

Shamanism

by: Giovanni Vines

A shaman is an important member of a tribe or society, performing many roles, including spiritual leader, spirit guide, healer, teacher, and chief. The phenomenon of the 'shaman', and the concept of 'shamanism', is an intriguing and complex component to the history of humanity, the development of world culture, and the evolution of consciousness. Shamanism is a universal phenomenon that transcends time, location, and race.



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Alt tag = A shaman played many roles within their community, including spiritual leader, spirit guide, healer, teacher, and chief.

Shamanism defies any meaningful, universal terminology. The terms 'shaman' and 'shamanism' are both academic constructs used by scholars in order to attempt to define an anthropological phenomenon that defies generalized explanations and labels.

Today, when we use the term or suffix 'ism', we think of a religious or ideological system of some kind that has a body of teachings or precepts, usually supported by written texts. Religious traditions have their sacred texts. Political ideologies also have texts, like the socialist and communist writings of Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Written texts help people define and relate to ideological concepts. There are no traditional written texts of any significance that can help us to define and understand shamanism. Shamanistic traditions have relied on the direct, person-to-person, generation-to-generation oral transmission of knowledge from practitioners to students.

Modern scholars have assembled some broad guidelines with respect to shamanistic belief and practice. These principles are, more or less, common to all forms of shamanism. They include:

- everything has a spirit, including animals, plants, and minerals
- everything in the world is consciously tied together through spirit
- individual, disembodied spirits exist, and they can influence the lives of individuals and social groups
- the shaman is capable of experiencing the spirit world and communicating with these spirits
- these spirits can be either benevolent and malevolent
- the shaman is responsible for healing illnesses caused by malevolent spirits
- the shaman can induce trances and mystical visions
- the shaman can transcend the physical world and enter the spiritual realms in search of knowledge
- shamans invoke animal spirits for use as spirit guides, messengers, and communicators of omens
- the shaman can employ other forms of divination, including foretelling future events

The principal role of the shaman is that of healer. Disease is believed to be caused by malevolent spirits. The shaman uses both physical and spiritual methods to heal. Physically, he or she might use herbs, fasts, sounds (drum, rattle), heat and cold, sunlight, water, and other natural means. On the spiritual level, the shaman enters the consciousness of the patient and confronts the infectious spirit for the purpose of driving it out or rendering it harmless.

Some scholars have offered more succinct definitions of shamanism. These include:

Dr. Roger Walsh – *“Shamanism might be defined as a family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves, or their spirit(s), traveling to other realms at will and interacting with other entities in order to serve the community.”*

Anthropologist Michael Harner defines a shaman as; *“A man or a woman who enters an altered state of consciousness at will to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons.”*



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Alt tag = A shaman enters an altered state of consciousness to acquire knowledge necessary to help others.

Defining shamanism is made more difficult by the fact that shamans do not see themselves as shamans, and do not associate their role in the community within any type of religious framework or ideology, outside of their own tribe or social group. It is also important to note that in most of these cultures, a woman could play the role of the shaman as easily as a man.

Origins of Shamanism

The term 'shaman' is believed to originate from the language of a Siberian tribe known as the 'Tungus'. It specifically derives from their word, 'saman', which means one who is excited, moved, or raised up. Some scholars believe that it derives from a different Tungus verb, meaning 'to know'. Other scholars believe that it may have originated from a Sanskrit term. According to scholars at the 'Golomt Center for Shamanic Studies' in Mongolia, the word shaman is more accurately translated as "priest."

The term 'shaman' was originally attributed to this Siberian tribe, the Tungus, but was soon adopted by scholars as a general term to describe spiritual and mystical practices which were observed within other groups, not only in Northern Asia, but also in Central Asia, Europe, Africa, Australia, and the Americas. What drove these scholars to apply the term so broadly was that they realized that there was a common element to all of these indigenous practices, stemming from the different cultures and locales. The common element they observed was the important role played by a member of each community as a spiritual guide and healer. However, in spite of this common element (the shaman), all of these different indigenous spiritual practices and traditions were distinct from each other in most other respects.

It is quite remarkable that nearly all of these traditional cultures had a shaman, who was the group's spiritual leader and guide. He or she served as sage and healer. All of these cultural traditions had a member of the community who played this role. And they didn't learn this tradition, or copy it from each other. They all somehow realized independently that they needed a member of their group to serve in this capacity. It is almost as if the human genome has genetic information that informs us that we need a person in our midst to act as a spiritual go-between, to help answer questions that are otherwise unanswerable. We also need someone to facilitate healing by addressing the causes of disease, which in ancient times were thought to have their origins in the spirit world.

There are other examples of individual groups of people sharing comparable ideological concepts, independently of each other. The belief in creation, for example, is a nearly universally agreed-upon concept. Nearly every culture and religious system has concluded that there was a moment of creation of the world. This includes traditions from Eurasia and Africa, which could have experienced some cross-pollination of ideas. But it also includes traditions from the Americas and Pacific Island cultures, which had no outside pre-Columbian influences. The phenomenon of the tribal shaman is also found in Pacific Island traditions, including Hawaiian and Tahitian.

History of Shamanism

Anthropologists have traced the origins of shamanism back at least as far as 12,000 years. A 2008 excavation of an ancient burial site in Israel, conducted by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, uncovered female remains and artifacts which are believed to be the earliest-known

shaman burial. But other scholars say that there is evidence of shamanism dating as far back as 25,000 years. Prehistoric cave art is believed to show evidence of shamanic practices. Rattles and other objects used in shamanic rituals have been found in archeological excavations dating from the Iron Age (1200 BCE – 600 BCE).



