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Shamanisms
Past and Present

DAVID KOZAK

For centuries, the exotic and romantic image and story line of the shaman as a religious virtuoso who takes magical, hallucinatory flights into the supernatural world, learning from or skirmishing with animal spirits and human ghosts, capturing and returning lost souls, and dwelling in a nother world of trance and ecstasy, has dominated both the scholarly and popular imaginations. The shaman has been perceived and represented as the prototypic, primordial religious practitioner who has direct contact with the supernatural, nonordinary realm of the phantasmic, a perception that has led to the widespread assumption that this is the central defining characteristic of this specialist. Along these lines, the shaman is viewed by some—in the past and in the present—as representative of a person who pursues an “authentic” religious experience and who considers shamanism as an “authentic” religious system when compared to various “inauthentic” institutionalized world religions. This often exotic and romantic image of shamans and shamanisms misrepresents or at least it misunderstands them. And importantly, if not ironically, to understand shamans and shamanisms we must look to ourselves and the stories we have told and continue to tell about them.

The study of shamans and shamanisms has been plagued with a number of conceptual problems. At root is the ethnocentric-based difficulty in creating a satisfactory standardized definition. This is because, on the one hand, shamans are highly diverse, culturally and historically relative phenomena, encompassing a vast array of social behaviors and beliefs. On the other hand, it is possible to identify shared or perhaps core shamanic phenomena. Yet, to pin a tidy label and definition on what shamanism is, is to risk the social scientific sin of overly particularizing or generalizing a constellation of behaviors and beliefs. Another problem relates to how the shaman’s psychological and phenomenological status has taken precedence in the literature. Central to this precedence is the interest in what is today called Altered States of Consciousness (ASC), the affective, inspirational, emotional, and ecstatic states experienced by many shamans. This emphasis is problematic because it largely ignores the very real problems of social history that place each shamanism in context and the individual culture history that drives the transformations that all individual shamanisms experience. While ASC is certainly important, it is debatable that it should be taken as an unproblematic feature of shamanisms. Finally, and related to the emphasis on ASC and shaman phenomenology, is that it has contributed to a line of self-help, self-actualization “New Age” neo-shamanism literature that often bears surprisingly little resemblance to what the ethnographic record tells us of indigenous forms of shamanism.

In this essay I propose to work backwards in that I will begin with a general discussion of the difficulties with the conflation of scholarly and popular writings and perceptions of shamans in the present. I then move toward providing a rough working definition and general description of shamanism. How anthropologists and other scholars explain shamanism is outlined prior to my offering three ethnographic (particularistic) case studies. I trust that the case-study approach that focuses on cultural particulars will demonstrate the difficulties inherent in defining the generalities of this subject matter. Moreover, my selection of case studies is intended to juxtapose the so-called “classical” Siberian shamanism with how colonialism, global capitalization, and Christian missonization have differentially affected Tohono O’odham and Putumayo shamanisms. This essay is not intended to be comprehensive—a perhaps impossible task. However, refer to Jane M. Atkinson and Joan B. Townsend for excellent literature reviews and discussions of the relevant issues." Here I offer a more modest goal: to provide the reader a basis for exploring and learning more about this most important religious phenomenon.

The Stories We Tell
Shamans and shamanic traditions continue to captivate both the scholarly and popular consciousness. This captivation has run and continues to run the gamut of admiration to condemnation, acceptance to persecution, emulation to fear. While it may sound strange, shamans and shamanisms as we know them are in part the rhetorical inventions of the Western intellectual and popular cultural imaginations. Oftentimes the stories that outsiders to shamanic traditions tell about them are based less in empirical reality than in the storyteller’s own assumptions, stereotypes, desires and expectations about what they themselves want from the exotic “other.” The inaccuracies in these stories have less to do with cultural secrecy or of shamans intentionally misleading
anthropologists than with the author’s failure to appropriately document the phenomena. Perhaps such ill-informed storytelling is innocuous enough, but it is frequently the case that such storytelling serves political, cultural, social, “racial,” even personal ends, from the usurping of sacred cultural traditions for personal needs at one end of a continuum to outright state-level political repression, domination, and oppression at the other end. Moreover, shamanism has served as a multivocal symbol for social, political, and religious purposes of the West. For instance, in the past, animistic religions were viewed by late nineteenth-century social evolutionists (e.g., E.B. Tylor, Sir James Frazer) as occupying an inferior or impoverished level of religious evolution and achievement, far behind the assumed superiority of monolithic found in the “civilized” West. Juxtaposed to this unfavorable view, shamanism is today frequently adopted by people who are unhappy with institutionalized and patriarchal Christianity. In the United States, the “New Age,” neo-shamanism, and self-actualization movements make much use of shamanic (tribal) symbolism and ideas, taken largely out of context, in order to cobble together a personal religious belief system and ritual practice that satisfies the individual’s needs. Whether historically or contemporarily, shamanism is often uncritically evoked as either impoverished and archaic religious expression or exalted as the solution to contemporary human ecological, existential, and personal crises.

