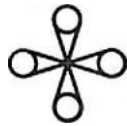


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# SHAMANISM

## Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy

*Translated from the French by*  
WILLARD R. TRASK



MIRCEA ELIADE

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## FOREWORD

To the best of our knowledge the present book is the first to cover the entire phenomenon of shamanism and at the same time to situate it in the general history of religions. To say this is to imply its liability to imperfection and approximation and the risks that it takes. Today the student has at his disposition a considerable quantity of documents for the various shamanisms—Siberian, North American, South American, Indonesian, Oceanian, and so on. Then too, a number of works, important in their several ways, have broken ground for the ethnological, sociological, and psychological study of shamanism (or rather, of a particular type of shamanism ). But with a few notable exceptions—we refer especially to the studies of Altaic shamanism by Holmberg (Harva)—the immense shamanic bibliography has neglected to interpret this extremely complex phenomenon in the framework of the history of religions. It is as a historian of religions that we, in our turn, have attempted to approach, understand, and present shamanism. Far be it from us to think of belittling the admirable studies undertaken from the viewpoints of psychology, sociology, or ethnology; we consider them indispensable to understanding the various aspects of shamanism. But we believe that there is room for another approach—that which we have sought to implement in the following pages.

The writer who approaches shamanism as a psychologist will be led to regard it as primarily the manifestation of a psyche in crisis or even in retrogression; he will not fail to compare it with certain aberrant psychic behavior patterns or to class it among mental diseases of the hysteroid or epileptoid type.

We shall explain why we consider it unacceptable to assimilate

shamanism to any kind of mental disease.' But one point remains (and it is an important one), to which the psychologist will always be justified in drawing attention: like any other religious vocation, the shamanic vocation is manifested by a crisis, a temporary derangement of the future shaman's spiritual equilibrium. All the observations and analyses that have been made on this point are particularly valuable. They show us, in actual process as it were, the repercussions, within the psyche, of what we have called the "dialectic of hierophanies"—the radical separation between profane and sacred and the resultant splitting of the world. To say this is to indicate all the importance that we attribute to such studies in religious psychology.

The sociologist, for his part, is concerned with the social function of the shaman, the priest, the magician. He will study prestige originating from magical powers, its role in the structure of society, the relations between religious and political leaders, and so on. A sociological analysis of the myths of the First Shaman will elicit revealing indications concerning the exceptional position of the earliest shamans in certain archaic societies. The sociology of shamanism remains to be written, and it will be among the most important chapters in a general sociology of religion. The historian of religions must take all these studies and their conclusions into account. Added to the psychological conditions brought out by the psychologist, the social conditions, in the broadest sense of the term, reinforce the element of human and historical concreteness in the documents that he is called upon to handle.

This concreteness will be accentuated by the studies of the ethnologist. It will be the task of ethnological monographs to situate the shaman in his cultural milieu. There is danger of misunderstanding the true personality of a Chukchee shaman, for example, if one reads of his exploits without knowing anything about the life and traditions of the Chukchee. Again, it will be for the ethnologist to make exhaustive studies of the shaman's

<sup>1</sup> See below, pp. 23



costume and drum, to describe the seances, to record texts and melodies, and so on. By undertaking to establish the "history" of one or another constituent element of shamanism (the drum, for example, or the use of narcotics during seances), the ethnologist—joined when circumstances demand it, by a comparatist and a historian—will succeed in showing the circulation of the particular motif in time and space; so far as possible, he will define its center of expansion and the stages and the chronology of its dissemination. In short, the ethnologist will also become a "historian," whether or not he adopts the Graebner-Schmidt-Koppers method of cultural cycles. In any case, in addition to an admirable purely descriptive ethnographical literature, there are now available numerous works of historical ethnology: in the overwhelming "gray mass" of cultural data stemming from the so-called "ahistorical" peoples, we now begin to see certain lines of force appearing; we begin to distinguish "history" where we were in the habit of finding only "Naturvolker," "primitives," or "savages."

