WHAT IS A SHAMAN? DEFINITION, ORIGIN AND DISTRIBUTION

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INTRODUCTION

There is currently unprecedented interest, excitement and confusion about shamanism. Shamanic literature, rituals and workshops are proliferating and have spawned a veritable cottage industry. Genuinely shamanically trained anthropologists such as Michael Harner and highly controversial figures such as Lynn Andrews, "the shaman of Beverly Hills" (Clifton, 1989), are offering shamanism workshops. Given that only a few years ago there was concern that shamanism would soon be extinct, it is clear that the tradition, or at least its contemporary Western version, is doing rather well.

controversial views of the shaman

What is not so clear is what exactly a shaman is. In fact, on this point there is remarkable controversy. On the one hand the shaman has been called "mentally deranged" and "an outright psychotic" (Devereaux, 1961), a "veritable idiot" (Wissler, 1931), a charlatan, epileptic and, perhaps most often (Kakar, 1982; Noll, 1983) an hysteric or schizophrenic.

On the other hand an opposite but equally extreme view seems to be emerging in the popular literature. Here shamanic states are being identified with those of Buddhism, Yoga or Christian mysticism. Thus, for example, Holger Kalweit (1988, p. 236)

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claims that the shaman "experiences existential unity—the *samadhi* of the Hindus or what Western spiritualists and mystics call enlightenment, illumination, *unio mystica*." Likewise Gary Doore (1988, p. 223) claims that "shamans, yogis and Buddhists alike are accessing the same state of consciousness."

Unfortunately there seem to be serious deficiencies with these comparisons which appear to be based on gross similarities rather than careful phenomenological comparisons (Walsh, 1990). Space does not allow presenting such analyses here. Suffice it to say when careful phenomenological comparisons are made, then it becomes apparent that shamanic experiences differ significantly from those of traditional categories of mental illness or those of mystics from other traditions (Noll, 1983; Walsh 1990).

shamans and shamanism as unique phenomena

So, contrary to much popular and professional thinking we cannot simply define (or productively discuss) shamans and shamanism in terms of either diagnostic categories or other mystical traditions. Rather we need to consider and define them as unique phenomena. Clearly an adequate definition might do much to help reduce the enormous confusion concerning the nature of shamanism.

DEFINITION

The term itself comes from the word *saman* of the Tungus people of Siberia, meaning "one who is excited, moved, raised." It may be derived from an ancient Indian word meaning "to heat oneself or practice austerities" (Blacker, 1986) or from a Tungus verb meaning "to know" (Hultkrantz, 1973). But whatever its derivation the term shaman has been widely adopted by anthropologists to refer to specific groups of religious healers in diverse cultures who have sometimes been called medicine men, witch doctors, sorcerers, wizards, magicians or seers. However, these terms do not adequately define the specific subgroup of healers who fit more stringent definitions of shaman such as the one to be used here. The meaning and significance of this definition, and of shamanism itself, will become clearer if we examine the way in which our definitions and understanding of shamanism have evolved over time.

Early anthropologists were particularly struck by the shamans' unique interactions with "spirits." Many in the tribe might claim to revere, see, or even be possessed by spirits. However, only the shamans claimed to have some degree of control over them and to be able to command, commune and intercede with them for the benefit of the tribe. Thus Shirokogoroff (1935, p.

269), one of the earliest explorers of the Siberian Tungus people, stated that:

> In all Tungus languages this term (saman) refers to persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people, who suffer from the spirits; in such a capacity they may possess a complex of special methods for dealing with the spirits.

But whereas early explorers were most impressed by the shamans' interactions with spirits, later researchers have been impressed by the shamans' control of their own states of consciousness in which these interactions occur (Dobkin, de Rios & Winkleman, 1989; Noll, 1983; Peters, 1981; Peters & Price-Williams, 1980, 1983). As Western culture has become more interested in altered states of consciousness (ASC), so too researchers have become interested in the use of altered states in religious practices (Tart, 1983a, b), and it appears that the first tradition to use such states was shamanism. Contemporary definitions of shamanism have therefore focussed on the use of such states (Harner, 1982; Noll, 1983; Peters & Price-Williams, 1980).

shamanism as first tradition to use altered states

However, there are many, many possible states of consciousness (Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980; Wilber, 1977, 1980), and the question therefore naturally arises as to which ones are peculiar to, and defining of, shamanism. There are broad and narrow definitions. In the broad definition the "only defining attribute is that the specialist enter into a controlled ASC on behalf of his community" (Peters & Price-Williams, 1980, p. 408). Such specialists would include, for example, mediums who enter a trance and then claim to speak for spirits. It should be noted at this point that the use of the term "spirits" here is not meant to necessarily imply that there exist separate entities that control or communicate with people. Rather the term is simply being used to describe the way in which shamans and mediums interpret their experience.

So a broad definition of shamanism would include any practitioners who enter controlled altered states of consciousness no matter which particular states these may be. Narrow definitions on the other hand specify the altered state(s) quite precisely as ecstatic states. Indeed, for Mircea Eliade (1964, p. 4), one of the greatest religious scholars of the 20th century, "A first definition of this complex phenomenon, and perhaps the least hazardous, will be: shamanism = technique of ecstasy." Here ecstasy infers not so much bliss but more a sense, as the Random House dictionary defines it, "of being taken or moved

out of one's self or one's normal state and entering a state of intensified or heightened feeling." This definition of ecstasy as "being taken out of one's self or one's normal state" is, as we will see, particularly appropriate for shamanism.

The distinctive feature of the shamanic ecstasy is the experience of "soul flight" or "journeying" or "out-of-body experience" (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1982). That is, in their ecstatic state shamans experience themselves, or their soul/spirit, flying through space and traveling to either other worlds or distant parts of this world. In other words "the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld" (Eliade, 1964, p. 5). These flights reflect the shamanic cosmology which comprises a three-tiered universe of upper, middle, and lower worlds, the middle one corresponding to our earth. The shaman ranges throughout this threefold world system in order to learn, obtain power, or to diagnose and treat those who come for help and healing. During these journeys shamans may experience themselves exploring other worlds, meeting other-worldly people, animals or spirits, seeing the cause and cure of a patient's illness, or interceding with friendly or demonic forces.

the shaman's three-fold world system

So far, then, we have three key features of shamanism to include in any definition. The first is that shamans can voluntarily enter altered states of consciousness. The second is that in these states they experience themselves leaving their bodies and journeying to other realms in a manner analogous to contemporary reports of some out-of-body experiences (Monroe, 1971; Irwin, 1985) or lucid dreams (LaBerge, 1985). Third, they use these journeys as a means for acquiring knowledge or power and helping people in their community.

Interaction with spirits is also frequently mentioned in definitions of shamanism. In addition, Michael Harner, an anthropologist who may have more personal experience of shamanic practices than any other Westerner, suggests that a key element of shamanic practices may be "contact with an ordinarily hidden reality" (Harner, 1982, p. 25). Thus he defines a shaman as "a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness at will to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons" (Harner, 1982, p.25).

Should these two additional elements, "contacting a hidden reality," and "communication with spirits," be included as essential elements of a definition of shamanism? Here we are on tricky philosophical ground. Certainly this is what shamans