

Shamanism

Mapping the Boundaries

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In his “reader” on the subject, published in 2003, Graham Harvey defined shamanism not so much as a technical term as a “semantic field.”¹ Applied only to activities in contemporary British society, it has already become attached to five different phenomena; its application to practices and practitioners in traditional societies are correspondingly even more diverse. Graham’s own response was to celebrate this diversity as something exciting in itself, telling us valuable things about the contrasting ways in which scholars approach the study of indigenous peoples. His argument has certain obvious truths, and attractions, but both are more appealing for a scholar of religious studies (such as he is) than to a historian or an anthropologist concerned with traditional cultures. Whatever the difficulties that the last two disciplines encounter in their work—and these are immense—they are supposed to be studying something more than themselves.

What is very clear is that the only common factor in the study of shamanism consists of Western scholarship. It is this that created the term, produced the studies that embody its different meanings, and transmitted enthusiasm for it to audiences within its own homelands. It has, in the process, made the term into a label with absolutely no agreed-on meaning; in this regard, the ivory tower has become a Tower of Babel. At present, anybody wishing to write of shamanism in a scholarly context has a series of choices. The first is whether to apply the word “shaman” to any person in a traditional society who communicates with a spirit world and uses this expertise on behalf of others, or else to confine it to a particular kind of practitioner within that broad category. Many scholars have made the former, loose, usage, and it has been adopted, explicitly or not, by people who call themselves shamans

1. Harvey, “General Introduction,” in *Shamanism: A Reader*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Routledge, 2003), 18.

within modern Western society. The problem with this is that it is so broad and universal that it says nothing of very much interest about any particular time and place. Every traditional society has experts in dealing with spirit worlds, and many urbanized, literate, and state-regulated cultures have had them, too. Most have divided such experts up into different categories, all of which are subsumed under the blanket term “shaman” in this loose usage. Most people who have written about shamanism have therefore preferred to make a more restrictive and precise definition of it; the trouble, of course, is that there is no general agreement over what that should be.

The solution to the problem proposed here is to go back to basics, and ask what it was that first made Europeans take up the word “shaman,” invent the word “shamanism,” and find them interesting. The first word, of course, comes from Siberia, and it is that region which constitutes, in the phrase of Mircea Eliade, the “locus classicus” of shamanism. European travelers reported what was later termed shamanism in Mongolia from the thirteenth century and in Siberia from the sixteenth; in each case, their first contact with the region concerned. Until the end of the seventeenth century, the Europeans themselves came from a world of traditional spirituality, in which most people dwelt in small rural communities, were overawed by the forces of nature, feared and negotiated with entities embodying those natural forces, and had local specialists for that work of negotiation. They were also familiar with trance states and ecstatic visions. Yet what they encountered in Siberia and Mongolia still seemed new and startling to them, and usually inspired them to anxiety and repulsion.

So what was it that struck Europeans as so remarkable, and so alien, about what they came to term shamanism? The straight answer is that it consisted of what Anna-Leena Siikala has termed a “rite technique.”² In other words, the people who practiced it entered trance, and appeared to communicate with spirits, in a dramatic public performance. This commonly included music, song, chant, or dance, or a combination of these, holding the attention and engaging the senses and imagination of an audience. It was of a piece with this that, all over northern Asia, shamans were expected to have distinctive clothing or equipment, which marked them out at a glance when they were in role, though these could range from elaborate costumes to a mere cloth or decorated stick. The attention of Europeans was drawn to shamans, primarily and even essentially, because shamans usually dressed, and certainly behaved, in a dramatic and distinctive fashion.

2. Siikala, *The Rite-Technique of the Siberian Shaman* (Helsinki: Academic Scientarum Fennica, 1987).

To me, therefore, the rite technique is crucial to the definition. If we are to attempt to map out the former extent of shamanism as a traditional mode of spirituality, we are not looking for trance states in general, or specific kinds of trance, or relationships with spirits, but a dramatic ritualized performance as a means of working with spirits to achieve results in the human world. It was that which, in European eyes, distinguished a shaman from a priest, witch, cunning person, oracle, Druid, medium, visionary saint, or any other spiritual practitioner already familiar in European culture. This approach has the merit of fitting the model by which the whole concept of shamanism was developed, and of giving scholars something specific and well defined to seek.

In seeking it, prehistory is fairly obviously a closed book, and archaeology useless unless it yields either written texts or material objects that can be associated with written evidence. There are no artifacts that, purely by themselves, can be certainly interpreted as relics of shamanism, and artistic representations are almost as susceptible to differing interpretation. Historical records show that shamanism, by this definition, has a large global distribution, including most continents and both hemispheres, but also clear limits. In Eurasia, it was found over the whole of Siberia (one third of the northern hemisphere), and in Mongolia, Manchuria, and among the Sami people of northern Scandinavia, with an unbroken continuation through the North American Arctic. Around this “core territory” was a buffer zone, comprising the rest of Scandinavia, Iceland, parts of European Russia, Turkestan, and Korea, in which aspects of the classic rite technique appear, but not the whole. In addition, the full-blown shamanic rite has also been recorded in areas of Eurasia detached from its main distribution, such as Moldavia and parts of South Asia, having got there either by migration or by independent development. A similar sort of mapping seems to work for Africa and the Americas.