It is unnecessary to dwell here on the great services that historical ethnology has already rendered to the history of religions. But we do not believe that it can take the place of the history of religions. The latter's mission is to integrate the results of ethnology, psychology, and sociology. Yet in doing so, it will not renounce its own method of investigation or the viewpoint that specifically defines it. Cultural ethnology may have demonstrated the relation of shamanism to certain cultural cycles, for example, or the dissemination of one or another shamanic complex; yet its object is not to reveal the deeper meaning of all these religious phenomena, to illuminate their symbolism, and to place them in the general history of religions. In the last analysis, it is for the historian of religions to synthesize all the studies of particular aspects of shamanism and to present a comprehensive view which shall be at once a morphology and a history of this complex religious phenomenon.

But an understanding must be reached concerning the importance to be accorded to "history" in this type of investigation. As

we have said more than once elsewhere, and as we shall have occasion to show more fully in the complementary volume (in preparation) to *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, although the historical conditions are extremely important in a religious phenomenon (for every human datum is in the last analysis a historical datum), they do not wholly exhaust it. We will cite only one example here. The Altaic shaman ritually climbs a birch tree in which a certain number of steps have been cut; the birch symbolizes the World Tree, the steps representing the various heavens through which the shaman must pass on his ecstatic journey to the highest heaven; and it is extremely probable that the cosmological schema implied in this ritual is of Oriental origin. Religious ideas of the ancient Near East penetrated far into Central and North Asia and contributed considerably to giving Central Asian and Siberian shamanism their present features. This is a good example of what "history" can teach us concerning the dissemination of religious ideologies and techniques. But, as we said above, the *history* of a religious phenomenon cannot reveal *all* that this phenomenon, by the mere fact of its manifestation, seeks to show us. Nothing warrants the supposition that influences from Oriental cosmology and religion *created* the ideology and ritual of the ascent to the sky among the Altaians; similar ideologies and rituals appear all over the world and in regions where ancient Oriental influences are excluded a priori. More probably, the Oriental ideas merely *modified* the ritual formula and cosmological implications of the celestial ascent; the latter appears to be a primordial phenomenon, that is, it belongs to man as such, not to man as a historical being; witness the dreams, hallucinations, and images of ascent found everywhere in the world, apart from any historical or other "conditions." All these dreams, myths, and nostalgias with a central theme of ascent or flight cannot be exhausted by a psychological explanation; there is always a kernel that remains refractory to explanation, and this indefinable, irreducible element perhaps reveals the real situation of man in the cosmos, a situation that, we shall never tire of repeating, is not solely "historical."

Thus the historian of religions, while taking historico-religious facts into account, does his utmost to organize his documents in the historical perspective—the only perspective that ensures their concreteness. But he must not forget that, when all is said and done, the phenomena with which he is concerned reveal boundary-line situations of mankind, and that these situations demand to be understood and made understandable. This work of deciphering the deep meaning of religious phenomena rightfully falls to the historian of religions. Certainly, the psychologist, the sociologist, the ethnologist, and even the philosopher or the theologian will have their comment to make, each from the viewpoint and in the perspective that are properly his. But it is the historian of religions who will make the greatest number of valid statements on a religious phenomenon *as a religious phenomenon—and* not as a psychological, social, ethnic, philosophical, or even theological phenomenon. On this particular point the historian of religions also differs from the phenomenologist. For the latter, in principle, rejects any work of comparison; confronted with one religious phenomenon or another, he confines himself to "approaching" it and divining its meaning. Whereas the historian of religions does not reach a comprehension of a phenomenon until after he has compared it with thousands of similar or dissimilar phenomena, until he has situated it among them; and these thousands of phenomena are separated not only in time but also in space. For a like reason, the historian of religions will not confine himself merely to a typology or morphology of religious data; he knows that "history" does not exhaust the content of a religious phenomenon, but neither does he forget that it is always in History—in the broadest sense of the term—that a religious datum develops all its aspects and reveals all its meanings. In other words, the historian of religions makes use of all the *historical* manifestations of a religious phenomenon in order to discover what such a phenomenon "has to say"; on the one hand, he holds to the historically concrete, but on the other, he attempts to decipher whatever transhistorical content a religious datum reveals through history.

