PART I

Introductions

CHAPTER 1

Shamanism and the issue of religion

On a blustery winter morning on the campus of a major American research university, I have the opportunity to sit with a unique individual. Thai is an undergraduate anthropology student with a second major in Southeast Asian studies. He is also a *txiv neeb*, what scholars of religion term a *shaman*. Thai is a member of Wisconsin's numerous and thriving Hmong community, a set of people who relocated to the United States from their homeland in Laos starting in the mid-1970s, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. In Laos, Hmong people lived in mountainous areas, and combined traditional hunting and gathering practices with small-scale agriculture and livestock husbandry. Much has changed in their rebuilding of lives in the United States, but some things remain the same. One of these, at least in Thai's view, is the crucial relation that exists between Hmong people and an unseen but highly influential spirit world. As a *txiv neeb*, Thai is a specialist in these relations, a traveler between the visible world of the everyday and a profoundly different and powerful unseen. Through a set of rituals that hold psychic and physical dangers for the practitioner, Thai travels that spirit world, pursuing, confronting, cajoling, and confounding spirit entities on behalf of his clients and community. Through these journeys, Thai gains information and strategies for curing woes facing his fellow Hmong: sickness, social strains, misfortune. He rescues or recovers fugitive souls that have distanced themselves from their bodies and counters the aggressions of foreign souls that have made incursions on his clients' health or wholeness. He is, in traditional views, a hero. Yet he is also deeply humble, viewing his work as an act of service for the good of others and for the placation of a spirit world at times impetuous and insistent. This study examines Thai's activities within the broader context of shamanism as it has been described and chronicled cross-culturally over the last several centuries. In this broader context, Thai's ritual acts, customs, and worldview can be seen as illustrative of a set of religious practices and understandings that have been important to people in various cultures from time immemorial.

Figure 1. Thai Vang Yang, a practicing Hmong *txiv neeb*, explains elements of Hmong shamanic cosmology in an American university classroom. Photo T. DuBois

By looking at past and present research on these phenomena, this volume seeks to provide a concise overview of a set of traditions of nearly worldwide distribution and deep human interest.

ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

In Thai's community, people speak of two competing religions: Christianity and shamanism. Many contemporary Hmong Americans belong to

various Christian denominations. Particularly prominent is the Hmong Missionary Alliance Church, which had already begun to attract followers when the Hmong were still in Laos. In North America, however, the pace of conversion to this and other forms of Christianity has increased exponentially. Christian Hmong retain some of the old customs of their culture, but they do not consult shamans. To do so, in their view, would be to violate a basic tenet of their new religion.

Although this dichotomy is clear and very real in Thai's life, scholars of religion have long debated whether shamanism as we find it in hunter-gatherer or subsistence agricultural communities can actually be called a "religion" per se, or, rather, should be regarded as merely a "component," "dimension," or "role" of certain religions. Within anthropological discourse, the term *religion* has been applied fairly haphazardly, so that its exact scholarly significance is sometimes unclear. In an overview of shamanism, for instance, Piers Vitebsky (2000: 55) writes: "Shamanism is probably the world's oldest form of religion. It is a name generally given to many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of religions around the world." Of course, two different meanings of the term *religion* are invoked in these two sentences, without explicit differentiation: one, a general human phenomenon ("religion") of which specific local varieties can be regarded as variant "forms"; the other, a specific term for local bodies of practices and ideas ("religions"). The former permits us to speak of "shamanism" as a world phenomenon; the latter, to speak of "shamanisms" as locally delimited and specific.

