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## Neo-esotericism

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### Definition

Neo-esotericism refers to a wide set of beliefs, rituals, celebrations, bodily techniques, practices, and behaviors which blends influences of Eastern traditions, indigenous cosmologies, and European occultism, diverging from norms and hierarchies of institutional religions. It arises from counterculture movements in the 1960s and spreads in different branches, as diverse as so-called alternative communities withdrawn from consumption society and urban circuits of neo-esoteric facilities offering products, services, and therapies up to individual choices. Despite its diversity, it is possible to identify in the phenomenon some regularities concerning spatial distribution, calendar, institutional organization, and cultural frameworks.

## Introduction

*Neo-esotericism* is one of several expressions used to describe a particular set of beliefs, rituals, celebrations, corporal practices, and behaviors, belonging to a field of spirituality that evokes influences as uneven as Eastern traditions, indigenous cosmologies, and European occultism and at the same time is different from norms and hierarchies of institutional religions. New Age, contemporary mysticism, alternative communities, Human Potentialities Movement, and Age of Aquarius are some of the other terms commonly used to describe this phenomenon.

I suggest the term *neo-esotericism* for it best expresses this double quality: it points to a form of spirituality to be lived in small groups – it is worth remembering that the term “esoteric” technically indicates rites known and followed within a restrict circle of adepts, in a determinate initiatory system or sect, while the prefix “neo” allows for a distinction in regard to interdictions prescribed by dogmas and liturgies of mainstream religions.

There are other denominations of the phenomenon: “religious nomadism” or “moving syncretism” alludes to the transit of adepts between different options and to their lack of permanent commitment or affiliation; “postmodern religion” describes individual choices and personalized development of rituals. This frame initially seems to be highly fragmentary; however it shows several regularities in respect to spatial

insertion, calendar of activities, and underlying discourse, as revealed by a recent research carried out in the city of São Paulo. Before presenting this new scenario, however, it is worth tracking its backgrounds.

## Backgrounds

The challenge posed to the “establishment” in the 1960s, within the framework of what became known as *counterculture*, is usually seen as the place of origin of the New Age movement, and even if it was more visibly manifested in the USA, reflections were seen throughout the Western world.

The history of counterculture rebellion is well known: it starts in the 1950s with the *Beatnik* movement, its poets and hitchhikers – *the rucksack revolution*, in the words of one of its most famous exponents, Jack Kerouac – and spreads in several directions in the following decade. The more salient political aspects are manifested in the protests against the War of Vietnam, in pacifist and civil rights movements, reaching a climax in the 1968 protests in France and in the Prague Spring. A more individual perspective finds in the use of drugs a way for liberation and turns itself to the experiment of new psychoactive substances, such as LSD. Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, and Janis Joplin express with their music both the protests and the youth preferences of the time, which soon got universalized and assumed mass consumption patterns, whose highest expression was the British group *The Beatles*.

This antiestablishment stream affects sexual behavior and organization of family life, impacts the ways of living and dressing, and introduces new consumption habits and communication forms: spiritual values, of course, would not go untouched. Rising up against dominant patterns of biblical Protestant American culture, new paths are discovered by the movement: Eastern philosophy and religions. Many are the ways which led the youth to meet with gurus, *roshis*, *swamis*, and *bhikkhus*, many of whom settled at the centers of the Western world, bringing along

their practices, beliefs, and institutions already transformed in certain ways but still inspired by their millennial and traditional symbolic systems of origin.

This process of spiritual renewal and search for alternative lifestyles is not, though, a mere product of countercultural effervescence: its roots go back to the North American transcendentalist stream of the twenty-ninth century (best represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau); the Theosophy developed by Helena Blavatsky, Henry S. Olcott, and Annie Besant; and esoteric and occultist European streams. One of its milestones was the World Conference of Religions in Chicago in 1893, which was attended by Swami Vivekananda, one of the promoters of spiritual culture of India in Western countries.