Anthropologists early recognized the importance of shamanism in human religious history and cultures and have formulated various explanations and interpretations. The explanatory and interpretive stories that anthropologists tell include evolutionary, functional, structural, psychological, Marxist, cultural, and political-economic strategies. And while the emphasis of shamanic research has been on the shaman as healer, as bridge between this and other worlds, as individual, as an evolutionary type, a more recent trend has emerged with an emphasis on the role of the shaman and shamanisms as parts of larger political, historical, and economic contexts in the burgeoning global political economy. Various anthropologists have rightly criticized the emphasis that had been placed on such things as the distinctions made between the so-called “classical” shamanisms of Siberia and all others, the affective and hallucinatory states that shamanism is, the abnormal personality traits supposedly exhibited by whom the shamanism is, and so on. The emphasis has also been on the universal characteristics shared by shamanism and shamanistic systems. In response to the bulk of the literature, some anthropologists have gone as far as to say that “shamanism” is an invented and contentious category of disparate items, ripped out of context, artificially if artfully associated and all of it dreamed up in the West with little basis in reality.

As indicated, anthropologists are not the only ones who find shamanisms of interest. In fact, the scholarly and the popular images merge with shamanism. Today there is a burgeoning popular, nonacademic and practitioner-based interest in shamanism, and particularly in their altered states of consciousness, and ultimately in self-help and self-actualization as grounded frequently in Jungian psychology. And while the self-actualization approach is largely denigrated by anthropologists as opportunistic, superficial, and self-serving in its treatment of shamanism, it was originally anthropologists who promoted, if indirectly, the current popularity. It is reasonable to say that the current popular and self-help interest of the neo-shamanism, New Age, and self-actualization movements stem from the publications of anthropologists Carlos Castenada, Ake Hultkrantz, and Michael Harner, and the religious historian Mircea Eliade. There is a distinct romanticizing and exoticizing of shamanism in their publications which appeals to a consumer group who feels that their lives as members of Western industrial societies are vacuous and that institutional forms of religion are inauthentic. In this literature, whether stated implicitly or not, shamanism offers what is believed to be an authentic method for establishing a relation between the individual and the natural and supernatural worlds.

The overarching rhetorical strategy used by the aforementioned authors is what I call the “shaman-as-hero” archetype, as the striving, seeking, brave, self-assured individual (the image is usually male). With not a little irony, this shaman-as-hero is transformed by such speculations and interpretations into the quintessential “laissez-faire” “self-made man,” the rugged individualist-equivalent of the non-Western, “primitive” world. In other words, the shaman becomes imbued with the idealistic Western characteristics of hyper-individualism in order to better correspond to the lives of people who wish to use shamanism for their own psychic and spiritual needs, rather than for understanding the shaman on his or her own cultural terms. The shaman-as-hero archetype and hero rhetoric, as rugged individualist, thus become acceptable and appropriate. But in this process, the shaman becomes yet another commodity for consumer culture. Herein lies the crux of the storytelling quandary.

The shaman has been used to tell stories distinctly not of the shaman’s making. Rather, the stories often tell as much if not more about the tellers of scholarly or popular culture stories. All such characterizations are deeply flawed as they neglect to account for the social context in which all shamanism is a part. Shamanism is nothing, after all, if not a community-centered activity. What lacks in much of the literature on shamanism is an appreciation for the social, political, historical, gendered, and economic contexts that shamanism participate in. The struggles of shamans with other shamans, with other villagers, and with outside forces have significantly modified their cultures and religious practices. And the danger of representing the shaman as the rugged individual hero is that shamanism is trivialized, reduced to a caricature, and is literally evasively of its own meaning and context. This trivialization, of course, serves an important storytelling purpose: It affords outsiders easy access to the complex traditions of shamanism without force to understand the intricacies of context or to become part of a community where shamanism is only a fraction of a much larger social and cultural whole. Importantly, it allows the storyteller’s imagination to conjure and speculate freely: shamanism as aesthetics rather than science. But this is ideally not what the anthropological study of shamans and shamanisms is about. Rather, anthropologists wish to understand and perhaps partly explain some of the phenomena associated with this compelling and important social role and religious practice. Anthropological understanding is gained up close,
through fieldwork observation and participation, through learning the language of the shaman's community, and distinctly not from a 'safe' distance where insight derives from one's own imaginative flights of fancy or creative speculation.