Scholars of religion, for their part, have focused tremendous energy on trying to define the nature and essence of "religion" itself and have found shamanic traditions particularly thorny to categorize. As Roberte Hamayon (2001: 4) summarizes the trend: "shamanism was perceived as a set of elementary components potentially compatible with all religions – if not inherent in the religious attitude as such – and implicitly devoid per se of systemic properties." Because of the decentralized nature of shamanic traditions, in other words, and their seeming lack of the trappings of more familiar Western religions – e.g., an institutional identity, a professional priesthood, a body of explicit dogmas and policies – shamanism did not seem to meet the definitional threshold of "religion." As both Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) and Hans Kippenberg (2002) have shown, such views have in practice more to do with the history and development of the academic study of "religion" than with the phenomena at the center of Thai's supernatural experiences. But in a volume such as this, devoted to providing an introduction, it is important to address such scholarly debates from the outset and define the nature and approach of the analysis to come.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss shamanism as a set of practices and understandings concerning the cosmos, spirits, and human needs. The shaman is a communally recognized professional who cultivates personal relations with helping spirits in order to achieve particular ends for the community: generally, healing, divination, and/or the control of fortune. By entering into trance states through communally recognized rituals, the shaman is able to communicate with spirits, travel the cosmos in search of errant or recalcitrant souls, and minister to the particular needs of clients. Shamanic traditions occur cross-culturally with great frequency in Eurasia and the Americas, particularly in small-scale hunter-gatherer societies as well as those practicing subsistence agriculture. Shamanic practices have also sometimes been incorporated into other religious traditions and, in the current era, have begun to be adapted for use among urbanized Westerners. While the precise relation of these roles and understandings to other aspects of "group-bound religions" (Smart 1973) is left to theorists to debate in other forums, I follow the practice of native scholars like Thai in regarding these shamanic phenomena as essentially religious in nature and often as the conceptual backbone of what a community defines as its religion. As such, it becomes possible to examine the commonalities that obtain between the practices of a Hmong *txiv neeb* like Thai, a Greenlandic *angakok*, a Sámi *noaide*, or a Daur Mongol *yadgan*, while still recognizing the essential distinctiveness of each. A discussion of this stance is presented below.

In his *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (2002), Hans G. Kippenberg traces the development of the field of religious studies as a secular science. As Kippenberg details, the "science" of religion grew largely out of eighteenth-century tracts on the "philosophy" of religion, which was itself an attempt to harmonize a centuries-old tradition of overtly Christian theology with the realities of cross-cultural analysis, state-based religious *Realpolitik*, and historical change. Early studies of the field enshrined Judeo-Christian (or, more specifically, *Protestant*) concepts of God, religious experience, and religious institutions as normative and fundamental, and skewed data or ideas from other religious traditions to fit and justify this largely unquestioned paradigm. Part of this tendency was conscious: scholars viewed Protestant Christianity as superior to other religious traditions, and they were sometimes intent on underscoring that belief in their scholarship. Part of the tendency, however, was unconscious as well: without explicit in-depth familiarity with other religions, it became easy to form definitions which excluded or marginalized important aspects of other belief systems if they did not find close parallels in Judeo-Christian traditions. Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin (1994) argue in their anthology

Amerindian Rebirth, for instance, that anthropologists working with Native American cultures never fully took stock of the fact that reincarnation is an important feature in many North American Native religions, despite the fact that Native informants were sometimes very clear in emphasizing its importance in their lives. Writes Mills in the introduction to the volume: "Reincarnation belief has been underestimated because it was not part of the Western world-view and hence was not expected; and also because Amerindian and Inuit belief on the subject is varied and complex" (1994: 3). Gananath Obeyesekere (2002: xix) points out, justifiably, that, had the dominant religious background of Western scholars been Buddhist or Hindu rather than Christian, this aspect of Native religiosity would no doubt have been accorded far more attention.

Amid the rampant philosophical shifts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the field of "religious studies" became dominated by a nostalgic discourse of "tradition" vs. "modernity," dehistoricized into a framework of a purportedly universal sense of the divine at the root of all religious experience. This latter notion found its seminal formulation in Robert Ranulph Marett's (1909) concept of "pre-animistic religion." As Marett wrote: a "basic feeling of awe drives a man, ere he can think or theorize upon it, into personal relations with the supernatural" (1909: 15). This awe experience then becomes refined and interpreted via social, cultural, and historical institutions into the framework of a religious understanding, with attendant rituals and duties associated. As Marett writes:

> Thus, from the vague utterance of the Omaha … onwards, through animism, to the dictum of the greatest living idealist philosopher … a single impulse may be discerned as active – the impulse, never satisfied in finite consciousness yet never abandoned, to bring together and grasp as one the *That* and the *What* of God. (1909: 28)

This underlying awe experience, Marett posited, could stand as the definitional basis of all religious expressions the world over.