However, while getting in touch with counterculture movement, this stream ended up reaching a wider public, increasing the flow between East and West, engendering new encounters, experiments, and goals. Hermann Hesse, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley, Gregory Bateson, Gary Snyder, Timothy Leary, Paramahansa Yogananda, Daisetz Teitaru Suzuki, and Srila Prabhupada are some of the folks which, each in their own time and at their field, personally or through his works and institutions, were key figures in this process, whose poles were the West Coast of the USA, the city of London, the religious centers of India and Tibet, and the Far East.

One of the convergences that were mainly responsible for consolidating the New Age in the beginning of the 1970s occurred between the conceptions of two institutions, which were paramount to these changes: the Esalen Institute and the Findhorn Community.

The first, seated in California, was the irradiating center of what has come to be known as the Human Potentialities Movement, focused on research and development of new techniques to arouse the potentialities of the Self. The second, a communitarian experience in Scotland – a model and inspiration for countless “alternative rural communities” around the world – emphasized that this “Self,” according to theosophical

principles, was in fact a divine spark in an eternal search of its primordial source and origin.

Many other innovative encounters and experiences covering almost every aspect of life – personal, affectivity, family, and work relations – and fields of action such as healthcare, environment, food production, alternative technologies, were identified as being part of a silent but continuous and profound change of behaviors and attitudes on a planetary scale.

In a certain way, this frame is completed with Fritjof Capra's contribution. Capra is a high-energy physicist who, in the bestseller *The Tao of Physics* (1974), aims to establish a parallel between modern physics and Eastern mysticism. In his next book, *The Turning Point* (1982), he describes the epistemological basis of this process and the rupture it represents in the fields of medicine, psychology, and economics: according to the author, a “paradigm shift” is taking place. As a consequence, the movement ceases to be seen as a hippie eccentricity and embodies other tendencies, including certain areas of the scientific field, hence becoming a florescent branch of business, in the early 1980s.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning the influence of the works of Carlos Castañeda, a controversial anthropologist whose learning experiences with a Yaqui shaman from Sonora, Mexico, known as Juan Matus, since 1961, brought to the movement the contribution of indigenous cosmologies.

### Neo-esotericism in Brazil

Brazil was not isolated from these transformations. During the 1960s, there was also a political and ideological frenzy, but the college students, together with social movements and left-wing organizations, were more concerned with social inequalities than with the withering of prosperity years and of academic modernism, which were held to be responsible for disorientation of the postwar *Baby Boom* generation in the USA.

Thus, a more political perspective was manifested in popular culture centers, new cinema experiments, avant-garde theater, and

popular music. It is only since the 1970s, when the democratic channels of participation were closed and popular organizations were repressed by the military dictatorship, that conditions to the rise of more spiritual and personal development aspects of the hence called New Age movement were created.

Many features usually associated to this phenomenon – occultism, esotericism, and orientalism – existed long before in Brazil. There is a speculation about the presence of Templar Order members on ships of the Portuguese explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral in 1500, when he first landed on the shores of what is now known as Brazilian state of Bahia. Nevertheless it is certain that some secret societies are present in Brazil at least since the eighteenth century. One of them is the Masonry, whose first lodge was founded in the state of Pernambuco in 1797 by the doctor and former friar Arruda Câmara. In Pelotas, a southern city of Rio Grande do Sul state, information can be found regarding the founding, in 1902, of the first theosophical lodge, although, officially, the opening of the first Brazilian section of the Theosophical Society, based in Madras, India, occurs in 1919, in Rio de Janeiro.

In São Paulo, the Esoteric Circle of the Communion of Thought was founded in 1909, becoming, along with “The Thought” publisher and bookstore and the eponymous magazine, an important and pioneer channel for propagation of spiritualist ideas and philosophical systems. The Brazilian Anthroposophical Society, with followers in Porto Alegre since 1910, was officially founded in São Paulo in 1935; the Brazilian Theosophical Society, settled in 1916 in Rio de Janeiro, was renamed, in 1969, as “Eubiose”; Rosacruz Amorc dates from 1956 and Rosacruz Áurea from 1957, all of them with significant influence on the neo-esoteric scene.

