



So, WHAT EXACTLY IS SHAMANISM THEN?

Nicholas Breeze Wood

Above: Tuvan shamans in Southern Siberia drum around a fire during a ceremony

Defining shamanism is not easy, and you may not agree with the definition I will try to give here. Shamanism is not tidy and there will be anomalies in what I write - but I hope to give at least a rough rule of thumb, despite the exceptions.

The word 'shaman' is a Western corruption of the word *samaan* or *s'amanthe*, from the Siberian Evenk people (previously known as the Tungus people), which was brought into the Russian language by early explorers of Siberia.

The word gradually became established as a general term for a Siberian tribal healer in Russia, and then migrated to the rest of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries via anthropologists.

The word shamanka - meaning a woman shaman - was never used by Siberian people - the ending *ka* is a Russian way of giving a word a diminutive female form.

Some say the word is of Sanskrit origin, coming from the word *s'ramana* - which means a Buddhist monk - but the Evenk language is not related to Sanskrit, and the Evenks were not exposed to Tibetan Buddhist monks in great numbers - with whom, some people say the word was carried from India into Siberia. So the Sanskrit origin of the word is extremely dubious. Furthermore Russian explorers first recorded the word in the 16th century and any Tibetan Buddhist contact would have been roughly around the same time.

The word shaman only comes from the one tribal group, found in Siberia and Manchuria, and different tribal peoples in different regions use different names for the role.

In Siberia - close to the Evenk people, the Yakut people call male shamans *khamma* or *ayun*, whereas the Mongols and Buryats call them *buge* or *bo*, the Koreans *mudang* or *baksu*, the Tartars and Altaians *kam* and *gam*, the shamans of Kyrgyzstan *baksy*, and the Samoyed people *tadibey*.

But a woman shaman in Siberia has a different name, and this name is very much the same, over a very wide geographical area. Among the Mongols, Buryats, Yakuts, Altaians, Evenks, and

Kyrgyz the word for a woman shaman is *udagan* (or variations such as *utagan*, *ubakan*, *utygan* or *utugun*). This word probably originates from the Mongolian word *Etugen* which is the name of the ancient hearth-goddess.

Because *udagan* is so universal, language experts know it to be a very old word, older than all the words for a male shaman, which shows that female shamans have been around a lot longer than male ones have.

SHAMANISM AND ANIMISM

A shaman has an animistic world view. An animist understands that all parts of Creation are alive in some way, and have spirits. Nothing is dead in the animist's universe - you and I have souls, and so do all the animals and plants, and likewise the rocks and rivers, mountains and clouds, stars, sun and moon, even an illness, or a concept, or a ceremony, or a ritual object has a soul - everything has a soul, and we live within a vast network of interconnectedness. All animistic and shamanic cultures understand this.

All shamanic cultures are animistic - but not all animistic cultures are shamanic.

Shamanic cultures are something special, something rare, something that only occurs in a few places on earth - although there are animistic cultures all over the globe.

An animistic culture is a culture which has a basic world view of animism. Examples of animistic cultures include the Q'ero of Peru and Bolivia, the tribes of North America, the Mayan people of Central America, the Maori of New Zealand, the Aborigines of Australia, tribal groups of Africa, the ancient Celts and Vikings, some groups in India, and many other peoples around the world.

None of the above are shamanic cultures, although some aspects of ancient animistic Viking culture were shamanic - the practice of *seidr* specifically. *Seidr* is an ancient practice where seers - generally women - go into trance and have the spirits speak or sing through them. The practice died out centuries ago, but the modern shamanic movement has done a splendid job of re-creating it, and I know many powerful *seidr* practitioners who dive deep and swim fast and strong.

A shamanic culture is an animistic culture where shamanism is practised - either within families - where the shaman heals just those immediately close to them - or where 'professional' shamans can be found, who work for the wider community.

A shaman is someone who goes into trance, and in that trance, they are either taken over by ancestor spirits - who were shamans before them - or they get taken over by local gods and spirits, such as the spirit of a mountain or a lake, or their soul leaves their body, and travels out to the other spirit worlds which are all around us - unseen - there to meet with spirits, so as to gain knowledge and power. Often all of these things happen within the same shamanic tradition.

Some people within animistic cultures have experiences of trance too, for instance when on a vision quest - in the Native American traditions - the quester may fall into a trance and see visions, but that does not make them a shaman, because the trance happens without

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their volition - and they can not call upon it when they wish to enter it.

