

SHAMANISM AND SPIRIT POSSESSION - THE DEFINITION PROBLEM*

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It does not take long to discover that the term “shamanism” is used in many different ways, both in popular and scientific publications. Unfortunately, this is to be expected, as it is a reflection of the general confusion in the literature regarding what is, and is not, considered to be shamanism. In the following remarks I can only briefly touch on a few of the many interesting aspects of shamanism and problems that arise in trying to define this phenomenon. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this essay will help in increasing awareness of some of the issues involved.¹

Defining words is certainly one of the most thankless tasks in science. A few always will disagree or find the definition in some way wanting. My personal inclination is to agree with Popper (Magee 1973:49; cf. also Turner 1964:324) that in many cases debates over the meanings of terms stand in the way of, rather than assist, the growth of science. Indeed, numerous words have proven effective in spite of their ambiguity (e.g. “energy”). However, on some occasions clarification of a term appears both of considerable value in advancing development in theory and necessary in avoiding confusion among scholars working in the same, or similar, fields. Some go so far as to believe that science *is* the art of defining terms.

Whatever the case may be, clearly defined terms obviously allow improved communication and comparability. Although I will not deal in detail with formal rules of definition here - indeed for practical reasons I will even later fail to follow these rules to the letter - some points should be mentioned. If possible, to avoid confusion, a new definition should not be too dissimilar to one already attributed to the term in popular and scientific literature. It should be applied with consistency and precision to the word so that others can decide if the phenomenon they are examining should be designated by the term. The definition ideally should contain unambiguous words requiring no further explication and contain all, and only, those elements considered to be essential to the phenomenon. The term should not be defined so precisely that it applies only to the specific context within which it originates, since then it cannot be applied to similar phenomena elsewhere.

Often in definitions no attempt is made to arrive at the true essence of the phenomenon being defined, but rather to establish a convention governing the use of signs (Opp 1970:96). With some terms the debate is simply concerned with what convention should be accepted, the original use of the term or essence of the phenomenon

being ignored. Indeed there is difficulty in ever arriving at the essence of a phenomenon, especially if this involves historical interpretation and associating the essence with the term being defined. It is precisely this issue that lies at the root of the problem in defining shamanism, as we shall see.

In some dictionaries and anthropological textbooks, the term “shaman” is defined so generally that no elements differentiate it from words referring to many other religious practitioners. For example in *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (Stein 1973:1310) “shaman” is defined as “a medicine man; one acting as both priest and doctor, who works with the supernatural.”² Keesing (1958:431) in a general anthropology textbook, defines “shaman” as “an individual religious expert.” The term is used in these, and numerous other sources (e.g. Jacobs 1964:64; Gove 1971:2086) in such a general and vague way that it serves little scientific purpose.

Although by no means the first to deal directly with the problem of defining shamanism, it is to the lasting credit of Eliade (1964) that in his monumental work on shamanism, he organized and summarized disparate sources of information on shamanistic phenomena throughout the world and divorced the use of the word “shaman” from the very general connotation it had received in popular works. Eliade (1964:5) came perhaps closest to a statement of what he considers the minimal elements necessary in a definition of “shaman” when he stated “the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld.” It is this definition, or one similar in form, which has come to be used by numerous scholars, and this may be largely attributed to the influence of Eliade (see Vajda 1964; Dumont and Pocock 1959; Hoffman 1967:108).

However, when we examine other definitions which have appeared in anthropological works, we frequently encounter quite different viewpoints. In *Notes and Queries in Anthropology* (1951:181), a basic fieldwork manual in anthropology, we find this definition: “The condition of possession is typical of the medicine men of the Siberian arctic region, who are called shamans. The term has been applied generally for spirit possession of priests, and the manifestations have come to be called shamanism.” Firth(1964:638), in *A Dictionary of Social Sciences* states: “The most general usage of shaman denotes a specialist in healing, divination and allied social functions, allegedly by techniques of spirit possession and spirit control.” In a recent book on shamanism and spirit possession, Lewis (1971:51) defines a shaman as “a person of either sex who has mastered spirits and who can at will introduce them into his own body.” Numerous other authors could be cited using similar definitions (Winick 1956:481; Rahmann 1959: 751; Beattie and Middleton 1969:xvii). Since Eliade (1964:499) explicitly rules out spirit possession as an essential element in the definition of “shaman,” why is there this discrepancy?

