Shamanism

Shamanism refers to a range of traditional beliefs and practices similar to Animism that claim the ability to diagnose and cure human suffering and, in some societies, the ability to cause suffering. This is believed to be accomplished by traversing the axis mundi and forming a special relationship with, or gaining control over, spirits. Shamans have been credited with the ability to control the weather, divination, the interpretation of dreams, astral projection, and traveling to upper and lower worlds. Shamanistic traditions have existed throughout the world since prehistoric times.

Some anthropologists, such as Christine VanPool, define a shaman as an intermediary between the natural and spiritual world, who travels between worlds in a trance state. Once in the spirit world, the shaman would commune with the spirits for assistance in healing, hunting or weather management.

Shamanism is based on the premise that the visible world is pervaded by invisible forces or spirits that affect the lives of the living. In contrast to animism and animatism, which any and usually all members of a society practice, shamanism requires specialized knowledge or abilities. It could be said that shamans are the experts employed by animists or animist communities. Shamans are not, however, often organized into full-time ritual or spiritual associations, as are priests.

Shaman originally referred to the traditional healers of Turkic-Mongol areas such as Northern Asia (Siberia) and Mongolia, a "shaman" being the Turkic-Tungus word for such a practitioner and literally meaning "he (or she) who knows".

The Tungus word has been further connected with Chinese sha men "Buddhist monk," ultimately from Sanskrit. śramaṇa "Buddhist ascetic" (see shramana).

Accordingly, the only proper plural form of the word is shamans and not shamen, as it is unrelated to the English word "man".

In its common usage, it has replaced the older English language term witch doctor, a term which unites the two stereotypical functions of the shaman: knowledge of magical and other lore, and the ability to cure a person and mend a situation. However, this term is generally considered to be pejorative and anthropologically inaccurate. Objections to the use of shaman as a generic term have been raised as well, by both academics and traditional healers themselves, given that the word comes from a specific place, people, and set of practices.

Certain anthropologists, most notably Alice Kehoe in her book "Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking", are highly critical of the term. Part of this criticism involves the notion of cultural appropriation. This includes criticism of New Age and modern Western forms of Shamanism, which may not only misrepresent or 'dilute' genuine indigenous practices but do so in a way that, according to Kehoe, reinforces subtly racist ideas such as the Noble Savage.

Kehoe is highly critical of Mircea Eliade's work. Eliade, being a historian rather than an anthropologist, had never done any field work or made any direct contact with 'shamans' or cultures practicing 'shamanism'. According to Kehoe, Eliade's 'shamanism' is an invention synthesized from various sources unsupported by more direct research. To Kehoe, what Eliade and other scholars of shamanism treat as being definitive of shamanism, most notably drumming, trance, chanting, entheogens and hallucinogenics, spirit communication and healing, are practices that 1) exist outside of what is defined as shamanism and play similar roles even in non-shamanic cultures (such as the role of chanting in Judeo-Christian rituals) 2) in their expression is unique to each culture that uses them and cannot be generalized easily, accurately or usefully into a global 'religion' such as shamanism. Because of this, Kehoe is also highly critical of the notion that shamanism is an ancient, unchanged, and surviving religion from the Paleolithic.

Shamanistic practices are sometimes claimed to predate all organized religions, and certainly date back to the Neolithic period. Aspects of shamanism are encountered in later, organized religions, generally in their mystic and symbolic practices. Greek paganism was influenced by shamanism, as reflected in the stories of Tantalus, Prometheus, Medea, and Calypso among others, as well as in the Eleusinian Mysteries, and other mysteries. Some of the shamanic practices of the Greek religion later merged into the Roman religion.

