

Shamanism Study Guide for Initiates and Members
of
Circulos Tenebris Matrem Arcanas
Circle of the Dark and Mysterious Mother



Shamanism

Shamanism is a practice that involves a practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to perceive and interact with what they believe to be a spirit world and channel these transcendental energies into this world.

A shaman is someone who is regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of benevolent and malevolent spirits, who typically enters into a trance state during a ritual, and practices divination and healing. The word "shaman" probably originates from the Tungusic Evenki language of North Asia. The term was introduced to the west after Russian forces conquered the shamanistic Khanate of Kazan in 1552.

The term "shamanism" was first applied by Western anthropologists as outside observers of the ancient religion of the Turks and Mongols, as well as those of the neighboring Tungusic and Samoyedic-speaking peoples. Upon observing more religious traditions across the world, some Western anthropologists began to also use the term in a very broad sense. The term was used to describe unrelated magico-religious practices found within the ethnic religions of other parts of Asia, Africa, Australasia and even completely unrelated parts of the Americas, as they believed these practices to be similar to one another.

Shamans may be called through dreams or signs. However, shamanic powers may be inherited. In traditional societies shamanic training varies in length, but generally takes years.

Turner and colleagues mention a phenomenon called shamanistic initiatory crisis, a rite of passage for shamans-to-be, commonly involving physical illness and/or psychological crisis. The significant role of initiatory illnesses in the calling of a shaman can be found in the detailed case history of Chuonnasuan, who was the last master shaman among the Tungus peoples in Northeast China.

The wounded healer is an archetype for a shamanic trial and journey. This process is important to the young shaman. They undergo a type of sickness that pushes them to the brink of death. This happens for two reasons:

- The shaman crosses over to the underworld. This happens so the shaman can venture to its depths to bring back vital information for the sick and the tribe.
- The shaman must become sick to understand sickness. When the shaman overcomes their own sickness, they will hold the cure to heal all that suffer. This is the uncanny mark of the wounded healer.

Beliefs

There are many variations of shamanism throughout the world, but several common beliefs are shared by all forms of shamanism. Common beliefs identified by Eliade (1972) are the following:

- Spirits exist, and they play important roles both in individual lives and in human society.
- The shaman can communicate with the spirit world.
- Spirits can be benevolent or malevolent.
- The shaman can treat sickness caused by malevolent spirits.
- The shaman can employ trance inducing techniques to incite visionary ecstasy and go on vision

quests.

- The shaman's spirit can leave the body to enter the supernatural world to search for answers.
- The shaman evokes animal images as spirit guides, omens, and message-bearers.
- The shaman can perform other varied forms of divination, scry, throw bones/runes, and sometimes foretell of future events.

Shamanism is based on the premise that the visible world is pervaded by invisible forces or spirits which affect the lives of the living. Although the causes of disease lie in the spiritual realm, inspired by malicious spirits, both spiritual and physical methods are used to heal. Commonly, a shaman "enters the body" of the patient to confront the spiritual infirmity and heals by banishing the infectious spirit.

Many shamans have expert knowledge of medicinal plants native to their area, and an herbal treatment is often prescribed. In many places' shamans learn directly from the plants, harnessing their effects and healing properties, after obtaining permission from the indwelling or patron spirits. In the Peruvian Amazon Basin, shamans and curanderos use medicine songs called icaros to evoke spirits. Before a spirit can be summoned it must teach the shaman its song. The use of totemic items such as rocks with special powers and an animating spirit is common.

Such practices are presumably very ancient. Plato wrote in his Phaedrus that the "first prophecies were the words of an oak", and that those who lived at that time found it rewarding enough to "listen to an oak or a stone, so long as it was telling the truth".

Belief in witchcraft and sorcery, known as brujería in Latin America, exists in many societies. Other societies assert all shamans have the power to both cure and kill. Those with shamanic knowledge usually enjoy great power and prestige in the community, but they may also be regarded suspiciously or fearfully as potentially harmful to others.

By engaging in their work, a shaman is exposed to significant personal risk, from the spirit world, from enemy shamans, or from the means employed to alter the shaman's state of consciousness. Shamanic plant materials can be toxic or fatal if misused. Spells are commonly used to protect against these dangers, and the use of more dangerous plants is often very highly ritualized.

