

### North American Shamanism

In the general literature on native North Americans, every sort of priest, healer, ritual specialist, and sorcerer is somewhere called a shaman. Here the term is synonymous with some unarticulated notion of "primitive religious specialist." A clearer understanding of shamanism can be discerned from those scores of descriptions of Native American religions and cultures where romantic and primitivist biases are less influential, although the statement of what distinguishes shamanism from other phenomena is necessarily complicated because of the diversity of shamanism in North America.

In broad terms, North American shamans are individuals with extraordinary access to spiritual power. Shamans must not be simply equated with priests, although they may serve priestly functions. Shamans must not be equated with the recipient of a guardian spirit through vision quest or dream, although they frequently find access to spiritual power in vision and dream experiences. Shamans must not simply be identified with healers, for not all healers are shamans, and further, there are numerous shamanic functions other than healing.

**Shamanic Traits.** Given the ambiguity of these broad criteria of North American shamanism, a fuller presentation may take the form of an outline of shamanic traits. This outline is a set of features no one of which is, by itself, distinctive or adequate and no set or single combination of which constitutes an exclusive definition of shamanism. This approach has advantages over the attempt to define North American shamanism in terms of a single necessary distinguishing feature. The outline establishes a framework in which to investigate and study a variety of often complex religious phenomena that may be interrelated around the idea identified by the term *shamanism*.

North American shamans invariably have extraordinary spiritual power, that is, the capacity to influence the world through spiritual forces. Thus a central element of North American shamanism is spiritual power—its nature, acquisition, accession, use, and loss. Native American spiritual concepts are very difficult for the outside observer to comprehend, and herein lies what is both a major obstacle and a challenge to the study of North American shamanism.

Spiritual powers are usually identified in some way that allows them to be humanly conceivable. The spirit forms vary widely; some are identified with animal (or other natural) forms, others with mythological figures and deities. Even the ghost of an ancestor or the soul of

some living thing may be identified as a shaman's spirit power.

Individuals initially gain access to spiritual powers in a variety of ways, including inheritance, personal quest, purchase, election by society or by the spiritual power, and extraordinary experience accompanying the suffering of a malevolence. In North America quests for power only rarely involve the use of hallucinogenic drugs; these quests more commonly involve fasting and isolation. The quest for shamanic power and the quest for a guardian spirit are usually distinguishable, although the techniques may not be. In some cultures there is continuity between guardian spirit practices and shamanism. Initiatory experiences, as well as the periods of training that usually follow initiations, may be brief or may extend over a considerable period of time. Initiatory experiences may include images of skeletonization, death, and rebirth or images of magical flight with extended revelatory scenarios, but more often they contain none of these elements.

The acquisition of power is commonly accompanied by the revelation of a power object or other means by which to objectify, display, and make contact with spiritual power. There are endless varieties of power objects held by North American shamans. They are often referred to by native terms commonly translated as "medicine." Power and access to power may also take the form of formulas, charms, and songs. Objects of power and special songs are also commonly held by those who are allied with a guardian spirit. The presence of power is demonstrated by its use in any of the many shamanic functions and, occasionally, in highly dramatized power performances using *legerdemain*.

Throughout North America, healing is the most central function and use of spiritual power. The most common and widespread theories of disease are those of object intrusion and soul loss. According to the first theory, illness results when a health-obstructing object enters the body. Object intrusion is most commonly believed to be a consequence of malevolent intent and is ascribed to sorcery and witchcraft, but sometimes it is simply an objectification, even personification, of an illness. The corresponding treatment usually involves a technique of sucking, in which the curer, entranced or not, sucks the object from the body using an instrument such as a tube, horn, or his or her mouth directly on the person's body at the place where the object is diagnosed to exist. The object, once removed, may or may not be presented in material form to demonstrate to those present the success of the treatment. Soul loss, the other common theory of disease, is based upon a variety of often complex theories of soul or life forms that may

depart the body or be drawn or stolen from the body. Entranced magical flights, dramatized spirit journeys, and prayer recitations are techniques used to retrieve and return the soul or life form, thus restoring health and life.