We need not dwell here on these few methodological considerations; to set them forth adequately would require far more space than a foreword affords. Let us say, however, that the word "history" sometimes leads to confusion, for it can equally well mean historiography (the act of *writing* the history of something) and simply "what has happened" in the world. This second meaning of the word itself comprises several special meanings: history in the sense of what happened within certain spatial or temporal boundaries (history of a particular people, of a particular period), that is, the history of a continuity or of a structure; but then again, history in the general sense, as in the expressions "the historical existence of man," "historical situation," "historical moment," or even in the existentialist use of the term: man is "in situation," that is, *in* history.

The *history* of religions is not always necessarily the *historiography* of religions. For in writing the history of one or another religion or of a given religious phenomenon (sacrifice among the Semites, the myth of Herakles, and so on), we are not always able to show everything "that happened" in a chronological perspective; we can do so, of course, if the documents permit, but we are not obliged to practice *historiography* in order to claim that we are writing the history of religions. The polyvalence of the term "history" has made it easy for scholars to misunderstand one another here; actually, it is the philosophical and general meaning of "history" that best suits our particular discipline. To practice that discipline is to study religious facts as such, that is, on their specific plane of manifestation. This specific plane of manifestation is always *historical*, concrete, existential, even if the religious facts manifested are not always wholly reducible to history. From the most elementary hierophanies—the manifestation of the sacred in some stone or tree, for example—to the most complex (the "vision" of a new "divine form" by a prophet or the founder of a religion), everything is manifested in the historically concrete and everything is in some sort conditioned by history. Yet in the hum-

blest hierophany there is an "eternal new beginning," an eternal

return to an atemporal moment, a desire to abolish history, to blot out the past, to recreate the world. All this is "shown" in religious facts; it is not an invention of the historian of religions. Obviously, a historian bent on being only a historian has the right to ignore the specific and transhistorical meanings of a religious fact; an ethnologist, a sociologist, a psychologist may do likewise. A historian of religions cannot ignore them. Familiar with a considerable number of hierophanies, his eye will have learned to decipher the properly religious meaning of one or another fact. And to return to the very point from which we set out, this book strictly deserves to be called a study in the history of religions even if it does not follow the chronological course of historiography.

Then too, this chronological perspective, however interesting to certain historians, is far from having the importance commonly attributed to it. For, as we have attempted to show in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, the very dialectic of the sacred tends indefinitely to repeat a series of archetypes, so that a hierophany realized at a certain "historical moment" is structurally equivalent to a hierophany a thousand years earlier or later. This tendency on the part of the hierophanic process to repeat the same paradoxical sacralization of reality ad infinitum is what, after all, enables us to understand something of a religious phenomenon and to write its "history." In other words, it is precisely because hierophanies repeat themselves that we can distinguish religious facts and succeed in understanding them. But hierophanies have the peculiarity of seeking to reveal the sacred in its totality, even if the human beings in whose consciousness the sacred "shows itself" fasten upon only one aspect or one small part of it. In the most elementary hierophany *everything is declared*. The manifestation of the sacred in a stone or a tree is neither less mysterious nor less noble than its manifestation in a "god." The process of sacralizing reality is the same; the *forms* taken by the process in man's religious consciousness differ.

