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Title of extract: **Shamans and Animists**

Name of Author: **Harvey, G.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Religion in Focus. Harvey, G.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Equinox**

Pages scanned: **55 - 73**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **What is Religion? TRRS4012**

Name of Designated Person
authorising scanning:

Date authorised: 10.04.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

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Shamans and Animists

Graham Harvey

A man in a bird mask is playing a steady rhythm on a bodhran (pronounced "bow-rahn," an Irish-style frame drum) on a high ridge overlooking a wide plain. As he dances himself into a light trance, the drum beat gets quieter and he settles himself down at the roots of a tall tree. He has come to this place to renew his friendship with what he calls the "spirits of the place" and to "enter the dream of the land." Later he will drink tea from a thermos flask before driving back to his home in a nearby city in England. He will have found new energy and enthusiasm to pursue his job as an environmental educator working with groups in schools and country parks. He may even have received fresh ideas about ways to do his work. He is a shaman, a mediator between the human and other-than-human communities. Shamans are also healers: this man tries to heal relationships, especially helping people to restore good relations with the other inhabitants of the places in which they live—that is, the animals, plants and other living beings. He does not teach a religion called "shamanism." Most of the people with whom he works have no idea that he is a shaman. Indeed, many have never heard the word or, if they have, it was on a TV programme about Siberia or the Amazon. Few associate what this man does with what they know about shamans. He does not advertise his title or worldview but encourages and enables people to live ecologically responsible and celebratory lives. He has colleagues who are not shamans but are also committed environmental educators. But, he says, all his inspiration, commitment, and passion come from his shamanic engagement with empowering beings whom he visits in the otherworld he accesses while in trance on that high ridge away from the city.

This chapter is about shamans and their communities. It introduces the world or the nature of reality as it is understood by two loose groups

of people. (These are not organised groups, and the differences between them are not fixed.) The first group can be labelled “animists” (a term that will be explained later) whose worldview and lifeways make shamans necessary for certain purposes. The second can be called “self-religionists” (again, this will be explained soon) for some of whom it is desirable to become a shaman. The animists are the chief focus of the chapter, along with animist shamans. Some attention is devoted to self-religion shamans in the later part of the chapter. The conclusion will note that in reality people often shift back and forward between the two groups—which, anyway, only exist as broad categories of academic study.

First, we must confront the problem that until recently there was no religion called “shamanism.” In fact, the recent idea that shamans and those who employ them practice “shamanism” might surprise many of those so labelled. It is not just that the label is strange to them: it is common for strangers, visitors, and academics to feel they need to label something that locals or insiders take for granted as part of their everyday lives. But in this case, as far as some of those involved are concerned, the title “shamanism” might seem as strange as if Christianity were called “priestism” or Buddhism “monkism.” What shamans, priests, and monks do is of great importance to many people, but their technical activities (doing what shamans, priests, and monks do) are far from the whole of these religions. It is also important to note that shamans are not the only religious officials that animists might approach or employ. Indeed, to identify people as members of a religion called “shamanism” when they might only rarely call upon shamans pays far too much attention to such matters.

Nonetheless, that there is now a religion called shamanism is evidenced by the large number of books and websites with “shamanism” in their titles. Many of these are devoted to helping people become shamans, and it is now possible to train to do so almost anywhere. There has been a massive, rapid, and widespread increase in global, popular, positive interest in shamans and their worldviews and practices. While I will argue that these new shamans are not the same as the other kind (the ones I’m calling “animists”), and while it is true that “shamanism” is a new phenomenon, this does not mean that new ways of being a shaman are not religious or interesting. The two kinds of shaman are just different, existing in different cultural contexts—and the difference between them helps us understand both.

The first part of the chapter is about animists, then something will be said about the shamans they employ. In fact, these shamans are themselves animists who work for other animists. This is a label that is now applied to people who understand the world to be a community of persons, most

of whom are not human, but all of whom deserve respect. Animists are people who are involved in learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons, whether or not they are human.¹ They resort to (animist) shamans when they need someone who is good at mediating with various other-than-human persons, or who can help restore the well-being of individuals and communities by various means.

The following vignettes are about a community of First Nation Canadians or, more accurately, indigenous Newfoundlanders. They offer some insights into what animism means to a community when things are going reasonably well, when there is no need to call in shamans to solve problems. Later we will discuss the kinds of problems that make shamans necessary to animists and what they do about it.