Several other functions are common among North American shamans: weather control; hunting-related functions, such as game divination, game charming, and intercession with master or mistress of animals; war-related functions; and general clairvoyant and divinatory practices, such as diagnosing disease, foretelling the future, and finding lost objects. These functions are usually, but not always, secondary to healing. While most shamanic actions are clearly understood as having a benevolent intent in societal terms, the shaman is commonly seen within his or her society as potentially, if not actually, malevolent. Shamanic powers may thus be used for sorcery, witchcraft, or revenge, either on the shaman's initiative or at the behest of another.

Shamanic performances occasionally include the use of esoteric languages through which shamans communicate with spirits. In some cultures shamans employ speakers or assistants who interpret shamanic speeches to those present.

The shaman's characteristic attraction to the mystical is often a distinguishing feature of his or her personality. The role of the shaman in society varies widely, from reclusive eccentric on the fringes of society to leader and teacher at the very center of the authority and political structure of the society. Very commonly a community expresses a sense of ambivalence toward its shamans. While they are sought after and held as highly important individuals, they are feared and avoided because of the powers they control. Few North American cultures totally exclude females from shamanic roles, and in some cultures, particularly those found in northern California, females even predominate; nonetheless, throughout the region shamans tend to be more frequently male.

**Culture Areas.** Shamanism and related beliefs and practices occur widely throughout North America. The following brief review of culture areas presents some of the major religious phenomena in North America that may be considered shamanism or closely related to it.

The Inuit (Eskimo) tribes, both along the coast and in the interior, have figures that most closely resemble Siberian shamans, with whom there is a likely historical connection. Inuit shamans, working individually or in groups, use techniques of ecstasy as well as dramatic performances and clairvoyance to serve individuals in need of curing, and they serve the community by controlling weather and procuring game for the hunt. Mag-

ical flights and transformations into spirit beings are characteristic of Inuit shamans; they are also conduits through which the spirits speak. Spiritual power is demonstrated through combats between shamans and the use of legerdemain in dramatic performances.

Tribes along the Northwest Coast have complex shamanic practices. The experience of trance is common to both initiatory experiences and shamanic performances, although techniques of ecstasy are not used everywhere in the region or by all shamans in any one community. While curing is their most important practice, shamans also perform other functions, such as locating food supplies and, in former times when wars were fought, weakening the enemy. The great ceremonial periods in the winter include shamanic festivals during which groups of shamans demonstrate their spiritual powers. Groups of Coast Salish shamans perform dramatizations of canoe journeys into dangerous spirit worlds where they struggle to win back the lost soul of a sufferer. Throughout the area sucking techniques are used to remove malevolent objects. Considerable variation occurs within this area.

The shamanic practices of the Northwest Coast exhibit some continuity with those of the adjacent Basin, Plateau, and northern California areas. Sucking techniques are common, and there is some use of ecstatic techniques. The costume of the shaman is believed to be very powerful, and is a vehicle through which the shamanic tradition is passed from one person to another.

In the Plateau area male and female shamans using song and formula in ritual performances serve a variety of needs. Illness is commonly attributed to witchcraft and ghosts, and shamans act to combat these malevolent forces. The prophetic and millenarian movements that arose in the nineteenth century, which culminated in the Ghost Dance movement of 1890, developed from a shamanic religious heritage. [See Ghost Dance.] Elements of shamanism also influenced the Indian Shaker religion that arose in this area. [See North American Religions, *article on Modern Movements.*]

On the Plains and the Prairies, there are many kinds of medicine and holy persons. Fasting and praying in quest of spiritual power is widespread, and while most tribes in this region distinguish between the individual recipient of a guardian spirit and the shamanic figures, there is a continuity between them. Evidence of spiritual power can manifest itself in various forms, such as a public ritual, a tipi or lodge decoration, special garments, and medicine bundles. Medicine bundles are especially important as the residence of spiritual powers; the bundles are kept by a community and passed from generation to generation.

The shamans of these tribes perform many functions, acting either individually or in groups and societies. Besides curing, they were at one time important for success in war, and during the hunt they charmed and called game. Their powers of clairvoyance and prophecy are still widely exercised in various forms of spirit lodges or the Shaking Tent ceremonies. In these ceremonies, the shaman enters a lodge and reads the messages communicated by the spirits through the shaking of the lodge or the appearance of little flashing lights.