This is not without its bearing on the conception of a chronological perspective of religion. Though a *history* of religion exists, it is

not, like all other kinds of history, irreversible. A monotheistic religious consciousness is not necessarily monotheistic throughout its span of existence for the reason that it forms part of a monotheistic "history," and that, as we know, within that history one cannot revert to polytheism or paganism after having known and practiced monotheism. On the contrary, one can perfectly well be a polytheist or indulge in the religious practices of a totemist while thinking and maintaining that one is a monotheist. The dialectic of the sacred permits all reversibilities; no "form" is exempt from degradation and decomposition, no "history" is final. Not only can a community—consciously or unconsciously—practice many religions, but the same individual can have an infinite variety of religious experiences, from the "highest" to the most undeveloped and aberrant. This is equally true from the opposite point of view: any cultural moment whatever can provide the fullest revelation of the sacred to which the human condition is capable of acceding. Despite the immense historical differences involved, the experiences of the monotheistic prophets can be repeated in the most "backward" of primitive tribes; the only requirement is "realization" of the hierophany of a celestial god, a god attested nearly everywhere in the world even though he may be absent from the current practice of religion. No religious form, however vitiated, is incapable of producing a perfectly pure and coherent mysticism. If exceptions of this kind are not numerous enough to impress observers, this is due not to the dialectic of the sacred but to human behavior in respect to that dialectic. And the study of human behavior lies beyond the field of the historian of religions; it is the concern of the sociologist, the psychologist, the moralist, the philosopher. In our role of historian of religions, it suffices us to observe that the dialectic of the sacred makes possible the spontaneous reversal of any religious position. The very fact of this reversibility is important, for it is not to be found elsewhere. This is why we tend to remain uninfluenced by certain results attained by historico-cultural ethnology. The various types of civilization are, of course, organically connected with certain religious forms;

but this in no sense excludes the spontaneity and, in the last analysis, the ahistoricity of religious life. For all history is in some measure a fall of the sacred, a limitation and diminution. But the sacred does not cease to manifest itself, and with each new manifestation it resumes its original tendency to reveal itself wholly. It is true, of course, that the countless new manifestations of the sacred in the religious consciousness of one or another society repeat the countless manifestations of the sacred that those societies knew in the course of their past, of their "history." But it is equally true that this history does not paralyze the spontaneity of hierophanies; at every moment a fuller revelation of the sacred remains possible.

It happens—and this brings us back to our discussion of chronology in the history of religions—that the reversibility of religious positions is even more striking in the case of the mystical experiences of archaic societies. As we shall frequently show, particularly coherent mystical experiences are possible at any and every degree of civilization and of religious situation. This is as much as to say that, for certain religious consciousnesses-in crisis, there is always the possibility of a historical leap that enables them to attain otherwise inaccessible spiritual positions. Certainly, "history"—the religious tradition of the tribe in question—finally intervenes to subject the ecstatic experiences of certain privileged persons to its own canons. But it is no less true that these experiences often have the same precision and nobility as the experiences of the great mystics of East and West.

Now, shamanism is precisely one of the archaic techniques of ecstasy—at once mysticism, magic, and "religion" in the broadest sense of the term. We have sought to present it in its various historical and cultural aspects, and we have even tried to outline a brief history of the development of shamanism in Central and North Asia. But what we consider of greater importance is presenting the shamanic phenomenon itself, analyzing its ideology, discussing its techniques, its symbolism, its mythologies. We believe that such a study can be of interest not only to the specialist

but also to the cultivated man, and it is to the latter that this book is primarily addressed. For example, facts that we could have adduced concerning the dissemination of the Central Asian drum in the Arctic regions, while of intense interest to a small group of specialists, would probably leave the majority of readers cold. But things change—or, at least, so we hope—when it becomes a matter of entering so vast and varied a mental universe as that of shamanism in general and the techniques of ecstasy that it implies. In this case we are dealing with a whole spiritual world, which, though differing from our own, is neither less consistent nor less interesting. We make bold to believe that a knowledge of it is a necessity for every true humanist; for it has been some time since humanism has ceased to be identified with the spiritual tradition of the West, great and fertile though that is.

Conceived in this spirit, this work cannot possibly exhaust any of the aspects that it approaches in its several chapters. We have not undertaken a complete study of shamanism; we lack both the resources and the will for such a task. It is always as a comparatist and a historian of religions that we have treated our subject; admitting which, we plead guilty in advance to the inevitable gaps and imperfections in a work that, in the last analysis, represents an effort toward a synthesis. We are neither an Altaicist nor an Americanist nor an Oceanicist, and it is probable that a certain number of specialized studies have escaped our notice.

