

WHAT IS A SHAMAN? DEFINITION, ORIGIN AND DISTRIBUTION

Roger Walsh
Irvine, California

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.

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.

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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).

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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).

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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.

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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

experience and believe they are doing. However it is an enormous philosophical leap to assume that this is what they are actually doing. The precise nature (or in philosophical terms the ontological status) of both the realms which shamans experience themselves traversing and the entities they meet is an open question. To the shaman they are interpreted as independently and fully "real"; to a Westerner with no belief in other realms or entities they would likely be interpreted as subjective mind creations.

It may, in fact even be impossible to decide this question. Technically speaking we may have here an example of ontological indeterminacy due to the under-determination of theory by observation. Speaking more simply, this is the inability to determine a phenomenon's ontological status because the observations allow multiple theoretical interpretations. The result is that one's interpretation of such indeterminate phenomena (in this case of the nature of "a hidden reality" and "spirits") depends largely on one's own philosophical leanings or worldview. We are therefore on safer grounds defining shamanism if we skirt these questions of philosophical interpretation as much as possible.

In summary, 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 their community.

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This definition seems to cover the major features of shamanism. The reference to a "family of traditions" acknowledges that there is some heterogeneity among shamanic practitioners (Siikala, 1985). However, at the same time the definition is precise enough to differentiate it from other traditions and practices as well as from various psychopathologies with which it has been confused. For example, priests may lead rituals and medicine men may heal, but they rarely enter altered states; mediums may enter altered states but do not journey; Taoists and Tibetan Buddhists may sometimes journey but this is not a major focus of their practice; while those suffering mental illness may enter altered states and meet "spirits," but involuntarily as helpless victims.

Of course this definition will not satisfy everyone nor include every conceivable shaman. Judging from the enormous number and range of definitions, no single definition can. It is, nevertheless, reasonably narrow and precise. This will allow us to focus our investigation on a clearly distinguished group of

widely dispersed areas of the world raise the question of how these similarities developed. One possibility is that they emerged spontaneously in different locations perhaps because of a common innate human tendency or recurrent social need. The other is that they resulted from migration and diffusion from common ancestors.

If migration is the answer then that migration must have begun long ago. Shamanism occurs among tribes with so many different languages that diffusion from a common ancestor must have begun at least 20,000 years ago (Winkleman, 1984). This long time period makes it difficult to explain why shamanic practices would remain so stable for so long in so many cultures while language and social practices changed so drastically. These difficulties make it seem unlikely that migration alone can account for the long history and far flung distribution of shamanism.

It follows that if the worldwide, history-long distribution of shamanism cannot be attributed to diffusion from a single invention in prehistoric times, then it must have been discovered and rediscovered in diverse times and cultures. This suggests that some recurring combination of social forces and innate abilities must have repeatedly elicited and maintained shamanic roles, rituals and states of consciousness.

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Certainly there seems to be evidence of some innate human tendency to enter specific altered states. Studies of different meditative traditions suggest that an innate tendency to access altered states can be very precise. For example, for two and a half thousand years Buddhists have described accessing precisely eight highly specific and distinct states of extreme concentration. These concentrated states, the so called *jhanas*, are extremely subtle, stable, and blissful and have been very precisely described for millennia (Buddhaghosa, 1923; Goleman, 1988). Today a few Western meditators are beginning to access them and I have been fortunate to interview three of these people. In each case their experiences tallied remarkably well with ancient accounts. Clearly then there seems to be some innate tendency in the human mind to settle into certain specific states if it is given the right conditions or practices.

The same principle may hold for shamanic states. Observations of Westerners in shamanic workshops suggest that most people are readily able to enter shamanic states to some degree. These states can also be induced by a wide variety of conditions which suggest that there may be some inherent tendency for the mind to adopt them. The conditions which induce them can include such natural occurrences as isolation, fatigue, hunger, rhyth-

mic sound, or ingestion of hallucinogens (Winkleman, 1984; Walsh, 1989, 1990). Thus they would likely be rediscovered by different generations and cultures. Since the states may be pleasurable, meaningful and healing they would likely then be actively sought after and the methods for inducing them remembered and transmitted across generations.