Eastern-based religions, such as Buddhism and its several denominations which arrived in the first decades of the twentieth century, were first linked to immigrants, especially Japanese: the first Buddhist temple in Brazil, Templo Kômeôji, was built in 1932, in Cafelândia, São Paulo. But it was only after World War II, during the 1950s, that temples and associations were

consolidated and settled in different regions in Brazil. The Sotô Zenshû Buddhist Community, for example, was officially recognized on November 30, 1955, and its first temple – Zengenji – was built in Mogi das Cruzes (São Paulo). The same occurred with the so-called *New Religions*: Seicho-No-Iê in 1952, Perfect Liberty in 1958, and Soka Gakkai, which was formally initiated in 1960 but has adepts since the 1950s.

Acupuncture practices, which were so far restricted to Liberdade, which is known as an “oriental” neighborhood in São Paulo, spread therefore beyond the sphere of immigrants and their descendents: the disciples of the pioneering teacher Frederico Spaeth establish the first Brazilian acupuncture association and, in 1961, created the first institutionalized clinic, the Brazilian Institute of Acupuncture. A similar process had happened with some of martial arts modalities: in 1959 master Wong Sun Keung started tai-chi-chuan classes at the Chinese Social Center, followed by Chan Kow Wai and Chiu Ping Lok. The latter created in the city of Santo André (state of São Paulo), one of the first recorded martial arts academies, the Tai Chi, Yoga, and Kung Fu Academy, in 1969. In Rio de Janeiro, the Hermógenes Yoga Academy, created in 1962, is worth mentioning.

These and other elements, institutions, and practices, even though they were merged into the new esotericism, did not trigger the phenomenon in and by themselves: the dissemination of neo-esotericism relied upon certain circumstances that, as noted above, arose after the political and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and expanded during the 1970s. At the time, a musical and artistic movement called “Tropicalism” cleared way for a stance far closer to the libertarian and Dionysian position of counterculture. One of Caetano Veloso’s most famous song choruses – “sem lenço, sem documento, nada nos bolsos ou nas mãos” [with no handkerchief and no papers, nothing in my pockets or hands] – celebrates the refusal of establishment values.

Raul Seixas was the singer most akin to neo-esoteric themes, explicitly developing

mystical tropes in his compositions. Seixas and his not yet internationally famous partner Paulo Coelho joined initiatory societies inspired by the doctrine of the British esoterist Aleister Crowley. The titles of a couple of his albums – “Aeon” and “Gita,” the latter of which included the song “Sociedade Alternativa” [Alternative Society] – are examples of this tendency.

The police invasion of his house in 1974, which forced him to leave the country – a fate shared by Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, and Chico Buarque, just to mention a few famous subjects – is a sample of the effects of the *anos de chumbo* (literally “years of lead”) of military rule, signaled by the renowned verse “the dream is over,” by John Lennon. Many left-wing and cultural movements activists embarked on religious and alternative paths, like the writer and composer Rogério Duarte, a former member of the Popular Culture Center of the National Students Union; the ex-activist and political prisoner Alex Polari, who became a director of “Cefturis,” a religious organization based on the consumption of ayahuasca beverage; the actress Odete Lara, a zen Buddhist practitioner; and the playwright Fauzi Arap, among many others.

This was also the time of an outburst of associations such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which was established in 1974 and in 3 years counted 18 urban temples and a rural community, New Gokula, in the city of Pindamonhangaba, state of São Paulo. The same happened with the Ananda Marga group and with disciples of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, among others.

What characterized the search for new paths was the proliferation of the so-called alternative rural communities. These experiences, emphasizing an attitude of refusal of established values, aimed to adopt a lifestyle based on other principles, opposed to the so considered distortions of urban society of consumers: community life, frugality, nature-linked spirituality, farming without pesticides, and natural diet based in macrobiotic or vegetarianism.

