

The Role and Functions of Contemporary Shamans in Southeast Asia

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The meaning of the word shaman (of Tungus origin) has become obscured by numerous, increasingly different interpretations. The term has also been applied to practitioners who live outside Siberia, and are actually called by different names in their respective countries: *bomoh* in Malaysia, *ma khi* in Thailand, and *tany-di* in Singapore.

Because I did not want to rely on secondary sources, I went to Southeast Asia to find contemporary shamans. Having started my research in 1960 I was able to witness, over a thirty-one year period (during visits lasting from several months to a year), the continuation of shamanic traditions among different groups living in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. What struck me most was the emergence of new shamans in urban centers like Singapore and Bangkok.

I found practitioners divining, interpreting dreams, counteracting acts of sorcery, making rain or stopping floods, but most of all healing and counseling on matters of inter- and intrapersonal relationships as well as career issues and business affairs. These practitioners used a wide range of techniques and paraphernalia. Because I had to establish generally applicable criteria, I decided to call only those practitioners "shamans" who:

- attain alternate states of consciousness at will (this is an important feature, because medicine men do not go into trance and therefore cannot be called "shamans");
- fulfill needs of their community which otherwise are not met (i.e., they use holistic approaches, in contrast to Western-trained physicians who are caught in the confines of their own discipline), and

– are mediators between the sacred and the profane (i.e., they encode ineffable messages).

My first and third criteria are compatible with Eliade's (1974/1951) classic definition of the shaman as master of "archaic techniques of ecstasy." I prefer my three criteria because they allow for the inclusion of trance mediums. I am compelled to do so, since I discovered, during my fieldwork, that mediums as well as shamans go on "journeys to the spirit world" (i.e., "magical flights"). They communicate, for example, with the souls of the dead and bring spiritual messages back to the world of the living. On the other hand, they are also able to call spirits into their body so that these spiritual energies can become actors. In brief, shamans are also mediums, and mediums are capable of going on magical flights. Both can do what the other is doing. They may, indeed, enter a wide range of altered states of consciousness during a single session (see, e.g., Heinze, 1988; Lewis, 1975; Peters and Price Williams, 1980; Winkelman, 1986). It is, therefore, more accurate to use the generic term, *shaman*, rather than having to refer to the same individual at one time as a shaman and, at another time, (perhaps only a few minutes later) as a medium (for more definitions see, e.g., Hultkrantz, 1983; Schroeder, 1955, and Winkelman, 1984).

In Southeast Asia today, only Malaysians follow the traditional pattern that the seventh son of a seventh son has to become a shaman. Shamans today are "called" by deified heroes and other benevolent spirits and then accept the commitment to serve their community for the rest of their life. Only a few enter into a contract with the spirit world to serve for a specific period of time (from three to ten years, for example); some are encouraged by their community or decide themselves to be trained by experienced practitioners.

They have to learn not only how to contact the world of spirits and how to encode spiritual messages; they have also to master how to properly dispel the energies they called and how to ensure that nobody participating in their rituals leaves without having experienced a proper closure. In the West, I have witnessed many cases where neo-shamans failed to notice the psychological crises which arose in their clients during shamanistic¹ rituals and, consequently, caused more harm than good.

1. I am using the word *shamanic* for activities carried out by professional shamans, and the word *shamanistic* for activities which are carried out by individuals other than professional shamans, mainly to cultivate themselves.

Differences in Shamanic Trances

Witnessing shamanic rituals for thirty-one years, I observed a wide range of different trances, i.e., either "mind-expanding" or "dissociative" trances. Eliade's "magical flight," for example, is a mind-expanding trance because the shaman continues to be the actor and reports what (s)he has experienced. (Incidentally, I disagree with Eliade when he speaks of shamanic techniques of ecstasy. The "magical flight" is consciously produced by shamans while "ecstasy," in most cases, is interpreted as being activated by the "Grace of God"). On the other hand, the calling of a spirit into the body of a shaman is a dissociative trance because the spirit becomes the actor and most shamans don't recall what transpired during this kind of trance; afterwards an assistant has to translate the spiritual message for the clients.

Furthermore, it is physically difficult to remain in a deep trance for a long time; most shamans, however, are good actors. When the audience wants to experience the invisible, shamans fulfill these expectations and dramatize the ritual process. In shamanic societies, acting out a trance is as effective as a genuine trance. Through my long-standing friendship with shamans, I learned to distinguish whether practitioners were deeply in trance or were working on intermediate levels or were not in trance at all. A forty-year-old housewife in Singapore (1971), for example, calls the spirit of a general from the Three Kingdoms (third century A.D.) into her body every evening from 7 to 12 p.m. and twice on weekends. During the onset of the trance, her toes stiffen and curl. When the depth of her trance decreases and she permits a release of tension, her toes uncurl. I observed how she monitored and changed the intensity of her trance during a five-hour session. Her clients, however, look the "god" in the face and don't pay any attention to his (or her) toes. They don't "see" any difference (Heinze, 1988:95).