How, then, does this exercise fit a study of witchcraft? Here again, it is necessary to start by defining the object of study. I have suggested that there are five characteristics that make up the figure to whom English-speakers attach the word witch, and which is found in belief systems in every inhabited continent of the world.³ The first, and most obvious, is that a witch is somebody who uses apparently supernatural means to cause misfortune or injury to others. Second, this person works harm to neighbors or kin, rather than strangers, and so is a threat to other members of a shared community. Third, she or he operates not for straightforward material gain but from envy or malice, and so is either inherently evil or in the grip of inherent evil.

3. Hutton, “Anthropological and Historical Approaches to Witchcraft: Potential for a New Collaboration?” *The Historical Journal* 47 (2002): 421–23.

Fourth, the appearance of such a figure is not an isolated or unique event; the witch works in a tradition, by inheritance, training, or initiation. Finally, this person can be opposed by countermagic, or by forcing her or him to rescind a spell, or by eliminating her or him directly. There are also many variables in the construction of local images of the witch figure, such as gender, social status, whether witches work alone or as part of a secret society, and whether their actions are deliberate or involuntary. It is the five characteristics specified above that seem to be definitive.

Their use maps witch beliefs onto the globe as surely as the definition of shamanism proposed above, but with very different results. Whereas it is possible to define large shamanic regions, the pattern of witch traditions more usually resembles a chessboard. Within a single region, such as the southern Sudan or New Guinea in the twentieth century, or the Mediterranean basin in ancient times, it is possible to find peoples who have a strong fear of witchcraft, and others who either do not believe in it at all, or do not think that it matters in practice, as well as viewpoints on the whole spectrum between. Traditional societies that do not take witchcraft seriously tend to have well-developed alternative theories to account for apparently uncanny misfortune: most commonly that it is inflicted by angry spirits of the land, or of ancestors, who must be propitiated or fought off.

There is no constant relationship between the practice of shamanism and a belief in witchcraft, as both are defined here. Siberia was probably the largest witch-free area of the planet, as across most of it mysterious afflictions were generally attributed to the inhabitants of an often malevolent spirit world, and the prime task of the shaman was to deal with the latter and neutralize its effects. Among societies divided into clans competing for resources, such as the Evenki, it was common to blame the shamans of rival groups for attacking one's own people using spirits as agents, and retaliation as well as defence was regarded as the duty of one's own shamanic practitioner. Nonetheless, at times the roles of shaman and witch could overlap, even in Siberia. Among one of its most complex traditional societies, the Sakha, who seem to have intruded into the region from Turkestan, it was accepted that some shamans could turn bad and secretly attack the persons and livestock of their own neighbors. Such individuals were punished by native law. More important is the fact that shamans elsewhere in the world have commonly played the role of opponents of witchcraft. Most peoples who have believed in the witch have usually possessed practitioners credited with an expertise in detecting witches and operating countermagic against their spells. English-speakers have commonly called such figures "wise folk" or "cunning folk" within their own societies and "witch doctors" when referring to those of

foreign tribal groups. The Arctic zone of North America is replete with examples of traditional peoples, from the Tlingit of Alaska to the Inuit of Greenland, who both dreaded witchcraft and used shamans to combat it.

It may be suggested that a tighter definition of shamanism, of the sort that is proposed here, makes possible a more meaningful discussion of the different ways in which traditional (and modern) peoples interact with a spirit world. Likewise, the definition of the witch provided alongside it seems to contain the essence of what English-speaking scholars have, in practice, called witchcraft among peoples across the world. The notion that some societies have not needed to fear witchcraft because of alternative explanations for misfortune could explain at present puzzling phenomena in European and Near Eastern history, such as why there were apparently no witch trials in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland, or why ancient Egypt (which lacked the witch stereotype) became the prime inspiration for the later European tradition of ritual magic. The overlap between the Eurasian shamanic province and the area of the European witch trials could account for the fact that most of the victims in Iceland and Finland were, initially at least, male. This bucks the classic European trend, and makes more sense once it is appreciated that these places had a subshamanic tradition of working with spirits, in which practitioners were usually men. I believe personally that such a patterning can be more useful than either a loose employment of the term “shaman” for anybody (or at least anybody in a tribal society) who is expert in dealing with spirits, or a refusal to find any merit in a global perspective for witchcraft studies. I am also, however, only too aware that such exercises, in these areas, can resemble a person trying to lay a carpet, who finds that to get it neatly positioned in one part of the room seems automatically to cause it to come loose, and ruck up, in another.

Further Sources

Beyond works cited in footnotes, detailed source material to support the discussion above can be found in the following works:

- Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. London: Routledge, 1964.
- Hutton, Ronald. *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*. London: Hambledon and London, 2001.
- . “The Global Context of the Scottish Witch-Hunt.” In *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare, 16–32. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- . *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*. London: Hambledon and London, 2003, 87–136.

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