**Defining Shamanisms**

Defining shamans and shamans is not an easy task. In fact, shamanism is truly many things to many people. For myself, I would prefer to avoid making categorical or definitional statements altogether. Yet it is reasonably possible to make a few general statements about shamans and shamans. Realize, however, that generalizations on this subject are tentative and any claim must be viewed and evaluated in the context of ethnographic data.

Let us begin by saying that a shaman is a ritualist who is able to divine, predict, and effect future outcomes, provide medical care, who is believed to have direct access to the supernatural, phantasmic realm, and who gains his or her powers and abilities by being tutored by spirits including deceased ancestors. Shamans are frequently skilled orators or singers. The social role of the shaman is often the only or one of only a few distinct social roles available in the culture. This general definition of the shaman shares characteristics with other ritualists known variously as medicine man, medium, spirit or faith healer, priest, oracle, witch doctor, among others.

**Origins of Shamanism.** For many anthropologists today the origins of shamanism is a moot question because it must remain largely conjectural reconstruction and is ultimately unprovable. Despite this, hypothesizing and research continue. Siberian and Arctic shamanism is considered by some to be the original source and prototypic form of shamanism in the world. The word “shaman” was originally derived from the Tungus (a central Siberian tribe) word *samani*, with the English word shaman being derived from the German noun der schaman. Others argue that Tungus shamanism was itself influenced by Buddhism. For this latter suggestion a linguistic affiliation has been explored with the Sanskrit word *sravana*, which translates as “one who practices austerities.” Siberian origin also relates to the Bering Straights land bridge hypothesis which explains the peopling of the New World. This hypothesis is widely accepted by archaeologists and argues that the ancestors of today’s Native Americans migrated from Northern Asia to North America, bringing their religious and shamanic practices with them. This diaspora hypothesis is based on linguistic and physiological data and partly on the similar, cross culturally shared shamanic practices which indicate a common heritage.

Ancient rock art has produced some of the more intriguing sources of data and interpretation regarding the origins question. Several researchers suggest that some rock art styles are actually the renderings of the shaman’s altered states of consciousness and of the shamanic cosmos dating to us long ago as 8,000 to 25,000 years. Rock art data suggesting paleolithic origins derive from Lascaux cave paintings in France, southern Africa, and the British Isles and are based on neurologically based entoptic phenomenon. Entoptic phenomena are those visual phenomena that people see while experiencing various altered states of consciousness, visual phenomena that are argued to follow distinct pan-human patterns and forms. It is claimed that these visual forms and patterns were then chiseled or painted on stone and were used as sacred mnemonic and didactic devices. Moreover, it is argued that shamanistic power came to reside in the shaman’s ability to control such altered states and visions and the creation of sacred images.

While it is not possible to know the absolute origins of shamanism, interesting research and hypothesizing continue to be accomplished. The assumption that Siberian shamanism is prototypical and diffused outward, as with all origin theories, must be viewed with a healthy skepticism. The fact that cultures change, adapting and culturing beliefs and practices, in myriad patterns, it becomes impossible to pinpoint the genesis of the shamanic science and art.

**Where Shamanisms Are Found.** Shamans and shamans are found throughout North and South America, Siberia, parts of Asia, Polynesia, and Africa, virtually throughout the entire world. The ethnographic record reveals that shamans are related to a variety of social structure. Gatherer-hunter, egalitarian populations like the San of southern Africa are the most likely to possess a shamanistic system. Yet, pastoralists like the Tungus of Siberia or the Somali of northeastern Africa and agriculturalists like the Pima of southern Arizona also have shamanic traditions. Recent studies of highly stratified, state-level systems of governing, as in Korea, have also documented the presence of shamanistic systems. Therefore, much of what we find shamanisms depends on how shamans are defined. Gatherer-hunter populations are largely egalitarian with minor status differentiation who subsist on a diet characterized by feast-and-famine food availability which radically fluctuates throughout the yearly cycle. The shaman’s role in an often tenuous subsistence setting, for example, is that of mediator between the his or her village and the environment where they live and the spirit forces that control food and water availability. The shaman divinities to locate game animals and to diagnose and cure spirit sicknesses, soul loss, and sorcery malevolence. Spirit-caused sicknesses are frequently the result of human intention or to disrespect for the spirit and natural worlds.