The Midewiwin, or Great Medicine Society, is an important part of the religious, social, political, and economic systems of central Algonquin and other tribes in the Great Lakes region. The initiation practices of the Midewiwin call for the ritual shooting and killing of the initiate, who is then revived as a newly born member of the society. The Midewiwin includes graded levels of shamanic figures. The curing performances are complex and involve many in the community.

A variety of shamanic activities are important to the tribes in the Northeast and Southeast Woodlands areas. The earliest records of some of these activities were set down by Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century. For some tribes in the eastern portion of this area, shamans served the needs of family groups. Costumes and paraphernalia were elaborate in the shamanic practices of many of these tribes. Shamans tended to specialize according to function: curing, weather control, and hunting. "Societies of affliction," that is, societies composed of all those treated, exist among the Seneca.

The North American Southwest is culturally and historically complex. Among Pueblo cultures there are both shamans and priests, although their roles sometimes overlap. Shamans may either participate in or remain aloof from the dramatic ceremonial performances distinctive among the Pueblo tribes. The integration, yet distinction, of shamanic activities and functions in intensely communal contexts is important to the understanding of these cultures and their religions.

Navajo religion centers on conceptions of health. Extraordinarily complex curing ceremonials that last as long as eight days and nine nights are performed by individuals who learn through apprenticeship the many songs, prayers, and ritual procedures as well as the accompanying story traditions. Many ceremonies are directed toward associated classes of disease etiology.

Among the Pima of the Southwest, shamans treat many kinds of illnesses attributed to spirit forces identified with animals and other natural forms. The treatment is private and includes sucking, blowing, and singing.

In recent decades in Oklahoma and other areas where Native Americans have experienced significant intertri-

bal contact, as well as contact with non-natives, innovative forms of shamanism have resulted that are directed toward the complexities and dangers associated with an acculturative environment.

The development and widespread practice of the peyote religion, legally organized in the twentieth century as the Native American Church, are rooted in an older shamanic tradition. This religious movement commonly serves some of the same needs as does shamanism; its techniques and practices are often similar to those of shamanism. [See North American Indians, *article on* Indians of the Plains.]

This brief survey is perhaps adequate only in suggesting the extent, complexity, and importance of shamanism among tribal peoples throughout North America. In many respects the study of shamanism in North America is undeveloped. The publication of Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951; Eng. ed., New York, 1964) widely expanded the interest in the study of shamanism as a worldwide religious phenomenon but has had relatively little impact on the study of North American shamanism. Conversely, the consideration of the North American religious practices we have called "shamanism" has had little impact on the broader study of shamanism. North American shamanism therefore raises many important issues that constitute an enriching challenge to the study of the phenomenon worldwide.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

The principal definitional discussions of shamanism that take North America into consideration are Åke Hultkrantz's "Spirit Lodge, a North American Shamanistic Séance," in *Studies in Shamanism*, edited by Carl-Martin Edsman (Stockholm, 1962), pp. 32-68, and Hultkrantz's "A Definition of Shamanism," *Temenos* 9 (1973): 25-37. In the later article "techniques of ecstasy" is put forward as a necessary criterion, thus leading to the conclusion that most North American practices are pseudoshamanism, since ecstasy is not widespread. Kenneth M. Stewart's "Spirit Possession in Native America," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 2 (1946): 323-339, attempts to show that ecstatic and other entranced states, which the author loosely terms "possession," existed widely throughout North America, but close examination of his data reveals that ecstasy in shamanism occurs rarely beyond the sub-Arctic and the Northwest Coast.

Surprisingly few widely comparative studies of shamanism exist. Leonard L. Leh's "The Shaman in Aboriginal North American Society," *University of Colorado Studies* 21 (1934): 199-263, is a relatively extensive survey by geographic area. Willard Z. Park's study *Shamanism in Western North America* (1938; reprint, New York, 1975) compares Paviotso (Northern Paiute) shamanism with shamanic practices throughout western North America.

The great resource for the study of North American shaman-

ism is the ethnographic record. Although uneven in most respects, it often includes extensive material on shamanism. Exemplary studies that focus on shamanic practices of a single tribe are Park's work on the Paviotso; *Piman Shamanism and Staying Sickness* (Tucson, 1974) by Donald M. Bahr and others; the section on shamanism in Franz Boas's *Religion of Kuakiutl Indians*, vol. 2, *Translations* (New York, 1930); and David E. Jones's *Sanapia, Comanche Medicine Woman* (New York, 1972).

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