AN INTRODUCTION TO SHAMANISM

Shamans are an integral part of communal religious traditions, professionals who make use of personal supernatural experiences, especially trance, as a resource for the wider community's physical and spiritual wellbeing. This Introduction surveys research on the topic of shamanism around the world, detailing the archaeology and earliest development of shamanic traditions as well as their scientific "discovery" in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonization in Siberia, the Americas, and Asia. It explores the beliefs and rituals typical of shamanic traditions, as well as the roles of shamans within their communities. It also surveys the variety of techniques used by shamans cross-culturally, including music, entheogens, material culture, and verbal performance. The final chapters examine attempts to suppress or eradicate shamanic traditions, the revitalization of shamanism in postcolonial situations, and the development of new forms of shamanism within new cultural and social contexts.

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Cover. Woman transforming, detail from mural *Freedom*, by Lon Michels (www.lonmichelsart.com), used with the artist's permission. Photo courtesy John Hunter.

Preface

The following study surveys current understandings and research on the topic of shamanism. An initial set of three chapters introduces the "discovery" of shamanism in Western scholarship during a period of intense interaction between indigenous cultures around the world and forces of Western exploration, expansion, and colonization. The set of traditions associated with practitioners designated by the Evenki (Tungus) term *shaman* became generalized in scholarly formulations into an overall norm, one which more recent scholars have also sought to encounter in ancient textual as well as archaeological sources. The antiquity and seeming uniformity of the traditions have been explained through both psychological and historical theories and are a source of enduring interest for scholarly as well as generalist audiences.

A second set of three chapters examines the soteriology and rituals typical of shamanic traditions, as well as the roles of shamans within their communities. The importance of particular understandings of the cosmos and the experience of the shamanic profession as a calling are discussed in detail, with an emphasis on the interaction of personal religious experience and communal needs and expectations. In this context, shamans can be regarded as integral parts of communal religious traditions, professionals who make use of personal supernatural experiences as a resource for the wider community's negotiation of physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Two further chapters survey current research focusing on the ways in which shamanic traditions and techniques can be understood cognitively. Scholars have sought to uncover the mechanisms in the brain through which shamanic trance states are effected, managed, and interpreted. Other scholars working within the area of the ethnography of healing have explored the ways in which shamanic therapeutic acts can prove effective, not only for patients, but also for the broader community as well as for the shaman personally.

A further set of three chapters explores some of the arsenal of performative techniques used by shamans cross-culturally within their professional

activities. Music frequently plays a key role in shamanic rituals, as do entheogens – psychoactive substances used for religious purposes. Material culture helps express and effectuate shamanic relations, both for shamans and for their communities. Verbal lore – narratives or incantations performed by shamans, accounts of shamanic experiences, or narratives of primordial or historical shamans – provides a rich pool of knowledge regarding the spirit world and the workings of the shaman within it.

A final set of three chapters examines shamanic traditions today. The same era of Western expansion that led to the scholarly identification of shamanism as a religious phenomenon also led to an intensification of efforts to eradicate or replace it, often in favor of new religious traditions introduced by colonial forces. Communities at times resisted such efforts, retaining at least elements of prior shamanic beliefs even in contexts of profound religious change. Occasionally, communities have revitalized prior shamanic traditions, seeing them as a key for cultural survival and the recovery of lost social cohesiveness. And finally, individuals have attempted to recreate or even adopt shamanic traditions personally on the basis of scholarly information as well as extant evidence regarding the nature or workings of shamanic activities in general. These neoshamanic movements can be regarded in part as a product of a blurring of the conceptual boundaries that once separated Western scholars and their readers from the shamanic communities they sought to understand.

I owe thanks to many for help and encouragement in this project. My colleagues in religious studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison deserve thanks first of all for having encouraged and supported my teaching in this area. Special thanks in this connection go to Charles L. Cohen and Quitman Phillips, past and present directors of the university's academic program in religious studies. They helped make it possible for me to develop and test a framework for conveying past and current research on shamanism to students with little previous knowledge of the subject. Colleagues in both the university's folklore studies program and Department of Scandinavian Studies were also instrumental in the project, particularly James P. Leary, Ruth Olson, Susan Brantly, and Scott Mellor. My students, too, deserve tremendous thanks, both for their enthusiasm for the topic and for their various insights over the years. Often students became important informants as well as valuable critics of my writing and presentations. In the wider field, I thank especially Thai Vang Yang, Peter Nause, Anna-Leena Siikala, Juha Pentikäinen, Neil Price, Frank Korom, and Timothy F. Tangherlini.

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