**Shamanic Cosmos.** The cosmos is frequently, though not always, divided into a series of horizontally stacked layers, three or more. Humans occupy a middle earth level that is loosely demarcated by permeable boundaries by upper and lower spirit worlds. The upper and lower worlds are nonphysical in character and accessible only through spiritual means. The various levels are linked and readily accessible to shamans. The spirit worlds are sources of power for human benefit. A version of “balance” between these worlds is the desired state and it is the shaman whose job it is to maintain this balance. Imbalances are manifested in humans as illnesses, or in the lack of game animals, or in natural disasters. As in the human world, so too in the spirit world, there is an emphasis on reciprocity with the spirits who inhabit the supernatural realm. A shaman’s job is to keep the spirits happy or at least mollified and fellow.
villagers healthy. The afterlife locality is conceived of as either an improved version of the human community or an ill-defined place. It is usually not a location of punishment or reward for the person’s actions in life. The concept of sin seems to be absent. Spirits, including human ghosts or ancestors, may be malevolent, benevolent, both, or benign. In any case, spirits have a significant impact on the human community.

A Shaman’s Training. Direct contact with spirits is a universal feature of the shaman’s practice. A shaman’s contact with spirits makes the power from the other non-earthly cosmic layers accessible to a larger community of people in the middle earth level. A shaman is taught this power by a spirit(s) and the teaching consists of learning songs, chants, speeches, ritual techniques, and in the construction and use of shaman’s tools such as a drum or other musical instruments, clothing, smoke, feathers, rattles, and crystals. A shaman ideally uses this supernatural knowledge and power to aid his or her community members’ health and well-being, although shamans are also able to use this power to harm others. Frequently, a shaman has the ability for soul flight, or at the very least the shaman is capable of making nocturnal journeys as guided by spirit tutelaries.

A shaman may inherit his or her abilities or be selected by spirits to accept this important social responsibility. A person may be approached by spirits as a child or at any time in one’s life for that matter. Often, the selection occurs during an acute or trying period in a person’s life such as psychological stress, physical illness, accident, or a “near death” experience. A person often has the choice of accepting or rejecting a spirit’s advances, and the shaman role. If a person accepts a spirit’s advances, the spirit(s) will tutor their pupil in the shamanic sciences during nocturnal dreams or in hallucinatory or trance-induced states. A shaman’s training is a lifelong process and a shaman’s abilities and effectiveness may wax and wane over a lifetime.

States of Consciousness. The literature is crowded with discussions of the shaman’s altered state of consciousness, Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC), magic flight, trance, hallucinatory, inspirational, and ecstatic abilities. Made famous by Mircea Eliade, the shaman’s ecstasy has come largely to define—as discussed above—much of what we think of as quintessentially shamanic. Altered states of consciousness are either induced with hallucinogenic plants, including fungi, or with nonhallucinogenic alcoholic drinks, tobacco smoke, hyperventilation, meditation, and rhythmic drumming. It is not the altered state per se that is important but rather the communication that the altered state facilitates between spirit-animal and shaman or shaman and the lost soul that he or she searches for. As mentioned above, the altered state is also a time when the shaman is tutored by spirits.

Sacramental Actions. Blowing, sucking, singing, massaging, spitting, smudging, painting, chanting, walking, singing, seeing, and sprinkling water, ashes, and corn meal are all sacramental actions used by shamans as taught to them by spirit tutelaries. By sacramental I mean how a shaman uses his soul, augmented by the soul(s) of his spirit helpers or tutelaries and tools (i.e., feathers, water, smoke, peyote, or other hallucinogens) to positively affect the soul of a patient and/or of an entire community. The sacramental act of blowing, for instance, may come in the form of singing songs to patients, reciting chants to spirits, or even of blowing cigarette smoke over a patient to illuminate embedded sickness or discover the location of sorcery objects. A sacrament’s performative intent is to improve the living condition of a person or of a community through sacredly endowed actions: blessings made physically manifest for all to see. A shaman’s sacramental actions are always for good; in comparison, sorcery could be classified as an antisacramental act.

Shamanic Discourses. The verbalizations of shamans provide a rich avenue for understanding shamanism. Songs, chants, narratives, and verbal explanations given by shamans are ways to examine the internal and cultural dimensions and perceptions held by practitioners themselves. This area of research is perhaps the most challenging for an anthropologist as it demands the researcher to possess a firm grasp of the shaman’s own language. Text transcription and translation become central in this work and interpretations and explanations of a single or a few key words may be the foundation for an entire study. A rich corpus of song and chant texts has revealed the art of various shamans, but also the meaning and centrality of shamanic discourses in the work of healing or divining.

