

SHAMANISM

Concept of Shamanism: One of the world's oldest concepts is considered as the concept of Shamanism. Shamanism is a collection of long-established principles and customs that engross the capacity to make a diagnosis, heal, and many a times lead to suffering of men by wandering the earthly existence and developing an unusual liaison with the spirits. The shamans possess the ability to control the spirits in their own ways and bring out the result that they expect to happen. The shamans believe the earthly existence as well as the world of the spirits is interconnected to each other. If a person holds the power to traverse himself to the world of the spirits then he can heal the people on this earth through that power acquired by him from the spirits. The word "shaman" (pronounced SHAH-mahn) initiated from the Tungusic Evenki language of North Asia, due to the spirit-workers present in their cultures. It was in the west after the Russian forces conquered the shamanistic Khanate of Kazan in 1552 that term was first introduced. It was the works of the western anthropologists who first put into application the term "shamanism". The Sanskrit word for "shaman" is *śramaṇa*¹, referring to a nomadic monastic or divine figure. Therefore, the sources of shamanism are embedded in theology and mythical histories.



Fig: 1--A Shaman

Scholars' opinion on Shamanism: There is no exact definition of Shamanism. Varied scholars have used varied perspectives in order to bring out the role of the Shamans in the world. The English historian Ronald Hutton (2001) identified for definitions of Shamanism—the first one refers to "anybody who contacts a spirit world while in an altered state of consciousness"; the second dimension of the definition of Shamanism refers to those who get in touch with the spirit world while being in an transformed state of consciousness at the request of others; the third definition points to distinguish shamans from the other magico-religious experts who are supposed to connect with the spirits, such as "mediums", "witch doctors", "spiritual healers" or "prophets" by

¹ Source :- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shamanism#cite_note-12 (Eliade, Mircea (1989). Shamanism. Arkana Books. p. 495.)

asserting that they assume some unique method which are not used by the others; lastly, "shamanism" is referred to the native religions of Siberia and bordering parts of Asia.²

Shamanism is believed to be the initial and the most prevalent healing, psychotherapeutic, and spiritual tradition. The shaman has been regarded as "mentally deranged" and "an outright psychotic" (Devereux, 1961), a "veritable idiot" (Wissler, 1931), and a charlatan. Roger Walsh defined shamanism as "a family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves or their spirit(s) traveling to other realms at will and interacting with other entities to serve their community" (Walsh, 1989, 1990) (cited, Walsh, 1994).

Core Shamanism: The concept of core shamanism was developed by Michael Harner. The basis of Core Shamanism is the journey into alternate reality, through the stimulus of drumming. Drum beats vary between about 205 and 220 beats per minute according to the needs of the journeyer (Harner 1980). It is drug free in nature. The shaman transforms himself into an altered state of being to establish contact from the helping spirits as well as other spirits including the dead. They try to delve into the extremes of alternate realism, expand wisdom, and heal the other people with the help of the spirits. The power of the traditional shamans and the training of the shamans depend on the ability of the shamans to get in touch with the spirits and solicit those spirits to help them out for achieving their goals and objectives (Townsend 1999b, 115). Core Shamanism as well as traditional shamanism points on the reality of substitute reality and seeing as well as delve into that reality. In Core shamanism, the shamans require deliberate effort and focus to transcend themselves into the other world possessed by the spirits. The main focus in Core Shamanism is to help and protect one's own self and the others. The first and foremost rule in Core Shamanism is not to use shamanic knowledge to either attack, assault or harm or impair the others.

Animism and Shamanism: Animism is present in the section which deals with the anthropology of religion. It is the belief system of the tribal indigenous people. It is the belief in souls in all things, including inanimate objects. Animism is such a belief where there is no distinction between the spiritual and the physical (or material) world, and spirits or souls of the deceased exist not only in humans, but also in some other animals, plants, rocks, geographic features such as mountains or any other natural element including thunder, wind, and shadows. The concept of animism was developed by Sir Edward Tylor (1871) where he said that animism often includes "an idea of pervading life and will in nature". Therefore, the concept is widely recognised in the traditional period. On the other hand, shamanism involves a shaman's ability to transcend into the world of the spirits and enters into a state of trance while any religious ceremonies or while healing any individual. Edward Tylor (1871) regarded shamanism (which he called animism) as the earliest form of religion, since it involves a belief that inanimate objects have souls (Langdon 1989, 54). The two concepts widely vary from each other, yet many scholars use them synonymously. Animism regards each and every element present on the Earth to have a soul of themselves, where as shamans transcends themselves to the world of the spirits and provides healing to the people.