Animistic cultures can have a great knowledge of magic, can perform powerful healings and can have great wisdoms, but their priests and healers don't enter into controlled voluntary trance, and do not go to the spirit worlds - instead



Left: Buryat white shaman will ritual bell and dragon staff

Siberian Shamans are generally divided up into white and black. This has nothing to do with the West's concepts of white and black magic, it is more to do with the shaman's role in their community

Left: Mongolian shaman
Photo C1910



they tend to call the spirits into this world - which although can be extremely powerful, is subtly different from shamanism, where shamans go to the spirits.

The cultures where shamanism is found mostly are tribal groups across Siberia, Finland and the far North of Europe, Mongolia, Tuva, Central Asia, China, SE Asia, Tibet and Nepal. Some anthropologists consider some of the tribes from the Amazon Rainforest to be shamanistic too, whereas others don't. Personally, because their medicine people go into trance - albeit with the aid of psychoactive plants - I think they could be called shamanistic too. There are also traces of shamanic practice to be found in Hungary and other places. The map - like shamanism - is not perfectly tidy.

As a rule of thumb, if you are working with a culture outside of those geographic areas you are working with an animistic culture rather than a shamanic one. But the edge between what is shamanic and what is animistic is a

Below: a Buryat shaman looks out over 'shaman rock' on Olkhon Island, Lake Baikal, Siberia



very blurred one. For example a Siberian shaman performs many practices which have much in common with a Native American medicine person. This can be explained by saying that shamans also perform animistic practice - not everything they do for people is shamanic - shamanism is the extra something they do for people which a medicine person doesn't.

All animistic cultures the world over have similarities - that is because the world is the way the world is, and spirits are the way that spirits are. You can look upon

this as the 'bones of the sacred.' All the bones of the world's animistic spiritual systems are the same, but each culture puts different flesh on the bones. This is why a Zulu medicine person and a Lakota medicine person will look - on the surface - different, but when you understand the bones, you will see they are doing the same basic job.

WHO CAN BE A SHAMAN?

The Evenk people, from whom the word shaman came, have a saying; 'A shaman sits on a different

branch of the Tree of Souls to a normal person.'

This relates to a story they have that the souls of babies sit like birds on branches of the World Tree, waiting to be born. Normal babies sit on branches in the tree, but shamans sit on their own unique branch - shamans are different to other people.

Can you choose to be a shaman? No you can't. You are either born a shaman, or you are not. If the spirits want you, there is nothing you can do, and if the spirits don't want you there is likewise nothing you can do. No spirits equals no shamans.

Being a shaman is not a cool life, most tribal people think it's a bit of a curse and often try their hardest to get away from the role. However the spirits always have their way, and the shaman-to-be often gets ill, or may die, if they don't accept their calling. Native shamans often think people in the West are crazy if they want to become shamans, and actually seek it out.

The most important teachers of a shaman are the spirits. Without the spirits a shaman is nothing, and the spirits teach the shaman, who becomes their apprentice. Human teachers are important too however, as a human teacher is a bit like a marriage arranger, they introduce the shaman to the spirits and also teach the shaman ways to interact with the spirits.

Some shamanic traditions give their new shamans initiations, others don't, it depends on the culture. Some cultures say you can not be a shaman in their culture unless you have the DNA of that culture - however far back in time the DNA came from. Others say you can be a shaman in that culture without the DNA.

Mostly people get the call to be a shaman because they are 'off with the spirits' from a young age, and this will often lead to either physical or mental illness in their teenage years - often called 'shaman sickness.' They may also have all of these and be hit by lightning as well, or get possessed by spirits and go into involuntary trance.

In traditional shamanic cultures a shaman will be called to diagnose the nature of the illness, and if it is determined that the sick person is



Top: a Nepalese shaman performs a ceremony

Left: a Tibetan shaman holds his double skinned damaru drum

Below: Dayak
shaman from
Borneo

Bottom: a
Korean Mundang

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to be a shaman, and the sickness is shaman-sickness, the shaman treating them will tell the sick person they have to learn to be a shaman, or face the consequences. However in the west, which is not a shamanic culture, things are, of course, generally not so clear.

In the early 1980s a new, Western style of shamanism came along - generally known as 'Core Shamanism.' This came about mostly through the work of Michael Harner.