Shamanism was further influential in many cultures, including Native American, Jewish, and Christian traditions. In Europe, shamans were associated with the spread of Catholicism. The Catholic Church was instrumental in the collapse of the Greek and Roman religions, and shamans were often persecuted or marginalized. However, the influence of shamanism continued to spread, and today it is practiced by many indigenous and traditional communities around the world.
The belief in witchcraft and sorcery, known as brujeria in South America, is prevalent in many shamanic societies. Some societies presume very ancient; in about 368 BCE, Plato wrote in the Phaedrus that the “first prophecies were the words of an oak”, and that summoned by the singing of songs called icaros; before a spirit can be summoned the spirit must teach the shaman its song. The use of their effects and healing properties only after obtaining permission from its abiding or patron spirit. In South America, individual spirits are and heal the patient by banishing the infectious spirit. Many shamans have expert knowledge of the plant life in their area, and an herbal physical methods are used to heal. Commonly, a shaman will “enter the body” of the patient to confront the spirit making the patient sick, While the causes of disease are considered to lie in the spiritual realm, being effected by malicious spirits or witchcraft, both spiritual and symbols of medicine. Oftentimes the shaman has, or acquires, one or more familiar helping entities in the spirit world; these are often spirits reassembled” again, often with implanted amulets such as magical crystals. The imagery of initiation generally speaks of transformation and beings inhabiting it, meeting a spiritual guide, being devoured by some being and emerging transformed, and/or being “dismantled” and beings of the universe and leaving his body like a spirit, soaring through the heavens and underworld. There he would be introduced to the different spirits and taught which to address in future trances. According to Mircea Eliade’s book “Shamanism”, during the initiation, spirits would take the shaman’s old bones and replace them with new ones. Since sickness was thought to be caused by an evil spirit entering the victim’s body, the shaman would call it out in order to affect a cure. He would do so by a special ritual, beating a rhythm on his drum, swaying and chanting steadily increasing the sound and interspersing it with long drawn out sighs, groans, and hysterical laughter.

Different forms of shamanism are found around the world, and practitioners are also known as medicine men or women, as well as witch doctors.

[edit]
Initiation and learning
In Shamanic cultures, the shaman plays a priest-like role; however, there is an essential difference between the two, as Joseph Campbell describes:

“The priest is the socially initiated, ceremonially inducted member of a recognized religious organization, where he holds a certain rank and functions as the tenant of an office that was held by others before him, while the shaman is one who, as a consequence of a personal psychological crisis, has gained a certain power of his own.” (1969, p. 231)

A shaman may be initiated via a serious illness, by being struck by lightning and dream of thunder and become a Heyoka, or by a near-death experience (e.g., the shaman Black Elk), and there usually is a set of cultural imagery expected to be experienced during shamanic initiation regardless of method. According to Mircea Eliade, such imagery often includes being transported to the spirit world and interacting with beings inhabiting it, meeting a spiritual guide, being devoured by some emerging transformed, and/or being “dismantled” and “reassembled” again, often with implanted amulets such as magical crystals. The imagery of initiation generally speaks of transformation and granting powers, and often entails themes of death and rebirth.

In some societies shamanic powers are considered to be inherited, whereas in others shamans are considered to have been called": Among the Siberian Chukchis one may behave in ways that Western clinicians would characterize as psychotic, but which Siberian culture interprets as possession by a spirit who demands that one assume the shamanic vocation. Among the South American Tapirape shamans are called in their dreams. In other societies shamans choose their career: First Nations would seek communion with spirits through a "vision quest"; South American Shuar, seeking the power to defend their family against enemies, apprentice themselves to accomplished shamans.

Shamanic illness, also called shamanistic initiatory crisis, is a psycho-spiritual crisis, or a rite of passage, observed among those becoming shamans. The episode often marks the beginning of a time-limited episode of confusion or disturbing behavior where the shamanic initiate might sing or dance in an unconventional fashion, or have an experience of being “disturbed by spirits”. The symptoms are usually not considered to be signs of mental illness by interpreters in the shamanic culture; rather, they are interpreted as introductory signposts for the individual who is meant to take the office of shaman (Lukoff et.al, 1992).

The shaman plays the role of healer in shamanic societies; shamans gain knowledge and power by traversing the axis mundi and bringing back knowledge from the heavens. Even in western society, this ancient practice of healing is referenced by the use of the caduceus as the symbol of medicine. Oftentimes the shaman has, or acquires, one or more familiar helping entities in the spirit world; these are often spirits in animal form, spirits of healing plants, or (sometimes) those of departed shamans. In many shamanic societies, magic, magical force, and knowledge are all denoted by one word, such as the Quechua term "yachay".