Shamanic Traditions

Most people in the United States think of Native American Tradition when they hear the term Shamanism. Native practices are shamanistic, but there are many shamanic Traditions in human culture. The following are some of the shamanic traditions throughout the world.

Asia

Vietnam – Len Dong - Shamanism is part of the Vietnamese religion of Đạo Mẫu. In Vietnam, this ritual practice is called Lên đồng or also known as hầu bóng, or hầu đồng, sessions involve a number of artistic elements, such as music, singing, dance and the use of costumes.

China - Hmong shamanism - The Hmong people, as an ancient people of China with a 5,000-year history, continue to maintain and practice its form of shamanism known as Ua Neeb in mainland Asia. At the end of the Vietnam War, some 300,000 Hmong have been settled across the globe. They have continued to practice Ua Neeb in various countries in North and South America, Europe and Australia. In the U.S., the Hmong shaman practitioner is known as Txiv Neeb has been licensed by many hospitals in California as being part of the medical health team to treat patients in hospital. This revival of Ua Neeb in the West has

been brought great success and has been hailed in the media as "doctor for the disease, shaman for the soul".

Indonesia – Dukun -

Throughout the villages and towns of Indonesia, local healers known as dukun practice diverse activities from massage, bonesetting, midwifery, herbal medicine, spirit mediumship and divination.

Japan – Miko - Shamanism is part of the indigenous Ainu religion and Japanese religion of Shinto, although Shinto is distinct in that it is shamanism for an agricultural society. Since the early middle-ages Shinto has been influenced by and syncretized with Buddhism and other elements of continental East Asian culture. The book "Occult Japan: Shinto, Shamanism and the Way of the Gods" by Percival Lowell delves further into researching Japanese shamanism or Shintoism. The book Japan Through the Looking Glass: Shaman to Shinto uncovers the extraordinary aspects of Japanese beliefs.

Korea – Mundang - Shamanism is still practiced in North and South Korea. In the south, shaman women are known as mudangs, while male shamans are referred to as baksoo mudangs.

Malaysia - Bobohizan, Bomoh, and Pawang- Shamanism were also practiced among the Malay community in Malay Peninsula and indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak. People who practice shamanism in the country are generally called as bomoh or pawang in the Peninsula. In Sabah, the Bobohizan is the main shaman among the Kadazan-Dusun indigenous community.

Mongolia - Mongolian classics, such as The Secret History of the Mongols, provide details about male and female shamans serving as exorcists, healers, rainmakers, oneiromancers, soothsayers, and officials. Shamanic practices continue in present-day Mongolian culture.

Philippines - Babaylan and Anito - 1922: a shaman of the Itneg people renewing an offering to the spirit (anito) of a warrior's kalasag shield Shamans were highly respected members of the community in the ancient animistic religions of the Philippines. They were generally known as babaylan or baylan. In most Filipino ethnic groups, the shamans were almost always women. The few men who gain shaman status were usually asog or bayok, men who dressed as women and lived as women. They usually acquire their role either by inheriting it from an older shaman or after surviving a serious illness or a bout of insanity. Regardless of the method, full-fledged shamans are those who have acquired spirit familiars who serve as their guides into the spirit world.

Siberia and North Asia - Oroqen shaman, northern China - Siberia is regarded as the locus classicus of shamanism. The area is inhabited by many different ethnic groups, and many of its peoples observe shamanistic practices, even in modern times. Many classical ethnographic sources of "shamanism" were recorded among Siberian peoples.

Manchu Shamanism is one of very few Shamanist traditions which held official status into the modern era, by becoming one of the imperial cults of the Qing dynasty of China (alongside Buddhism, Taoism and traditional Heaven worship). The Palace of Earthly Tranquility, one of the principal halls of the Forbidden City in Beijing, was partly dedicated to Shamanistic rituals. The ritual set-up is still preserved in situ today.