Healing and Shamanism: Healing implies to restore the health of the individuals so that one can function normally in the society. Healing in Shamanism is believed to be one of the traditional practices based on healing. These healing practices preserve the cultural heritage of a nation within themselves. Shamanism involves a therapy based on the energy location of a human being.

² Source:-- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shamanism#cite_note-12

It is believed in shamanism that everything has energy and there are times when those energies get imbalanced and it is with the help of these shamans that the energy is made balanced once again thereby healing the individual. Shamans are believed to be healers as they cater to the physiological, psychological, and social needs of a human being. Some commonly used methods of shamanic healing are retrieval of the soul, recovery of power among the animals, withdrawal, spiritual healing, as well as psycho pomp (i.e. accompanying the “dead” spirits to the “other world”).³ Shamans consider that when a person undergoes from any kind of physical or psychological disturbance or upset, then a section of the soul inside him rips off and doesn't add to the individual's well being. It is predicted that these splitting off of the soul from the human body leads to the loss of memory, or a sensation of desolation. A Shaman controls this period by traversing into the world of the spirits and forming an alliance with them, thereby looking for the missing soul parts and bringing them back to the body of the mortal.

Joan Halifax (1982) notes that, “that they have been ill themselves gives them an intuitive sympathy for the suffering of others and lends them emotional credibility as healers”. The healing techniques are based on verbal texts, hymns or songs narrating stories of the formation and of the relationship between the mortals and the spirits. The Shamans delivers myth regarding the foundations of experienced disorders by the other people, narratives that elucidate the cause for the suffering of men, reason for getting old, and the explanations for one's death. They notify of unusual occurrences and extraordinary capacity of the healers, recognize where those healing agents may be located by the others, and give details of how they may be dealt with for bringing about healing of the individual.

One of the practice followed by the Nepali shamans related to healing is sending off the souls of the dead to drum up business⁴:

Wake up, dead souls, those who died at the

Right time, wake up!

Those who died at the wrong time, deceased

Dead souls, wake up!

Wake up, dead souls, wake up!

Go to the east, go to the west!

Go to the north, go to the south!

You, go in the middle of the night,

Entering towns, whoever you fancy, strike!

Go, dead souls, go! (Maskarinec 1998, 349)

Role of the Shamanic Healer: Every shamanic healing ritual brings to a close with either a sacrifice which is generally a blood offering, claimed by the recognizable spirits with which the shamans work. Many a times, the offer is postponed by the shamans but the offer is presented one day or the other. The sacrifice acts like a conclusion or as a negotiation with the spirits who have been held responsible for the illness. It induces those spirit forces to concede to the power of the shaman over life and death. The Shamans practice entheogens i.e. generating the spirit of the divine within oneself. The shamans uses music, songs, dancing, singing, medicine songs, vigils, fasting and many other things which is believed to bring about healing of an individual.

Shamans also have a variety of paraphernalia in diverse cultures which are⁵:-

³ Source:-- <http://www.spirithealer.com/about/shamanism/>

⁴ Source:-- Encyclopedia of Shamanism

⁵ Source:-- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shamanism#Paraphernalia>

- **Drum**-- the pounding of the drum permits the shaman to accomplish a changed state of being or to take a trip on an expedition between the physical as well as the spiritual worlds.
- **Feathers**-- In various cultures of North and South American and in Europe and Asia, birds are believed to be the couriers of the spirits. Feathers are used in any kinds of festivals as well as during the process of any individual.
- **Rattle**—It is found among the South American and African people. It is used at some point in festivals and giving blessings to the people.
- **Gong** – It is found throughout South East Asia as well as shamans of the Far Eastern group.
- **Pipe** – The shamans Uses it for smoking a variety of tobaccos and psychoactive medicinal plants.
- **Sword**—It is believed to protect the shaman from the wandering "evil" spirits while the shaman journeys to the spirit world.
- **Shake** – It is found in Hmong Shamanism. It is the course of conversing with his shamanistic spirits in order to direct him to the world of the spirit.
- **Long Table** – A wooden table, around nine by two feet, is generally used in Hmong Shamanism. The table alters into a "flying horse" in the spirit world.
- **Rooster** – the rooster safeguards the shaman from the wandering "evil" spirits by turning him invisible and indistinguishable. Therefore, the evil spirits can only see the rooster's useless spirit, thereby protecting the shaman.

