

# MYTH, RITUAL & THE SACRED

## Elements of Shamanism

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### 1 Introduction

Moore and Habel classify sacred persons into three divisions and focus on the types of ritual that the sacred persons are associated with, the types of religious experience that they undergo and the types of authority structures within which they function.<sup>1</sup> In this system, the shaman is categorised under the ‘experiential experts’, meaning that the religious experiences of the shaman are the key distinguishing aspects of the shaman. This does nevertheless not imply that the shaman does not have specific ritual functions or does not fit into an authority structure.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) focuses on the ability of the shaman to practice ecstasy, the ability to send the soul on a journey outside the body to transcendental realities.<sup>2</sup> Eliade’s interpretation of shamanism is universalistic; He used the term ecstasy exclusively to indicate the ascent to a sky-god motif, which he believed to be the core concept of ‘pure shamanism’. Eliade further saw ecstasy as a condition which is controlled by the shaman, whereas he understood possessed persons not to be in control of their invading spirits.

Lewis, who deals with the topic of ecstasy and possession, calls attention to De Heusch’s distinction between involuntary possession by unwelcome spirits which must be exorcised and voluntary possession by welcome spirits which can be incorporated into the system. He further argues that ecstasy is merely one form which so-called possession may take. The outward manifestation of the phenomenon is

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<sup>1</sup>B. Moore and N. Habel, *On religion related to education* (Adelaide: SACAE, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Mircea Eliade, ‘Shamanism: an overview’, in: Mircea Eliade, editor, *Encyclopedia of religion*, volume 13 (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

the same in that shamans appear to be possessed by spirits, act as their mediums, and even though they claim to have mastery over them, can lose that mastery.<sup>3</sup>

In both ecstasy and possession, the onset of illness is interpreted by reference to spirit involvement. In Siberian contexts the experience is interpreted as travel through cosmic spheres and in African as possession by ancestral spirits.<sup>4</sup> O'Donoghue combines these two views and concludes that the shaman is both an expert in ritual ecstasy and has the power to control spirits.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 A Healing Seance among the Yakut

The shaman starts the healing session by putting on his shamanic costume. The costume is an important element of Siberian shamanic activity. Symbols representing the ascent and descent and death and rebirth themes may be embroidered on the costumes.<sup>6</sup> The second important shamanic element in the healing seance is the use of the drum. The drum of the shaman is often referred to as the vehicle of the soul. The beating of the drum combined with the chanting and dancing brings the shaman in a altered state of consciousness in which he or she is capable to travel to transcendental realities. The Yakut shaman also imitates the motions of a bird flying, he acts like the animal in order to be able to be empowered by the animal, thus enabling the shaman to fly.

## 3 Initiation of the Carib Shamans of Dutch Guinea

An apparent theme in the initiation ritual is the consumption of large amounts of tobacco juice, leaves and smoke. The use of hallucinogens in shamanic ritual is a dominant element of shamanism all over the world. The use of psychedelic agents is according to anthropologist Michael Harner one of the ways of achieving the trance like state conducive to a sense of seeing and contacting the supernatural.<sup>7</sup> Other ways of achieving this altered state of consciousness are ritual dancing and drumming. The actual initiation of the shaman occurs according during severe

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<sup>3</sup>Ioan M Lewis, *Religion in context: cults and charisma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup>S.A. Thorpe, *Shamans, medicine men and traditional healers* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>Normal Habel, Michael O'Donoghue, and Marion Maddox, *Myth, ritual and the sacred. Introducing the phenomena of religion* (Underdale: University of South Australia, 1993).

<sup>6</sup>Thorpe (1993).

<sup>7</sup>Michael Harner, *Hallucinogens and shamanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

illness. In this state the shaman undergoes the possession and ecstasy journey. In some societies the illness is replaced with a trance induced by drugs, fasting or sleep deprivation.<sup>8</sup> All these elements are present in the Carib initiation ritual.

#### **4 A Siberian (Goldi) Funerary Ceremony**

In funeral rites the shaman's knowledge of the geography of the cosmos enables the shaman or her to guide the souls of the dead on the journey to the land of the dead.<sup>9</sup> The Goldi shaman goes to search for the soul in the vicinity of the yurt. After the shaman finds the soul of the deceased he journeys together with it through the underworld. The soul of the deceased is then left behind with the other souls already present in the underworld. Another element typical of shamanism is the use of spirit helpers to journey through the transcendental worlds. The Goldi shaman summons two powerful tutelary spirits to help him. Without the help of these spirits, the shaman could not come back from the underworld. The use of spirit helpers is also mentioned in the previous two accounts.

#### **5 Discussion**

The examples illustrate that in primal religions in different parts of the world there are sacred persons that operate in very similar ways. Shaman is originally a Siberian word, but is nowadays used in various cultural contexts. This has evolved into the conception of the term shamanism, where the shaman becomes a defining factor for primal religions. The shamanic figure, which emerges from the abundant research on the subject, is a conceptual one, a constructed or ideal type. The use of such a type was proposed by Max Weber as a means of creating order out of an otherwise chaotic state in which everything is viewed as unique.<sup>10</sup> The scientist is always seeking to grasp chaotic reality into for the human mind manageable concepts. Thorpe has shown in her study that there are very clear similarities between the Siberian shaman, the North American medicine men and the South African izingoma.<sup>11</sup> The account on the Carib initiation ritual in the textbook shows that shamanic features can also be found in South America.

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<sup>8</sup>Habel et al. (1993).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Thorpe (1993).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

## 6 Conclusion

The shaman is an expert in controlling preternatural experiences. He or she can induce states of altered consciousness in order to be able to communicate with transcendental realities, usually in the form of ecstasy or enthusiasm. Preternatural experiences can also be psychopathological states such as psychoses as discussed in another brief study.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore not strange that shamans have in the past been committed to mental institutions. The shaman was — especially in the former Soviet Union, where deviation from the norm was totally not acceptable — considered a madman. Nowadays shamans are highly respected, many scholars have written studies about them and the New Age Movement imitates the rituals and methods in order to reproduce similar spiritual experiences. The shaman illustrates that insanity and sanity or the irrational and the rational are very closely linked, or as the French philosopher Foucault (1926–1984) expressed it beautifully: "Insanity is the horizon of reason".<sup>13</sup>

## References

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<sup>12</sup>See: *Religious Experiences*, <http://www.geocities.com/pprevos/sacred/experience.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup>Michel Foucault, *Madness and civilisation. A history of insanity in the Ages of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1997).