While the causes of disease are considered to lie in the spiritual realm, being effected by malicious spirits or witchcraft, both spiritual and physical methods are used to heal. Commonly, a shaman will “enter the body” of the patient to confront the spirit making the patient sick, and heal the patient by banishing the infectious spirit. Many shamans have expert knowledge of the plant life in their area, and an herbal regimen is often prescribed as treatment. In many places shamans claim to learn directly from the plants, and to be capable of harnessing their effects and healing properties only after obtaining permission from its abiding or patron spirit. In South America, individual spirits are summoned by the singing of songs called icaros; before a spirit can be summoned the shaman must teach the shaman its song. The use of totem items such as rocks is common; these items have believed to have special powers and an animating spirit. Such practices are presumably very ancient; in about 368 BCE, Plato wrote in the Phaedrus that the "first prophecies were the words of an oak", and that everyone 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."
By engaging in this work, the shaman exposes himself to significant personal risk, from the spirit world, from any enemy shamans, as well as from the means employed to alter his state of consciousness. Certain of the plant materials used can be fatal, and the failure to return from an out-of-body journey can lead to physical death. Spells are commonly used to protect against these dangers, and the use of more dangerous plants is usually very highly ritualized.

Generally, the shaman traverses the axis mundi and enters the spirit world by effecting a change of consciousness in himself, entering into an ecstatic trance, either autohypnotically or through the use of entheogens. The methods used are diverse, and are often used together. Some of the methods for effecting such altered states of consciousness are:

- Drumming
- Singing
- Fasting
- Sweat lodge
- Vision quests / vigils
- Dancing / Spinning (game)
- Use of "power" or "master" plants to induce altered states or aromatics used as incense such as:
  - Cedar
  - Sage
  - Sweetgrass
  - Tobacco
  - Psychedelic mushrooms (Alluded to euphemistically as "holy children" by Mazatec shamans such as María Sabina.
  - Fly agaric
  - Peyote
  - San Pedro Named after (St. Peter), guardian of the Gates of Heaven by the Andean peoples (Quechua name: Huachuma)
  - Ayahuasca Quechua for "Vine of the Dead"
  - Iboga
  - Datura
  - Morning glory
  - Salvia divinorum (sometimes called Diviners' sage)
  - Cannabis

In modern context Lasers and other optical projections in conjunction with computers as well as loud theta inducing Trance Music

Shamans will often observe dietary or customary restrictions particular to their tradition. Sometimes these restrictions are more than just cultural. For example, the diet followed by shamans and apprentices prior to participating in an Ayahuasca ceremony includes foods rich in tryptophan (a biosynthetic precursor to serotonin) as well as avoiding foods rich in tyramine, which could induce hypertensive crisis if ingested with MAOIs such as are found in Ayahuasca brews.

Most shamans are men, but there are societies in which women may be shamans. In some societies, shamans exhibit a two-spirit identity, assuming the dress and attributes of the opposite sex from a young age, for example, a man taking on the role of a wife in an otherwise ordinary marriage. This practice is common, and found among the Chukchi, Sea Dyak, Patagonians, Araucarian, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Navajo, Pawnee, Lakota, and Ute, as well as many other Native American tribes. Such two-spirit shamans are thought to be especially powerful. They are highly respected and sought out in their tribes, as they will bring high status to their mates.

In Korea, all shamans are female.

The New Age movement imported some ideas from shamanism as well as Eastern religions. As in other such imports, the original users of these ideas frequently condemn New Age use as misunderstood and superficial[1][2].