Conne River Powwow

Eagles are quite common along Newfoundland’s Conne River. They live among the forested rocky crags across the river from the Mi’kmaq town of Miawpukek (a First Nations reserve recognised by the Newfoundland and Canadian governments). They often take fish from the community’s fishery in the Bay d’Espoir. Local people, therefore, see them every day. However, when the inhabitants of Miawpukek held their first traditional, non-competitive powwow in 1996, an eagle flew one perfect circle over the central drum group during the final honor song, and then flew back to its treetop eyrie across the river. Everyone, locals and visitors, noticed. Cries of “*kitpu*” or “eagle” simultaneously greeted the eagle, expressed pleasure at its beauty and participation, and declared that its flight demonstrated approval for the event. The flight of this eagle, in this way, at this moment, was celebrated as an encouragement to the Mi’kmaq community to continue the process of returning to their observance of traditional lifeways. Several people told me that what was happening at Miawpukek was not a “revitalisation movement” because traditional ways did not need revitalising: the eagles and bears had always maintained them. Now that significant numbers of the indigenous human population of the area, and of the island more generally, were returning to participate in traditional ways of life and traditional understandings of the world, a representative of the eagles was honoring them for coming home and joining in.

Powwows are indigenous North American cultural festivals with a particular stress on dancing. Sometimes dancers compete for prizes (best costume, best dancer of a particular style), but at Conne River this

1. Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2005).

first powwow was not competitive. The drum groups and dancers were part of a celebration of the recovery of pride in being indigenous or native. The dances were not thought of as "religious" or "sacred," except perhaps for the "honor songs" which paid respect to elders and veterans and involved the use of eagle feathers and eagle-bone whistles, which are considered sacred by many native people in North America. Near the powwow dance grounds were a series of more explicitly sacred places. A fire was kept alight throughout the three days of the powwow and was the focus of ceremonies each dawn. People would gather and smoke a pipe of tobacco or kinnikinnick (a mixture of local herbs) together, always offering smoke to the six directions (east, south, west, north, above and below). They would also make small offerings to the fire. When they talked about this they would say that it was important to feed the fire not only with wood but also with gifts of sacred herbs and even with the first portion of the food prepared for all powwow participants. "Feeding the fire" was obviously not just a metaphor; the fire was understood to desire food and to be grateful to those who made offerings, as well as those who gave it wood.

On the same promontory on a bend in the river, the organisers had constructed four sweat lodges. These were temporary domed structures in which about a dozen people could sit around a central hole in the ground. Stones were heated up in a large fire outside between the four lodges, and at appropriate moments in a long ceremony they were brought in and placed in the hole. Water poured on the hot stones immediately turned to steam and raised the temperature dramatically. The coverings on the lodges kept the heat in and the light out. The ceremony in the darkness and the heat was not undertaken for individual health (lodges are not like Scandinavian saunas) but in order to pray for the well-being of all living beings. Some people talk about "stone people lodges" rather than "sweat lodges," implying that the most powerful participants in the ceremony are not the sweating humans but the rocks who are understood to be giving up their lives for the benefit of all other living beings. They are addressed as "grandfathers," a term of respect and kinship.

One day during the powwow I was talking with the leader of one of the sweat-lodge ceremonies about everything that was happening that week. He started to talk about how Conne River was not only home to human people, but to a wide range of other-than-human people including the bears, eagles, fish, trees, rocks, and the fire. He said that there were also people who were only seen in visions, people who might come to teach someone how to live a better life, or to give them some piece of knowledge that they could use to help others. He said that the craggy rock across the river was home to a community of "little people." But as



Figure 3.1: A sweat lodge or "stone people lodge" with a corner of the covers lifted to reveal the framework. (Photo by Joyce Gannon.)

soon as he said this, he stopped talking to me, walked to the river bank and seemed to speak to someone over the river. Later he told me that it was not appropriate to speak about such powerful people without their permission and without offering respect. He apologised but insisted that no more should be said about them. The important thing, he said, was to talk with them if they showed themselves to you, but otherwise to leave them in peace. Having been given similar advice in Ireland, I suspect that the "little people" are not little; rather, this term is used to speak about powerful beings without distracting them from whatever they may be doing at the time.

These four short stories about my experiences at Miawpukek's first powwow (the eagle's flight, the fire being fed, the sweat lodge ceremonies, and the "little people") illustrate facets of a way of living that can be called "animism." The Conne River Band of the Mi'kmaq Nation are not the only animists in the world. Many indigenous peoples share animist understandings of the nature of the world and practice animistic ceremonies. Animism has also been a factor in the revival of Paganism, especially among those who stress the importance of belonging to particular places, those who have sought advice from indigenous people, and those are the forefront of Pagan eco-activism.

It is important to remember that there are many different kinds of animists. Animism is not a single religion, but a label for a kind of religion or a trend recognisable among religions. This chapter provides an introduction to the flavour of animism using real (or slightly fictionalised) examples from many places, but it does not claim that all animists are the same or that they agree on everything. This is particularly true because animism (like all living religions) arises from and is expressed in particular relationships. Animists in particular places engage with *specific* living beings, or "other-than-human persons," who live in the same area.