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Thus shamanism and its widespread distribution may reflect an innate human tendency to enter certain pleasurable and valuable states of consciousness. Once discovered, then rituals and beliefs which support the induction and expression of the states would likely also arise and shamanism would emerge once again. This natural tendency might be supported and amplified by communication between cultures. For example, shamanism in Northern Asia appears to have been modified by the importation of yogic practices from India (Eliade, 1964). Thus the global distribution of shamanism may be due to both innate tendency and diffusion of information. The end result is that this ancient tradition has spread across the earth and has survived for perhaps tens of thousands of years, a period which represents a significant proportion of this time that fully developed human beings (*modern Homo sapiens*) have been on the planet.

DISTRIBUTION

Given that shamanism has endured so long and spread so widely the question naturally arises as to why it occurs in some cultures and not in others. Answers are beginning to emerge from cross-cultural research. One notable study examined 47 societies spanning almost 4000 years from 1750 B.C., i.e., the Babylonians, to the present century (Winkleman, 1984, 1989). It is interesting to note that, prior to Western influence, all of these 47 cultures used altered states of consciousness as a basis for religious and healing practices. However although shamanic practices were found in most regions of the world they occurred only in particular types of societies. These were primarily simple nomadic hunting and gathering societies. These peoples relied very little on agriculture and had almost no social classes or political organization. Within these tribes the shaman played many roles, both sacred and mundane: medicine man, healer, ritualist, keeper of the cultural myths, medium, and master of spirits. With their many roles and the power vacuum offered by a classless society shamans exerted a major influence on their tribe and people.

However, as societies evolve and become more complex, it appears that this situation changes dramatically. In fact, as

societies become sedentary rather than nomadic, agricultural rather than foraging, and socially and politically stratified rather than classless, then shamanism as such seems to disappear (Winkleman, 1984, 1989). In its place appear a variety of specialists who focus on one of the shaman's many roles. Thus instead of shamans we find healers, priests, mediums and sorcerers/witches. These specialize respectively in medical, ritual, spirit possession, and malevolent magic practices. An obvious contemporary Western parallel is the disappearance of the old medical general practitioner or G.P. and the appearance of diverse specialists.

It is interesting to compare some of these ancient specialists with the shamanic "G.P." who preceded them. Priests emerge as representatives of organized religion and are often religious, moral, and even political leaders. They are the leaders of social rites and rituals and on behalf of their society they pray to and propitiate the spiritual forces. However, unlike their shamanic ancestors they usually have little training or experience in altered states (Hoppal, 1984).

Whereas the priests inherit the socially beneficial religious and magical roles of the shaman, the sorcerers and witches inherit the malevolent ones. Shamans were often ambivalent figures for their people, revered for their healing and helping powers, feared for their malevolent magic (Rogers, 1982). Sorcerers and witches, at least as they are defined in Winkleman's (1984) and other anthropological studies, are the specialists in malevolent magic and as such they tend to be feared, hated, and persecuted.

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Mediums are the specialists in spirit possession. While they do not journey, they may enter altered states in which they experience themselves as communicating messages from the spirit world (Klimo, 1987; Hastings, 1990). It will be remembered that some researchers (e.g., Peters & Price-Williams, 1980) have wanted to use a broad definition of shamanism that includes anyone using altered states to serve the community. However, such a definition fails to distinguish shamans and mediums, both of whom use altered states, though of different types. Other researchers have argued for a narrow definition, like the one used here, that clearly separates these two practitioners. Cross-cultural studies suggest that though there is some overlap mediums and shamans tend to be found in different types of societies (Bourguignon, 1973; Winkleman, 1989). This provides further evidence for distinguishing them. This is not to deny that some shamans are capable of spirit possession, but it is to say that they are also capable of more than this.

It seems, therefore, that as cultures evolve so do the forms of their religious practitioners. Though shamans as such largely disappear, most of their roles and skills are retained by various specialists. There is however, one exception, and that is the practice which is one of the defining characteristics of shamanism, namely journeying. None of the shaman's successors seem to journey.

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Why this practice should largely disappear is a mystery. Michael Harner (1982) attributes it to suppression of shamanic practices by organized religion and indeed, during the last century it was a criminal offense in parts of Europe to own a drum. Another factor may have been the discovery of other altered states such as the powerful states associated with various yogic and meditative practices. However, it is unclear whether these factors alone could account for the disappearance of a practice, journeying, that was powerful enough to spread around much of the world, survive for perhaps tens of thousands of years, and form the basis for humankind's most ancient and durable religious tradition: shamanism.

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Requests for reprints to: Roger N. Walsh, M.D., Dept. of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92717.