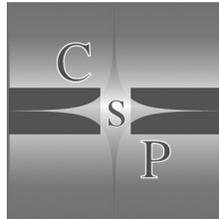


The Nature of Shamanism and the Shamanic Story

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By

Michael Berman



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INTRODUCTION

The book makes out a case for the introduction of a new genre of tale, the shamanic story, which has either been based on or inspired by a shamanic journey, or contains a number of the elements that are typical of such a journey.

The first chapter will briefly explore what are regarded by the author as misconceptions about shamanism including, for example, the belief that no danger is involved in shamanic practices (the failure of the practitioners and proponents of neo-shamanism to fully acknowledge the eristic nature of indigenous shamanism).

A definition of shamanism will then be proposed, the intention of which is to encompass the different forms shamanism takes in different cultures. The question of whether shamanism is a religion, a way of life, or a methodology will then be considered. The opinions of various experts are examined, including Emile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, Joan Halifax, Michael Harner, Mihaly Hoppal, Ake Hultkrantz, Sandra Ingerman, Carl Jung, Roger Walsh, William James, Karl Marx, Max Muller, Paul Radin, Ninian Smart, and Van Der Leeuw. Many of the recent writers on the subject appear to skirt the issue of whether shamanism can be regarded as a religion or not. The intention in this study, however, is to tackle the question head-on, in the hope of contributing something new to the discussion.

The main focus of the work follows, which is to identify how the chief characteristics of the various types of journey the shaman undertakes can be found in what will be termed “shamanic stories” (citing biblical, traditional and contemporary examples of the genre). The stories are preceded by a brief description of the different types of journey that are possible—to the Lower World, Middle World, Upper World, Land of the Dead, journeys for the purpose of divination and also for purposes of Soul Retrieval—as the extent to which these form the basis of the stories selected for analysis is one of the areas the work then goes on to consider.

The stories featured are the Book of Jonah from the Old Testament, two traditional stories from the Republic of Georgia—*The Earth will take its Own* and *Davit*, a contemporary German tale *Bundles*, and the Korean story of *Shimchong, the Blindman's Daughter*.

The textual analysis involves both biblical and mythical interpretation. The analysis is based on the assumption that the stories represent shamanic journeys and the parallels between the two will be highlighted. However, Bettelheim's psychoanalytical approach, among others, is also taken into account. Attention is drawn to how the selected stories can be interpreted on a number of different levels and how all of these interpretations contribute to the richness and depth of the tales. By making use of textual material from a number of different cultures and times, the intention is to highlight the pervasive influence shamanism has had and to show how the "new" genre being proposed is a universal one.

Finally, to bring the work to a close, the parallels between the shaman and the storyteller are explored—such as the way in which they both make use of a ritual framework, how they both produce the effects of the *numinosum*, and how they both have the power to heal.

The research questions addressed include 1) defining what shamanism is, deciding whether it should be classified as a religion, a methodology or a way of life 2) considering whether a case can be made out for the introduction of a new genre of tale and, if so, what its characteristics are.

What makes the work different to others in the field is that in it a case is made for the introduction of a new genre of tale to be termed "shamanic stories" (as opposed to folktales, myths, sagas or fairytales). Although well-known stories such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Alice in Wonderland* have been compared to shamanic journeys, this work includes the study of two Georgian folktales that have, as far as can be ascertained, never been considered in this light before.

As for the contribution to knowledge which may be expected, it is hoped the introduction of this new genre of tale will be of use not only those involved in the study of shamanism but also to those whose interest is in the study of literary texts. Since the old bearers of shamanic traditions quite often were, and even today are, illiterate, the study of their folklore—epic songs, laments, narratives—undoubtedly provides a rich source for research.

CHAPTER ONE

A DEFINITION AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF SHAMANISM

The purpose of this opening Chapter is to consider a number of what are regarded by the author as misconceptions about shamanism—including the idea that the shaman is “possessed”, the belief that shamans are exclusively male in all societies where they are found, that symptoms of malevolent spirit possession are an unconscious attempt by women to protest against neglect and oppression in a society largely dominated by men, the idea promoted by the practitioners and proponents of neo-shamanism that the practices are invariably “safe” and result in no harm being done to others, and the view that shamanism dates back to Palaeolithic times. Finally, a definition of shamanism will be proposed which recognizes the different forms shamanism takes in different cultures and that encompasses both shamanism as it is traditionally practised and neo-shamanic practices.

Possessed or In Control?

The suggestion the shaman is “possessed” is frequently found in definitions¹. Possession can be defined as a belief that a person is changed in some way through the presence of a “foreign” spirit entity or power. It will be shown such a suggestion is unhelpful as in fact they are very much in control of the process they initiate by providing examples to support the case. Indeed, if they were not in control of the process, they would surely be unable to do their jobs effectively and would thus not be accepted as shamans by the communities they operate in.

¹ “Debate about possession in shamanism began in earnest when Hans Findeisen (Findeisen 1957) declared that possession by spirits is the main feature of shamanic ecstasy, describing the shaman as a ‘possessed priest,’ whose body is occupied by spirits while its own is elsewhere” (Stone, 2003, p.115).

The Tungus, for example, clearly differentiate “between a person possessed (involuntarily) by a spirit, and a spirit possessed (voluntarily) by a person” (Lewis, 2003, p.48). However, it has to be admitted that this is not always the case as even among the Orochi, a Tungusic-speaking people, it did not in fact obtain (see Hutton, 2001, pp.65-67). On the other hand, generally speaking, it can be said that the shaman is someone who has learnt how to control the possession and can turn it on or off at will.

Just as the function of the shaman to develop an approach to the supernatural that would provide the layman with convincing explanations for success or failure had to be acquired, their roles as intermediaries had to be accepted and respected so that they could make reasonable livings from their work (see Radin, 1957, p.172). Clearly none of this would have been remotely possible unless the shamans had been very much in control of what they did.

Shirokogoroff, in his seminal work first published in 1935, comments on the distinction between whether a person is possessed by the spirits or the spirits are possessed by the person. He makes the point that no Tungus or Manchus would accept anyone as a shaman if the person could not possess the spirits—further evidence to support the case for the shaman being in control, rather than at the mercy, of the spirits.