Empirical Observations. Since the social evolutionist E.B. Tylor’s time (late 1800s), some anthropologists have argued that religious beliefs and practices are ultimately based in people’s systematic observations of the sentient world around them. Empirical observations of the physical world serve as a template for their ultimate conceptions of the soul, human body, the sacred, and the role of religious belief in human affairs. Furthermore, people are also astute observers of humans and human-plant interactions. As such, the empirical observations and experiments that people conduct in their natural world serve as the basis for their public and private religious lives.

Explaining Shamanisms

Anthropologists use various theoretical orientations to understand and explain the shamanism phenomenon. I will briefly discuss two general orientations: the psychological-physiological and the political-economic. This brief discussion lumpstgether general tendencies and the two theoretical categories could be divided in other ways.

Psychology and Physiology. The belief that shamans are mentally ill, who suffer from neuroses, psychoses, or schizophrenia, has roots in the eighteenth century. During that time shamanic practices competed, if indirectly, with the ascendency of rationalist principles being developed with the scientific revolution. At the time, inspirationally or mythically based ways of knowing were being systematically discreditied as irrational and as nonsense. The shaman as crazy person penetrated well into the twentieth century with anthropologists such as A.L. Kroeber, Ralph Linton, and A.F.C. Wallace. These anthropologists, using one or another psychoanalytic theory, concluded that the
shaman and potential shamans suffer from a number of severe mental or physical complaints. Kroeber went so far as to say that so-called primitive cultures not only condoned but exalted psychotic behavior, that the shaman’s claim to see and deal with spirits was nothing other than a delusional psychopathology. The mental illness theory of the shaman persisted until the 1960s when counter-arguments mounted against this unfortunate interpretation. By the late 1960s shaman’s behaviors were considered psychologically normal. And as Jane M. Atkinson has pointed out, the change of attitude that occurred in the 1960s toward shamanic psychology and behavior was affected by changing notions of consciousness in general spurred on by hallucinogen-modified consciousness in particular and the effectiveness of shamanism as psychotherapy in general.7

The continued interest in the psychic states of shamans, anthropologists, and other behavioral researchers, wishing to ground their work on a scientific footing, developed their research around the concept of altered states of consciousness or shamanic states of consciousness. The emphasis of this research is on the phenomenological experience of the practitioner, the cross-culturally shared trance-state characteristics, and more recently an interest in the neurophysiological bases of ASC. Of note in this regard are studies related to the role of endorphins and other chemicals released in the brain during rituals. More recently there is an interest in what Michael Winkelman calls “neurognostic structures” of the psyche. He argues that shamanism is a biologically based transpersonal mode of consciousness.8

It is suggested that the capacity for shamanic behavior—that is, trance and vision flights—is a biologically based memory device of sorts, a shamanic equivalent of a Chomskyan “deep structure” of linguistic ability or a Jungian “archetype” of collective consciousness, whereby shamanic behavior is a hard-wired and universal human characteristic and is evidenced in the similarities shared by shamans in vastly different cultures.

Politics, Economics, and History. Complementing the biological- and psychological-based explanations for shamanism is a recent interest in the political, historical, and economic factors related to shamans, cultures with shamanistic systems, and how these relate to state-level and global capitalist structures of power and institutionalized religions. This interest area reflects a general trend in anthropology that emphasizes historical and political economic factors.

Foremost in this approach is an appreciation for how shamanisms have been affected by various state, economic, and institutionalized religious structures. Due to the impacts of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the historical and political economic approach takes for granted that much of what we know of as shamanism today is the result of contact and change initiated by institutions stemming from the West. The implication is that to understand shamanism we must also understand how the structures of power have been manifested at the local level. Thus, much of the published work stemming from this general orientation takes change as inevitable, that shamanic-oriented cultures have been victimized, and that the search for pristine and “authentic” versions of shamanisms is fallacious and naive. In response to the psychological-physiological approaches, to understand shaman psychology, ASC, and ritual actions, the researcher must be rigorous in defining the social, political, and economic context(s) in which individual shamanisms are expressed. Thus, this general approach emphasizes the social rather than the individual, the historical rather than the immediate, the cultural rather than the psychological, and the relations of power rather than altered states.9

The primary drawback to this general political economy orientation is that it may sacrifice the richness of local-level interpretations and individualistic articulations for its emphasis on structure, history, and power relations. Real people are often lost in a maze of political and economic and historic factors that seemingly override the agency of individual actors.

In sum, the theories that anthropologists use to explain or interpret shamanisms are of necessity incomplete. This is because human experience is far more complex and rich than our abstractions of it. Thus, our theories are ways to assist our comprehension of a culturally rich realm of humanism and each theory tends to privilege partial elements of that richness.