Central Asia - Geographical factors heavily influence the character and development of the religion, myths, rituals and epics of Central Asia. While in other parts of the world, religious rituals are primarily used to promote agricultural prosperity, here they were used to ensure success in hunting and breeding livestock. Animals are one of the most important elements of indigenous religion in Central Asia because

of the role they play in the survival of the nomadic civilizations of the steppes as well as sedentary populations living on land not conducive to agriculture. Shamans wore animal skins and feathers and underwent transformations into animals during spiritual journeys. In addition, animals served as humans' guides, rescuers, ancestors, totems and sacrificial victims. As a religion of nature, shamanism throughout Central Asia held particular reverence for the relations between sky, earth and water and believed in the mystical importance of trees and mountains. Shamanism in Central Asia also places a strong emphasis on the opposition between summer and winter, corresponding to the huge differences in temperature common in the region. The harsh conditions and poverty caused by the extreme temperatures drove Central Asian nomads throughout history to pursue militaristic goals against their sedentary neighbors. This military background can be seen in the reverence for horses and warriors within many indigenous religions.

Europe - Noaidi, Sami shamanism, and Finnish mythology - Some of the prehistoric peoples who once lived in Siberia have dispersed and migrated into other regions, bringing aspects of their cultures with them. For example, many Uralic peoples live now outside Siberia, however the original location of the Proto-Uralic peoples (and its extent) is debated. Combined phytogeographical and linguistic considerations (distribution of various tree species and the presence of their names in various Uralic languages) suggest that this area was north of Central Ural Mountains and on lower and middle parts of Ob River. The ancestors of Hungarian people or Magyars have wandered from their ancestral proto-Uralic area to the Pannonian Basin. Shamanism has played an important role in Turko-Mongol mythology: Tengriism - the major ancient belief among Xiongnu, Mongol and Turkic peoples, Magyars and Bulgars - incorporates elements of shamanism. Shamanism is no more a living practice among Hungarians, but remnants have been reserved as fragments of folklore, in folktales, customs.

It is also believed that the Celtic Druids were also a shamanic culture. This is very likely the case, but because the Druids did not keep written records, much of their practice has been lost. Several groups and scholars have set out to recreate the Celtic Druid Tradition.

Circumpolar shamanism - Inuit and Yupik cultures - When speaking of "shamanism" in various Eskimo groups, we must remember that the term "shamanism" can cover certain characteristics of various different cultures. Mediation is regarded often as an important aspect of shamanism in general. Also in most Eskimo groups, the role of mediator is known well: the person filling it in is actually believed to be able to contact the beings who populate the belief system. Term "shaman" is used in several English-language publications also in relation to Eskimos.

Americas

North America - Medicine man and Native American religion - Native American and First Nations cultures have diverse religious beliefs and there was never one universal Native American religion or spiritual system. Although many Native American cultures have traditional healers, ritualists, singers, mystics, lore-keepers and Medicine people, none of them ever used, or use, the term "shaman" to describe these religious leaders. Rather, like other indigenous cultures the world over, their spiritual functionaries are described by words in their own languages, and in many cases are not taught to outsiders.

Many of these indigenous religions have been grossly misrepresented by outside observers and anthropologists, even to the extent of superficial or seriously mistaken anthropological accounts being taken as more authentic than the accounts of actual members of the cultures and religions in question. Often these accounts suffer from "Noble Savage"-type romanticism and racism. Some contribute to the fallacy that Native American cultures and religions are something that only existed in the past, and which can be mined for data despite the opinions of Native communities.

Mesoamerica – Maya and Aztec - The Urarina of the Peruvian Amazon have an elaborate cosmological system predicated on the ritual consumption of ayahuasca, which is a key feature of their society. Santo Daime and União do Vegetal are syncretic religions with which use an entheogen called ayahuasca in an attempt to connect with the spirit realm and receive divine guidance.

Amazonia - Urarina - In the Peruvian Amazon basin and north coastal regions of the country, the healers are known as curanderos. Ayahuasqueros are Peruvians who specialize in the use of ayahuasca. Ayahuasqueros have become popular among Western spiritual seekers, who claim that the ayahuasqueros and their ayahuasca brews have cured them of everything from depression to addiction to cancer.