As Michael Harner points out, the shaman usually remains in control of the process during the séance and suffers no amnesia on the point of reintegration, being able to remember everything that transpired during the liminal stage (what transpires in ritual or sacred space), whereas the medium generally comes out of the altered state with no substantial memory of the experience. He adds that the fact shamans are able to operate in the liminal stage of the ritual with such discipline and focus shows how well-grounded they are, and helps to account for their effectiveness in helping others (Harner, 1988, pp.8-12). Even when shamans dance their guardian animal spirits, this is not the uncontrollable possession that can be observed in the practices of the Caribbean Vodun cults, but rather a reaffirmation by the shamans of their oneness with their power animals, and it can be interpreted as a magical transformation of the shaman into that animal (see Harner, 1990, pp.62-63). The willingly induced state of the inspired can be regarded as characteristic of the state of both the shaman and religious mystics whom Eliade calls prophets, whereas the involuntary state of possession is more like a psychotic state.

In shamanism, rapture can be seen as one method of enhancing life’s powerfulness:

Whether or not this inspiration is ascribed to demonic possession it is in any case an affair of decreasing one’s own, and increasing a foreign,

numinous and demonic life; the ancient Israelite judges, for example, led their people to victory because the spirit of Jahveh had come upon them. This exaltation, this fullness of God, confers mighty power (Van Der Leeuw, 1938, p.487).

Viewed in this light, “possession” can be seen as something positive and worth striving for, without the usual negative connotations associated with the word. It can thus be interpreted as a means of tapping into higher powers instead of making use of one’s own and so becoming drained in the process. Indeed, one of the features of shamanism is that despite the apparent exertions of the practitioner during the course of the séance, any physical fatigue is in most cases quite unnoticeable: “Why should I feel fatigued?” asked a Chuchkee shaman in regard to this subject. “I do nothing. The ‘spirits’ make all the exertion” (Bogoras, 1909, p.433).

Whereas we cannot necessarily escape from bad dreams or disentangle ourselves from unpleasant experiences, the shaman wills himself into what Harner refers to as the Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC) and, “since it is a conscious waking state, is able at any time to will himself out of it, back into the OSC [Ordinary State of Consciousness]” (Harner, 1990, p.xxii). However, it has to be conceded that when highly potent substances made from plants are taken by the shaman, despite what Harner maintains, it may not be so easy for him to will himself out of it at any time. Nevertheless, it should be clear by now the suggestion the shaman is “possessed” creates both a false and misleading impression of what actually takes place.

There is a danger of “cognicentricism”—interpreting alternative states from the limited perspective and experience of our own state—and this is undoubtedly what has happened in the past:

Western psychiatry has a long history of viewing mystics as madmen, saints as psychotics, and sages as schizophrenics. ... Religious experiences and states of consciousness have been viewed all too often as pathological because of cultural bias, lack of psychological expertise, psychoanalytic emphasis on pathology, and ignorance of the potential range and value of certain altered states (Walsh, 1990, pp.75-76).

In clinical dissociative disorders the dissociation functions as a defence mechanism by reducing and distorting consciousness to block the awareness of psychological pain and conflict whereas the shamanic journey seems to do just the opposite. Walsh goes on to explain that even though either atypical psychosis or brief reactive psychosis might be an appropriate diagnosis for what occurs during the initiation crises a shaman

undergoes, non-psychiatrists are generally unfamiliar with the many varieties of psychosis and may thus falsely assume that all psychoses are schizophrenia (Walsh, 1990, p.87). And even though the shaman and religious mystics may have been possessed during their “call,” their empowerment lies in the fact they have overcome the condition and are cured. Their concern then becomes the curing of others.

As for the main differences between the shaman and the schizophrenic, to whom he has been wrongly compared, they can be summarized as follows: Whereas the shaman exhibits increased powers of concentration, control over his state of mind, and shares the knowledge of what he experiences on his journeys, the schizophrenic is distracted, has no such self-control and is trapped within what he experiences (Vitebsky, 2001, p.138). It would seem to me, however, as a neo-shamanic practitioner, that a question mark remains over whether the shaman necessarily shares the knowledge of what he or she experiences as Vitebsky suggests, especially in the case of neo-shamanism where the practitioner may well journey purely for purposes of self-development.

The shaman can be said “to move back and forth between the two realities deliberately and with serious intention. Whichever the reality, the shaman thinks and acts in the ways appropriate to it, and has as his objective the mastery of both his non-ordinary activities and his ordinary activities” (Harner, 1990, pp.46-47). And this is what the schizophrenic is clearly unable to do—he fails to think and act appropriately as far as society is concerned. It is Harner’s belief that only the person who successfully masters his actions in both realms can be regarded as a master shaman. However, to aspire to such heights is perhaps being somewhat unrealistic for, as Jung maintained, conscious man does not possess the unconscious, rather he is possessed by it—so in that sense we can all be said to be possessed!

What the practitioner actually controls is the *when*, the *where* and the *why*—the time, the place, and the purpose of the process. In other words, the shaman controls when the séance takes place, where it takes place and whether it is for the purpose of healing an individual or for the community as a whole. On the other hand, during genuine ecstatic shamanism, what cannot be controlled is the nature of what takes place on the journey in the sense that there is no way the shaman can know this in advance of the process.

Mediums, Magicians and Shamans

The question of whether or not the shaman is “possessed” leads us on to consider whether a distinction can consequently be drawn between a medium and a shaman. Although the incorporation of spirits and possession by them are universally distributed phenomena, this does not mean that they necessarily belong to shamanism in the strict sense. Whereas mediums usually make no use of music and what they do requires no conception of a cosmos, in shamanism music plays an integral role in the process, often in the form of drumming. As for the shaman’s concept of the cosmos, it provides the “map” that is needed to enable him or her to set out on a shamanic journey. A distinction can also be drawn between a shamanic session and that of a possession cult, such as the vodoun ceremony in Haiti, in that the shaman’s audience usually remains passive and it is the shaman, rather than the audience, who performs.