Three Case Studies

Ethnographic description, the product of intensive fieldwork conducted by an anthropologist who lives for an extended time with the people being studied, is crucial to the work of sociocultural anthropologists. The ethnographic method is perhaps the superior way for understanding shamans and it also offers the potential for a critical appraisal and reevaluation of past storytelling inaccuracies and excesses regarding the study of shamanism around the world. Because the fieldwork experience demands that the anthropologist live among and participate in the subject’s community life and have a familiarity with the host culture’s language, the anthropological perspective holds out promise for a nuanced understanding and documentation to be found in this religious-medical practice. It is also a valuable source for criticizing the frequently problematic categories, analyses, and assumptions made by outside observers of shamanic phenomena. To illustrate this point and present a fragment of the diversity of shamans found in the world today, and to demonstrate its range of applicability, I offer three case studies of shamanism in Northern Asia, North America, and South America. The case studies reveal that shamanisms are a complex interweaving of cultural practices, gifted individual practitioners, political economic issues, and ASC. They reveal how shamanisms change, how they are influenced by the institutionalized religions like Christianity, and by global capitalism and social change. Each case study demonstrates in its own way how the category of a generalized shamanism is a theoretical oversimplification at best and that shamanisms undergo change and modification to fit the needs of a people.

Siberian Shamans

Siberian shamanism is often referred to as the “classical” form that used to exist. Mirotche Eliade made Siberian shamanism famous and identified it by their exotic and mystical rituals and costumes, hallucinations, trances, the mastering of spirits, and cosmic travels. Since Eliade’s work, many shamanisms have

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been evaluated and compared with it. As Caroline Humphrey has pointed out, Eliade's characterization is seriously flawed as it lacks both social and historical context. Moreover, she criticizes Eliade's representations for effectively crystallizing the current belief in the context-free view of shamanism as a mysterious and purely inspirational phenomenon. In order to offer a context to Siberian shamanism I draw extensively from the research of Robert Hamuyon.  

According to Hamuyon there are two primary types of Siberian shamanism: hunting and pastoral. Each corresponds to distinct social organizational forms, economic, and political characteristics. Siberian "hunting shamanism" is present in tribal, noncentralized, forest-dwelling societies like the Chugchee. Hunting shamanism is characteristic of the form Eliade spoke of in his writings. "Pastoral shamanism" as found among the Tungus is characterized by people who are patrilineal and patrilocal, who domesticate livestock, and live in regions that border the forest and steppe regions. A potential third type, what Hamuyon calls "peripheral shamanism," is only marginally identifiable as shamanism as it is related to state formation and how the traditional shaman's role and power were usurped by Lamaist Buddhist lamas and through the decentralization and feminization of the shaman's role in Siberian shamanic societies. With state formation, institutional religion gains power and pushes traditional inspirational religious practices and beliefs to the margins of society where women may become shamans as men become Buddhist lamas. In many ways state or institutionalized religion delegitimizes shamanism.  

The fundamental element of "hunting shamanism" is that spirits of animal species are contacted directly by a shaman who makes compacts with them in order to supply humans with good luck at hunting. The divinely inspired and experienced shaman-spirit compacts assure food availability for human consumption. This compact is not conceived as one-sided in that while animal spirits supply humans with food through hunting successes, the other half of the compact is that humans will eventually supply the spirits with human flesh and blood. Such is the source and cause of much human sickness and death. The task, however, is for the shaman to limit the amount of human sickness and death while maximizing the amount of animal flesh available for human consumption. A shaman's success at this depends on another kind of compact: that of his ritual marriage to the daughter of the game spirit (an elk or reinder spirit).  

The exchanges and compacts established between spirit-animals and humans make them trading partners in an ongoing economic and social relationship. The relationship is a form of generalized reciprocity where the exchanges are never equally balanced and immediate in return. Rather, delayed and non-equivalent exchanges keep the relationship alive and in need of continual tinkering by the shaman and spirit(s). To balance out their reciprocity would mean an end to their relationship. Thus, a shaman's power resides in his ability to maintain this reciprocity. His authority in the human community, therefore, stems from his usefulness to his peers, in the shaman's ability to secure a plentiful supply of game animals while minimizing sickness and death.

The human-animal compacts—of food and marriage—serve as the model of social organization. The dualistic spirit-human relationship is replicated in human-animal relations and in the human kinship system of moieties or clan subdivisions. Here, too, in the human world of marriage alliances, society is predicated on compacts between moieties just as the shaman makes compacts with the animal-spirit world.  