The intention of these introductory stories is to suggest issues that most, maybe all, animists would recognise as being important. At the heart of each story is knowing that the world is a community of living beings—persons—most of whom are not human, but all of whom deserve respect and are willing to communicate. In sweat lodges, people often end each round of prayers by saying "all our relations," recognising that all living beings (which might include rocks) are related. (There are many different sweat lodge traditions, and not all of them use "all our relations" as a refrain, but all address other beings in kinship terms). This is the common ground that animists share. The precise question of how one recognises a living being and how one actually engages in relationships with other-than-human persons generates the diversity of local styles of animism. Later we will discuss the problems caused by animist ways of life that require shamans to act as mediators and healers. The following two sections, however, address two contrasting uses of the word "animism." These will not only enrich our understanding of how animists engage with the world, but will also prevent confusion caused by later reading of different interpretations of animism.

Edward Tylor's Old Animism

Many dictionaries define animism as a "belief in souls and spirits" or as the "attribution of soul or life to inanimate or natural objects." Sometimes animism is said to be the belief in a supernatural force animating natural objects, the world or the cosmos. The problem with these definitions is that they suggest, if not state, that animism is wrong because it does not match the modern notion that "natural objects" (such as trees and animals) do not have souls or life in the same way that humans do. These dictionaries also define "soul" as some part of humans that is different to their bodies, possibly combining consciousness, will, and emotion. It might be seen as the part of humans that is immortal. Certainly it is said to be distinct from physical or material form. More detailed discussions would show that in some cultures it is understood that people have more

than one "soul," each performing a different function. Despite the complexity of these systems of knowledge, dictionaries often allege that animists are simply and childishly confused about the nature of the world, projecting human attributes (life, soul, consciousness, immortality, mind) on to inanimate, "natural" (i.e. merely physical) objects.

The dictionaries are following a tradition established by Edward Tylor in the late nineteenth century. Tylor is sometimes called the "father of anthropology." He was interested in a remarkable range of human activities. In his two-volume work *Primitive Culture*, Tylor argued that religion is a "belief in souls or spirits."² He asserted that these are mistaken beliefs: such entities do not really exist but came to be believed in because their existence would explain strange dreams and feverish hallucinations. Also, he thought, such beliefs were persuasive because they comforted people in the face of death. That is, if you dream of someone whom you know to be far away, perhaps your "soul" is travelling to meet them. If you know that someone possesses a "spirit," you can hope that when they die you may meet them again in another form or in another realm. Tylor drew on evidence provided by travelers, missionaries, colonial officers and many other sources from around the world. He was not chiefly concerned with offering a careful ethnographic description of particular people and their cultures and knowledges. He thought that the mass of data that he collected was evidence of particular local types of a common, global phenomenon called "religion." He also argued that it was possible to use this information to discover the first creation of religion and to trace its evolution throughout history. Thus, he claimed to have defined the one thing that all religious ideas and practices have in common. His conclusion was that at an early stage in human cultural evolution people adopted the mistaken belief in souls and spirits, and that only modern rational science could correct the error and discover the real world.

Much of Tylor's work was challenged as soon as it was published, and now it survives only as an example of superseded Victorian scholarship. His work cannot be cited as an accurate description of any particular culture, and no one is convinced by his claim to have defined the essence of religion. Nonetheless, dictionaries still echo his assertion that there are people called animists who believe in souls and spirits. Perhaps this is related to the fact that Tylor's views coincide closely with the modern notion that only humans possess mind while everything else is mere matter. This notion, too, has been challenged from many perspectives but remains generative and pervasive for some.

2. Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1913 [1871]).

The New Animism

The term "animist" has been adopted in some places as a self-designation, a label by which people are happy to identify themselves. For example, many West Africans who observe traditional religious practices but are not Christians or Muslims call themselves animists. Increasing numbers of British Pagans call themselves animists, especially those who stress the importance of respecting the diversity of life in their immediate surroundings. What these people mean by "animism" is not what Edward Tylor meant. Contemporary scholars use the term in a new way that fits better with evidence provided by conversations with animists and participation with them in relationships in particular places.

The new use of the term animism labels ways of living in the world that understand it to be a community of living persons, most of whom are not human, but all of whom deserve respect and engage in relationships of various kinds. In contrast with Tylor's stress on beliefs in souls and spirits, the new animism is concerned with behaving towards other beings with respect—or "caution and care" as Mary Black says.³ The key words are different: "souls" and "belief" in the old animism, "persons" and "behaving respectfully" in the new animism. Many of the scholars interested in animism draw on the work of Irving Hallowell, who spent time with the Ojibwa of Beren's River in southern central Canada in the 1930s and 1940s.

