

Shamanism and Divination

Background notes for January 20 and 23, 2017

1. Animism

Human beings live in a harsh and hostile world. To be sure, we do not experience it that way today, but that is only because of the astonishing level of prosperity generated by industrialism and modern science. We have a rather good idea about about nature works, and our apparent mastery over natural forces is accelerating—not only growing, but growing faster.

It was not always that way. Only 200 years ago—1820— 94% of people lived on less than \$2 a day, defined as “absolute poverty”. We didn’t know about germs. There was no penicillin. In the 1700s, it is estimated that the death rate for women giving birth, every time she gave birth, was between 1% and 1.5%. In order to have two adult children, a woman had to endure six to eight pregnancies. And perhaps half of those babies would not make it to adulthood. Over a lifetime of going through 4 to 8 pregnancies, it is estimated that 3 or 4 out of 100 women died.

Long before we understood the law of gravity, or could consistently manipulate chemicals and predict how they would work, we needed to control our environment. We didn’t know about barometric pressure, and that such and such a configuration of phenomena meant a storm was coming, but we needed to protect ourselves from disease, bad weather, social chaos, and ensure a productive hunt or harvest.

Our distant ancestors didn’t know about scientific laws, or the forces of nature, but they recognize that the world seemed to be alive. Environmentalists complain that we are using the world as a dead thing, as an object rather than a living thing with which we have relationships. But that is the price of **science—it kills nature, and thereby masters it.**

But ancient humans *did* see the world as alive. It was full of *spirits*—sun, moon, stars; animals, especially those that were important to the lives of a particular community; trees, flowers, water, wind. These natural entities were alive. *How did they know?*

Today we call this understanding of the cosmos, the world, the forces of nature, **animism**. Animism says that all things are full of life—let’s call it life-force—energy and power. Just think of animals, but recognize that this life-force is in everything. So we can say that all natural phenomena, anything that changes—is full of soul, or spirit. And the solution to success and well-being—controlling the weather, finding a herd to hunt, healing a disease—is to figure out of each soul works and inducing it to do your bidding.

Many of the northern indigenous Americans will talk to a bear as they were about to kill it. ““I am thankful that I found you and sorry that I am obliged to kill you,” is one prayer documented. The killer will promise the spirit of the beast a sacrifice of maple sugar or berries. They will ask the bear not to take revenge: ‘Do not leave an evil thought against us because we have killed thee. Thou hast intelligence, thou seest that our children are suffering from hunger. They love thee and wish thee to enter into their bodies. Is it not a glorious thing for thee to be eaten by the children of captains’.” In summary, the bear is seen as another person, who can understand the sacrifice it must make.

But these “souls” are mysterious, hidden. We see the results—say when we watch two bucks attack each other for the chance to mate with a doe in heat. But without the aid of scientific

knowledge, we wouldn't understand why the bucks did it. So we'd say, "their souls or spirits made them do it."

2. The Shaman

Therefore, it takes a special person with special knowledge to deal with these souls. In ancient cultures, this person was a **shaman** [pronounce either *shah*-man or *shay*-man]. This word is derived from terminology used among tribes that existed in central and northern Asia, especially what we now call Siberia. Since in prehistoric times some of these peoples made their way to the Americas, the spiritual leaders of indigenous Americans brought with them the practices and skills of these Siberian shamans.

The spirits the shaman is attempting to contact and influence in another realm. The shaman must enter this realm and interact with the spirits. He must communicate the needs and problems of his community to the spirits—maybe a child is deathly ill—and persuade the spirit to give relief or aid.

But this spiritual realm is very difficult to get to. We live in a mundane world of sensation, physical action. I'm hungry, I eat. I feel a discomfort at the bottom of my torso, and I relieve it by urinating or defecating.

To enter this spiritual realm, the would-be shaman had to first die to his ordinary physical awareness. He might have felt what we would call depressed. The world no longer satisfied him. He experienced mental or psychological discomfort, an unexplainable unhappiness. He might have gone through a complete physical and spiritual collapse. In some cases, he appeared completely insane—feed on the bark of trees, or cut himself. Somewhere in his anguish, he received a new sense of the meaning of life. Sometimes it was spontaneous. But often it had to be generated. The man would go away from the community for solitude and fasting.