At the same time, there is an endeavor in occult and esoteric circles to reinvent shamanism in a modern form, drawing from core shamanism, a set of beliefs and practices synthesized by Michael Harner and often revolving around the use of ritual drumming and dance; various indigenous forms of shamanism, often focusing on the ritual use of entheogens; as well as chaos magic. Much of this is focused upon in Europe, where ancient shamanic traditions were suppressed by the Christian church and where people compelled to be shamans often find it improper to use shamanic systems rooted in other parts of the earth. Various traditional shamans express respect for this endeavor, sharply distinguishing it from "light" New Age shamanism. Some anthropologists and practitioners have discussed the impact of such ‘neo-shamanism’ as ‘giving extra pay’ (Harvey, 1997 and elsewhere) to indigenous shamans, particularly as many pagan- or heathen-'shamanic practitioners' call themselves by specific names derived from older European traditions - the völva or seidkona (seid-woman) of the sagas being an example (see Blain 2002, Wallis 2003).

Sometimes, however, people from Western cultures claim to be shamans, often associated with either the New Age or Neopaganism movements. This is considered offensive by many indigenous practitioners, who view these New Age, Western "shamans" as hucksters out for money or affirmation of self. Many shamanistic cultures feel there is a danger that their voices will be drowned out by self-styled "shamans," citing, for example, the fact that Lynn Andrews has sold more books than all Native American authors put together. Often too, these New Age Shamans (sometimes called Plastic shamans), make up elaborate ceremonies that are often completely fraudulent (such as Sweat lodge ceremonies, or Chuluaqui-Quodoushka). Others may be based on real traditional ceremonies but reproduced in a way that distorts, or commercializes, their meaning.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shamanism
See also
Neurotheology — speculation regarding the biological basis of spirituality and spiritual practices
Shaman's Drum Journal
Core Shamanism

Notes

External links
Buryat-Mongol Shamanism
Religion and Spirituality: Shamanism at the Open Directory Project
General shamanism page with American traditions dominant
Flight of the Condor - Contemporary Shamanism Large collection of essays and teachings from a contemporary shaman
Gaelic Shamanism website exploring the shamanism inherent within the Gaelic oral tradition of the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland.
The story of Tantalus a shamanic story from Greek mythology.
Dance of the Four Winds: Secrets of the Medicine Wheel In this riveting narrative of spiritual discovery Dr. Alberto Villoldo journeys to Peru to investigate the practices used by Indian shamans to access the four paths of the Medicine Wheel ISBN 0892815140
Shamanism Training in North America - Links to articles on contemporary shamanic practice and trainings.
The Two-Spirit Tradition Two-Spirit Shamanism in North America.
The website of Sacred Hoop Magazine promoting the spiritual traditions of shamanism and animism
Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism - Complements book (see below) and offers public discussion forums.
Scandinavian Center of Shamanic Studies - Dedicated to the contemporary practice of shamanism
Remedies Used By Shamans
Spiritplants Refuge - Public forums
Shamanic Medicines - Information on shamanic medicines with links to research, community, & rare plant suppliers
Ancient Enchanting Instruments Website on Enchanting Instruments including Shamanism (History, Techniques and more...)
[[4] - Native American forum on Frauds and Plastic Shamans

"Love is the law, love under will."

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The mission of the Atlanta Vampire Alliance [AVA] is to promote unity in the greater Atlanta, Georgia real Vampire Community while being available to the newly awakened to encourage self-awareness and responsibility. We honor the traditions of history, respect and discretion regarding Community affairs while advocating the safety and well being of our members. Vampires & admirers, folkloric/literary enthusiasts, Goths, psychics, pagans, spiritualists, occultists, paranormalists, DragonCon/Frolicon/Other "Con" attendees, audiophiles & music lovers, board-gamers, club goers, coffee & tea drinkers, conversationalists, fine dining patrons, horror fans, kinky-minded people, movie fans, trivia nerds, wine & cheese snobs, etc. Additionally, please understand we are NOT a RP (VtM) or LARP based group! See Also: Atlanta Vampire Alliance [AVA] http://www.atlantavampirealliance.com.

In 2005, he helped found the Atlanta Vampire Alliance (AVA), an organization that promotes unity and offers support to those "newly awakened." Today, it is one of the most far-reaching organizations of real-life vampires in the world. One year later, he founded the largest vampire research company, Suscitatio Enterprises, LLC. Now he runs and operates the Vampire Community News network, an internal social media platform that he founded in 2008. It's one of the reasons he proved an invaluable resource for a recent study by two social workers that made headlines nationwide. Published in the jour...