However, the difference between a medium and a shaman is not as clear cut as it at first might seem to be. Although in Haitian vodoun those who participate in *loa* ceremonies often do not remember what happened to them during their possession by the spirits, the *loa* priest or priestess eventually learns how to “see” in trance, a process called *la prise des yeux*. And once they have learnt how to control the trance-like state in this manner, they share the same mastery that shamans exhibit (see Narby & Huxley, 2001, pp.76-77). So it can be seen from this example the suggestion there is a clear dividing line between spirit possession and shamanism is not strictly accurate, and that the relationship between the two can in fact be quite fluid.

This would appear to be an appropriate point at which to briefly consider the difference between a magician and a shaman too. It has been suggested a magician “intends to subject the invoked deity to his will” (Drury, N., 1982, p.33) whereas the shaman turns to his Helpers and Sacred Teachers in non-ordinary reality for guidance, or to intercede with them on behalf of his clients. It is doubtful, however, once again whether the situation is really so clear cut. Can a magician really subject powerful deity to his will any more than a shaman can subject to his will the spirits he intercedes with? And would any magicians express what they do in such terms? It would seem to be highly unlikely unless they were claiming to be godlike themselves. It is more likely that what has happened here is the negative connotations of the word “magician” have influenced Drury’s choice of definition. In common parlance, according to the *Collins English Dictionary* (2005), the uncountable noun *magician* can be – another term for conjuror, a person who practises magic, and a person who has

extraordinary skill and / or influence. There can be little doubt the shaman satisfies the third of these definitions. Moreover, Eliade himself refers to the shaman as “a primitive magician”. As must surely be evident by now, producing clear definitions in this field that are generally accepted is not an easy matter!

The Role of Women in Shamanism

It is also falsely supposed by some writers that shamans are, and / or were, exclusively male. A considerable number of Russian scholars base their theory about female shamans and their priority in time to male shamans on supposed survivals of earlier stages of development—the assumption there was a matriarchal phase when the woman was not only the head of the family but also a seer and priest (see Edsman, 1967, pp.16-17). However, concrete evidence to indicate that women were in fact the original shamans has not been produced to date. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence to indicate women have played an important part in its history as will now be shown.

For example, we learn from Van der Leeuw (1938) that the priestesses of the Bahaus in Borneo, observed by Nieuwenhuis, would bring back the missing soul part of a sick person by attaching it to a cord, then blowing it into the body through the crown of the head (Nieuwenhuis, *Wurzeln*, 43; cf. his *Quer durch Borneo*, I, 103, cited in Van Der Leeuw, 1938, p.296). And we learn from Maddox that:

Women sometimes are considered superior enough to attain the coveted position [of shaman]. In “Die Medizin der Naturvolker,” Doctor Bartels asserts that this is the case among the Ashanti, among the negroes of Loango, in Libuku, in Zululand, in Borneo, in Australia, in Siberia, and among some of our Indian tribes (Maddox, 2003, p.72).

Bear in mind this comes from a book first published in 1923 when attitudes towards women were of course very different.

Moving on to refer to more recent observations on the role played by women in shamanism, the Korean *son-mudang* (more politely known as *mansin* by those who participate in such rituals²), the Ainu *tsusu*, the Ryukyū *yuta*, all indicate there was once a wide area where a feminine

² Koreans commonly use the term *mudang* for both shaman and hereditary priestess, and this is also the term used by Blacker. However, as Kendall (1985) points out in the Preface to her book, the more polite and localized title is *mansin* (pronounced *man-shin*).

shamanism prevailed, in which spiritual power was believed to be the proper domain of women, and where women were consequently recognized to be the natural intermediaries between the two worlds (Blacker, 1999, p.28). In fact, one of the oldest shamanic figures we have any record of is the Shinto *miko*, also from Japan—a powerful sacral woman who is said to have served in shrines throughout the land during the late prehistoric period and to have acted as the mouthpiece for certain kinds of numina (Blacker, 1999, p.104). We also learn from Blacker that in the Ryuku islands (a string of tropical islands that runs from Japan to Taiwan) magic power, similar to that said to be possessed by the *kami*, could be controlled and invoked only by women. And any man who required such power to carry out the duties of his office, could only acquire it indirectly through a woman relative (Blacker, 1999, p.113).

Further evidence to show that many women became shamans can be found in the research carried out by Shirokogoroff among the Tungus, Haslund Christensen among the Mongolian shamans, and Kendall in her recent work about the Korean *mansin* (Jakobsen, 1999, p.179).

Rosie Plummer, a North American Paviotso, provides a contemporary example of a female shaman. She is said to have inherited her vocation from her father, and he inherited his from his brother, who was also a shaman. However, like many Paviotso shamans, Rosie received the “call” relatively late in life, when she was already in her fifties. Apparently her father appeared to her in a series of dreams and instructed her to become a *puhagəm* (shaman-doctor). She then began to have experiences of power during her dreams and the rattlesnake spirit appeared to her. She recognized it as her spirit guide because it has also been the guide of both her father and his brother (Halifax, 1991, p.105).

Sieroshevski observed that in Siberia the women shamans had greater power than the men and played a particularly prominent role among the Yakuts. In the Kolmyck district, for example, the male shamans would not only wear dresses but also comb and style their hair in the same way as the women did (cited in Maddox, 2003, p.88).

Maddox (2003) refers to how the female idea of the shamanate was so prevalent in Korea at the time when he was writing that not only did the men who became practitioners wear female clothing but the whole shaman class was in fact spoken of as feminine. And even today, when someone dies in Korea, the *mugam*, who is usually a woman, can act as a psychopomp or soul-guide. A séance or *kut* is then held, for which the family of the deceased person pay. After entering a trance state, the *mugam* summons the Death Messenger and offers various bribes to make sure the deceased is properly looked after. The *mugam* also communicates

with the lingering spirit of the deceased, to persuade him to leave the place where he formerly lived and to accept his new home and status. The climax of the ceremonies is when a strip of white silken cloth, which represents a bridge, is stretched between two of the mourners. The *mugam* then splits it with a knife and, by pushing her own body along the length of it, divides it into two narrower strips. At the same time she pushes in front of her various belongings of the deceased, which could include his photograph. Once she reaches the end it is believed the spirit has been safely conducted to its new home and the “bridge”, which is no longer needed, is then destroyed (Rutherford, 1986, p.78).