In the Ojibwa language a grammatical distinction is made between animate and inanimate genders but not between masculine and feminine genders. A suffix, *-g*, is added to nouns and verbs that refer to animate persons rather than inanimate objects. For example, the plural form of the word *asin* (stone) is *asiniig*, identifying stones as grammatically animate.⁴ Ojibwa speakers use the same personal pronoun (*wiin*) for masculine and feminine persons, not making much of the difference between masculine and feminine (grammatically anyway), but they use animate gender terms for a wider range of beings than the English language officially recognises. In practice some English speakers do talk about their ships, cars or computers as if they were animate beings rather than inanimate objects, giving them names and applying the personal pronouns "he" or "she" rather than the impersonal "it." In the French language, tables are marked as grammatically feminine, *la table* rather than *le table*. Do French speakers treat "female" tables as animate female persons?

3. Mary B. Black, "Ojibway Power Belief Systems," in *The Anthropology of Power*, ed. Raymond D. Fogelson and Richard N. Adams (New York: Academic, 1977), 141-51.
4. John D. Nichols and Earl Nyholm, *A Concise Dictionary of Minnesota Ojibwe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 14.

Perhaps they do in poetry and children's stories, but what about in everyday reality? Just so, the question arises, do the Ojibwa treat grammatically animate stones as animate persons? Do they speak with stones or act in other ways that reveal intentions to build or maintain relationships?

Irving Hallowell asked an old Ojibwa man, "Are *all* the stones we see about us here alive?"⁵ Grammatically all stones everywhere are animate, but did the old man actually think that particular rocks around him were alive? The man (who is never named) answered, "No! but *some* are." He had witnessed a particular stone following the leader of a shamanic ceremony around a tent as he sang. Another powerful leader is said to have had a large stone that would open when he tapped it three times, allowing him to remove a small bag of herbs when he needed it in ceremonies. Hallowell was told that when a white trader was digging his potato patch, he found a stone that looked like it may be important. He called for the leader of another ceremony who knelt down to talk to the stone, asking if it had come from someone's ceremonial tent. The stone is said to have denied this. Movement, gift-giving and conversation are three indicators of the animate nature of relational beings, or persons.

Hallowell makes it clear that the key point in each account is not that stones do things of their own volition (however remarkable this claim might seem) but that they engage in relationships. For the Ojibwa the interesting question is not "how do we know stones are alive?" but "what is the appropriate way for people, of whatever species, to relate?" This is as true for humans as it is for stones, trees, animals, birds, fish, and all other beings that might be recognised as persons. Persons are known to be persons when they relate to other persons in particular ways, more or less intimately, willingly or respectfully. (This is not to forget that enmity is also a relationship, and we will think about this in a while.) The category of "person" is only applicable *when* beings are relating with others. This is quite different to the understanding of ontology (the way being is understood) in most European-derived cultures, in which personhood is an interior quality, a fact about an individual (human) who is self-conscious. Hallowell recognised this by insisting that we are not talking here about different "belief systems"—epistemologies—but about different ontologies, different ways of being in the world, different ways of living. Indeed, we could say that the Ojibwa old man lived in a different world from Hallowell's until the latter learnt to see the world as his teacher showed it to be.

5. A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View," in *Readings in Indigenous Religions*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Continuum, 2002), 24. Originally published in *Culture and History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, ed. Stanley Diamond (New York, Columbia University Press, 1952). Citations are to the Continuum edition.

The World Is a Community

Having learnt from his Ojibwa hosts, Hallowell coined the phrase (used several times in this chapter already) "other-than-human persons" to refer to the animate beings with whom humans share the world. He has been criticised for privileging humanity, as if he were saying that what makes something a person is their likeness to humans. In fact, he is clear that "person" is not defined by human characteristics or behaviours. The term is a much larger umbrella than "human." All beings communicate intentionally and act towards others relationally: this makes them "persons." It is useful *for us* (humans) to speak about "human-" and "other-than-human" persons only because (a) we are humans talking to humans (if we were bears we might speak of "other-than-bear persons"), and (b) because the English language encourages people to hear the word "person" as a reference to humans. It is a common problem in speaking of religions or of cultures other than our own that we do not have words that translate exactly what other people say in their language. If the phrase "other-than-human person" seems clumsy, this is only because it derives from a world that speakers of English and other European languages do not easily inhabit. A great weight of history and accepted ideology encourages us to think that humans are different from all other beings. Our uniqueness has been asserted so often that we find it difficult to see ourselves as related to all other living beings. We easily speak of our "environment" as if we were surrounded by a heap of resources available for the taking. "Nature" is like the blank page on which humans write significant "cultural" words. But animists live in a different world: a community of persons all of whom are capable of relationship, communication, agency and desire. There is no mute or inert "nature," but only the many competing conversations of cultural life. Perhaps some more examples will enrich understanding here.