Many of those communities were inspired by the teachings of a master or of a particular doctrine, like the Hare Krishna. Some were

motivated by a prevention of an imminent catastrophe such as the nuclear menace, while others were trying to contact extraterrestrial beings. They spread all over the country, but some regions were preferred: south of the state of Minas Gerais, the Chapada [plateau] dos Veadeiros (state of Goiás), Chapada Diamantina (state of Bahia), Chapada dos Guimarães (state of Mato Grosso), and Serra [ridge] da Bocaina (state of São Paulo). Those places were chosen for their “telluric energy,” for their status as planetary chakras, and for other reasons drawn from New Age ideas.

A couple of community experiences, both founded by a notorious neo-esoteric character, José Trigueirinho, must be highlighted: the Centro de Vivências Nazaré, founded in 1981 at the city of Nazaré Paulista (with the presence of Sara Marriott whose experience in Findhorn was crucial for the development of the community after Trigueirinho’s exit in 1987), and Figueira Community, in Carmo da Cachoeira (MG), in existence since 1988.

The spread and reach of those experiences may be assessed in the several national meetings of alternative communities, starting with the 1978 meeting in Gravataí (RS). In the sixth meeting, in Três Marias (MG), in 1982, the Brazilian Association of Alternative Communities – ABRASCA – was created, and in 1985 there were over 70 communities. The nineteenth meeting happened in 1995, in Serra Azul. The 2013 meeting happened in Formosa do Rio Preto, Bahia.

This whole process was followed by a series of publications, among which stands out was “*Comum-Unidade*,” the movement official press created in the fourth still meeting in 1980, as well as “*Transe*,” “*Pensamento Ecológico*,” “*Vida & Cultura Alternativa*,” “*Planeta*,” and countless homemade bulletins, crucial in the setting of what was called “alternative culture.”

The magazine *Planeta* was created in 1972 by the renowned writer Ignácio de Loyola Brandão, based on the French *Planète*, owned by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier. For a long time this publication has been the main medium of “alternative culture,” even if its main focus,

nowadays, has to do with sustainability issues. Along the same lines and at the same time, other spaces were created, such as the Palas Athena Association and the bookstores Horus and Sipak, in São Paulo.

Although the phenomenon was localized and stigmatized as a remnant of an old hippie model, in the latter 1980s and throughout the 1990s, as a result of a process of consolidation, it diversified and assumed a market scale: in the city of São Paulo, a survey carried out in 1992 listed more than a thousand spaces dedicated to such activities. The Seekers’ Guide in 1993 listed 775 places, in 1994 listed more than a thousand, and in 1996 listed 1300 places offering all kinds of products or services linked to neo-esotericism.

In urban centers, in fact, the demand for products, such as food, herbs, accessories, and personal hygiene items, produced according to “natural” principles, which means the absence, in some cases, of pesticides and, in others, of products of animal origin, or manipulated following a certain set of principles, like Anthroposophy.

The growing demand for a regular supply of quality products could not rely on a sporadic, domestic scale production. Organic product markets, vegetarian restaurants, alternative product stores, and even some shelves in regular supermarkets started to receive products from bigger production unities, endorsed by entities such as the Organic Agriculture Association, or places maintained by religious associations, such as Korin agricultural (Mokiti Okada Foundation, linked to the Messianic Church), or philosophical associations, such as the Biodinamica Institute, in Botucatu (SP), inspired by anthroposophy.

Therefore, a new scale of production, consumption, and advertising emerged, with an infinity of new products (publications, music and video records, implements for alternative therapies and divination systems, decorative and cult objects, talismans) and services (congresses, symposiums, lectures, shows, workshops, celebrations, courses on body techniques, touristic itineraries, etc.) identified to the different systems incorporated in the neo-esoteric universe.

When the phase of strong refusal of establishment values – a more defensive, psychedelic, and rural attitude – was overcome, the tendency was now heading toward the discovery and improvement of inner potentialities, the search for a better life quality, configuring a real lifestyle recognized and visible in the great urban centers landscape, without being stigmatized.