The term “shaman” originated among the Tungus, and it was after studying shamanism and comparing it with similar phenomena in North Asia that Eliade (and others before him, e.g. Oesterreich 1921:305-9) came to the conclusion that spirit possession does not characterize true shamanism. However, in his classic study of

shamanism among the Tungus, Shirokogoroff (1935:269) gave a quite explicit definition of the word ‘shaman:’ “In all Tungus languages this term refers to persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people, who suffer from the spirits ...” He went on (Shirokogoroff 1935:271-274) to list formal characteristics of Tungus shamanism, none of which mention the shaman's ability to undertake a soul journey. Again, why does the discrepancy between this definition and Eliade's exist?

This is primarily due to Eliade's “historical” interpretation which is supposed to show that the soul journey aspect in prior times was of primary importance among the Tungus and spirit possession was a later development. But here we begin to see problems in using “historical” interpretations as a basis for arriving at the true essence of a phenomenon, let alone for the association of this essence with a particular word. For this is an enterprise fraught with difficulties, as any linguist will verify, even assuming written sources are available. The situation is, in brief, that there is a Tungus word, its ultimate origin and meaning uncertain, associated with a Tungus phenomenon, its ultimate origin and original form uncertain.

In his interpretation Eliade appears to have used two uncertainties to make a certainty: that the term “shaman” was associated with a distinctive complex involving soul journey. It must be stressed here that this does not mean that his interpretation is wrong, although the evidence suggests that it is just as likely the word “shaman” was associated with spirit possession as it is that it was associated with soul journey (see Shirokogoroff 1935:268-271; cf. Eliade 1964:495-496). It does mean that the factual evidence supporting the association of soul journey divorced from spirit possession with the term “shaman” is as yet unconvincing.

Without going into detail concerning Eliade's general approach to the study of religious phenomena, his interpretation of shamanism appears to have been influenced by his belief that the concept of a supreme heavenly deity existed in prior times among tribes in Asia, hence, necessitating a soul journey to the sky and later giving way to the concept of more mundane deities which came down to man, e.g. in spirit possession (Eliade 1964:505-506). It would follow logically from this that soul journey preceded spirit possession, and herein lays the reason for the sub-title of his work *Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. But the evidence for the starting point of such reasoning, namely the archaic religious ideology centered on faith in a supreme heavenly being, is certainly not more than an hypothesis based upon an interpretation of the few facts available to us about the beliefs of prehistoric man (see also Lewis 1971:50). It is interesting to note that Eliade bases his inferences about chronological age at least partly on such questionable criteria as quantity and universality, e.g. the more cultures found throughout the world possessing a trait, the older it must be.

Numerous scholars have pointed out that the influence of Western culture with its supreme deity concept has influenced tribes prior to, or during, the periods in which they were observed by Westerners even in cases where direct contact was failing. For this

reason, among others, it seems extremely difficult to state with any certainty what tribal beliefs actually were in prehistoric times.³

In view of the above, if a distinct complex involving soul journey--but not spirit possession--existed in Asia (and some authors doubt this, see Lewis 1971:50-51; Findeisen 1960:213), it would seem unfortunate that the word "shamanism" was used to denote it.⁴ In order to avoid further confusion in defining the term, we may wonder why the two phenomena cannot be united in a single definition. One could then speak of a "soul journey shamanism" and a "possession shamanism" (see Haekel 1971:131). Furthermore, although soul journey was considered secondary, it did occur along with possession among the Tungus (Eliade 1964:500), and does so among many other tribes also (Lewis 1971:51). Indeed, several scholars have written in such a way that the two aspects can be subsumed in one definition (e.g. Stiglmayr 1957:163; Hirschberg 1965:384; Haekel 1971:131).

It might be best at this point to pose a possible definition of the word "shaman" and then specify precisely how this definition was developed. Such a process will shed light on some of the problems involved in defining the term.

A shaman is a person who at will can enter into a non-ordinary psychic state (in which he either has his soul undertake a journey to the spirit world or he becomes possessed by a spirit) in order to make contact with the spirit world on behalf of members of his community.