Core shamanism took the basic model of going into trance and journeying out to the Spirit Worlds, but stripped it of all cultural aspects, making it more easily digestible to Westerners.

The basic tenet of Core Shamanism is that anyone can learn to journey and employ 'shamanic techniques' in their life, in order to help themselves or others. This is no doubt true, and many people derive much benefit from learning Core Shamanic techniques. However the same rule of being chosen by the spirits still applies.

I always think of the spirit world as being a bit like the ocean. All people can explore the shallows of shamanism; sit on the beach with their toes in the water, or paddle in the breaking waves - in other words almost everyone can learn to do a basic shamanic journey and do some things close to the shore.

Some people will wade out into the ocean up to their chests, or learn to swim a little - they go deeper in.

But only those chosen by the spirits will really learn to swim and dive, and hold their breath underwater, and go to the depths of the spirit world.

Saying this is not elitist - it is simply true. When doing shamanism at this deep level, it can be very physically and psychologically dangerous - some shamans die in ceremony. Not all people are cut out to dive deep, and only those with the spirits blessings and help will learn to go vastly out of their depths, to return safely - if they are lucky.

But everyone can live a rich animistic life and can learn some simple shamanic first aid - and I think the world would be a lot better if more people did.

SOME DO'S AND DON'T'S

There are lots of people out there who are really doing good shamanic practice - and there are lots of people who are not doing good shamanic practice at all - the New Age can be a place so full of fluff one can drown very easily, getting choked on all the fairy dust.

I often come across people who think yoga, or reiki, or some other form of therapy is the same as shamanism. It is not - at best it is animistic - but it is not shamanism.

I also come across many people who think shamanism is going and sitting out in nature, perhaps with their back against a tree, connecting and becoming 'one with everything.'

Again that is not shamanism. Meditating in nature is something to be encouraged - tuning in and feeling your connection with all your relatives is something of great benefit - but it's not shamanism. Shamanism is hard disciplined work, meeting the spirits and having actual dialogues with them, negotiating - or at times subduing or even fighting them - for the sake of your community.

Often in the New Age community people think shamans are wonderful people - close to Spirit - who love everyone and do good deeds all day long. That too is a myth.

Traditional shamans will often fight each other, and sometimes try to kill each other and steal power with the aid of their spirits.

Traditional shamans will also often curse as much as cure, and make it difficult for other shamans to practise. I was recently talking with a Mongolian shaman friend about this, and they were rather envious of some of my own 'shamanic adventures,' because I had journeyed to places they had only heard about from their elders; they themselves were unable to journey to those places, as the fear of attack from other shamans was too much a possibility for them. Thankfully these types of attacks are very rare in the Western shamanic and Core Shamanic communities, as within those communities, there are few people who have more than mere 'hot air,' as they often lack the knowledge and power to do much damage.

Also be warned, trying such 'dark work' is not advised, you will

likely open yourself to spirit forces far greater than you, and put yourselves and your loved ones in danger. You might also lose your connection to any healing spirits you have working with you.

Many years ago, one of my own teachers was tempted to try to use a spirit for a little bit of low level 'dark work.' They had a good relation with their spirit helper - who was really important to them and their practice - but when my teacher tried to get this spirit to do the 'dark work' that spirit left them, and never came back. That was over 30 years ago now, and I know my teacher still regrets that, even to this day.

Being a shaman is not a cool life, most tribal people think it's a curse and often try their hardest to get away from the role. However the spirits always have their way, and the shaman-to-be often gets ill, or may die, if they don't accept their calling. Native shamans often think people in the West are crazy if they want to become shamans and actually seek it out

Buryat shaman, wearing an iron crown set with iron antlers and holding his drum and a hobro - a horse spirit staff
Photo taken C1910



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I had a sobering warning from my own spirits too, although I was not attempting 'dark work' at the time. My spirit helper looked at me and then casually reminded me they could turn off my shamanic ability 'just like that.' There was the sound of a click of the fingers, and I was back out of trance in an instant, and back in normal reality - they had thrown me out. It was a lesson, there was no problem going back the next time, but I have no doubts that - should they want to - the spirits would simply turn me off like a tap.

There are many, many books out there which purport to be about

shamanism. Some of them are very good, others are not. Many of them are not about shamanism at all, because the word shamanism is a sexy word and book publishers use it to add fairy dust to their titles.

If you want to learn about shamans, I would advise reading about actual tribal shamanism, in good, grounded books about the cultures, Some New Age books are good, but most really are best avoided.