This tendency did not mean a depreciation of rural experiences, but its integration in the urban context and the initiatives which there developed: it was increasingly common to use ranches near urban centers to carry out workshops and weekend experiences: the circuit grew and attracted a wider public.

### The Time of Consolidation

Despite of or perhaps due to this expansion, the reactions, especially of the press, were to consider the neo-esotericism as a passing fad or as a marketing strategy to sell certain items – incenses, oils, goblin images, crystals, pendulums, and self-help literature. For a public more sensitive to the religious and philosophical systems operated by neo-esoteric adepts to undergird their practices, this was an attempt toward re-enchantment in a world far too secularized, at the dawn of the new millennium, in search of a new spirituality attuned to the postindustrial sociological logic.

The very experts in religious studies were surprised by this boom: used to investigate conventional religions – Catholicism, Protestantism, and Afro-Brazilian Religions – the neo-esoteric practices, which seemed closer to magic than to religion, did not fit in their regular analysis parameters: they were eclectic, without dogmas, or a hierarchal body of priests; many of them were carried out by women, with rites considered as “pagan” and so forth.

So, a research guided by an urban anthropology perspective revealed itself more fruitful than one motivated by religious studies: the focus was not on the origins or causes of dissemination of neo-esoteric practices or even on principles of doctrine but on the relations established with the city, its scenario, dynamics, and institutions.

The starting query of the research was raised by an empirical finding: the presence – in places in São Paulo as different as squares, shopping malls, and middle-class neighborhood stores – of certain practices such as spiritual advice and oracle counseling that, so far, were offered only in private closed space, for they dealt with people’s destinies, health, and pursuit of happiness. Now, however, those practices were offered in public spaces, in plain sight, and in places not surrounded by the expected atmosphere of mystery and concentration.

Besides this surprising visibility, the counseling system had changed as well. The fortune teller in a dark room full of cabalistic objects located at a distant address gives way to a new set of practices. Card playing, *I Ching* interpretation, *chackras* balancing, yoga practice, *do-in* application, and other practices associated with the neo-esoteric universe were modernized. Their followers mobilized equipment, conditions, and techniques – marketing, data processing, and franchising – similar to other service activities in urban centers. Neo-esotericism turned into a business!

Doubtless, these were profound changes, and, for many, the modernization and commercialism involved the loss of the aura of mystery and of the sacred character of the movement. For research purposes, though, there was a different issue: its hypothesis indicated more complex changes in users’ behavior – as they assume openly and without prejudice to those practices, they were moving away from old patterns, when healers, shamans, and seers were sought with embarrassment and in a clandestine way and were seen as regressions to primitive beliefs.

Moreover, what was going on was no longer listed as “alternative” activities: settled in well-located spaces, within an ongoing institutional legitimization process and covered by media, they were already embedded in daily scenery of the great metropolis, creating what I have called a “neo-esoteric circuit,” where behaviors, consumption agendas, and sociability constituted a very particular lifestyle. The first task of the research was to classify the facilities according

to their purposes, operational rules, and merchandise, and as a result five groups were identified:

**Philosophical-Spiritualists Institutions:** Characterized by the existence of a set of doctrines, rituals, and initiation levels, they are governed by some sort of organization and an internal hierarchy, distinguishing at least the followers' group from the leaders' group. The established bonds are similar to those of traditional religions. Many are franchises, adaptations, or local creations inspired by institutions founded abroad.

**Integrated Centers:** These places join and organize, in a creative way, several practices such as divinatory practices, therapies, formative courses, product sales, and collective experiences. They neither feature their own doctrine nor follow a strict set of dogmas, even if they do undergird their choices by means of a more or less coherent discourse which combines several religious, philosophical-occultist, gnostic traditions. They are managed according to an entrepreneurial frame and based on the work of their own professionals (usually the owners) even though they host permanent or occasional practices of guest specialists.