Shamanism in different religions: Different religion in the world follows different cultures. These cultures many a times imbibe the concept of Shamanism within themselves. The major religions of the world and their practice of Shamanism is noted underneath—

Shamanism in Hinduism: Hinduism is one of the ancient religions in the world, whose origin dates back to time unknown. There are different healing practices associated with the Hindu religion. One of the foremost healing practice in this aforementioned religion is Yoga. The observance of Yoga lies upon the viewpoint that look for amalgamation of one's true self (*atman*) and the Absolute (*brahman*). It generates a heat within the body of the individuals practicing yoga. This generation of the inner heat is considered essential by the Shamans. In both Shamanism and Yoga, "extreme heat" is obtained by meditating close to a fire, or by retention of breath. Though the two concepts are totally distinct from each other, but one may find subtle degree of similarity in both the concepts of yoga and shamanism. In the Hindu tradition, a Yogi desires to attain moksha or salvation from his earthly existence for which he practices various rituals and claims to have connection with the world of the spirits. Out of the many practices and religious rituals, a Yogi follows the Tantric cosmology by which he can see through the future of the cosmos as he is blessed with divine powers. There are many yogis in Hinduism who are believed to possess healing powers as they have the connection with the world of the spirits thus making them supra-individual. In Rajasthan, when people use words like--

bhu-t lagna- or bhooth laiyo or churail lagi,
-- (Kothari 1982, 11).

It means "a ghost lays hold of" or "gets stuck to" someone. Therefore, the links between bhakti, tantra, and shamanism in India are held to be very strong and closely tied with each other.

Shamanism in Islam: Shamanism has always been one of the prominent areas in the Islamic religion. It is referred to as *Islamized Shamanism*. Shamanism as a concept in itself and Sufism are believed to have a close relationship with each other. Wood (2002) analysed the shamans of Islam by studying the Gnawa musicians of Morocco who acted as the healers in their locality. They dress themselves in cowrie shell-covered clothing, and swirls their long decorations on the caps which are worn by them while dancing to the sound of metal castanets and drums. For many individuals it is just a source of recreation but if analysed deeply into the system of the Gnawa musicians then one can find out a deep rooted shamanic principle attached to it. Throughout the night, they opt towards the sacred and work with the genies in order to achieve the healing of the individuals. There is another ceremony noted by the Wood (2002) that is the Lila healing tradition. It is a long drawn ceremony which involves drawing out the evil genie from the individual so that he can function normally in the society. Zarcone and Hobart (2012), did an exploratory study on Shamanism and Islam where it was noted by them that shamanic practices are prevalent in the places like Central Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans. Therefore, the concept of Shamanism is much prevalent in Islam and among its followers.

Shamanism and Christianity: Elements of Shamanic practice can be traced in Christianity. The act of healing in Jesus Christ's name as well as having an experience of ecstasy and the feel of being in the seventh heaven are mainly associated with Shamanic beliefs and principles. The people associated with the Christian missionaries acts as the mediator between the people and themselves being the healer of the community as a whole. This practice is very close to the practice of Shamanism, thereby making it a point as traces of Shamanic practices are found in Christianity. Jesus is considered to be the one who is believed to be involved with many Shamanic roles, such as—

- (1) Spiritual leader as well as acting guardian of the consciousness of the people
- (2) Leader of religious ceremonies,
- (3) Psycho pomp which portrays the companion of the souls
- (4) Source of good fortune,
- (5) Healer as well as helper to the common mass, who puts deep faith on Him,
- (6) A Poet, singer as well as a performer of varied shamanic acts. (Hoppál 2000)