All Our Relations

Another of Hallowell's informants told him that he had been visiting with an elderly couple during a thunder storm. He said, "There was one clap of thunder after another. Suddenly the old man turned to his wife and asked, 'Did you hear what was said?' 'No,' she replied, 'I didn't catch it.'" Hallowell comments that

The casualness of the remark and even the trivial character of the anecdote demonstrate the psychological depth of the "social relations" with other-than-human beings that becomes explicit in the behavior

of the Ojibwa as a consequence of the cognitive "set" induced by their culture.⁶

In other words, after a lifetime living as animists this couple assumed that thunder is an act of communication.

On a short visit to the midwestern United States, I was invited to go sage-picking with a group of Lakota and Ojibwe (a variety of spellings and different names are used by the people: not only Ojibwa and Ojibwe but also Anishinaabeg, Chippewa and others). They use sage in their prayers throughout the year, burning some when they seek purification, and making up small bundles to offer as gifts to helpful other-than-human persons. We drove out of the city to a location where sage grew plentifully. Before cutting any sage, or even entering the field, everyone took pinches of sage left over from the previous year and held it to their hearts while introducing themselves to the field of sage, and requesting permission to cut some leaves for the following year. After a pause each person placed their sage offering on the ground. Once these gifts were given and one of the elders had indicated that permission was given, everyone gathered new leaves, being careful not to destroy entire plants and expressing gratitude each time they cut.

A similar experience was told to me by a Pagan couple who cut holly, ivy, and yew annually in order to decorate their home for their midwinter Yule festival. Their common practice had been to introduce themselves and their purpose at a spring in the heart of a wood near their home. They lit a candle and some incense by the spring while offering season's greetings to the wood and its inhabitants. Then they offered gifts to each tree from which they cut greenery, sometimes pouring libations of some drink at the roots of the trees, or tying strands of wool around a branch. One year, as they were leaving the wood, they saw a holly tree burdened with ripe berries. What they had cut until then held few berries, and they thought that just a few sprigs with their red fruit would enhance their celebrations. In too much of a hurry, or thinking that they had already addressed the whole wood, they attempted to cut from a branch. Although there was no wind that day, the prickly tree swiped the couple. Chastened, they apologized and left, being careful in future visits to pay particular attention to that tree.

In one of her excellent discussions of Aboriginal Australian relationships with their land and other-than-human neighbours Debbie Rose writes that not only humans, but also "other animals like kangaroos have their own rituals and law, and ... they too take care of relationships of

6. Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology," 34.

well-being" among all the inhabitants of an area or "country." All related beings share rights and responsibilities, and are expected to be committed to and concerned for each other's "flourishing in the world."⁷ Rose uses the term "totemism" to refer to these relationships and commitments that cross species boundaries, involving high degrees of mutual care. The word "totem" originated among the Ojibwe and refers to clans that include humans and particular animals and plants. It has come to be used more widely, but Rose demonstrates that many Aboriginal Australians understand totemic clans similarly to Ojibwe, i.e. as close inter-species kindreds. The title of one of her books points to the central importance of these relationships in making (human/Aboriginal) people what they are: *Dingo Makes Us Human*.⁸ Rose is careful to point out that relationships are not always harmonious: they can lead to tension, conflict and competition. There is often a need for mediators or diplomats to intervene between groups and individuals to sort out problems (the kind of intervention that might be the main activity of shamans in some communities, as we'll see). But in a community that privileges respect and seeks cooperation there is likely to be a bias towards trying to resolve differences amicably rather than destructively.

This series of short narratives illustrates a variety of points about animism. First among them is that animists treat the world as a community of living beings. Animists assume or expect that other-than-human persons might speak with them, give and receive gifts, and in other ways act intentionally as members of a local cross-species community. On occasions these relationships can be made tense or even aggressive by the competing desires and needs of particular beings or species meeting others. These various ways in which particular animists act towards other persons, human or otherwise, imply too that not all animists are alike; there are different kinds of animism. This diversity is hinted at in the vignettes by the inclusion of different groups of indigenous people and of British Pagans. But there is more: the indigenous people include both those who hold "traditional" worldviews and those who identify as Roman Catholic Christians. As was said earlier, "animism" is not a label for a single religion but for a style of religious activity. It is a style that seems appropriate not only to those commonly labelled "animists" but also to many other people.