It has been suggested by Vitebsky (2001) that female shamans tend to play a more important role in agrarian, crop-growing societies, like those to be found in South and Southeast Asia. He also observes that among the Sora, an aboriginal jungle tribe in Orissa, India, (where he carried out the fieldwork for the study), it is the “great” shamans, mostly women, who conduct funerals whereas the “lesser” shamans, mostly men, perform divinations and cures. It should be pointed out, however, this division of labour may in fact be a marker of relative hierarchy. In many South Asian societies the association with death is negative and devalued work – so if women shamans deal with death while male ones deal with health then the implication might be that women’s generally lower social status better suits them to this kind of work.

There is even a tradition among certain tribal groups that the first shamans were in fact female. There is a Buryat origin myth which describes how the first shaman sent to humans by the gods was an eagle. The bird could not make himself understood but he had sexual intercourse with a woman who thereby became a shaman herself (Stone, 2003, p.54).

As Jenny Blain points out, women have not only played a prominent role in shamanism. In seid-magic, in North European paganism, they have traditionally taken centre stage. Indeed, the majority of accounts of seiðr are of women and the male seiðrworkers of saga-times were considered to be “ergi” or unmasculine, possibly because they crossed gender barriers in ways that society found unacceptable (Blain, 2002, p.60)

For the last word on the subject, let us turn to Czaplicka, who wrote in 1914 that in view of

the present prominent position of female shamans among many Siberian tribes and their place in traditions, together with certain feminine attributes of the male shaman (such as dress, habits, privileges) and certain linguistic similarities between the names for male and female shamans, many scientists (Troshchanski, Bogoras, Stadling) have been led to express the opinion that in former days only female shamans existed, and that the male

shaman is a later development which has to some extent supplanted them (Czaplicka, 1969, p.244).

As to whether in former times there were only female shamans, we will probably never know. However, taking all the above evidence into account, there can surely now be no doubt women have played a significant role in the history of shamanism, and indeed they continue to do so, especially in neo-shamanism. Moreover, as anyone who has attended a neo-shamanic training workshop can attest to, the majority of trainees are invariably women and the same imbalance can be found in most drumming circles too.

Not only is there plenty of evidence to show the important part women have played in the history of shamanism, certain generalisations can be made about the kind of communities in which women shamans can be found. For example, in the Tajic or “agricultural complex,” as opposed to the Turkic or “cattle-breeder” complex, shamans are generally women. They conjure up spirits in human form; their powers are largely accounted for by the sexual relationship they enter into with a spirit, and no dancing takes place during the séance (Coulano, 1991, p.40).

Incidentally, there are accounts to be found in myths that would seem to indicate women have had a full part to play in the history of healing too. In Ancient Egypt, Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris, was reputed to have medical skills, which she gave proof of by restoring her son Horus to life. She was also believed to have discovered several remedies, which were named in her honour. And in Ancient Greece, Hygeia, daughter of Aesculapius, god of medicine, was worshipped in the temples of Argos as the goddess of both physical and mental health. Although this information cannot be verified, we can infer from the fact it has been preserved in allegoric form that women in those times were actively involved in the practice of medicine, just as they are today (Maddox, 2003, pp.75-77).

Another misconception about women in shamanism is the theory, put forward by Lewis (2003), that symptoms of malevolent spirit possession are an unconscious attempt by women to protest against neglect and oppression in a society largely dominated by men. Evidence to disprove the theory is put forward by Blacker, who did her fieldwork in Japan. She points out that although in all prefectures of Japan where cases of malignant possession can be found most of the patients are women, none of them appear to gain any satisfaction from consequently becoming the centre of attention. Nor are the rewards demanded by the spirit comparable with the sewing machines or soap that the Somali women cited by Professor Lewis demand (see Blacker, 1999, pp.312-313). Although instances such as those cited by Lewis clearly occur, it would be wrong to

generalize and infer from them this is always the case. Further evidence to disprove the theory put forward by Lewis can be found in Kendall's study of Korean female shamans. She disputes Lewis's theory by arguing "the family gods and ghosts dealt with by women are an integral part of Korean religious and social life and that women's religion provides an indispensable specialized complement to that of men" (cited in Vitebsky, 2001, pp.118-119).

Cross-Dressing and Shamanism

This would seem to be an apt point at which to briefly address the issue of transvestitism in shamanism. In southern Borneo, for example, the Ngadju-Dayak have a special category of hermaphrodite-shamans known as *basir*, which translates as "unable to reproduce". However, whether they are truly hermaphrodites or men who dress as women remains unclear. Another example can be found among the Chukchee—the spirit guides of male shamans oblige them to dress as women and they sometimes even take husbands³. According to Bogoras, the same category of shaman was also found among the Koryak, the Kamchadul, and the Asiatic Eskimo and he refers to them as "persons of a changed sex" (Bogoras, 1909, p.456).

The occasional androgyny of the shaman can be regarded as one inflection of paradise, where the two become one. As Joan Halifax observes, the dissolution of opposites, such as life and death or male and female, and the subsequent "making whole again" is one of the main features in the initiation and transformation process as experienced by the shaman, at least in the case of indigenous forms of shamanism (see Ripinsky-Naxon, 1993, pp.84-85). Looking at the same phenomena from

³ Bogoras provides us with a description: "Tilu'wgi's face, encircled with braids of thick hair arranged after the manner of Chukchee women, looked very different from masculine faces. It was something like a female tragic mask fitted to the body of a giantess of a race different from our own. All the ways of this strange creature were decidedly feminine. He was so 'bashful,' that whenever I asked a question of somewhat indiscreet character, you could see, under the layer of its usual dirt, a blush spread over his face, and he would cover his eyes with his sleeve, like a young beauty of sixteen. I heard him gossip with the female neighbors in a most feminine way, and even saw him hug small children with evident envy for the joys of motherhood" (Bogoras, 1909, pp.453-454). Bogoras also gives an example of a female to male gender transformation of a shaman and how delicate matters of sex were taken care of— by means of a "gastrocnemius from the leg of a reindeer, fastened to a broad leather belt" (Bogoras, 1909, pp.455-56).

another angle, the way we have been conditioned to see everything in terms of binary logic, makes it hard to apprehend more analogical and ternary belief-systems despite all the exceptions to the supposed rule (see Dumont, 1983).