Reliance on the domestication of animals (pastoralism) presents a second type of Siberian shamanism and is related to alterations in inheritance patterns which are linked to changes in social organization which is in turn linked to a transformation in conceptions of the supernatural. With "pastoral shamanism," no longer does food flow directly from compacts made in the supernatural world but it instead derives from various locations in the observable environment where grazing and herding occur. For the Tungus, pastureage is associated with patrilineal descent groups (in this case, clan segments), and nearby mountains become the locations where ancestors reside after death. Patrilocality becomes important and land or pasture inheritance follows the male line. Sickness is no longer caused by animal spirits but is associated with transgressions of patrilineal kinship rules and by one's ancestral spirits. Pastoral shamans do not make compacts with spirit animals but do they ritually marry the daughter of the game spirit as food comes from other sources. Here the shaman's role changes in that it is entrusted with ensuring the fertility of both the domesticated animals and human villagers. Pastoralist shamans are related to tribal mythology where the shaman is synonymous with the tribal founder.  

Here we see that even the classic Siberian shamanism takes several forms. Importantly, the forms are related to the mode of subsistence, social organization, residence patterns, and whether the shaman has intimate contact with animal spirits or deceased ancestor spirits who participate with the shaman in ongoing reciprocal exchanges.

**Tohono O'odham Christian-Shamanism**

The Tohono O'odham (formerly known as Papago) of southern Arizona and northern Sonora, Mexico, were gatherer-hunters and horticulturalists until the early part of the twentieth century. This form of shamanism is comparable to the hunting shamanism of Siberia. Their subsistence strategy made the best of an existence in the heart of the Sonoran Desert where scarce and unpredictable rainfall made growing corn, beans, and squash very tenuous. Despite this, O'odham subsistence practices emphasized the importance of rain and crop production. In fact, O'odham ritual life—both individual and public—centered around moisture. The public ritual of the annual rain ceremony focused the community's religious sentiments on securing adequate moisture for plant, animal, and human consumption.

Village well-being was symbolized by sufficient rainfall, and the village shaman was in part responsible for securing it. Shamans worked together to sing for, divine, and encourage the rains to fall. They directed the annual rain festivities by overseeing the production of a mildly intoxicating wine brewed from the syrup of saguaro cactus fruits. During the rain dance ceremony,
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shamans from various villages gave speeches and sang songs to attract the rain clouds from the "rain houses" positioned at the cardinal directions. The proper execution of the ceremony secured the ultimate fertility of the natural and human worlds.

The other central role of O'odham shamans was to diagnose a series of sicknesses unique to the O'odham people. Until the middle of the twentieth century it was thought in O'odham cosmology and medical theory that there were approximately 50 "saying sicknesses" (only O'odham contract them) that were caused by the spirit protectors of various animal-persons (e.g., deer, badger, coyote), insect-persons (e.g., fly, butterfly), natural phenomena-persons (e.g., wind, lightning), humans (e.g., ghosts, prostitutes), plant-persons (e.g., peyote, jimson weed), reptile-persons (e.g., rattlesnake, chuckwalla), and bird-persons (e.g., eagle, owl, swallow) species. Being sickened is the result of a human's impropriety or disrespect toward or transgression on the integrity of the spirit species. The person does not know when the mystery is contracted, but once symptoms emerge, the person consults a shaman for diagnosis. Once diagnosed, which can take a quick or a protracted form, the person is instructed to have the appropriate curing songs sung for them.

A shaman's ability to diagnose, and to cure, derives from spirit helpers who tutor the shaman during nighttime dreams. Thus spirits both cause sicknesses and provide the means for their cure. This tutoring takes the form of learning songs that are authored and sung by the spirit species to the shaman who memorizes them verbatim. The songs are densely meaningful, haiku-like poems that tell brief stories of experiences that the shaman has had with the spirit, present images of a landscape, or are statements about the quirinkness of the spirit itself.

This version of O'odham shamanism has been modified during the past three hundred years of contact with Spanish, then Mexican, and finally with American colonizers and Catholic missionaries. Catholicism has made significant inroads in O'odham religious culture since their early contact with the Jesuit priest Eusebio Kino in the late 1690s. Catholicism continues to be a strong element of O'odham identity. Another significant source of change came with the introduction of cattle into the U.S. Southwest regional economy. The external influences of Catholicism and cattle capitalism prompted changes in O'odham shamanism in several ways. First, shamans gained power from Christian deities as spirit tutelaries, primarily the saints, but Jesus and God also, just as they did from the traditional spirit-beings. As the O'odham adopted Catholic public rituals and theological beliefs, and as they began to adopt saints for village patrons and for individuals, people began to be sickened by these Christian spirits in a manner similar to that described above. Saint sickness became an illness diagnosed and treated by shamans.

