

## Topic Page: [Shamanism](#)

Definition: **Shamanism** from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

A traditional form of religion, in which it is believed that the world is governed by good and evil spirits who can be propitiated through the intervention of a shaman, a priest or sorcerer. The word is immediately Slavic, the cult being practised by the Samoyeds and other Siberian peoples. Its ultimate source, however, is Sanskrit *srama*, 'religious exercise'.



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Summary Article: **Shamanism**

From *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*

Shamanism is a term, originally taken from a Russian word used to describe a phenomenon of the religions of Siberia, that has now become established in international usage. It means a form of culture that revolves around the central position of the shaman, a religious expert who acts as an intermediary between man in his environment and society and the forces and the spirits of the other world. The shaman of the central Siberian peoples may be either a man or a woman. Among the shamans there probably existed a division of tasks and a hierarchy that was manifested in a specialization in different shamanistic skills. The respect enjoyed by the shamans was not dependent on their sex but on what they knew and remembered. The *Saami noaidi* (in English, "nojd") is a northern European equivalent of the Siberian shaman. Among the *Saami*, shamanism seems to have been a male institution; references to female shamans are found only in the late tradition.

The concept of shamanism became more generally known and its meanings broadened as a result of the book *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'écstase*, published by Mircea Eliade in 1951. According to Eliade, shamanism as an archaic technique of ecstasy is the most original form of religion. Because signs of shamanism are found in rock art, it has been considered to represent the religious culture of hunter-gatherer societies of the Paleolithic Age. A proof of its antiquity is the fact that the phenomenon is found both in the Old and the New Worlds.

The concept of shamanism is not, however, without problems. In the comparative study of religion, it is burdened by the scholarly tradition of the 19th-century Urreligion hypothesis with its emphasis on evolution or diffusion. When the word *shaman(ism)* was translated from Russian into English and German, its meaning took on a nuance reflecting the point of view of the Christian missionaries who defined it. The expression of basic pagan religion was made into an *ism*, a primitive belief, so that the missionary work might receive greater justification. Thus, the name of the phenomenon became established as *shaman-ism*, although this term is not found in the earliest documents, such as the diary of Avvakum Petrovitch, the Archpriest of the Old Believers, which describes the activities of the shamans that he witnessed among the Evenk people in the 1650s.

Shamans commonly used monotone drumming and frenzied dancing to attain a state of ecstasy. They also sometimes used narcotic substances: For example, the fly agaric fungus (*Amanita muscaria*) was used among northern Siberian peoples. Fasting was also one of their methods of preparation. In addition to dancing accompanied by drumming, the *Saami nojd* chanted shamanistic incantations (yoiking); this form of chanting was such an important part of shamanism that it was prohibited together with the shaman's drum during the missionary crusade to Lapland in the 18th century and in the

preaching of the Laestadian revivalist preachers in the 19th century.

## **Basic Concepts: Saman, Shamanizing, Shamanism, Shamanhood**

The concept of shaman comes from central and eastern Siberian indigenous peoples, most of whom are speakers of either Mandchu-Tungusic or Nivkh. The word *saman* means “someone who knows.” This “knowing” is the basic word to comprehend the whole phenomenon in its ecological cradle in northern Eurasia. The knowledge is oral and is described as a painful and responsible capacity, as a duty or vocation that is not easy to accept by someone “chosen by the spirits” and trained to his/her office by the elder shaman of the clan. This process is described in this entry on the basis of Siberian fieldwork by the author from 1988 until the present. The concept of shamanhood, instead of shamanism, was suggested in 1994, since the latter term is *ism*-oriented, which is not true in its cultural context. Shamanhood (parallel to the older Russian word *samanstvo*) is a kind of cultural mother tongue rather than a religion in the languages lacking the concept of “religion” in the Western meaning of the word (from Latin *religio*).

Shamanizing (Russian *samaniit*) is a word that comprehends the special skills of the shaman: those of questioning and replying, divining, and foreseeing in trance or dream events success and fate in life, death, and afterlife. It is his or her heavy duty in front of and on behalf of his/her clan or people to remember the great narratives of his or her people, singing, narrating, and acting them in the rituals, so healing the pains of the people. The importance of oral and rhythmic memory is emphasized, since almost every one of the 60 Siberian shamans the author met are illiterate. Besides the drum, there are several other instruments used by the shaman in the rituals of healing and divination.

The conceptual history of shamanism will show how the word *shamanism* was created under the influence of the Christian worldview. Shaman(ism) was identified as the “old form of paganism” and shamanic peoples (Greek *ethnos*) as the “heathens” (*ethnikos*) to be converted by Christian missions. Shamanism as the culture in the circumpolar-subarctic belt from northern Europe to Central Asia may be characterized by features like these: It is practiced by relatively small and isolated populations, and it is oral/unwritten since it lacks any kind of holy scripts or books.

In spite of the fact that the majority of Siberian cultures do not know the concept *shaman*, they are shamanic. Some of the approximately 35 northern peoples who speak Uralic languages, a family of languages that also includes Finns and the Ob Ugrians, call their shamans *noita* (Finnish) or *nait* (Mansi). There are epic songs (Finnish *runo*, *Saami leudd*) telling about the trips of the souls. Their mythologies include a number of souls or spirits, which all have their own names. It was believed that the spirit of the shaman could depart from the shaman's body to take trips to the kingdom of death, for example. The purpose of these trips was to find solutions to the problems encountered by the community or its members. These trips to the kingdom of death were considered dangerous. The shaman did them on behalf of the community to retrieve a patient's soul, to seek the knowledge needed for the healing rite, or to find solutions to problems. Finnish epic poetry includes examples of shaman trips: for example, the shaman travels to meet the people's primitive wizard, Antero Vipunen, who died long ago and who was already decomposing with spruces growing on his temples.

Transformation powers are essential for a shaman. It is believed that shamans are able to control different levels of consciousness; they are able to fall into a state of ecstasy, change their gender during the rite, or transform themselves into different animal forms. Sometimes, the shamans use intoxicating hallucinogens for inspiration when they try to reach other states of consciousness.

Shamans do not operate alone. They have a number of “auxiliary spirits” to help them. One of these is more important than the others; the Nanais at the Lower Amur, for instance, talk about special “nuptial spirits” that choose the shaman. The shamans meet these nuptial spirits in dreams, and sometimes, the shaman reveals that he or she has had sexual intercourse with a spirit, which may appear in the form of a bear, a tiger, or a sea lion, for example.

Shaman equipment, such as the drum, clothes, mask, bag, belt, musical instruments, and idols, portrays the figures that the shaman has learned to control on his transmigration trips. They describe the shaman's travel route, “shaman's road” as it is called, and they may also be a cognitive map of earthly topography as well. More important, however, the equipment conveys myths that delineate the topography of another, invisible world for both the shaman and the community.

When an aging shaman leaves on his or her final trip, he or she often tries to drown the drum, the shaman's soul, in a swamp. The purpose of this is to ensure that nothing disturbs the shaman's peace in the afterlife. The death of a shaman is arctic mythology: the departure of a lonely man to his own river and to the abode of the dead to join the other dead members of the family. The decision to publicly announce the intention to set off on this journey of no return means social death for the shaman. If another person joins the shaman and helps him achieve his voluntary death, it is not considered to be a crime that can be compared with murder.

### See also

Finland, Indigenous Religions, New Age Movements, New Religions, Russian Federation

### Further Readings

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Pentikäinen, Juha

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