Amerindians, such as the Apache, used burning as a way of executing witches: they were generally roasted over a fire. Retaliation for imagined magical acts took a serious toll on many feuding Indian tribes. The Amerindians met witchcraft with counter-witchcraft, and the California Indians went to war over perceived acts of magical aggression.²⁴ What was the human cost of the Amerindian witch hysteria? We may never assess the total casualties of these "magic wars" due to a scarcity of written records. However, can the detrimental impact of shamans, often involved in "smelling out" ceremonies and tribal war councils, on Amerindian societies be disputed?

5. Why are you (the author) against the New Age interest in Native American Shamanism?

During the Indian Wars in the Americas, shamans played an active part in tragedy. Today, despite historical evidence of magic's failure to win wars or alter nature, New Agers are embracing shamanism. Unbelievably, a recent *George* magazine poll stated one third of Americans believe in witchcraft!²⁵ Societies that are grounded in magical thinking pay a heavy price in human life. From 1987 to 1997, several thousand people have been beaten or burned across the continent of Africa. Their crime? They were identified as witches, wizards, or sorcerers by their communities. (See also "Bullets into Water: The Sorcerers of Africa," August 1998, Vol. 6, #6.) Is this the road Americans wish to travel on?

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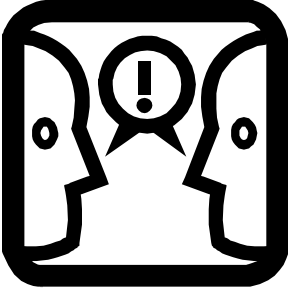
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Our Next Meeting

Urban Legends

By David Bloomberg



David Bloomberg, chairman of REALL, will discuss some of the most common urban legends, talk about why they spread, and explain how you can identify them. He will review how the media has handled these stories, address some of the history of such legends, and show how they merge, diverge, change, and evolve as they move from person to person.



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