Pathological Aspects of Shamanism

Some psychiatrists maintained until recently that shamans suffered from a kind of mental illness (Devereux, 1956; Silverman, 1967). In the case of the Siberian shaman, it was called "arctic hysteria" (e.g., Aberle, 1952). During my thirty-one years of fieldwork with 122 shamans in Southeast Asia, I found that all who go professionally into trance on demand, lead, outside their practice, a productive life that bears no indication of any pathology (see, among others

also, Noll, 1983; Peters and Price Williams, 1980). Bryce-Boyer (1964), for example, found that among the Apaches – who, indeed, show some schizophrenic features – their shamans were the least pathological of the tribe. Furthermore, the conditions of hysterics or schizophrenics appear to be uncontrollable. In many countries, they are diagnosed as spirit-possessed and require exorcism. The trances of shamans, on the other hand, take place in a culturally acceptable framework and are controlled (Heinze, 1988). These are important differences.

It takes, indeed, a healthy mind to be able to go into a trance on request, as many as several times a day. Shamans are trained (by experienced practitioners or by the spirits themselves) to monitor their own trances. In Asia, it appears to be fairly easy to fall into a culturally acceptable trance, but shamans have to learn how to return safely. Indeed a warning has to be issued to teachers of so-called “core shamanism” to prepare their students for the dangers of trance. Apprentices have, for example, to be told not to go so deeply into a trance that they can not safely come out again, e.g., not to “lose” their mind, and that they have to accept full responsibility for all those they take on a trance journey.

Historical Overview

The social, economic, political and cultural life of 20th century shamans is considerably different from the life of paleolithic shamans. Likewise, citizens of the twentieth century also seem to have needs that differ from those of our predecessors in hunting, herding, horticultural, and farming cultures. However, an individual in a big city can feel as alienated and isolated as a hunter or gatherer in a paleolithic jungle. Given their existential nature, the needs of contemporaries do not seem to differ fundamentally from those of earlier generations. Shamans, indeed, continue to ritualize the processes of transformation. And the characteristics of shamans who contact the spiritual world have remained the same.

What connects modern practitioners to shamans in the past? For European scholars (Balazs, 1954; Bogoras, 1904; Bouteiller, 1950; Dioszegi, 1968; Edsman, 1967; Hoppal, 1983; Hultkrantz, 1978; Jochelson, 1905-1908; Michael, 1963; Popov, 1932; Shirokogoroff, 1923; Siikala, 1978, etc.), the shamans living between Lapland and the Chukchee Peninsula belong to a vast single unit. When reports from Russia became accessible at the beginning of this century and

the study of shamanism was recognized in academia, North Asiatic shamans began to serve as the prototype, although shamanism was not exclusively an arctic phenomenon.

Ethnologists, psychologists, and historians of religion have, in the meantime, conducted research in other countries, notably India, Japan, Korea, Nepal, South America, Southeast Asia, USA (e.g., Glacker, 1975; Halifax, 1979, 1982; Harner, 1980; Harvey, 1979; Heinze, 1988, 1991; Jilek, 1982; Kakar, 1982; Kendall, 1987; La Barre, 1978; Lebra, 1969; Lee, 1981; Métraux, 1959; Neihardt, 1961; Peters, 1981). They report considerable differences in paraphernalia, techniques, and world view. My personal observations, for example in Southeast Asia, indicate that the trances of Malay shamans differ in quality from the trances of Siberian shamans. Different also are the techniques necessary to go into trance, either by drumming, chanting or silent meditation (e.g., Heinze, 1988; Jilek, 1982; Neher, 1962). Sometimes, trance is not required at all. Moreover, for some shamans, trance is predominantly mind-expanding, whereas for others it is a dissociative experience (see above; also Heinze, 1982, 1988, 1991). With different geographic, climatic, and cultural circumstances, we find different forms of shamanism corresponding to local needs. The stereotype of the North Asiatic shamans should no longer prevent us from recognizing other forms of shamanism.

As to the development of shamanism itself: from archaeological findings, well over 15,000 years old, we know that hunters and gatherers – i.e., nomadic cultures – already employed the services of shamans. With the beginning of agriculture (when people began to settle down), the tasks of shamans changed. The necessity of magic for the hunt, e.g., was superseded by the need for making rain or stopping floods. Horticulturists (e.g., Shinoists in Japan and Huicholes in Mexico) and nomadic-pastoralists (e.g., the Evenki in Northern Siberia and the Hungarian horsemen) also developed specific forms of shamanism (Goodman, 1987). Sociopolitical developments then pushed shamans gradually from their leading role inside the tribe to a role of specialist within a larger nation-state. Unchanged remained the shaman's role of being a mediator between the spiritual and the world of men.

It is not surprising that some rulers continued to retain shamanistic responsibilities. The crowns of Korean kings of the Silla Dynasty (third to fifth century A.D.), e.g., show shamanic symbols (antlers, trees). In Europe of the Middle Ages, the sick approached

kings and queens because they thought they could get well if a royal hand touched them. It was believed that, during anointment, the archbishop could confer divine powers to the body of kings and queens. In Southeast Asia, the rulers became *deva raja* (god-kings) with the aid of *brahmin* (Hindu priests). It has been documented that, until the middle of the nineteenth century, Malay sultans still were practicing shamans (Heinze, 1988). In our times, the ayatollahs in Iran, e.g., are believed to have direct access to transcendental powers (a belief still upheld by Shi'ites).