3. Sensory deprivation, ecstasy and the séance

This technique of seeking a spiritual realm through solitude and self-denial is called **sensory deprivation**. For a modern version of sensory deprivation, and of its apparent effects, see the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeqmKwsvM58>.

The shaman might have made use of **hallucinogenic substances** or techniques: psychoactive drugs, drumming, dancing and/or chanting. Eventually the ordinary world fell away, and he entered an alternative reality, a realm where he experienced and interacted with these souls or spirits existed. This state is **ecstasy**: to stand outside of one's mental and physical boundaries.

The shaman then was someone who has experienced this ecstasy, and was now capable of recreating it. He could heal and help others to access spiritual power, because he himself had been healed. In other words, his power was **charismatic**: it was the result of a gift, of gaining personal mastery over the spiritual powers of the world. It was not simply a matter of routine, or getting a training in some skill—nursing, welding, truck driving, or even teaching. (Most religious authority today is *routinized*: for example, a Roman Catholic priest does not need to prove he has magical power in order to turn the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. He does it because, by the sacrament of "holy orders," he is *authorized* to do it.)

In this altered state, he would act out, or mime entering the spirit realm. Among some Siberian expressions, the shaman actually would climb a post or tree set up in the middle of the tent, to act out ascending to the spirit realm. This event is the **séance**.

In the *séance*, he would be possessed by a spirit, or feel as if he was in direct contact with a spirit. He needed to find out why the spirits were angry—usually manifested by some failure of nature. Perhaps a disease was destroying the animal population that the tribe needed for food. Or a child was sick. Some of these spirits were destructive: by definition demons. The shaman would then bring back an explanation of the sacrifices required to “feed” the demon responsible, and save the tribe from the disease or pathology afflicting the community.

He would then return with knowledge (say, a herd to be hunted) or the ability to carry out the necessary healing. The shaman was a person of personal spiritual power (*charisma*), who had learned to make use of those powers and energies—to contact the spirits that made things happen to people—and then either persuade or manipulate the spirits to solve whatever problems the people faced.

You will watch a two-part video in which a shaman leads his community in a life-transforming, life-creative experience: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPXW0fEeujM>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoKT7OY5b2g> **You will answer the question for “Essay #1” listed on the syllabus.**

4. Divination and oracles

Divination is an ancient technique for gaining access to knowledge beyond the range of normal human awareness. It’s most basic meaning is to determine the will of the gods. Primitive human beings were simply trying to survive. But as society became more prosperous, people had more “free time,” the range of possible decisions became wider. This was especially true for leaders: going to battle was an especially important issue for the Romans. A general was expected to consult a flight of birds—sometimes by opening up a cage—to determine the advisability of fighting. Other modes of divination included killing an animal and examining certain body parts, especially the liver.

The Greeks used primarily oracles, which required some form of spirit possession. The best known example was the oracle at Delphi, which lasted for a 1000 years. A priestess would sit on a stool, go into a trance, and provide answers to questions. Based on recent archaeological research, the trance was probably brought on by ethylene gas, coming out of a hole in the rocks, which has psychoactive properties.

So an **oracle** is a message that claims to give knowledge about or insight into situations that are otherwise uncertain. Some oracles used written techniques, e.g., in China. (The instructor will show you pictures of oracle bones, as well as modern Chinese oracles.) Questions would be written on the bones (or tortoise shells), and then cast into a fire. The fire would crack the bones, and then the cracks would be “read” to give the answers to the questions. One king wanted to know: “if the king goes hunting in such a place, will it rain?” These could be collected, and the (in)accuracy of the results could then make a record that would help make future predications

Just as the shaman attempted to contact the spirits, a person engaged in divination attempted to gain knowledge of the future, or insight in the workings of the world. We would simply look at a weather forecast. But in a world without scientific knowledge, people needed other sources of knowledge.