**Specialized Centers:** This category includes associations, schools, gyms, and clinics focused on research and teaching of neo-esoteric subjects, training, and uses of specific techniques such as dances, martial arts, divinatory arts, and therapeutic practices such as acupuncture, Ayurveda massage, do-in, shiatsu, tui-ná, etc.

**Individualized Spaces:** Places, where one or more neo-esoteric practices are offered, carried out by one or several persons but with no sign or identification. These places do not feature a plan or specific framing within the neo-esoteric universe nor a business management, but only a common use of space, when more than one professional is involved. Home-based fortunetellers, seers and masseuses, as well as autodidactic experts which do not use this field of knowledge as a mean of living are included in this group.

**Shops and Stores:** Due to their clearly commercial nature, their relation to the neo-esoteric universe is more pragmatic than doctrinaire, even though their owners and staff may present a genuine interest in the more philosophical-spiritualist aspects of the products on sale and in the buyers as well, by advising how to use the products, for instance. Bookstores, homeopathic or herbal pharmacies, eco-esoteric touristic agencies, event producers, "natural" food and hygiene products shops, and places that sell goblin images, incenses, ornaments, talismans, and New Age records are included in this group.

The research revealed that there is a regularity in the way those groups act, from the neo-esoteric consolidation and expansion phase (from the beginning of the 1980s to the 2000s), on several levels. In regard to the special aspect, besides the broader circuit of its settlement across the city, specific circuits can be identified – acupuncturists, the "mancies" (chiromancy, necromancy, numerology, astrology, runes, tarot, etc.), natural therapists, and so on.

The calendar presents another level which makes visible a certain regularity, despite the common sense view according to which the neo-esoteric movement consists of a bunch of practices subjected to individual taste. Many activities are offered periodically – yearly, monthly, weekly, and even daily – in certain cases, for instance, the celebration of the Black Madonna, at "Paz Geia, Shamanic Research Institute," which coincides with the Brazilian's Catholic patron saint day, Nossa Senhora Aparecida, or the monthly celebration of full moon in many integrated centers, or trips to the "planet chackras" during vacation periods, or shamanic experiences and workshops on long weekends, conducted at small ranches outside the urban perimeter.

In regard to principles of doctrine, which are seen as eclectic and even incoherent, it is even possible, through the analysis of publications, pamphlet handouts, course, and conference programs, to identify a basic discursive frame, made by those sources mentioned in the introduction:

oriental traditions, indigenous cosmologies, and European occultism.

Therefore, an idea of immanence is absorbed from Hinduism, Taoism, and from several branches and schools of Buddhism. Diverging from Judaic Christian belief in a transcendent and personal God, neo-esoteric movement recovers a superior and divine principle that is not apart from the world and humanity. A consequence of this choice is a “holistic perspective,” by which the whole and the parts are integrated, resulting in the nondivision of body, mind, and spirit; sin and guilt are replaced by a self-improvement goal and inner knowledge is more valued than revealed truths. It is a branch that, despite its identification with the East, has also occidental tradition roots, even in a non-predominant way. The idea of a “divine spark,” for instance, which exists in the core of the human being, is present in gnostic branches of the early Christianity.

Reference can also be made to initiatory societies and occult-magic groups, considered to be the reservoirs of a universal wisdom, a sort of “*philosophia perennis et universalis*,” and fruit from a long and uninterrupted tradition liminal to the dominant philosophical and religious systems.

Indigenous cosmologies and traditional shamanic systems inspire the reappraisal of nature, which, regarded as sacred, is blended with an immanent perspective as described above: all beings participate in the same cosmic movement. This branch combines with some ecological notions which, far from considering nature as an object of human subjugation, presuppose a wider process of fusion which, in its most spiritualized versions, is not distinguished from the divine principle. The triangular-shaped matrix can be described as follows:

At one end is the **Individual**, in its several denominations and grades of depth – “inner self/superior self”, “personal legend”, inner spirituality, self-spirituality, inner voice; at a second end, the pole whence the individual evolved, which it belongs and whither this individual tends: the **Totality** (Transcendence, Absolute, Cosmos, the Superior

Principle, the Nature, according to each version). The history of humankind is this long wayfaring, flavored by every culture idiosyncrasy to establish a full contact between the multiple and the one, which is possible only because the former was always part of the latter. Considering thus the societal character of human way of life, there is a *tertius* between individual and totality, the **Community** – depository and guardian of each particular tradition and of the means that enables their members, in every historical context, to reach their true nature. The ideal model, thus, assumes the individual in its integrality (body/mind/spirit) belonging and perfecting himself inside a community considered to be harmonic, both immerse and integrates in a more inclusive and whole reality, of which one must become aware.