The early recorders of shamanic practices no doubt considered themselves to be enlightened by the standards of the times in which they were living. Fashions and standards change, however, and today they would be considered by many to be nothing more than racist and sexist imperialists. The following quote, on the subject of transvestitism among male Chukchee shamans who dressed and lived as women, serves to exemplify the point: “The perversion of the sexual functions, resulting from psychical or physical causes, may happen among primitive peoples as well as among civilized ones” (Bogoras, 1909, p.455). The way in which the shamanic practices were recorded was clearly coloured by the prejudices of the “outsiders” who did the job. Today we are often witness to the other extreme, “insiders” who go native and do everything they can to paint an idyllic picture of the world they inhabit temporarily and its people—who they live with and grow attached to. As a result, in the case of both the “outsiders” and the “insiders”, the material collected by them has to be subject to a great deal of critical scrutiny before any meaningful conclusions can be drawn from it.

According to the deconstructionists, polarities and privileged positions are simply arbitrary human constructions, and “objective reality” does not exist (see Hansen, 2001, p. 64). Shamans can be regarded as master deconstructionalists. By consorting with spirits, for example, they regularly deconstruct the polarity of life and death, and by their adoption of an alternative lifestyle the Chuchkee shamans can be seen to be doing just the same. One can even argue it is essential for shamans to deconstruct order, especially if a person’s or a community’s rigidity of outlook have blocked adaptation and growth, and they need to view their situation in a new light in order to remove the impasse.

The Eristic Nature of Indigenous Shamanism

Another misconception is that, contrary to what is given prominence on neo-shamanic workshops run by organizations such as the Foundation for Shamanic Studies or the Scandinavian Centre for Shamanic Studies, namely the safe nature of the techniques that are taught, indigenous shamanism is in fact *eristic*, in that the shamanic world-view openly acknowledges the role of battle against the spirits and of the risk involved in the course of such action. The shaman is regarded as a hero who

courageously intervenes into cosmic processes on behalf of his clients or the community he represents. He places himself in a precarious position and the action he undertakes is, more often than not, fraught with danger (Vitebsky, 1993, p.4).

Ironically, the Jivaro people in Ecuador (who now prefer to use the name ‘Shuar’), whom Harner himself lived among and has written about, use shamanic methods to protect themselves from attack and to engage in warfare against neighbouring communities. Incidentally, they also ingest substances made from plants, which many would consider to be highly dangerous too⁴. However, there is a tendency by neo-shamanic teachers to ignore aggressive elements or consider them to be examples of “sorcery” instead.

To suggest Harner himself is guilty of ignoring the potential dangers of shamanic practices is not strictly fair as can be seen from the following quote:

I had heard that persons sometimes died or permanently lost their minds from taking maikua. I also remembered stories of Jivaro who had taken *maikua* and become so delirious that they had dashed wildly through the forest to fall from cliffs or to drown. For this reason, they never took *maikua* without sober companions to restrain them (in Harvey, 2003, p.52).

However, the way Harner describes indigenous shamanism and the way he presents his own adapted version are, it has to be said, quite different.

As for Jonathan Horwitz, founder of the Scandinavian Centre for Shamanic Studies, when the question of whether there can be both good and bad shamans was raised by one of the trainees on the Basic Workshop he gave in London in June 2005, his response was to advise working with energy rather than might, and he then added that how we work with power is up to us. The cynic might be critical of such a response in that it could be argued he failed to answer the question. However, common sense indicates it would be tactless to instill fear in a trainee at such an early stage in their apprenticeship and under the circumstances it was probably the most helpful answer that could be given to the question.

In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (2002, p.2925), a *sorcerer* is defined as “A person claiming magical powers, a practitioner of sorcery; a

⁴ The effects of such substances are unlikely to be regarded as “hallucinatory” by shamans themselves as the term implies false vision. For this reason the word has not been used.

wizard, a magician” and there is no reference to any healing powers. The word comes from the Latin word *sortarius*, meaning one who casts lots, or one who tells the lot of others. However, in Dan. 2:2 it is the rendering of the Hebrew *mekhashphim*, and refers to men who professed to have power with evil spirits. We also know from the Bible that the practice of sorcery resulted in severe punishment so it clearly has negative connotations. Attempts are made to draw a distinction between someone like Carlos Castaneda, who has been labelled “a sorcerer”, with its negative connotations, and shamans who do not act in such ways. It has even been suggested there is a tendency for interpreters to romantically project such features of indigenous shamanism “into otherworldly, metaphorical, meta-empirical, neutralized (or otherwise unreal) psychodrama” (Harvey, 2003, p.14). The reality is there is no such clear dividing line between the two and shamanic techniques are not always safe or necessarily conducted without malevolent designs against other persons or communities who are considered to be a threat.

Lewis (2003) refers to the Evenk Tungus shamans the Soviet ethnographer Anisimov observed, the way in which they would unleash their protective spirits on their enemies and how, in retaliation, their enemy would let loose a host of their own guardian spirits to do battle in the form of zoomorphic monsters - another example of the less palatable aspects of shamanism, as far as those who want their shamanism sanitized are concerned.

Shirokogoroff (1982) was informed by the Tungus that when the shaman goes to the Lower World, death may sometimes occur. His soul can be stopped by other spirits or even by other shamans from returning, which is why such journeys are rarely performed. This could be due to the effort made by the shaman during the performance exacerbating an already existing health problem. Another possibility could be that as he is convinced his soul cannot return, he arrests the normal functioning of the heart and the breathing himself. Either way, this provides further evidence of the dangers involved in such practices and of course, unlike packets of cigarettes, neo-shamanic workshops come with no “Government Health Warning!”

One could also refer to the Yanomamo, a tribe of Tropical Forest Indians located on the border between Venezuela and Brazil. The shamans are called *shabori* or *hekura*. The latter term is also used to signify the numerous tiny spirits they are said to have the power to manipulate. The *hekura* can be found in all sorts of places—in the hills, in trees, under rocks or even in the chest of a human. The ones considered to be “hot” and meat

hungry are employed to devour the souls of enemies—especially children’s souls, although they can also be used by the shamans to cure sickness.