Shamanism in Buddhism: Buddhism is one of the Asian spiritual traditions. Yellow shamanism⁶ is another practice prevalent in Mongolia and Siberia which includes rituals and traditions imbibed from Buddhism. In Mongolia, yellow is regarded as the holy colour as it signifies their religion-Buddhism. Buddhism believes in the existence of ghosts, spirits, hell and heaven and that the spirits possess the power of residing within the human beings. The most perilous spirits or the evil spirits are believed to be capable of having a power on the individuals, leading to the human body's prime constituents to turn out to be deranged. Many a times it makes the original soul of the even to leave the body. The Monastic leaders had the power to heal the individuals in these conditions. Shamanism in the Sri Lankan continent exemplifies the "southern school's" prototype of housing: A series of dancing as well as drumming to conduct exorcisms are conducted by groups (*kattiya*) of classically low-caste exorcism specialists (*adura*), who eliminate the manipulation of antagonistic spirits (termed as "evil" in nature) from ailing Buddhist patients. The Dharmas laid down by Lord Buddha is used as the protocol to ward off the demonic spirits from an individual. Geoffrey Samuel (1993) pointed out on Tantric Buddhism that helps to understand Shamanic

⁶ The term "yellow shamanism" was first introduced in 1992 by Sendenjav Dulam (Source:-- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_shamanism)

Buddhism is—“Vajrayana Buddhism as practiced in Tibet may be described as shamanic, in that it is centered around communication with an alternative mode of reality via the alternative states of consciousness of Tantric Yoga” (Samuel 1993, 8).

Tantrism and Shamanism: Note on Shamanism also makes it essential to highlight Tantrism, which is one of the most important practice among the Hindus and the Buddhists. Tantrism is prevalent in all the major religions in India such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In the words of Swami Satyananda, tantra is composed of two Sanskrit words i.e. *tanoti* (expands) and *trayoti* (liberates). It is such a system on the basis of which one unshackles the two facets of perceptions and matter i.e. *purusha* and *prakriti* or Shiva and Shakti. Tantrism is depicted as a creative form of religion,. It is one in which the members employ a emblematically affluent dress, ritual instruments such as yantras, arithmetical models of the abode of gods and Buddhas, commanding words as well as the use of mantras. Shamanism and tantrism are two very inter-related concepts, though slightly differing from each other.

Shamanism and Psychotherapy: Shamans are mainly referred to as those people who assert that they can voluntarily control their consciousness in order to have an access to knowledge which are not easily available. The shamans use their power to cater to the requirements of the members of their community. The shamans acts as healers, counselors as well as psychotherapists. Bio-medicine considers an illness or pathology within one human body to be the cause of the attack of germs but according to the shamans, it is the evil spirits which possesses the body of the human beings and makes it their shelter, thereby making the human body get weaker day by day. Insomnia, changing or fluctuating moods along with crying spells, regretful hopelessness, as well as psychosomatic signs such as pain are believed to be the cause of evil spirit or the ill spirit within the human body. The shamans many a times have went through the pain that the individual might be suffering at that moment, therefore, through his/her personal experience, the shaman tries to prove his cognitive skills in front of the individual by providing him with inner peace and calmness. Thus, the shamans act as the best healers of the human mind. Torrey (1986) has acknowledged more than a few features that fabricates client and client anticipations—hope, faith, peace of mind, trust, as well as emotional stimulation. Thus, it is through the passage of time that a shaman inculcates experience within himself thereby healing his client mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Shamanism in the 21st century: Shamanism is cradled as one of the ancient traditional concept. Though the practice is declining at a higher rate due to growing modernization, urbanization, spread of education among the people, increasing rationality, use of science and logic to explain social situations and social events; this is leading to the declining rate of samanic practices in the 21st century. Today, a person finds the growth in the concept of **neo-shamanism**. It refers to a "new" form of what adherents call "shamanism", a modern system of seeking visions or healing. Neoshamanism comprises an eclectic range of beliefs and practices that involve attempts to attain altered states and communicate with a spirit world. According to the Report presented by Office for National Statistics 2011 ⁷(United Kingdom), the figures for England and Wales demonstrate that from approximately 80,000 people identified themselves as Pagan and 650 wrote in the description "Shamanism". There are different organizations which are working day and night in order to preserve the heritage of mankind involving shamanism as one of its traditional practices. The Foundation for Shamanic Studies is one of them which try to preserve the shamanic culture in the modern century. Therefore, today, shamanism survives primarily among indigenous peoples.

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoshamanism>

Shamanic practices continue today in the tundras, jungles, deserts, and other rural areas, and even in cities, towns, suburbs, and shantytowns all over the world.

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