Second, the O'odham also began, by the late 1880s, to be sickened by the instruments of frontier capitalism—cattle and horses (known collectively as devil sickness). O'odham readily adopted a cowboy lifestyle and are still cattle ranchers to this day. Here too O'odham shamans became charged with the responsibility of containing with the new contagions. Today, devil sickness is thought by some O'odham to be the most commonly diagnosed staying sickness.

Saint and devil sicknesses in the O'odham theory of sickness and cure represent what I call Christian-shamanism. Not only do shamans continue to use the traditional tools of tobacco smoke, eagle and owl feathers, and crystals to augment their power in diagnostic sessions, but many shamans also use saints' images, a Christian cross, and holy water. Perhaps more telling is the fact that the Christian deities (spirits) also come to shamans in the same manner as the traditional spirits—in dreams, singing and tutoring their human pupils in the diagnostic healing art and science.

Christian-shamanism can be understood as a manifestation of significant political, religious, and economic changes that affected this culture. For the O'odham, shamanism has been effectively used to attend to and ameliorate the changes conceived in the three-hundred-year plus period of colonization and missionization. Some might conclude that the O'odham shamanic system as described has been "corrupted" or "polluted" by the Christian influence. I do not think so, nor do I think that most O'odham think so either. In many ways, the O'odham are merely using all that is available to them to make their lives better and healthier.

Shamanism, Terror, and the Putumayo of Colombia

By the turn of the twentieth century, in the industrializing West, the demand for rubber expanded quickly. Far from the crowded cities of London, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Paris, the Putumayo Indians of the sparsely populated lowland Amazonian jungles of southern Colombia were being forcibly incorporated into the Industrial Revolution as rubber tree tappers. This incorporation was often violent and terrifying. To coercive work output of this recalcitrant labor force, the Putumayo Indians were subjected to systematic torture, murder, and sexual abuses. This troubling period in Putumayo and Colombian social history continues to haunt and permeate the present in the form of mal aire (evil wind) and in the shamanistic beliefs and practices that heal it. Current shamanic practice can be partly understood as an attempt to ameliorate the unquiet souls of the violently tortured and murdered Putumayo Indians of the southern Amazon jungle.

Michael Taussig argues in his provocative book Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man that contemporary yage (a hallucinogenic drink) shamanism in southern Colombia is an effort to heal the tortured memories of the violently killed Putumayo Indians. Sorcery and evil air are the two sicknesses that shamans currently treat. It is the latter that stems directly from rubber tapping and Christianization. Currently, both Indians and non-Indians of the region view the ancient ones, called the Huitoto (ancestral Putumayo), as sorcerers, demonic, and evil. Huitoto means "the people from below"—below the ground and below in the jungles. They were the people conquered during the Spanish conquest, people who were labeled and viewed by Europeans as evil, devil worshipping idolaters since Spanish times. The ideology of the Spanish was that they were violent, sorcerers, cannibals, and thus fearsome. This ideologically charged characterization persisted until the time of
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2. Perhaps most striking in this regard is Michael Taussig, who argues in "The Nervous System: Homeliness and Daizia," Stanford Humanities Review 11(1):44–81, 1989, that shamanism is a "made-up," "useful reticfication of disparate practices" that are the creations of academic programs such as religious studies and anthropology. Much earlier, Clifford Geertz in "Religion as a Cultural System," in Michael Banton, ed., Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion (London: Tavistock, 1966), came to the same conclusion as Taussig. What Taussig and Geertz criticize are the overly large generalizations and characterizations that anthropologists and others have made of shamanisms, and, particularly for Taussig, how such characterizations reflect Western notions of religiosity. More recently, anthropologist Alice Kehoe takes up this critical stance in Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2000).


5. J.D. Lewis-Williams's name is synonymous with the work on entoptic phenomena. His works Believing and Seeing (New York: Academic Press, 1981) and "Cognitive and Optical..."
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12. This section on Tohono O’odham shamanism is based on my own research in various communities on the Sells Reservation and on several published monographs. See Ruth Underhill’s classic, Papago Indian Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946) and the collaborative work Piman Shamanism and Staying Sickness by Donald Bahr, Juan Gregorio, David Lopez, and Albert Alvarez (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974). For a detailed treatment of a single staying sickness, see my Devil Sickness and Devil Songs: Tohono O’odham Poetics (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

13. Mal arar is a widespread “folk” illness found throughout parts of North and South America as well as in parts of Europe. Evil air sickness in the New World is thought by most observers to be an import from the Old World.


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