Even so, we do not believe that the over-all picture drawn here would have been modified in its general outlines: many studies merely repeat, with slight variants, the accounts of the earliest observers. Popov's bibliography, published in 1928 and confined exclusively to Siberian shamanism, lists 650 works by Russian ethnologists. The bibliographies of North American shamanism and Indonesian shamanism are similarly extensive. One cannot read everything. And we repeat: we have no thought of taking the place of the ethnologist, the Altaicist, or the Americanist. However, we have supplied footnotes throughout, indicating the



principal works to which the reader may turn for supplementary information. Naturally, we could have greatly increased the documentation, but that would have meant a work in several volumes. We did not see the value of such an undertaking; our aim is not a series of monographs on the various shamanisms, but a general study addressed to nonspecialist readers. Then too, a number of subjects to which we have merely referred will be studied in greater detail in other works (*Death and Initiation*, *Mythologies of Death*, etc.).

We could not have completed this book without the help and encouragement we received, during these five years of work, from General N. Radesco, former Prime Minister of Romania; from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris); from the Viking Fund (New York); and from Bollingen Foundation (New York). To them all, we offer our most sincere thanks here. We have taken the liberty of dedicating this book to our French masters and colleagues, as a modest testimony of gratitude for the encouragement that they have never ceased to lavish on us since our arrival in France.

We have already partially set forth the results of our researches in certain articles—"Le Probleme du chamanisme," *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CXXXI (1946), 552; "Shamanism," in *Forgotten Religions*, edited by Vergilius Ferm (New York, 1949), pp. 99-308; and "Einführende Betrachtungen Ober den Schamanismus," *Paideuma*, V (1951), 88-97 and in lectures that we had the honor to deliver, in March, 1950, at the University of Rome and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, at the invitation of Professors R. Pettazzoni and G. Tucci.

MIRCEA ELIADE

*Paris, March, 1946-March, 1951*

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FOREWORD

POSTSCRIPT ( 1962)

Translations of this work into Italian, German, and Spanish were published in 1953, 1957, and 1960, and each time we took the opportunity to make corrections and improvements in a book that, for all its shortcomings, was the first to treat shamanism *as a whole*. But it has been in preparing the text for the present edition in English that we have thoroughly corrected and considerably added to the original work. Numerous studies of the various shamanisms have been published during the past ten years. We have attempted to make use of these in our text, or at least to mention them in the notes. Though we have recorded nearly two hundred new publications ( that is, which have appeared since 1948), we lay no claim to have exhausted the recent bibliography of shamanism. But, as we said before, this book is the work of a historian of religions, who approaches the subject as a comparatist; it cannot take the place of specialists' monographs devoted to various individual aspects of shamanism. The present English translation may be considered the second edition, corrected and enlarged, of the volume published in 1951 under the title *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*. Cf. also our article "Recent Works on Shamanism: a Review Article," *History of Religions*, I (summer, 1961), 152-86.

Once more we wish to express our gratitude to Bollingen Foundation; the grant that it accorded us has enabled us to continue our study of shamanism long after the publication of the French edition.

By relieving us from teaching during the third trimester in 1958 and 1959, Dean Jerald Brauer, of the Federated Theological Faculty of the University of Chicago, made it possible for us to devote ourselves to preparing the present edition. We tender him sincere thanks.

Finally, we are glad to have this opportunity to express all our gratitude to our loyal translator and friend, Willard R. Trask, who, once again, has devoted his best skill to producing an adequate rendering of our book. Also, special thanks are due to Miss Sonia Volochova and William McGuire for their assistance in editing the manuscript and to A. S. B. Glover for preparing the index.