A further example of the eristic nature of indigenous shamanism is provided by Elkin, an account of practices recorded in Australia:

[A]fter putting a halter around the neck of the sleeping victim and dragging him unnoticed out of his camp, the sorcerer makes an incision in his abdomen or side, through which he extracts his kidney or caul-fat; then, inserting some grass or other packing, he closes up the wound so that no mark is visible, and restores the victim to consciousness. The latter returns to his camp, and is in perfect health for a day or two but generally dies on the third day. In another area, after preliminary acts the sorcerer opens the victim’s side between the ribs, and pushing his hand in, pierces the heart with a pointed stick and lets the blood out. He then closes the wound, and restores the victim to consciousness. As before, the latter is perfectly well for a day, but sickens and dies in about three days (Elkin, 1979, pp.308-309).

Once again, it is evident from the above that indigenous shamanism can be a highly dangerous business.

Definitions of Shamanism

Now let us take a look at some of the definitions of shamanism put forward by various experts in the field. We should perhaps start by pointing out that the term shaman is a social construct, one that has been described, not unfairly, as “a made-up, modern, Western category” (Taussig, 1992, p. 57). On the other hand, as it is so widely used, in both common parlance and in academic circles, a definition is clearly called for and will be provided. To start off with, some information on the etymology of the word: It is generally agreed that the word is derived from the Tunguso-Manchurian word *saman*, which is formed from the verb *sa-*, meaning “to know”. It has been suggested that there appears to be a relationship with the Indo-European root which yields the French verb *savoir* and the Spanish and Portuguese *saber*, all meaning “to know”. So the shaman becomes “the one who knows”. This means it is related to other familiar words, such as “witch” and “wizard”, both from the Indo-European root meaning “to see” or “to know”, and both of which are present in the forms of the French verb *voir*, the Latin *videre*, and the

German *wissen* (see Rutherford 1986, p.15)⁵. However, there is actually no reason why a Tunguso-Manchurian word should have any relationship with an Indo-European one as the language groups are completely unrelated so Rutherford's suggestion is nothing more than speculation.

The priest Avvakum Petrovich, in the second half of the seventeenth century, was one of the first to provide a written account of a Siberian shaman, describing him as "a villain of a magician who calls the demon" (cited in Narby & Huxley, 2001, p.2). However, I think we can safely discount definitions of this kind and move on to less judgmental definitions more worthy of our attention. After considering how the word is used in popular parlance by looking at the dictionary definition, the way in which anthropologists and other scholars have used it will then be examined.

In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (2002, p.2787), a *shaman* is defined as:

A priest among certain peoples of northern Asia, regarded as one with healing and magical powers who can influence the spirits who bring about good and evil; a healer among N. American Indians, regarded as possessing magical powers. Now also, a person regarded as having powers of spiritual guidance and healing through direct access to and influence in the spirit world.

And *shamanism* is defined as:

The traditional religion of certain peoples of northern Asia, according to which good and evil are believed to be brought about by spirits who can be influenced only by shamans; any system of religion, esp. among N. American Indians, in which shamans are recognized. Also the beliefs and practices associated with a shaman.

The first observation to make is that the word "priest" is used rather than "priest or priestess," suggesting only men assume the role⁶. This has

⁵ It should be noted that the term "shaman" is far from being universal and different ethnic groups use different terms: "The Yoruba of West Africa call their shamans *babalawo*, the Eskimo *angakok*, the Mongols *Kami*, ... the Haitian shaman is called a *houngan*, the Zulu shaman a *sangoma*, the Hawaiian shaman a *kahuna*, the Korean shaman a *mudang*, the Garhwali shaman a *bakia*, the Singaporean shaman a *tang-ki* (divining youth), the Malay shaman a *bomoh*, and the Thai shaman a *ma khi* (horse of the spirit)" (Heinze, 1991, p.8).

⁶ In defence of the dictionary, it should be pointed out that the word *shamaness* is included as a footnote to the definition.

already been shown to be a false belief. Secondly, it can be seen three different definitions are presented, all reductionist, rather than one comprehensive one. The third is presumably included to refer to neo-shamans. While the shaman might well take on the role of a priest/priestess or a healer, it will become evident during the course of this study they can also take on many other roles. However, in defence of the dictionary definition, it would clearly not be possible in so few words to cover all the possibilities. Harvey (2003) argues that the term “spirit” unhelpfully mystifies matters and prefers the use of “other-than-human persons”, coined by Hallowell (1960). However, as the “spirits” are “real” for those who encounter them, namely the shamans, it might be preferable to refer to them as “beings in (what are considered to be) other realities.”

As for the dictionary definitions of shamanism, the phrase “who can be influenced only by shamans” is problematic. Inappropriate behaviour towards hunted animals by other members of the community could, for example, bring about illness. And in the account an Iglulik shaman’s Lower World journey to the Sea Spirit Takanakapsaluk recorded by Rasmussen (1929), all those present at the séance are required to confess to any taboos they have broken, which are believed to be the cause of the ills brought upon them by the Sea Spirit. The problem with the suggestion a “priest” uses magical powers is that it leads one to question his credibility. Magic can be associated with trickery and this is surely not a quality one would hope to find in a priest. As for the regions specified, what is generally regarded as shamanism also occurs in many other regions of the world not referred to here. What is of particular interest is that both definitions refer to shamanism as “a (system of) religion,” and the question of whether it can be regarded as a religion or not will be considered in detail in Chapter 2 of this work. Suffice it to say for now the fact that the term carries particular associations and implications when used in academic discourse makes its use (or not) to refer to shamanism highly significant.

Perhaps a specialist dictionary might offer a more helpful definition of what a shaman is. The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions (1997, p.884) defines shamans as:

... inspired, ecstatic, and charismatic individuals, male and female, with the power to control spirits, often by incarnating them, and able to make journeys out of the body, both to ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ ... The word is now used of a wide variety of people who enter trance and ecstatic states, and make ‘out of body’ journeys.