The neutral term "person" is used to indicate that a shaman may be of either sex. The phrase "at will" serves to differentiate a shaman from a simple medium or a person who may become possessed in various situations, but who does not have the ability to do this whenever he so desires or who requires the assistance of others in order to become possessed. This is basically what Shirokogoroff (1935:271) means when he speaks of the shaman as a "master of spirits." He/she voluntarily is able to become possessed (cf. Lewis 1971:51) or undertake a soul journey. Hultkrantz (1973) feels that it should be emphasized in a definition that the shaman attains ecstasy with the help of a guardian spirit. Certainly so far as I am aware this is always the case, but it does not appear essential to the definition because if a person attained ecstasy without the help of a guardian spirit and fulfilled other aspects of the definition, in my eyes at least, he would still logically have to be considered a shaman.

Many shamanism experts will be annoyed at the fact that the word "ecstasy" does not appear in the definition, because for them that is precisely what the shaman is - an ecstatic *par excellence*. I personally would find this satisfactory were it not for the ambiguity of the term. Ecstasy implies in the minds of many "rapturous delight" or "an overpowering emotion" (Stein 1973:452). Eliade himself seems to oscillate between applying the term generally to dreams and trances (Eliade 1964:13) and as denoting exclusively the aspect of soul journey and not possession (Eliade 1961:155; see also Paulson 1964:137).

In numerous cases that I have observed the shaman could hardly be said to be in “rapturous delight” although certainly in a highly emotional state. Furthermore there apparently are shamans who exhibit few emotions while in a trance (Harper 1957). Thus I have decided to use the more neutral phrase “non-ordinary psychic state,” for what we are really trying to establish is that the shaman is in an unusual psychic state which indicates to members of his society that he is no longer operating in the ordinary consciousness of day-to-day living.⁵

The placing of the soul journey and possession aspects within the definition may not be exactly according to formal definition rules, but it is practically necessary to ensure that no ambiguity is involved in exactly what are the essential events taking place in the non-ordinary psychic state as it relates to shamanism. This is for me one of the most difficult areas of the definition, because it follows that a person who in a non-ordinary psychic state simply speaks to the spirits is not to be defined as a shaman. I draw this distinction, not because I do not see the merits involved in designating such people as shamans, but because it would violate the use of the term by numerous scholars and be too dissimilar to its use in the scientific literature.

The phrase “spirit world” is used as a neutral term because the soul journey may involve either ascension to the heavens, descent to the underworld or a “horizontal” voyage to spirits living in our own world.

“Possession” is a term which, on its own, is ambiguous because, aside from voluntary spirit possession, it may refer to malevolent spirits intruding into a person's body and causing illness. Clements (1932:189) has, however, made a clear distinction between spirit possession and spirit intrusion in which only the latter term refers to malevolent possession (cf. Walker 1972:3; Lewis 1971:54). In any event, within the context of the definition I think that no serious ambiguity arises.

The phrase “to make contact with” is employed because of its neutrality with regard to the purpose of the shaman's soul journey or possession. Normally, however, this is to create rapport with the spirits (Nioradze 1925:90).

Finally the social aspect of shamanism has been included because it seems an essential aspect of what we mean when we refer to shamanism, and it has also been stressed by Shirokogoroff (1935:273) and numerous other scholars (e.g. Stiglmayr 1957:163; Hultkrantz 1973).

In reviewing points raised previously about defining a phenomenon and applying these to the definition I have given, it holds up fairly well. It does not appear to include redundant elements or elements unessential to the phenomenon yet does include those without which a person could not be considered a shaman. For example, if a person fulfilled all aspects except the social one, I would not consider him a shaman, because the shaman is most definitely a social functionary. The definition does not radically depart from previous definitions and has the advantage of incorporating two opposing viewpoints, thereby avoiding the confusion arising if only one of these was found to be

acceptable. It is precise enough to be of use in comparative studies, and corresponds to the original use of the term among the Tungus. Above all it would seem to pass the crucial test of being able to aid a person in his decision as to whether or not the phenomenon he is studying should be labeled as shamanistic.

The definition is functionally oriented and as such is opposed to a definition involving elements of a distinctive complex, e.g. a formal initiation, particular attire and instruments, or the mythology concerning a first shaman, such as some authors (e.g. Vajda 1964) would like to see in reference to the soul journey complex of Siberia. Although it would undoubtedly be of considerable value to establish such a complex, as it would provide scholars with a model for examining other material, the reasons for not including such elements in the proposed definition should be obvious in view of the arguments and the definition guidelines stated above.

