

Why is Spiritualism a shamanism?

And what does Foucault have to do
with it?

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Alternative title...

How does a lawyer end up as a
Spiritualist medium?

(Making sense of a mid-life crisis...)

What are we going to do tonight?

- The Evenki (Tungus) peoples of Siberia & origins of the word 'shaman'
- Early Russian & North American descriptions of shamans – witchdoctors, magicians, sorcerers, etc.
- Mircea Eliade – a cross-cultural model of shamanism
- Shamanism or shamanisms?
- What is Spiritualism?
- Identifying a common apprenticeship
- Why does Spiritualism still feel a bit dodgy?

Shaman: a recent definition

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.

Thomas A. DuBois
'An Introduction to Shamanism' (2009)

The Evenki (Tungus)

- The Evenki are a series of Siberian clans
- Nomadic, reindeer-herding
- Widespread popular beliefs in clan spirits, of animals as well as the dead
- Various cosmologies & creation myths – often upper and lower worlds (upper and lower in relation to the world we live in)
- It is possible for both spirits and the embodied to be active in the other worlds from the ones they inhabit

Location



The Evenki Šamān (1)

- Interacting with spirits on a regular basis is reserved to specialists called shamans – ‘knowers’ or ‘those who know’
- Also herbalists, healers, carriers of clan folklore
- Long apprenticeships to existing shamans
- Ceremonies for recognition of shamans
- Special clothing & tents, other equipment such as drums, rattles
- Communication involves journeying and incarnation

The Evenki Šamān (2)

- Usually (not always) one practising shaman per clan
- Spirit helpers (familiar) – spirits of the dead (including predecessor shamans) and animals
- Controller of spirits or controlled by spirits?
- Protector of the clan – aggressor against other clans
- ‘Bad’ shamans – selfish use of powers
- Fundamental idea – continuing relationship with those (human and animal) who once inhabited this world & active (safe) communication as a learned skill

Siberian Šamān



and in colour...



Chuonnasuan

1927-2000

Last shaman of the Oroqen

(Photo Richard Noll 1994)

Russia & North America

- Early 20th-century Russian ethnographers – esp. Sergei Shirokogoroff
- North American explorers' accounts of similar practitioners from 18th-century onwards – esp. in sub-Arctic cultures.
- Examples in Samuel Hearne's 'A Journey to the Northern Ocean' published in 1795
- Long-standing US & Canadian scholarly history of discussion of the shaman/medicine man/witchdoctor/wise man(woman)/medium etc.

Cherokee 'Medicine Man'



Knud Rasmussen

- Danish explorer
- Told by an Iglulik shaman:

‘All the creatures that we have to kill to eat, all those that we have to strike down and destroy to make clothes for ourselves, have souls, like we have, souls that do not perish with the body and which must therefore be propitiated lest they should avenge themselves on us...’

(Harvey, 146)

Mircea Eliade & 'Shamanism'

- Mircea Eliade, University of Chicago – attempted a cross-cultural synthesis shamanisms, so as to develop a model of 'shamanism'
- First serious attempt to define a clear category & bring some order to scholarly discussion
- Emphasised 'journeying' or 'travelling' to the spirit worlds; downplayed incarnation of spirits (possessory aspects of shamanisms)
- Proposed that most shamanic traditions had deteriorated from worship of a 'high god'

Literature

- Mircea Eliade: 'Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy' (1964)
- Ioan Lewis: 'Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession' (1971, 1989, 2003)
- Piers Vitebsky: 'The Shaman' (1995)
- Merete Demant Jakobsen: 'Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing' (1999)
- Ronald Hutton: 'Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination' (2001)
- David Gordon Wilson: 'Redefining Shamanisms: Spiritualist Mediums and other Traditional Shamans as Apprenticeship Outcomes' (2013)

Vitebsky: the 'spirit journey'

- ... there are astonishing similarities, which are not easy to explain, between shamanic ideas and practices as far apart as the Arctic, Amazonia and Borneo, even though these societies have probably never had any contact with each other. Many current interpretations emphasize the healing side of shamanism, but this is only one aspect of the shaman's work. Among other things, shamanism is a hunter's religion, concerned with the necessity of taking life in order to live oneself.

(1995: 11)

Continuing Debates

- Shamanism or shamanisms?
- Is shamanism different from traditions of mediumship and/or spirit possession?
- Spirits, ancestors, community – ongoing relationships
- Urban or rural? South Korea, Japan & Vietnam
- Trance & awareness
- Spiritualism as the main form of mediumship in Anglo-American culture – why? Is it a shamanism?
- Roman Catholicism – traditions of mysticism & exorcism
- Africa – possessed spirit mediums or shamans?
- Pentecostal Christianity

CHRISTOPHER M. MOREMAN, EDITOR

THE SPIRITUALIST MOVEMENT

*Speaking with the Dead in America
and around the World*



VOLUME 1

American Origins and Global Proliferation

Spiritualism

- A movement whose adherents describe themselves as pursuing a science/philosophy but which is organised in much the same way as a religion
- A movement that coheres around the practice of mediumship
- In Spiritualism, according to its adherents, mediumship is used to demonstrate personal survival beyond death, to heal, to give 'channelled' philosophy
- Demonstrations of mediumship are given in Spiritualist churches, or privately with mediums

A personal journey... from here...



to here...



Case Study: Portobello, Edinburgh



Bath Street, Portobello



Portobello Spiritualist Church



Portobello Spiritualist Church



What goes on here?

- A church, with a minister and regular public services
- The development circle
- Duration, stages of development
- Kinds of skills learned
- Are mediums possessed or entranced?

Definition I: mediumship & shamanism(s)

Shamanism is an academic category, developed in order to draw together a wide range of traditions recognized as being shamanic in character.

The category shamanism therefore comprises particular shamanisms. Shamanisms are culturally contextualized apprenticeship outcomes in the development and management of personal awareness so as to engage with additional realities.

Definition II: apprenticeship

The shamanic apprenticeship comprises a process of learning achieved by communicating and developing relationships with spirit guides or helpers, facilitated by an existing practitioner, who usually also undertakes responsibility for passing on a body of accumulated traditional knowledge.

Definition III: the three stages

The shamanic apprenticeship typically proceeds from an initial uncontrolled (often possessory and/or unwelcome) psychic experience or phase to a point where the apprentice is granted communal recognition as having the ability to manage his awareness so that he is no longer personally at risk from uncontrolled spiritual forces, and is able to use his spiritual skills to communicate, at will, in ways that are recognized as being beneficial to other members of the community.

Why is Spiritualism (still) 'dodgy'?

- Excluded by scientific discourse as too religious?
 - Society for Psychical Research
- Excluded by religious discourse as too superstitious, even potentially evil?
 - Quaker-Spiritualist network
- Excluded by magical discourses as too Christian?
 - Geoffrey Hodson: *Fairies at Work and Play*
- What does Foucault have to do with it?
 - The power of words...

Suggested links

Teachings of Spiritualism – personal blog:
teachingsofspiritualism.wordpress.com

Also a Facebook page: Teachings of Spiritualism

www.portobellosc.org.uk (Portobello Church)

www.snu.org.uk (Spiritualists' National Union)

www.nsac.org (Nat. Spiritualist Assn. of Churches)

www.greaterworld.com (Christian Spiritualism)

www.whiteagle.org