Despite coming from a dictionary that specifically deals with religions, there are a number of obvious problems with this definition too. Although shamans might access ecstatic states, that does not mean they are continuously “ecstatic”—a clumsy use of language, whether they entirely “control” spirits is open to debate as we have already seen, and the terms “heaven” and “hell” are clearly inappropriate as they would mean nothing to most indigenous shamans.

In 1944 Swiss anthropologist Alfred Metraux defined the shaman as “any individual who maintains by profession and in the interests of the community an intermittent commerce with spirits, or who is possessed by them” (quoted in Narby & Huxley, 2001, p.4). As well as having an appealing simplicity, the definition is comprehensive in that it also fits African and Haitian possession cults. However, the words “by profession” remain a problem as shamans, especially in small communities, often had other full-time occupations as well.

In the words of Eliade, “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). This definition, however, would appear to be somewhat incomplete as the shaman undertakes other journeys too and, as Hultkrantz points out, it is at least as characteristic for the shaman to operate without “journeying” to the other world as long as he is in an ecstatic state (see Edsman, 1967, p.32). Eliade then goes on to say that “the shaman controls his ‘spirits,’ in the sense that he, a human being, is able to communicate with the dead, ‘demons,’ and ‘nature spirits,’ without thereby becoming their instrument” (Edsman, 1967, p.6). There is no sense here of the shaman necessarily being “possessed” so it can be regarded as a useful addition. However, the suggestion that he “controls his spirits” is neither accurate nor appropriate as “the relationship between shaman and spirit can be an uncertain one, and the shaman’s anguish can be too intense to justify the name of master” (Vitebsky, 2001, p.93).

Harner basically agrees with Eliade, which is not surprising in that the above definition implies there is nothing necessarily dangerous in what the shaman does. Such a definition ensures prospective workshop participants are not put off from attending as a result of any risks that might be involved. 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. The shaman has at least one, and usually more, “spirits” in his personal service. As Mircea Eliade observes, the shaman is distinguished from other kinds of magicians and

medicine men by his use of a state of consciousness which Eliade, following Western mystical tradition, calls “ecstasy” (Harner, 1990, p.20).

This raises the problem of what is meant by “ecstasy,” as it can refer to a whole range of emotional states from mental dissociation to the transports of joy a poet or an artist is said to experience upon viewing an inspiring subject. And somewhere in this range drug-stimulated hallucination could be included too. Moreover, the words “ecstasy” and “trance” are frequently used synonymously. A straightforward explanation of trance that helps to clarify the meaning of the word is that “it is intense mental concentration, so intense that the mind disengages from noticing bodily sensations” (Kehoe, 2000, p.58). As the word “ecstasy” can be used to refer to so many different situations, which makes its meaning ambiguous, the word “trance” is preferred for the purposes of this work.

As for the negative associations the word “trance” has for some people, in view of the fact that the term *consensus trance* can be used “to describe the habitual, automated manner of ‘normal’ consciousness” (Feinstein and Krippner, 1988, p.191), there is no reason to regard being in a trance state as anything strange. Indeed, all the time we spend sleeping or daydreaming can be regarded as time spent in trance states too.

One problem with Harner’s definition is the question of whether contacting a hidden reality and interaction with spirits should in fact be included as essential elements of a definition of shamanism. There is no doubt that these elements describe what shamans experience and believe they are doing but “the interpretation of the nature of these phenomena depends on one’s own philosophical leanings or world view” (Walsh, 1990, p.11). Based on this, it could be argued there should be two definitions—one that practitioners could feel comfortable with and a different one for outsiders!

Lewis “emphasises the coincident importance of spirit possession and [also] rejects the shaman’s ‘celestial voyage’, as the determining feature insisted on by Eliade and his successors” (Lewis, 2003, p.xviii). He paraphrases Eliade’s definition but only so as to criticize it:

According to Mircea Eliade, the diagnostic features of shamanism in the classical Arctic sense are quite specific. The shaman is an inspired priest who, in ecstatic trance, ascends to the heavens on ‘trips’. In the course of these journeys he persuades or even fights with the gods in order to secure benefits for his fellow men. Here, in the opinion of Eliade, spirit possession is not an essential characteristic and is not always present (Lewis, 2003, p.43).

Lewis then goes on to point out that:

[S]hamanism and spirit possession regularly occur together and this is true particularly in the Arctic *locus classicus* of shamanism. Thus, amongst the Eskimos and the East Siberian Chukchee, shamans are possessed by spirits. More significantly still, this is also true of the Arctic Tungus from whose language the word shaman derives, and whom, therefore we may take to epitomize the phenomena under discussion (Lewis, 2003, pp.44-45).

This could, however, be regarded as nothing more than an historical fluke. It only became the “ideal case” from which all others are considered to diverge as it is where people first studied the phenomenon. Another problem is that Lewis might be using the term “spirit possession” here to refer to what the initiate experiences and then learns to control once his or her apprenticeship has been completed, in which case it would not be entirely appropriate to describe what the fully-fledged shaman experiences during a *séance*.

A further criticism that can be levelled against Lewis is he attempts to classify shamanism, witchcraft, and possession cults separately, on the basis of the relationship of the practitioner toward the spirits. Although this may be helpful for analytical purposes, (as in the case of Weber and his use of ideal types which were never found in actual social settings) in practice the states Lewis refers to seldom, if ever, occur in isolation. In fact, a close relationship with the world of spirits can be found in all these guises in a single individual and it is not necessarily as black and white as Lewis suggests (see Couliano, 1991, p.46).

According to Blacker, a shaman is “a person who receives a supernatural gift from the spirit world ... the ability to put himself at will into altered states of consciousness in which he can communicate directly with spiritual beings” (Blacker, 1999, pp.24-25). And the shaman accomplishes this with the aid of a retinue of assistant spirits and by wearing “magic clothes”. To this definition she also adds “He must be capable of offering his body as a vessel for possession by spirits” (Blacker, 1999, p.26). However, nearly all her research is based on her trips to Japan and the “magic clothes” are not necessarily always a common feature. Backman and Hultkrantz point out that in the case of the Lapps special clothing was not regarded as at all necessary, and the items of clothing to be found in the museums of Oslo and Stockholm probably belong to a later period when the practice of shamanism was in decline and the noaidit were trying to revive it by emulating the vestments of the priests (in Rutherford, 1986, p.44). Moreover, as has already been pointed

out, it can be argued that in fact the shaman is very much in control of the process rather than being merely a “vessel for possession”, as Blacker suggests.