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Alt tag = Shamanism is seen by scholars to be the first evidence of man's spiritual and religious practice.

Shamanism is seen by many scholars to be the first evidence of man's expression of spiritual and religious practice. The cross-cultural presence of shamanism within these ancient hunter/gatherer societies also suggests a relationship with the development of the human brain. The origins of all of our modern world religions can be traced back to long-forgotten shamanic practices.

The Work of the Shaman

The primary mission of the shaman is to facilitate the well-being of individuals within the tribe or group, and to facilitate the well-being of the group at large. Shamans act as intermediaries or messengers between the human, physical world and the world of spirit. They heal by first mending the soul. By alleviating the ailing soul, the physical body is subsequently restored back to healthy balance and wholeness.

Shamans utilize communication with their spirit guides in the spirit world to determine the nature of a problem or disease, including its cause. Once the cause is determined, the shaman can prescribe the needed remedy. This remedy will normally involve both physical and spiritual components. Physical remedies can involve herbal decoctions, oils, heat (sweat lodges), sun,

smoke, massage, and other natural means. On the level of spirit, the shaman will focus his consciousness into the spirit of the ailing individual and neutralize the harmful effects of the malevolent entities responsible for the ailment.

Shamans developed some method to facilitate their spiritual transcendence. It is likely that some of them had practices which we would correlate with meditation and yoga. They most likely practiced some form of concentration techniques and perhaps breathing disciplines. What is certain is that many shamanic traditions used psychotropic substances to help facilitate their trance states. These substances included:

Amanita muscaria is a mushroom species, orangish-red with white spots, native to the temperate regions of Northern Asia and North America. Amanita was used by Siberian tribes as a catalyst to gain entrance into the spirit realms. Amanita is poisonous, so dosage and method of ingestion was critical.

Psilocybin mushroom is a member of the Psilocybe genus of mushrooms, known for their psychoactive and hallucinogenic properties. They have been depicted in stone age rock art in Africa and Europe, and in Central American stone art and motifs, and are believed to have been used in ceremonies by shamans in Europe and North Africa as long ago as 9000 years.

Cannabis Indica, or marijuana is also known to have been utilized by shamans in ceremonies throughout the world.

Yage is a psychoactive decoction containing DMT, obtained from a South American vine, Banisteriopsis caapi, mixed with additional botanicals.

Peyote Cactus buttons were consumed for their mescaline, a psychoactive substance with effects similar to psilocybin.

Salvia Divinorum is a small perennial plant, still used by healers and mystics in Southern Mexico to transcend the limits of the physical world and to communicate with spirit guides for the purpose of healing and forecasting the future.

Neo-Shamanism

Today, worldwide interest in shamanism is on the rise. Indigenous cultures, like Native Americans and the tribes of Northern Siberia, have taken to exploring their roots. This has led not only to a theoretical interest in shamanism, but also to a renewed practice.

But shamanism has been under attack for hundreds of years, along with the traditional cultural systems that shamans played such an important role in. For example, in Russia during the twentieth century, the Soviet Union sought to put an end to all religious practices, especially ancient shamanistic practices. The Soviets viewed these ancient practices as backward, superstitious, and obsolete.

Both Christianity and Islam have played big roles in the elimination of traditional shamanic religious practices. From the time of Constantine, when Rome adopted Christianity as its official state religion, all forms of so-called pagan (heretical) practices were declared illegal. Over time, they were systematically purged. Once Islam became established, Muslims eliminated the few traditional groups that still remained. These traditions were not difficult to purge since the essential skills and practical knowledge were passed orally from one generation to the next.

Once the shamans were dead, either by natural or unnatural means, the tradition was effectively ended.

The efforts to preserve the knowledge and traditions of shamanistic cultures has not only been taken up by surviving members of these native tribal groups, it has also been taken up by people outside of their groups. Some of these outside people are scholars and some are mystics who identify with the spiritual elements of shamanism. There are others who are sympathetic toward ancient sacred traditions in general, and who want to revive shamanism for the sake of cultural preservation. This preservation effort by people outside of traditional shamanistic cultures is referred to as 'neo-shamanism'. The 2011 census in the U.K. allowed participants to write in the description of their religious affiliation. Over 80,000 people identified themselves as pagan, with 650 describing their religion as 'shamanism'.

Some members of traditional, indigenous cultures do not support the activities of 'neo-shamanists'. They say that these 'new-age' outsiders are engaging in a form of cultural appropriation. The traditional practices are modified and diluted by fraudulent spiritual leaders who introduce illegitimate and sometimes unsafe elements into their spiritual practices and who do not understand the true nature of shamanistic initiation and practice. According to shamanist scholar, Michael York;

"Neo-shamanism and its New Age relations tend to dismiss the existence of evil, fear, and failure. In traditional shamanism, the shaman's initiation is an ordeal involving pain, hardship and terror. New Age, by contrast is a religious perspective that denies the ultimate reality of the negative, and this would devalue the role of fear as well."

True shamanism is about recognizing all things, especially plants and animals, as our relatives. It recognizes a direct spiritual connection of every individual thing with everything else in the world. It also recognizes that wisdom is available all around us; within other people, birds and animals, the sky, mountains and rivers. Most importantly, it recognizes that gifted people should assume responsibilities for the well-being of their communities.