These short narratives should also make it evident that animists do not

7. Deborah B. Rose, "Totemism, Regions, and Co-management in Aboriginal Australia," draft paper for the Conference of the International Association for the Study of Common Property, Vancouver, June 10-14, 1998, <http://www.indiana.edu/~iascp/Drafts/rose.pdf>

8. Deborah B. Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

privilege a supernatural or spiritual realm over material, physical reality. The phrase "other-than-human persons" embraces plants, rocks, animals, and thunder storms. Contrary to what Tylor's version of animism suggested, there has been only one reference, so far, to any animist belief in spirits and souls. But when the shaman whose story introduces this chapter speaks of "spirits of place" it is likely he does so only because he thinks that is easier than naming the specific beings of different kinds with whom he relates. Possibly, too, he is speaking of what others call the *genius loci*, a Latin term that refers to the powerful guardian of particular places.⁹ Interestingly, he is not in the least interested in "believing" in such beings. He says he is far too busy talking (and sometimes arguing) with the other-than-human inhabitants of the place to worry about belief and believing. Although some interpreters of animism insert the word "spirit" into their discussions, speaking of "tree spirits" or "rock spirits," the word hardly aids our understanding of what animists mean when they assert that trees and rocks intentionally communicate.

Otherworlds and Spirits

Having said all this, and without weakening the statement at all, it is important to note that animists might also assert that there are more elusive, less robustly material beings whom it is possible to encounter. According to Ojibwe animists, one of the signs that someone is a powerful person is that they are able to change their shape or transform their appearance. What may look like a thunder cloud one minute may appear as a rock or a bear or a human at another time.

Many animists say that there are beings in the world unrecognised as yet by rational scientists. In common with many other people they might continue to talk with their deceased relatives. In elaborate ceremonies or in casual everyday comments, people tell the dead what they are doing and seek advice and help. In many communities it is deemed appropriate to speak to any and every deceased person. In others, only those who were wise or powerful people before death are revered as ancestors after death. Especially wise or powerful ancestors might become the focus of ceremonies conducted only by people who have trained in the use of trance to be able to access an other-than-everyday reality in which they can converse with the elite among the ancestors. Just as animists give gifts when cutting plants, seeking reciprocal gifts in return, so they make culturally appropriate offerings to the ancestors.

9. For example, Barry Patterson, *The Art of Conversation with the Genius Loci* (Milverton: Capall Bann, 2005).

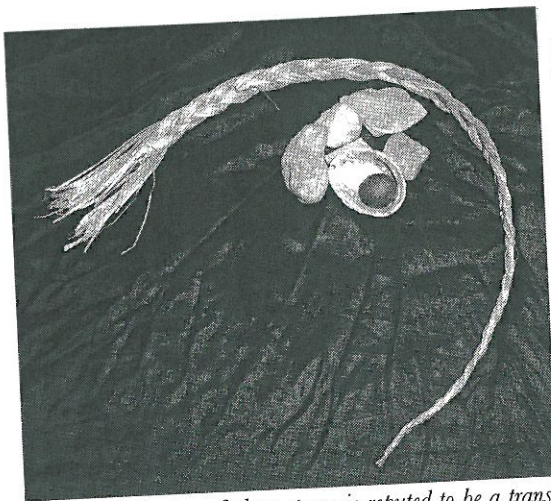


Figure 3.2: *One of these stones is reputed to be a transformation of a thunder-being. Intimate (relational) knowledge is required to distinguish between them. The braid of sweet grass is an offering to the stones. (Photo by Graham Harvey.)*

thus to hunger and maybe even starvation. But even respectful hunting and eating has its dangers. Animists do not see the world as a resource given to them to exploit but as a community of persons, relational beings worthy of respect. Also, death might not be the end of existence, but a particularly dramatic transformation into another stage of life. If the world is a community of persons, how is it possible to eat? Ceremonies in which animists request permission to take lives for the purpose of eating are not romantic decorations of an otherwise hard life. They are key elements of the relationships that animists work hard to maintain between themselves and other-than-human persons. Animists are taught by their elders (people responsible for inculcating appropriate ways of acting towards others) that relationships involve reciprocity. This can be wonderful when you are busy offering respectful gifts, but sometimes relationships go badly wrong. By accident or intention someone gets insulted. One insult or act of violence is likely to be reciprocated with more insults or violence unless someone steps in to mediate. Animists often need shamans.

Shamans and Shamanism

The word “shaman” derives from the Tungus language family spoken in Siberia. Among the Tungus-speaking Evenk, for example, it refers to reli-

Traditionally, the Inuit of the Arctic live by hunting seals and other sea creatures in the winter and caribou and other land creatures in the summer. Like many hunting groups, they say that animals have a leader, a Mistress or Master of Animals, who controls the number of animals taken by hunters. Not only is it important to offer respect to this leader, but it is vital that particular animals are treated respectfully too. Any insult is likely to lead to failure in hunting, and

gious ceremonial specialists whose job it is to serve their (animist) communities in particular ways. They deal with some of the problems caused by living in animist ways. They are the diplomats who negotiate between human communities and the wider other-than-human community. If someone gets injured, shamans are called upon to find out if there is a personal cause or if this is “just an accident.” Illnesses are often thought to be caused by aggrieved or aggressive otherworld beings, diseases are persons (just as bacteria and, perhaps, viruses may be). There are also predators in the world who consider humans to be prey, desirable sources of food. If animals feel insulted they will make sure that the hunters will fail to find anything to eat. In each case, shamans are necessary.