## Conclusion

On January 23, 1997 there will be an exceedingly rare and archetypally appropriate planetary alignment, a moment in time expressed in the heavens as a perfect six-pointed star. This pattern comes on the exact day that three outer planets, Jupiter, Uranus and Neptune are conjoined together for the first time in almost two hundred years. Not since the Renaissance have all five outer-most planets been so harmoniously arrayed. On January 23rd, this cluster of planets will center on the first degrees of Aquarius, joined by the Sun, with the Full Moon opposite them all. Thus, perhaps this pattern may also be a symbolic representation of the long heralded dawning of the Age of Aquarius. (Gaiamind Project – <http://www.gaiamind.com>)

This Internet message called of a collective simultaneous moment of prayer and meditation, in the period between 17:30 and 17:35 (GMT) of this day. It had called its participants to visualize a white light and therefore enter in a global resonance, waiting for great changes that would result in the emergence of a “self-reflexive consciousness of living Earth.”

According to the appeal, the year of 1997 could become, for the 1990s, what 1968 represented to the 1960s, but with a shift: if the counterculture years signaled a Dionysian explosion, the 1990s, as a time of dissolution, would be a decade ready for a spiritual change. The perfect mandala represented by the planetary alignment



indicated this possibility, and it was necessary to set in motion an intentional process to speed the dawning of planetary consciousness.

If the expected radical break of old patterns and the beginning of a new paradigm did not occur, it is undeniable that the movement that we are calling neo-esotericism helped the dissemination of a certain lifestyle, characterized by the search of a newly framed spirituality and a better quality of life. The elements for this lifestyle consisted, among others, of awareness of “inner self” processes; knowledge and application of techniques of relaxation; meditation and nature contemplation techniques, in order to achieve a “cosmic harmony”; valorization of a healthier diet; search for a balance between “physical, mental, and spiritual” levels; and defense of environmental policies.

Regarding the institutions that integrated the neo-esoteric circuit, it is worth mentioning that, when the thrill was gone, many service places, stores, and academies with precarious logistical or conceptual support were closed. The ones with more secure structure and tradition, or which had more successfully adapted to the new conjuncture, characterized by more social and collective agendas like sustainability instead of the emphasis on the development of personal potentialities, were able to maintain their activities.

Some entities turned to the propagation of traditional knowledge, especially by the activities of indigenous leaders with high presence in the neo-esoteric circuit. Many of them organized associations in Brazilian legal terms (social organizations, public interest social organizations, culture spots), which allowed them to receive public resources.

Finally, a note on two aspects is directly related to the neo-esoteric scene in Brazil. First is the absence of African-Brazilian cults, especially of Candomblé. The neo-esoteric practices maintained little contact with this rich tradition, despite the numerous aspects that could serve as a dialogue with many of neo-esotericism proposals: the relationship between deities and nature forces and aspects, the importance of ritual

dances, the care of the sacred foods, and the use of objects, clothes, and props in the ceremonies. A class barrier cannot be dismissed: while the neo-esotericism has spread mainly among the middle classes, the African-Brazilian cults are historically more linked to the popular classes, with strong presence among the black population.

Nevertheless the prestige that Candomblé has come to achieve, in the last decades, within academic, intellectual, and artistic circles, the dialogue with neo-esotericism is still limited. There are some examples in the closer relation between some branches of Umbanda and Spiritism: the points of contact are, among others, the doctrine of reincarnation, of karma, and of spiritual evolution.