As Kippenberg chronicles (2002: 125–7), Marett's theory garnered enthusiastic and nearly universal acceptance among scholars of religion in the early part of the twentieth century. It is especially noteworthy, from the perspective of this volume, that Marett made his argument on the basis of what were then termed "primitive" religions – i.e., the religious traditions of small-scale indigenous communities, even if in practice his definition worked to portray as natural and universal a specific Judeo-Christian notion of a single communicative God. Later scholars, such as Rudolf Otto (1950), would take up this purported universal and present it with an even clearer Christian bias. In his seminal work *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the*

Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational, Otto asserted that Marett's awe experience (labeled the "holy," or the "non-rational") is brought into relation with various rationalizing features in any given religious tradition. And (expectably), Christianity proved in Otto's view the ideal mix of awe and rational explanations:

> The degree in which both rational and non-rational elements are jointly presented, united in healthy and lovely harmony, affords a criterion to measure the relative rank of religions – and one, too, that is specifically religious. Applying this criterion, we find that Christianity, in this as in other respects, stands out in complete superiority over all its sister religions. The lucid edifice of its clear and pure conceptions, feelings, and experiences is built up on a foundation that goes far deeper than the rational. Yet the non-rational is only the basis, the setting, the woof in the fabric, ever preserving for Christianity its mystical depth, giving religion thereby the deep undertones and heavy shadows of mysticism, without letting it develop into a mere rank growth of mysticality. (1950: 142–3)

While such formulations enshrined Christianity as the pinnacle of all the world's various religious traditions, it presented the "primitive" religions discussed by Marett as inferior: mired in non-rationality, a "mere rank growth of mysticality." From this perspective, the beliefs at the foundation of shamanic interventions into the cosmos became theorized as defective, overly mysticized, or even as altogether outside of the province of religion itself. They were seen as secondary responses to life crises rather than primary expressions of religious insight, since by definition, the "primary" stuff of religion was the purported awe experience. Healing, divination, and the manipulation of luck were regarded as activities somehow below the proper gaze of religion, despite the fact that they are central to many ritual traditions the world over.

A further product of the Western bias evident in these scholarly trends was an insistence on positing the "religions" that respond to this experience of awe as unified systems. Since Western Christian denominations were explicitly demarcated by systematized doctrine, gatekeeping procedures, and provisions for treating internal dissention, scholars viewed these tendencies as fundamental to the very definition of *religion* itself. Thus, Émile Durkheim, in his important study *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915), defined religion as "a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things … which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (1915: 62). Without this systematized union, beliefs could be defined as "cults" or "groups of religious phenomena" (1915: 57), but not as *religion*. To qualify as a religion, such beliefs – and the people who hold them – had to organize themselves into

something resembling a Western "Church." Hamayon (2001: 4) notes the application of such criteria to shamanic traditions: "Scholars … failed to find in shamanism the institutional features held to characterize a religion as such (doctrine, clergy, sanctuaries etc.)." Such scholarly insistence on institutional features, of course, created a profound definitional hurdle, particularly in the case of small-scale, often largely egalitarian, communities, where the hierarchical and regimented framework posited for "authentic" religions was often foreign, and even distinctly repugnant. In such societies, religious rituals are often carried out within the home, and religious practitioners may be individuals, heads of households, elders, or specialists. Rituals vary in their execution, spiritual relations are private and unique, and small details of the cosmos may differ from practitioner to practitioner. Yet these traditions can easily carry the same significance in individuals' lives as those associated with large-scale, highly institutionalized religious denominations.

By the 1970s, scholars of religion had begun to sense the limitations of a theory of religion restricted to institutionalized awe-centered phenomena, while also usually retaining such assumptions as basic tenets of the field. As Timothy Fitzgerald (2000: 68–9) describes, the influential scholar Ninian Smart (1973) set out to modify the definitional framework of the field to encompass religious traditions where a putative awe experience did not appear central at all. Writing on the basis of E. E. Evans-Pritchard's classic ethnography *The Nuer* (1940), Smart described a set of religions which, rather than focus on awe, locate a sense of fulfillment (i.e., soteriology) on the basis of customary actions. Writes Smart: "Christianity is a religion, and it crosses the bounds of a number of societies; while the religion of the Nuer is essentially group-tied and functions as an abstraction from the total life of the Nuer" (1973: 15; quoted in Fitzgerald 2000: 69). Religion thus becomes, in Smart's analysis, not a doctrinally unified institutionally distinct entity, but rather elements of daily behavior, beliefs, or customs connected with day-to-day life, or responses to personal and/or communal crises, such as feud, disease, death, and misfortune. "Men behave and act religiously, and this is something that the study of religion picks out; just as economics picks out the economic behaviour of the people" (Fitzgerald 2000: 69; Smart 1973: 15).