There has been considerable debate about whether the term “shaman” should be used with reference to anyone outside of Siberia, or anyone apart from Tungus-speakers. The problem is that by applying the label one might make the mistake of thinking that what one shaman does is the same as what all shamans do. In fact, there are differences even between Evenk shamans. Interestingly, these differences are caused by the fact that they are animists. That is, each shaman is involved in more or less intimate relationships with particular other-than-human people, especially those from otherworlds (dimensions of reality normally alien to most humans). They are part of a group (the shaman and other-than-human and otherworld persons) who work together to heal people from particular illness-persons, to deal with particular animal-persons who may need persuading to become available to humans as food, or to gain knowledge otherwise inaccessible but necessary to the continuity of life or the well-being of society.

What makes some scholars sure that it is necessary to use the term “shaman” more widely is that there are religious experts in many parts of the world who perform ceremonies for similar (not always identical) purposes and do so in similar (but never identical) ways. The most common practice that leads some ritual leaders to be identified as shamans is the ability to enter trance states deliberately.

One scholar, Mircea Eliade, has dominated the study of what he called “shamanism.” He placed techniques for altering states of consciousness, achieving trance or “ecstasy,” the sense of being outside one’s body and especially the sense of journeying to other dimensions, at the heart of what shamans do. Those who have followed Eliade’s lead have used the phrase “altered state(s) of consciousness,” or its abbreviation “ASC,” so much that it is hard to see shamanism as anything but the deliberate manipulation of inner states, the quest for ecstasy.

Eliade asserted that there is a world-wide phenomenon, originating in the earliest phases of human evolution, in which people set apart in

some way (at birth or in a life-threatening illness or accident) are trained by more experienced shamans or by otherworld persons to control their conscious states in order to perceive and enter other realities. Once there, they gain knowledge and power to help their communities. The title of Eliade's book summarises his whole argument: *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*.¹⁰ The echoes of Edward Tylor's claims about animism ring loudly here. Eliade has not been rejected quite as decisively as Tylor, but there are few scholars who support his argument or approach without significant qualifications. Leaving aside the idea that we could know what the earliest "archaic" religion of humanity was like, there is just too much about Eliade's work that reveals it to be his own wished-for edifice. It is not acceptable to dismiss as "degenerate" those who do not quite fit Eliade's package—failing to journey into otherworlds using one or more of Eliade's preferred techniques, or not privileging a putative upper-world as Eliade did. In the end, there is too much Eliade in his construction of "shamanism" to be an acceptable lens through which to examine what shamans do.

Rejecting the notion that there was any such (systematised) thing as "shamanism" before Western travellers and scholars invented it out of the various practices and worldviews they observed (or imagined) among indigenous people, we are helped to see that what animist shamans do is rooted in what animists need them to do. Instead of paying so much attention to the strange practice of trance or "ecstasy" we might use the acronym "ASC" to talk about "altered styles of communication" rather than "altered states of consciousness." This aids understanding because it pays attention to the purposes for which shamans alter consciousness rather than to unusual techniques. Shamans communicate (with words and rituals, and sometimes with aggressive actions) with other-than-human persons, particularly the powerful ones, especially those from other dimensions of the world. They do so for the benefit of their human community but always in relationship with other-than-human helpers. They are called upon to act as shamans when things go wrong.

Other animists can and do talk with the other-than-human persons to whom they are related in totemic clans (cross-species kin groups). In many places animist adolescents are sent out into places less frequented by humans to seek a vision of a personal helper. This other-than-human or otherworld person may be with them for the rest of their lives and be the subject of continuous relational encounters and rituals. Animist elders (not shamans) may be responsible for making regular offerings to

10. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1964).

a wide range of other-than-human persons to maintain the health of the whole, diverse inter-species community of a particular place. (In addition to Debbie Rose's work, cited earlier, see Caroline Humphrey and Urgunge Onon's discussion of the different roles of shamans and elders among Daur Mongols.¹¹)

Shamans are deemed most valuable in many places when they cooperate with a range of allies in conflicts with beings who prey on or otherwise assault their human community. Piers Vitebsky writes of this risky business that "the shaman is a hero who makes a bold and necessary intervention into cosmic processes. The power to act is precarious and this human action is fraught with danger."¹² The willingness of shamans to take on their risky ventures and maintain high-risk relationships is deemed necessary in many animistic communities or contexts because someone has to deal with conflicts of interest between human and other-than-human persons who, altogether, make up the living world.