The alternative to a definition similar, if not the same, as the one outlined above, is a continuation of opposing schools of thought with resulting confusion for those not well versed in the issues involved. Although the definition I have presented is only one possible way of dealing with this complex definition problem, its acceptance hopefully would shift attention away from arguments concerning generalities, so that energies may be more fruitfully employed in a closer examination and analysis of the quite substantive differences that occur within what we have come to call shamanism.

**This version has been slightly revised to correct errors made during the copyediting of the original manuscript that the author was unable to check prior to publication.*

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for support received during the period in which this paper was written. Many of the ideas presented in this paper evolved during stimulating conversations with John Hitchcock, Andras Höfer, Ake Hultkrantz, and Engelbert Stiglmayr. I would like to express my appreciation to these scholars for sharing their opinions with me. However, it should be stressed that they do not all agree with the conclusions set forth here.
2. Some dictionaries (e.g. Stein 1973:1310) define shamanism as a religion of northern Asia. Such a view is certainly wrong, at least if one accepts the usual definition of religion (e.g. Malefijit 1968:12). Shamanism is only a part of religion, as there are always some religious activities in which the shaman does not play a role, religious beliefs unassociated with shamanism, other religious practitioners, etc. For further remarks in this regard see Shirokogoroff (1935: 276; cf. Reinhard 1976).
3. Two further reasons for questioning the evidence even from recent times regarding the number of cultures with beliefs in a supreme deity relate to problems of elicitation, translation and interpretation of native categories by Westerners and the so-called

Galton's problem, where the general difficulty with regard to the independence of different cultures is raised, aside from Western influences (Pelto 1970:296-299).

4. It should be noted here that Eliade has replied to those who criticized him for denying that possession is an element of shamanism. However, rather than re-examining the relationship of the word "shaman" with the phenomena of soul journey and possession as found among the Tungus, he chose instead to argue the case largely on the basis that soul journey must have occurred prior to possession (Eliade 1961:155; cf. Eliade 1964:507, n.34). Presumably he felt it would add weight to his argument that soul journey also appeared prior to possession among the Tungus, although it is at least possible that the soul journey complex could have been "borrowed" from other tribes after possession or, for that matter, that the combination of soul journey and possession could have been borrowed in whole (viz. Shirokogoroff 1935: 276-287; cf., however, Eliade 1964:498-502).

To elaborate Eliade's arguments and reasons why I find them unpersuasive would require considerably expanding the present essay without contributing to the issues being raised here. For even if his arguments were convincing regarding both soul journey as being prior to possession in general and its being prior to possession among the Tungus, they still would have little to do with the problem of the appropriateness of applying the term "shamanism" to either of these phenomena. He also argues (Eliade 1961:155) that possession seems to be a secondary phenomenon in regions where "shamanism" (read "soul journey complex") occurs; another argument of little importance if the term "shaman" was found primarily associated with possession among the Tungus. To summarize: the arguments for a distinctive soul journey complex in Asia are at times persuasive; the arguments that the term "shamanism" should be applied to this complex are not.

5. It became clear that the word "trance" was not a satisfactory term in some cases to denote the state that some shamans are in at the time they are possessed or have their souls undertake a journey to the spirit world. "Trance" is frequently defined as a "half-conscious state" (Stein 1973:1503), while what we are really trying to establish is that the shaman is in a non-ordinary psychic state, which in some cases means not a loss of consciousness but rather an altered state of consciousness. (The problem of faking is not of significance here, because the definition arises out of what the shaman says he does and acceptance of this by members of his society rather than what might in reality be taking place). Therefore, I have used the phrase "non-ordinary psychic state" in place of "trance." Any more specific phrase or term would seem to present difficulties for the definition, and in any event the phrase is more precisely delineated by the remainder of the sentence.

One possible solution to this problem might be to delete the phrase "non-ordinary psychic state" entirely. It might be viewed as being redundant, for spirit possession and soul journey would seem to automatically imply an unusual psychic state. However, it appears necessary to retain it, or some similar phrase, in the definition, because, even if people existed who believed a person's soul could journey while he remained in a

perfectly normal state - and he otherwise fulfilled requirements of the definition - it would still be difficult to consider such a person a shaman. This would neither conform to definitions of shamanism found in major works in the field nor conform to shamanism among the Tungus. "Shamanism" appears to be clearly associated with a non-ordinary psychic state, and this should, therefore, be stated in some way in the definition.

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