In the view of Radin, the shaman was primarily a physician and a curer with a neurotic-epileptoid constitution that resulted in periodic illness. “He differed from the generality of mankind, however, not only because he possessed such a special and diseased mentality but because he was at the same time endowed with the power to cure himself” (Radin, 1957, pp.134-135). He then goes on to define the shaman in terms of the role he or she performs:

The initial and primary task of the shaman-priest is to emphasize and magnify the obstacles that stand between man and his natural and realistic adjustment to the outside world. It is through the excellence and effectiveness of the “technique of obstacles” that he made his living and retained his hold upon the imagination of the people. Nor does this necessarily imply that he was an impostor, a dupe, or an individual with only mercenary motives (Radin, 1957, p.145).

As has already been pointed out, however, being a shaman was not necessarily a full-time occupation and the role would no doubt vary depending on the cultural setting and the needs of the particular community he or she operated in.

As for Sandra Ingerman’s definition, she would also appear to regard the shaman as primarily a healer: “A shamanic practitioner journeys to the spiritual realms on the client’s behalf to gather information on the appropriate method of healing in a particular case” (Ingerman, 1993, p.23).

Ake Hultkrantz has defined a shaman “as an inspired visionary who, on behalf of the society he serves, and with the assistance of his guardian spirits, enters into a deep trance in which his dreaming ego establishes relations with spiritual powers” (Hultkrantz, 1988, pp.34-35). But as he himself admits in his book *The Religions of the American Indians*, not all shamans enter ecstatic trance states so this definition would be applicable to only one kind of shaman.

Richard Noll—an American clinical psychologist—defines shamanism as “an ecstatic healing tradition which at its core is concerned with the techniques for inducing, maintaining, and interpreting the vivid experiences of enhanced mental imagery that occur in the deliberately induced altered states of consciousness in the shaman” (Narby & Huxley, 2001, p.249). However, the suggestion it involves “inducing” an experience from something already induced seems to me a somewhat clumsy use of words and neo-shamans such as Harner or Horwitz would

do no interpreting of the experience as it would be considered to be disempowering the client, something which they go to great pains to avoid.

According to Heinze, only those individuals can be called shamans who “can access alternate states of consciousness at will ... fulfil needs of their community which otherwise are not met, [and] are ... mediators between the sacred and the profane” (Heinze, 1991, p.13). However, whether they can fulfil needs that are otherwise not met is debatable and others can act as mediators between the sacred and the profane—such as priests and rabbis—so this would appear to be an unsatisfactory definition too.

Blain suggests one of the problems in defining shamanism is that “Shamans work within communities and what they do, spatially, geographically and politically located, changes over time and with changing circumstances” (Blain, 2002, p.48). In other words, what they do would seem to be constantly evolving. However, this could surely be applied to practitioners in many fields and all she is doing here is pointing out the obvious.

In his paper “Shamanic Rites seen from a Shamanic Perspective”, Horwitz defines a shaman as:

someone who changes his or her state of consciousness at will, in order to journey to another reality, a “non-ordinary reality,” the world of the spirits. There she meets with her spirit helpers to ask for help, power, or knowledge for herself and / or others. Mission accomplished, the shaman journeys back to ordinary reality where she uses or dispenses the newly gained knowledge and / or power (in Ahlback, 1993, p.40).

If, however, we adopt this definition, then a great many shamans would no longer be recognized as such. This would include, for example, the blind mediums still to be found in most of the prefectures of the north-east of the main island of Japan known as *itako* or *ichiko*. “A girl is impelled to become an *itako* purely and simply because she is blind ... By becoming a medium she will become a viable member of her community rather than a burden” (Blacker, 1999, p.141). “Her duties fall into two broad categories: *kamioroshi* or bringing down *kami*, and *hotokeoroshi* or *kuchiyose*, summoning ghosts” (Blacker, 1999, p.151). Shamanism does not necessarily involve soul journeys in Korea either. Benedict Allen in *Last of the Medicine Men* presents us with yet another example of shamans who do not undertake such journeys:

[I]n Siberut, even a fully fledged *kerei* didn't actually deliberately visit the spirits, journeying in a trance state to their spiritual dimension like the classic shaman. On the contrary, a trance state was to be avoided—it came about if any of us mortals merely brushed with the supernatural, and was a moment of danger, when your soul was threatened. It was these weakening encounters that the initiate was learning to manage. ... Putting aside the business of training the initiate, they instead entertained the ancestors they had drawn here. In their dances they flew about as birds, and then scurried about as crocodiles, causing hilarity among the spectators by lying in ambush behind the posts and pouncing on toddlers and other unsuspecting members of the audience—like me, who they pretended was a giant tree (Allen, 2000, p.51).

If the *itako* and *kerei* are not to be regarded as shamans, then what are they to be classified as? Consequently, it would seem that a different definition to the one Horwitz proposes is required. Shirokogoroff, taking a reductionist or essentialist approach, offers the following:

In all Tungu languages this term refers to persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at 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 spirits (Shirokogoroff, 1982, p.269).

However, a magician might have mastery of spirits too but use it purely for personal gain. Moreover, this would once again not be appropriate as a universal definition of shamanism, as in the case of the definition proposed by Horwitz. It can only strictly be applied to practitioners in Siberia and it is not how the term “shaman” has come to be used.

A pedant might take the attitude that the word “shaman” can only mean whatever it meant to its original users and anthropologists might argue about its applicability to what is practised in other cultures. At the same time, however, there are people who consider themselves to be shamans or to be doing “shamanic” things and the current usage of the word cannot simply be ignored (Harvey, 1997, p.107).

Hultkrantz has proposed there are in fact three different types of shamanism: genuine ecstatic shamanism, imitative shamanism and demonstrative shamanism. In the case of the imitative form, the shaman enacts a kind of ritual pantomime of a séance, and in the demonstrative form the shaman proves his success in curing the sick by, for example, holding up for all to see the disease object that he has extracted from the