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The Shaman

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Shamanism is a range of traditional beliefs and practices that involve the ability to diagnose, cure, and sometimes cause human suffering by traversing the axis mundi and forming a special relationship with, or gaining control over, spirits. Shamans have been credited with the ability to control the weather, divination, the interpretation of dreams, astral projection, and traveling to upper and lower worlds. Shamanistic traditions have existed throughout the world since prehistoric times.

Shamanism is based on the premise that the visible world is pervaded by invisible forces or spirits that affect the lives of the living. In contrast to animism and animatism, which any and usually all members of a society practice, shamanism requires specialized knowledge or abilities. Shamans are not, however, organized into full-time ritual or spiritual associations, as are priests.

### **Etymology**

The word shaman originated among the Siberian Tungus (Evenks) and literally means he (or she) who knows; the belief that the word may be derived from Sanskrit is perhaps due to a confusion of the words 'shamanism' and 'shramanism', from the Sanskrit shramana, Pali and Prakrit samana; but the samanas were ascetics, not shamans.

It has replaced the older English language term witch doctor, a term which unites the two stereotypical functions of the shaman: knowledge of magical and other lore, and the ability to cure a person and mend a situation. However, at the present time this term is generally considered to be pejorative and anthropologically inaccurate. Medicine man is preferred, especially as not all traditional peoples approve of the use of shaman as a generic term, given that the word comes from a specific place and people.

### **History**

Shamanistic practices are thought to predate all organized religions, and certainly date back to the neolithic period. Aspects of shamanism are encountered in later, organized religions, generally in their mystic and symbolic practices. Greek paganism was influenced by shamanism, as reflected in the stories of Tantalus, Prometheus, Medea, Calypso among others, as well as in the Eleusinian Mysteries, and other mysteries. Some of the shamanic practices of the Greek religion were later adopted into the Roman religion.

There is a strong shamanistic influence in the Bön religion of central Asia, and in Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism became popular with shamanic peoples such as the Tibetans, Mongols and Manchu beginning with the eighth century. Forms of shamanistic ritual combined with Tibetan Buddhism became institutionalized as the state religion under the Chinese Yuan dynasty and Qing dynasty. One common element of shamanism and Buddhism is the attainment of spiritual realization, at times mediated by entheogenic (psychedelic) substances.

A shaman may be initiated via a serious illness, by being struck by lightning, or by a near-death experience (e.g. the shaman Black Elk), and there usually is a set of cultural imagery expected to be experienced during shamanic initiation regardless of method.

According to Mircea Eliade, such imagery often includes being transported to the spirit world and interacting with beings inhabiting it, meeting a spiritual guide, being devoured by some being and emerging transformed, and/or being "dismantled" and "reassembled" again, often with implanted amulets such as magical crystals. The imagery of initiation generally speaks of transformation and granting powers, and often entails themes of death and rebirth.

In some societies shamanic powers are considered to be inherited whereas in others shamans are considered to have been "called" - Among the Siberian Chukchis one may behave in ways that Western clinicians would characterize as psychotic, but which Siberian culture interprets as possession by a spirit who demands that one assume the shamanic vocation. Among the South American Tapirape shamans are called in their dreams. In other societies shamans choose their career: First Nations would seek communion with spirits through a "vision quest"; South American Shuar, seeking the power to defend their family against enemies, apprentice themselves to accomplished shamans.

### **Practice and method**

The shaman plays the role of healer in shamanic societies; shamans gain knowledge and power by traversing the axis mundi and bringing back knowledge from the heavens. Even in western society, this ancient practice of healing is referenced by the use of the caduceus as the symbol of medicine.

Oftentimes the shaman has, or acquires, one or more familiar helping entities in the spirit world; these are often spirits in animal form, spirits of healing plants, or (sometimes) those of departed shamans. In many shamanic societies, magic, magical force, and knowledge are all denoted by one word, such as the Quechua term *yachay*.

While the causes of disease are considered to lie in the realm of the spiritual, being effected by malicious spirits or Witchcraft, spiritual methods as well as what we would consider physical methods are used to heal. The shaman often will enter the body of their patient to find the spirit making the patient sick, and heal by removing the infectious spirit by the patient.

However, many shamans have expert knowledge of the plant life in their area, and an herbal regimen is often prescribed as treatment. In many places, the shamans claim to learn from the plants directly, only being able to determine the effects of a plant and use it to heal after meeting the spirit of the plant and getting permission.

In South America, individual spirits are called through *singing icaros*; to call the spirit, the spirit must teach you their song.

- San Pedro Named thus (St. Peter) by Andean natives because he's the guardian of Gates of Heaven
- Ayahuasca Quechua for "Vine of the Dead"
- Iboga

Shamans often observe special diets or fasts and taboos particular to their vocation. Sometimes these have physical purposes beyond effecting a change in brain state or taboo; for example, the diet followed by shamans and apprentices when drinking Ayahuasca includes eating foods rich in serotonin as well as avoiding foods rich in tyramine, which could cause a hypertensive crisis if ingested with an MAOI such as Ayahuasca.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

Most shamans are men, but there are societies in which women may be shamans. In Old Norse Religion, shamanism was seen as un-manly and practiced mainly by women. However, in Old Norse mythology, the supreme god Odin was also seen as the foremost shaman. In some societies shamans exhibit a two-spirit identity, assuming the dress and attributes of the opposite sex from a young age, this may include a man taking on the role of a wife in an otherwise ordinary marriage; this practice is common, and found among the Chukchee, Sea Dyak, Patagonians, Aruacians, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Navaho, Pawnee, Lakota, and Ute, as well as many other Native American tribes. Such two-spirit shamans are thought to be especially powerful. They are highly respected and sought out in their tribes, as they will bring high status to their mates.