MIRCEA ELIADE

*University of Chicago*  
*June, 1962*

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NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

Transcriptions of Russian names and terms and of names and terms derived, through Russian transliterations, from the languages of the various Siberian tribes follow in general the transliteration system adopted by the Joint Committee on Slavic Studies, appointed by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. The system is not applied to the actual names of the Siberian tribes or to personal names that have established spellings: e.g., Sandschejew, Shirokogoroff.

The spelling of names of tribes, including names of Siberian tribes, follows that established in George Peter Murdock, *Outline of World Cultures* (Human Relations Area Files Press, New Haven, 19.58).

For names and terms transliterated from Oriental and other non-European languages, the usages of current English and American scholarship are followed in so far as possible, except in quotations.

Where necessary, variant spellings of forms of authors' names and variant transliterations of foreign words are given in parentheses: e.g., Waldemar G. Bogoras (V. G. Bogoras); *tabjan* (*tabyan*).

Full references for works cited in the footnotes are given in the List of Works Cited.



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# SHAMANISM

Archaic Techniques  
of Ecstasy



# General Considerations. Recruiting Methods. Shamanism and Mystical Vocation

## *Approaches*

SINCE the beginning of the century, ethnologists have fallen into the habit of using the terms "shaman," "medicine man," "sorcerer," and "magician" interchangeably to designate certain individuals possessing magico-religious powers and found in all "primitive" societies. By extension, the same terminology has been applied in studying the religious history of "civilized" peoples, and there have been discussions, for example, of an Indian, an Iranian, a Germanic, a Chinese, and even a Babylonian "shamanism" with reference to the "primitive" elements attested in the corresponding religions. For many reasons this confusion can only militate against any understanding of the shamanic phenomenon. If the word "shaman" is taken to mean any magician, sorcerer, medicine man, or ecstatic found throughout the history of religions and religious ethnology, we arrive at a notion at once extremely complex and extremely vague; it seems, furthermore, to serve no purpose, for we already have the terms "magician" or "sorcerer" to express notions as unlike and as ill-defined as "primitive magic" or "primitive mysticism." We consider it advantageous to restrict the use of the words "shaman" and "shamanism," precisely to avoid misunderstandings and to cast a clearer light on the history of "magic" and "sorcery." For, of

course, the shaman is also a magician and medicine man; he is believed to cure, like all doctors, and to perform miracles of the fakir type, like all magicians, whether primitive or modern. But beyond this, he is a psychopomp, and he may also be priest, mystic, and poet. In the dim, "confusionistic" mass of the religious life of archaic societies considered *as a whole*, shamanism—taken in its strict and exact sense—already shows a structure of its own and implies a "history" that there is every reason to clarify.

Shamanism in the strict sense is pre-eminently a religious phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia. The word comes to us, through the Russian, from the Tungusic *l'aman*. In the other languages of Central and North Asia the corresponding terms are: Yakut *oyuna* (*oyuna*), Mongolian *biigii*, *bagii* (*huge*, *bii*), and *udagan* (cf. also Buryat *udayan*, Yakut *udoyan*: "shamaness"), Turko-Tatar *kam* (Altaic *kam*, *gam*, Mongolian *kami*, etc.). It has been sought to explain the Tungusic term by the Pali *samana*, and we shall return to this possible etymology (which is part of the great problem of Indian influences on Siberian religions ) in the last chapter of this book.' Throughout the immense area comprising Central and North Asia, the magico-religious life of society centers on the shaman. This, of course, does not mean that he is the one and only manipulator of the sacred, nor that religious activity is completely usurped by him. In many tribes the sacrificing priest coexists with the shaman, not to mention the fact that every head of a family is also the head of the domestic cult. Nevertheless, the shaman remains the dominating figure; for through this whole region in which the ecstatic experience is considered the religious experience par excellence, the shaman, and he alone, is the great master of ecstasy. A first definition of this complex phenomenon, and perhaps the least hazardous, will be: shamanism =, *technique of ecstasy*.

As such, it was documented and described by the earliest travelers in the various countries of Central and North Asia.



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