Contemporary Shamans and Core Shamanism

Contrary to Eliade's polemic, contemporary shamans are not (by definition) degenerate heirs to a once more noble, archaic tradition. Like members of other religions, they are the contemporary performers of living and evolving practices. Their worldviews, like their rituals, develop as new situations, needs, desires, knowledges and ideas arise. They, and the wider animistic communities for which they work, not only respond to outside or alien pressures, they actively seek the tools they need to deal with the world today.

Examples of mutual interaction between animists, shamans, and practitioners of a remarkable array of religious and cultural movements abound. In Siberia (the putative heartlands of "shamanism"), and elsewhere in central and north Asia, the fall of the Soviet empire has led to new possibilities for shamans as, for example, employees in various national, regional, or ethnic heritage performances. Amazonia continues to produce new movements inspired by animistic, Catholic, Spiritist, and other worldviews and lifeways. Shamans incorporate chants to their outboard motors in their repertoire of healing and empowering ritual songs. Elsewhere, animistic shamans, as the opening vignette of this chapter illustrates, confront the hierarchical separation of humans

11. Caroline Humphrey with Urgunge Onon, *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Daur Mongols* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

12. Piers Vitebsky, "From Cosmology to Environmentalism: Shamanism as a Local Knowledge in a Global Setting," in *Shamanism: A Reader*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Routledge, 2005), 279.

from the world induced by Cartesian modernism. They blend ritual and educative expertise in entertaining and profound acts of creativity that aim to reinvigorate human relationships with other beings. Perhaps they answer Ronald Grimes' incitement to imagine a ritual performance that will be suitable to the need for humans to "root themselves in the planet like old trees."¹³

Contemporary animist shamans (and their animist neighbours)—who drive cars, design websites, run fish farms, use credit cards, vote in political elections and otherwise share and contest modern global culture—are the current exponents of one way of being and acting as shamans. There is another way. Although this way of being a shaman is now commonly called "shamanism" it too is fluid, changeable and dynamic. Some people shift (more or less easily) between the two forms—demonstrating again the need to be careful not to imagine that academic distinctions are anything more than useful ways of seeing patterns.

What I have called "self-religion shamans" may sometimes also be animists. But the key feature that invites us to see them differently is that what they do has a particular purpose. In common with a significant number of other people worldwide, they aim to enhance their knowledge of themselves, and improve their self-expression and personal well-being. Paul Heelas's encapsulation of New Age as a "self-religion" is applicable here too.¹⁴ Following Eliade and particularly Michael Harner's "core shamanism,"¹⁵ self-religion shamans employ "the techniques of ecstasy" to understand, improve and heal their inner selves. This shamanism is a therapeutic movement entirely suited to the modern age. Its concept of the self and its purpose is largely that of modernity: there is an inner core to each individual that can be accessed and more fully realised by a variety of techniques drawn from meditative, psychotherapeutic and other practices as well from animist shamanic performances. The various alienations and losses of soul that seem endemic in modern life can be treated in what may then be seen as a path towards wholeness and maturity.

This brief sketch of the emerging phenomenon of modern shamanism is in no way meant to suggest that it is of less value or interest than the animism which has been the focus of most of this chapter. For that matter, the brevity of this introduction might misleadingly suggest that the two kinds of shaman have nothing in common. Again, let me emphasise that

13. Ronald Grimes, "Performance Is Currency in the Deep World's Gift Economy," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 9 (2002): 162.

14. Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

15. Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

people can and do shift between the two styles. However, there are differences of purpose, performance and philosophy that are worth attending to. The foundation of this difference is the understanding of what it means to be a person. By trying to see the specifics of particular practices of both animist shamans and self-religion shamans we begin to see what attracts people to each. For animist shamans the world is an interrelated community and a person is a being made up of many relationships. For self-religion shamans the world is a collection of individuals and the true self is found within. Shamans of both kinds offer therapies appropriate to both worlds. They intervene to attempt to deal with the difficulties of living. If the animist shaman tends to work for others and the self-religion shaman seeks to work on their inner self, both do so because they understand these to be the most significant arenas of need.

There are, then, broadly speaking, two kinds of shaman. Each kind is actually lived out in a multiplicity of different styles in particular localities. This must be true given that the broader contexts in which shamans perform their religious acts also vary enormously. There is no one way to be an animist. There is no one way to be a modernist. Variety of experience as well as expression are common to followers of all living religions, including shamans and animists.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Harvey, Graham, ed. *Shamanism: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 2003.

———. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2005.