In addition to curanderos use of ayahuasca and their ritualized ingestion of mescaline-bearing San Pedro cactuses (*Trichocereus pachanoi*) for the divination and diagnosis of sorcery, north-coastal shamans are famous throughout the region for their intricately complex and symbolically dense healing altars called mesas. Sharon (1993) has argued that the mesas symbolize the dualistic ideology underpinning the practice and experience of north-coastal shamanism.

In several tribes living in the Amazon rainforest, the

Amazonia – Mapuche - Among the Mapuche people of Chile, Machi is usually a woman who serves the community by performing ceremonies to cure diseases, ward off evil, influence the weather and harvest, and by practicing other forms of healing such as herbalism.

Amazonia – Aymara - For the Aymara people of South America the Yatiri is a healer who heals the body and the soul, they serve the community and do the rituals for Pachamama.

Part of the healing power attributed to shamanic practices depends of the use of plant alkaloids taken during the therapeutic sessions.

Amazonian – Fuegians - Although Fuegians (the indigenous peoples of Tierra del Fuego) were all hunter-gatherers, they did not share a common culture. The material culture was not homogenous, either: the big island and the archipelago made two different adaptations possible. Some of the cultures were coast-dwelling, others were land-oriented.

Both Selk'nam and Yámana had persons filling in shaman-like roles. The Selk'nams believed their /xon/s to have supernatural capabilities, e.g. to control weather. The figure of /xon/ appeared in myths, too. The Yámana /jekamu/ corresponds to the Selknam /xon/.

Oceania

Oceania - Umbarra and Tunggul panaluan - On the island of Papua New Guinea, indigenous tribes believe that illness and calamity are caused by dark spirits, or masalai, which cling to a person's body and poison them. Shamans are summoned in order to purge the unwholesome spirits from a person.[Shamans also perform rainmaking ceremonies and can allegedly improve a hunter's ability to catch animals.

Australia - In Australia various aboriginal groups refer to their shamans as "clever men" and "clever women" also as kadji. These aboriginal shamans use maban or mabain, the material that is believed to give them their purported magical powers. Besides healing, contact with spiritual beings, involvement in initiation and other secret ceremonies, they are also enforcers of tribal laws, keepers of special knowledge and may "hex" to death one who breaks a social taboo by singing a song only known to the "clever men".

Africa

Africa - The classical meaning of shaman as a person who, after recovering from a mental illness (or insanity) takes up the professional calling of socially recognized religious practitioner, is exemplified among the Sisala (of northern Gold Coast) : "the fairies "seized" him and made him insane for several months. Eventually, though, he learned to control their power, which he now uses to divine."

The term sangoma, as employed in Zulu and congeneric languages, is effectively equivalent to shaman. Sangomas are highly revered and respected in their society, where illness is thought to be caused by witchcraft, pollution (contact with impure objects or occurrences), bad spirits, or the ancestors themselves, either malevolently, or through neglect if they are not respected, or to show an individual her calling to become a sangoma (thwasa). For harmony between the living and the dead, vital for a trouble-free life, the ancestors must be shown respect through ritual and animal sacrifice.

The term inyanga also employed by the Nguni cultures is equivalent to 'herbalist' as used by the Zulu people and a variation used by the Karanga, among whom remedies (locally known as muti) for ailments are discovered by the inyanga being informed in a dream, of the herb able to effect the cure and also of where that herb is to be found. The majority of the herbal knowledge base is passed down from one inyanga to the next, often within a particular family circle in any one village.

CTMA and Shamanism

If we go back to the original definition of shamanism;

“Shamanism is a practice that involves a practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to perceive and interact with what they believe to be a spirit world and channel these transcendental energies into this world.”

we can see that at its heart, shamanism is about altered states of consciousness that allows the practitioner to see into the spiritual realm and connect physical reality with the spirit plane. Gnosticism, being an experiential tradition, is by definition shamanic. One may also be surprised that the original Judaic Tradition, prior to the temple period, was one of shamanic practice. We believe that all mystical endeavors are shamanic, so CTMA by definition is a shamanic path. Whatever deities or practices we use to engage all lead back to an experience of both physical and spiritual reality.