

People of Power: Shamanism

(contours of discussion adapted from Atkinson, "Shamanisms Today")

1. Origination: used among the Tungus in Siberia and Central Asia, it was broadened beyond its original context (similar to *mana*). One of the major anthropological criticisms is that this decontextualization robs the term of significance in any particular context. In effect, a plurality of shamanisms and shamanistic approaches needs to be at the foundation of our understanding.
2. The search for generalities in a world context
 - a. Earlier disrepute of the psychological profile of a shaman: fantasy prone, unstable, hysteric, abnormal
 - b. More recent disrepute (including deconstruction) of the term "shaman" itself:
 - i. Geertz: "insipid categories by means of which ethnographers of religion devitalize their data." ("Religion as a Cultural System" in Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion)
 - ii. In the 1980s, however, the term evidenced a resurgence in scholarship. However, it has spread out of anthropological circles into psychology and New Age thinking (e.g., Michael Harner).
 - iii. It has moved from the category of abnormal psychology to the category of universal psychobiological capacities.
 - c. Fields of study and foci:

Field of Study	Focus
Therapeutic/psychology	Shaman and patient
Phenomenology	Shaman and the spirit(s); trance state
Performance arts	Shaman and his/her human audience

3. Concerning the general applicability of the term:
 - a. Clusters of ideas to consider:
 - i. Trance (altered state of consciousness [ASC], shamanistic state of consciousness [SSC]): Trance itself is also a broad term, and in

cultures it can range in meaning from psychological disconnection to spirit possession.

- (1) The neurophysiology or the ASC (use of psychedelic drugs and the more recent study in endorphins [opiate like compounds that the brain releases in response to certain stimuli])
- (2) The psychology of shaman, patient, and audience (and noting that there is certainly trickery within the broad spectrum of shamanism), identifying therapeutic aspects within cultural knowledge systems
- (3) The spirituality: as Christians we cannot overlook the spiritual side of shamanistic journeys into other planes of existence.

ii. Society:

- (1) Adaptability: "Shamanism, as the oldest form of religious belief in Korea, has always been the most influential religious tradition. Due to its flexibility and receptivity, shamanism has been successfully incorporated into other major religious traditions, such as those of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity that have been introduced into Korea." (Ro, "Ancestor Worship," 11)
- (2) Examining shamanism only in regard to the ASC is "akin to analyzing marriage solely as a function of reproductive biology" (Atkinson, 311).
- (3) Social functions and dynamics must be considered in discussion of any local shamanism. Social anthropologists are extremely reluctant to discuss shamanism outside of any social manifestations of it.
- (4) Not all shamanistic practices have healing as their goal; societal considerations give us categories broader than the shaman/patient event for interpreting how shamanistic concepts and performances are interwoven into the fabric of a culture.
- (5) Classic Marxist anthropology examines the economics of shamanistic activities in light of the self interest of the shaman, generally regarding the supernatural components as

bogus. More recently, anthropologists have seen the need to avoid divorcing shamanism from its economic and political contexts. Note, for example, Korean intellectuals have adopted shamanism as a means of protesting against the ruling government.

iii. Ritual:

- (1) The importance of the ritual *process* (as a means or religious expression) cannot be separated from the importance of the *product* (generally the healing of the patient(s)).
- (2) The parallels between shamanistic ritual and psychiatric ritual cannot be ignored. Jung himself showed a deep interest in shamanism, and his influence remains today (especially in the use of the concept of archetypes)
- (3) Art: shamanistic ritual as a category of performance art has received some attention recently, and merits significant study

iv. Cultural system of knowledge: The ritual meaning and efficacy, success and failure of a particular shamanistic event is essentially negotiated through schemata of social interaction among the shaman, the patient, and the audience.

b. Neo-shamanism in the United States: the most significant development in the field is the rise of shamanism (not just the study, but the practice) in the US and Europe.

i. Historical factors include: the drug culture of the 60s and 70s; the human potential movement; environmentalism; interest in non-Western religions; and popular anthropology (especially Castaneda).

ii. Michael Harner comments:

"It is not that we are 'playing Indian' and trying to adopt an archaic cultural style that does not suit us. Rather, we are simply attempting to 'play human' by going back to the saner and healthier world view that we had before the church and the state. Evidence in progress in this return to our shamanistic roots can be seen in the fact that now shamanic journeys are being labeled as 'guided imagery' or 'visualization' and are even accepted in some official medical circles. Nevertheless, it should be noted that real shamanic journey goes well beyond what is called 'guided

imagery.'

"Much prejudice against shamanism still remains, based mainly on misconceptions about what it is. As I have tried to show, shamanism is really just getting back to our common human nature and reconnecting with the plants and animals and the planet itself. Therefore, when people in Western civilization profess that shamanism would be unsuitable for them, they are actually saying--probably without knowing it--that getting spiritually in touch with the planet, other people, all species, and their own hearts and souls is not for them." ("What is Shamanism?", 10-11)

- c. Variations in terminology across cultural divides include such specialists as (both good and evil) such as diviners, medicine men, astrologers, magicians, sorcerers and witches.