Emergence of New Shamans

The need to come into the presence of the spiritual is deeply rooted in the human soul. Over thousands of years those seeking a spiritual connection developed different methods and disciplines to come "to know God." In each culture, therefore, spiritual disciplines are available to those who seek them. Most people, however, have neither the inclination nor the time for "spiritual practice"; they seek mediators who have developed the ability to gain access to the world of spirits and who can manifest the spiritual in visible form, i.e., translate the ineffable messages of the sacred in ritual actions.

As mediators, shamans work on a number of different levels. Socially, they are citizens like everybody else. Spiritually, they enjoy a higher position because of their relationship to the Divine. During rituals, they operate on intermediate levels, between the spiritual world and the world of humans. Normative rules of the social order are suspended and the encounter with the omnipotent spiritual world screens it. On the one hand, shamans protect the spiritual world from being polluted by human weaknesses and, on the other hand, they channel spiritual energy in a useful way so that it does not overtax the capacity of their clients.

My field data confirm that the reasons for consulting shamans have always been twofold: spiritual and very pragmatic at the same time. Aside from looking for a "spiritual connection," people are concerned about their own and their family's health and seek solutions for problems in inter- and intrapersonal relationships as well as career issues and business affairs.

The first sign of the emergence of new shamans is through the manifestation of their faculty to establish connections to other dimensions, in brief, their spiritual powers. Initiation now mainly

takes place on the spiritual plane, because, in urban settings, shamans "authorized" to initiate are hard to find.

Shamans usually begin their work inside the family. Word that some advice, an exorcism or cure has been successful spreads fast. One satisfied client tells others (relatives, acquaintances, and friends) and the group of followers grows. (It has to be noted that shamans never promise that there is a solution for each case. Among the shamans I worked with, none accepted cases (s)he could not solve. Shamans rather say that they would willingly intervene on behalf of clients but that they could not change their "fate"). Because their reputation continues to build with success, shamans do not need to advertise and natural selection takes care of fakes. Nobody finds it necessary to accuse and punish fake shamans; people simply stop going to all those who are no longer successful.

During the second phase in the career of a shaman, a hierarchy develops among the assistants. Members of the entourage take over the task of regulating the stream of clients and they also interpret and explain what the spirit has said. (The spirit may be talking in a different tongue which, in most cases, sounds very much like glos-solalia. An assistant has then to translate the spiritual messages). Clients have to be told how amulets are to be worn, how herbal medicine has to be taken or how blessed water should be used. Entourage and clients expect codification, so the "correct" performance of rituals becomes important. In contrast to practitioners of world religions, shamans consciously avoid any dogma and work quite well even in the context of world religions. This flexibility is one reason for their survival. Shamanic rituals to bring individuals in the presence of the Divine are continuously refined for the specific purpose, i.e., each case is considered to be unique.

The entourage also determines, among others, the fee for the different shamanic services and receives the incoming donations. Although it is generally believed that shamans will lose their faculties when they become greedy, in some cases the wealth of successful shamans becomes obvious. In most cases, however, modesty and a frugal life-style attest to the altruistic aspects of shamanism.

Syncretic Elements in Shamanism

In multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, shamans often borrow from different traditions and continually reinterpret elements of

their rituals. The success of shamans rests in their ability to integrate features which enhance the effect of their performances. The reasons for syncretism are, therefore, obvious. Different ethnic groups have brought their own religion and culture to the city and the effectiveness of various rituals has become known to other ethnic groups. That means, urban shamans (as did all their predecessors from the beginning) integrate elements of the cultures with which they have come into contact and give these elements a new meaning, depending on the context in which the specific ritual is performed. All elements of urban shamanism are familiar to the shamans and their clients. All have been in contact with the respective traditions as insiders or outsiders. This does, however, not exclude cases where shamans shape new images and use new symbols to convey the "formless" messages they continue to receive from the spiritual world. Paraphernalia and rituals will also correspond to the personality of particular shamans and the needs of the people who consult them.

The complexity of shamanic techniques is beneficial because it allows a wide range of explanations and fulfills a wide range of needs. Important for this investigation is that, in the twentieth century, without the legitimization of one specific culture or tradition, techniques and rituals have developed and changed to fulfill the needs of particular segments of a population. As has been said above, legitimization occurs *after* a successful ritual; its codification may render future performances less flexible.

Shamans continue to fulfill the expectations of those around them. People want spiritual advice, protection, and a healing, and they want to experience the presence of spiritual power. These expectations open the gates for shamans who shift the attention of their clients and then trigger their self-healing powers.

In sum, shamanism is very much alive today. It has stayed accessible whether we look without or within. Shamans have been and continue to be called to serve a vital role in restoring the connection between the sacred and the secular.

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