



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Introduction to the Study of Religion

Prof Bettina E. Schmidt

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Shamanism and Animism

- Old terms with new meaning

Animism as Early Theory of Religion

- Animism = belief in spirits
- Regarded by scholars in the 19th century as the earliest form of religion

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917)

- professor of anthropology at Oxford
- challenged the common attitude of his time by applying Darwinism to human cultures



*E.B. Tylor. Aet. 67
From a photograph by Maull and Fox*

Tylor's evolutionist scheme of religion

- Animism [=belief that everything and everyone has a soul] on lowest level
- → Polytheism [belief in many gods]
- → Monotheism [belief in one god]
- and in the end (highest level) → Science
[=>religion is no longer necessary]

After Tylor

- Animism is no longer regarded as earliest form of religion
- -> Tylor's evolutionism is rejected today
- However, term "animism" is still used

Contemporary Animism

- Graham Harvey writes that “animism now means different things, refers to different experiences, labels different theories.”
- *contemporary* animism = “activities of people who can be identified as animists” (even if they do not use the term)
-

Diversity of beliefs

- Animism
- Shamanism
- Many deities (with one creator god)
- Totemism
- and many more

Early Illustration of Shaman



- An illustration of a shaman in Siberia, produced by the Dutch explorer Nicolaes Witsen in the late 17th century

Origin of term

- Term 'shaman' derives originally from the Evenk language (Tungusic) in Siberia
 - "The Tungus verb *sama* means "to shake the lower part of the body" when one speaks about wild animals and "to act in a shamanic manner" in a ritual context" (p. 285).
- Applied to male and female
- Used by Russian explorers for Siberian traditions since the 15th century

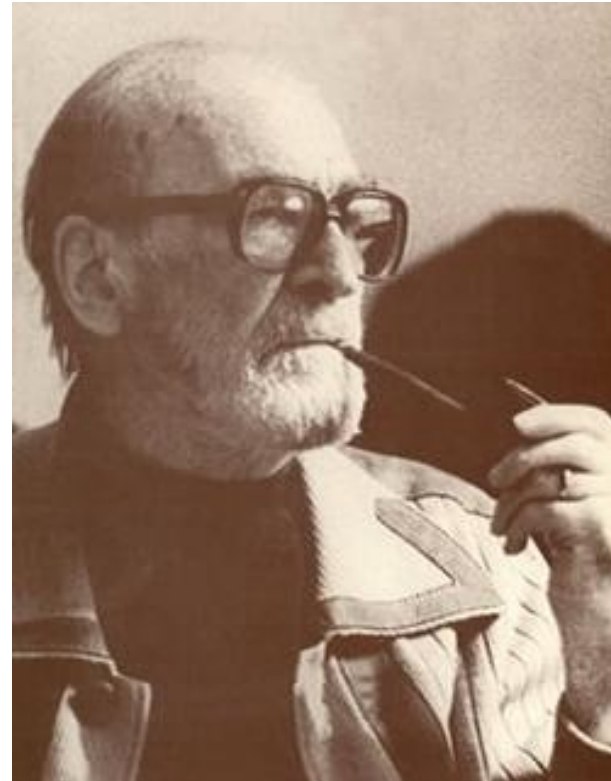


Mircea Eliade

- ...describes shamanism as “technique of religious ecstasy”
 - shamans are intermediaries between the human world and the spirit worlds
- Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton University Press 1972, pp. 3–7)

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986)

- Born in Romania, worked and lived first in France and (since 1956) in the USA
- Historian of Religion (most importantly at the University of Chicago) and novelist



- Among his academic books are contributions about shamanism, yoga and the Sacred and the Profane
- Editor in chief of the Encyclopaedia of Religion (first edition)

Roberte Hamayon

- argues that shamanism is a Western concept
- And very different from shamanism of Siberian hunters before the Soviet era



Shamanism as Way of Life

- Humans live in relation to other beings including animals
 - “Humans are just one species among others” (p. 285)
- The shaman is charged by the community to look after the community and communicate with the spirits.

Shamanism Today

- After the end of the Soviet regime Siberian people were free to revitalise old practices
- Shamanism as authentic indigenous practice that became cornerstone of their identity

Activity

- Now go to the link below and click on the video (embedded in an article by The Guardian). It shows you a small ceremony of a shaman in China today.