From an ethnographic point of view, Smart's enlargement of the definitional framework of religion would seem sensible and justified. Yet quintessentially, it proposed a fundamental shift in the methodological assumptions of scholarship on religion. For if "religion" now becomes aspects of life, "behaviors," rather than a unified institution transcending time and society, then the assumed core experience of "awe," depicted by Marett as the

foundation of all religious expression, becomes decentered. "Religion" becomes a culture-bound component of daily, seasonal, or occasional praxis, rather than an institutionalization of an ineluctable meditation on a mysterious, transcultural, personal apprehension of God. It becomes the performance of religious behaviors, rather than their institutionalization into a church. Anthropological and sociological approaches thereafter largely adopted this empirical and functional viewpoint, leaving the issues of institutional unity and awe aside, while often retaining the Western notion of unity through terms like "system" or "complex." Illustrative of this shift is the definition which Clifford Geertz presents in his classic article "Religion as a Cultural System" ([1965] 1979). Geertz writes:

> *Religion* is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (1979–80)

The ethnographer's work becomes recognizing the "system" behind religious activities or ideas, which may or may not coincide with institutions designed to achieve centralized control. In a postmodern academic milieu of the late twentieth century, Geertz's confidence in the ability of an analyst to discover such a unified system may itself appear naive.

By the century's end, the field of religious studies appeared primed to interrogate fundamentally the assumptions that had received such unanimous acclaim at the outset of the twentieth century. Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) challenged the awe experience model as covert Christian theology, one which trivialized the religious experiences of individuals in more "group-tied" religions such as Hinduism or Japanese Shinto. Calling for the rejection of the term *religion* altogether, Fitzgerald declares:

> Working with the blurred yet ideologically loaded concept of "religion" and "religions" as a starting point can confuse and impoverish analysis, conceal fruitful connections that might otherwise be made, encourage the uncritical imposition of Judeo-Christian assumptions on non-western data, and generally maximize our chances of misunderstanding. (2000: 6)

His viewpoints were echoed by many other scholars in a spirited debate (see, for example, Dirks 1994; Jensen and Rothstein 2000; Gold 2003). Fitzgerald advocates replacing the blanket term *religion* with a trio of other terms: *soteriology* ("the sense of a personal quest for salvation located in a transcendent realm" 2000: 15), *ritual* (symbolic acts undertaken as expressions of religious belief), and *politics* (the interaction of religious activities and social formations). In Fitzgerald's framework, then, the customs and

understandings discussed in this volume would fall largely under the rubric of "ritual," while the personal views of shamans themselves regarding the spirits they interact with might well be construed as a variety of soteriology, which may (or may not) be ultimately equivalent to the sense of "awe" posited by Marett. Finally, the social roles of shamans within their communities, or in confrontation with colonial authorities or a changing world, as discussed in the later chapters of this study, would fall under the rubric of politics. By removing the reified and culturally biased term *religion*, Fitzgerald argues, such analysis avoids the potential for becoming enfolded into an underlying scholarly project of justifying – "naturalizing" – Judeo-Christian ideas of God and religion in the manner of ideology. In the coming chapters, then, I follow Fitzgerald's provocative recommendation by using wherever possible specific terms like *cosmology*, *role*, and *ritual*, while continuing to assert – in the manner of Smart – that small hunter-gatherer and subsistence agricultural communities often display a "religion" made up of specific, socially embedded responses to daily events and crises – the practical tasks of the shaman (among others) in general. Whether or not these specific beliefs and behaviors combine into a "unified system" is largely, as I hope the above discussion makes clear, a judgment of interpreters rather than a verifiable empirical fact. From the point of view of shamans like Thai, however, the various concepts and behaviors described in these pages do indeed constitute a unified and highly satisfying system of belief, one which Thai is quite comfortable describing as a religion.