Likewise some books - which are really fiction - are often cited as important books about shamanism. Here I'm especially thinking of the writings of Carlos Castaneda, but there are many other authors too.

Castaneda was an excellent novelist who wrote some fine story books. He drew from many ancient traditions and his books are a cornucopia of useful metaphors about Spirit and the sacred - only please do not think they are literally true, and especially please don't think his books describe shamanism.

Shamanism often gets associated with the taking of mind altering plants. In recent years tourism to the Amazon has proliferated and people take such substances as Ayahuasca, San Pedro, Peyote and various types of mind-altering mushrooms.

People often seem to think this is essential when it comes to shamanism, but let me assure you it is not. Most shamanic cultures across the world do not take any mind altering substances at all - instead they rely on the spirits taking them over, aided by a mixture of ceremony, song and drumming.

If you are drawn to working with what are often called 'teacher plants' that's fine, but work with them in such a way that you respect their spirits. Every traditional culture who uses plants like this has ceremonies and songs which are part of the practice. You don't just grab a plant and ingest it in order to have a cosmic adventure; learn the traditional ways, find traditional teachers and do it properly - for your sake and for the respect and honour of the plant spirits, and the spirit of the lineage.

Shamanism is not a path of personal growth or personal healing. Sure both are going to happen to you along the way, but that's a by-product.

Buryat shaman
in trance as the
spirits enter him



However, Core Shamanism can be excellent for those things - and there is nothing wrong with using aspects of Core Shamanism to heal yourself, in fact, again, the world would be a much better place if people worked on 'their stuff' and got some healing, and the much more therapy-like model of Core Shamanism can be excellent for this.

But primarily a shaman's job is to help their community - however you define that term.

Your community can be your family. As I said before, in a lot of traditional Siberian cultures, a shaman worked only for their family - or it could be for your friends and people you know in your real world life, or it could be your internet family, or even nationally or globally. We mostly no longer live in rural, agriculturally based small villages, our concept of community has changed dramatically in the last few hundred years. You will have to work out what the word means to you now.

Because we are not a shamanic culture - or even an animistic culture - we, in the West need to find ways to build an animistic worldview ourselves.

Because of this, we have tended to look towards other cultures who have held their animistic worldview - such as the Native Americans or Africans - despite the West's often determined efforts to 'educate the savages out of their primitive ideas.'

So, you are likely to tread on the toes of tribal peoples who have been marginalised, and seen genocide and cultural annihilation happen to their ancestors. They might welcome you and wish to share sacred teachings with you, or they might not. That will be on a tribe by tribe, person by person basis.

So tread carefully and respectfully. Learn with humility and pay attention to what is being taught to you. Treat it precious as you carry it - like a fragile baby - into your own life and culture, as the chances are, the people you are being taught by, held on to those traditions through times of absolute horror and desperation - so act well.

You might feel drawn to follow an animistic path from your own ancestors - perhaps you have Celtic or European blood, perhaps you have African blood or Central

Buryat shaman
drums in the
smoke of a
sacred fire

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Asian blood - and the pull of the blood on you is strong.

That's a wonderful blood line to explore, but be aware, if you come from a European culture the traditions are broken, and paths such as Wicca or the Druids, are modern inventions, and bear little in common with their ancient ancestors.

Our ancestors were not following their spiritual path for recreation, or self improvement, they held to their spirituality because it was there to save their lives, to help heal their sick, and to help bring crops and animals to their table.

It is very easy to 'get off' on fantasy in the West, because we are divorced from the natural world, and we don't need our ancient ways to help us survive. In the olden days, if things didn't work, people would die, now it is not like that, and the essential pragmatic point of spirituality is no longer there. We seek it to find balance in our urban world, and because we do that, it is far too easy to get seduced by the romance of it and entranced by the

'fantasy. Don't become so spiritual that you are no earthly good.

You may indeed be called to walk a true shamanic path - but if you are, it's no big deal, you are not special, you are just chosen by the spirits to bear a heavier load on your back than many of your fellows - remember only an idiot actively wants to be a shaman.

But walking an animistic life-path, seeing the beauty in all of your relations, seeing it in every being you meet, from a raven to a rainbow, a starfish to a star, will make your life richer, and make you feel more connected - because we truly are all related.

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*Above: Buryat
shaman drums
in the smoke
of a sacred fire*