The second observation relates to the neo-esotericism's relations with cosmologies and rituals of indigenous peoples, resulting in what ended up being known as “urban shamanism.” At first this relationship was preferably akin to rituals of the Indians of the North American continent plains, as well as peoples of the Andean highlands, the Yucatan peninsula, and North of Mexico: the sweat lodges or *temazcales*, talk sticks, and invocations of Pachamama, among others elements, appeared in experiences offered by neo-esoteric spaces; the “witchcraft” of indigenous peoples of Brazil, however, was virtually unknown.

Later, however, the traditions of the peoples of the Amazon basin, especially those using *ayahuasca*, began to be present in workshops on integrated and specialized centers. This substance – made of a vine and a leaf grown and prepared in the state of Acre, Brazil, and used since the 1930s as the foundation of practices that were institutionalized in religions such as Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, and Barquinha – has spread by the southern cities since the 1970s. Some institutions linked to neo-esotericism have maintained contact with these religions, while others use the beverage for their psychoactive powers to induce altered states of consciousness. More recently ayahuasca, whose use is permitted by Brazilian law in spaces and in the context of

those religions, begins to be used in therapeutic procedures, especially in the treatment of drug addicts. In addition, some research shows its introduction into villages and communities of indigenous peoples whose rituals and cosmologies not originally included the use of these plants.

To conclude, let us return to what was argued in the introduction of this article on the different denominations gathered here by the name neo-esotericism. The original sense of one of them, New Age, comes from the astrological field: it refers to a shift, caused by the so-called precession of the equinoxes, in the apparent path of the solar system in the zodiac along which the stars appear to move, performing certain cycles. Astrologists believe that we are currently entering a “new era,” a moment that always announces or brings important changes for humanity.

According to this schema, the Age of Taurus corresponded to the Mesopotamia civilizations, the Age of Aries to the Judaic-Mosaic religion, and the Age of Pisces, which began with the rise of Christianity, has brought to the edge, the values identified with the Western way of life. At its end, after 2,000 years, a New Age is the beginning: the Age of Aquarius is bringing and announcing deep changes for humankind in its way of thinking, feeling, acting, and relating to each other, to nature, and to the supernatural sphere. In a general way, these changes were understood as a rebalance between poles – body/mind, spirit/matter, masculine/feminine, science/tradition, and so forth – since now opposites and in conflict. It is worth remembering, regarding this aspect, the famous musical Hair, premiered in 1967, which portrays that clash of values: one of its songs is “Aquarius” and the chorus repeated:

This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius  
The Age of Aquarius  
Aquarius! Aquarius!

There is controversy in astrological circles surrounding the actual beginning of the era: some consider that we have been in it for some

time and others estimate that real change took place at the turn of the millennium; all agree, however, that changes are already underway and that they run deep. This had to do, in short, with which occur from time to time, to produce synthesis, to establish a more general order, and to provide an explanatory principle in the face of the unpredictability caused by extreme situations of conflict and disruption. In this case, one is in the face of the exhaustion of the hitherto dominant model questioned by the incipient manifestations of the late 1950s which burst in the 1960s and inaugurating what was known as postmodernity. Against the hegemony of the great narratives rose the voices of minorities, civil rights activists, the feminist movement, and religious experiences outside the mainstream, among others.

The consequences of all this global movement were felt in different ways in regional and national contexts – as we tried to show in this text, with reference to the Brazilian case. And if the expected paradigm shift did not occur in all its extension, as announced, there is no denying that experiments inside the neo-esoteric groups and spaces left their prints. One result has been the legitimacy of a world view and lifestyle that, despite the emphasis on the development of personal potential and community type of experiences, made room for issues such as eco-sustainability, exhaustion of natural resources, and collective responsibility for the preservation of the environment. After all, according to a catchphrase of that time, “we are all Earth ship’s crew . . .”

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Alternative Therapies](#)
- ▶ [Counterculture](#)
- ▶ [New Age](#)
- ▶ [Urban Shamanism](#)

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