

# Shamanism as a Research Subject

## SOME METHODOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

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There is hardly any other ethnological or historico-religious subject that has had such a great power of attraction on scholars or on other more or less popular writers as shamanism, particularly in its North-Eurasian version, the one dealt with in this essay. To be convinced of this one need only look at the bibliographical works on the subject. The bibliography on the Russian literature dealing with this subject, published by the Russian scholar A. Popov in 1932, on its own includes more than 650 articles and long essays.<sup>1</sup> Thirty years have passed since then, and interest in shamanism has far from died out among Russian scholars. In addition there are essays on the subject written in other languages.

Included in this enormous quantity of literature—which a scholar could scarcely go through in one lifetime—there are of course both short notices and more thoroughgoing theses, either of a general or a specific character, but an overwhelming proportion of the literature concerned consists of descriptive and phenomenological surveys, with greater or lesser theoretical features. In this literature and in unpublished sources, especially those in different Russian archives, there is a vast amount of material on North-Eurasian shamanism, which provides a solid foundation for comparative research. Attempts at comparative research are by no means lacking. There have been prominent scholars both in Russia and in the West who have endeavoured to go into the whole question of shamanism on the basis of their own field-research, and the results provided by others.<sup>2</sup> But surely

<sup>1</sup> A. Popov, *Materialy dlja bibliografi russkoj literatury po izučeniju šamanstva*, Leningrad 1932.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. V. Bogoras, "K psichologii šamanstva u narodov severovostočnoj Azii", *Etnogr. Obozrenie* 1910, Nr. 1/2.; D Zelenin, *Kult ongonov v Sibirii*, Moskva-Lenin-

there is no scholar who would dare to maintain that this has always been done in a satisfactory way. A great number of Russian scholars who have devoted themselves to North-Eurasian shamanism have been orientated along evolutionist lines, and were therefore inclined to draw broad general conclusions from phenomena limited to different localities. This tendency appears even among such reliable fieldworkers as, for example, Bogoras, Jochelson or Sternberg. North-Eurasian shamanism, as is known, does not comprise a completely unified phenomenon, but exists in different gradated forms that not seldom take on a strong local colouring. Not only does the personality make-up of the shamans vary, but so do their authority, their pattern of behaviour, and professional equipment, and all this provides a fertile soil for different theoretical reconstructions and generalizations. For every theory advanced there are ample opportunities to find proof for a contrary theory. Research so far is rich in such contradictions which not seldom concern matters of principle.

A striking example of this is provided by the discussion on the shaman himself, more exactly on his psycho-physical personality. Is the shaman a normal human being, or is he afflicted with certain illnesses which create the natural qualifications for his profession? The question is of major importance, for when the latter theory is accepted, an unhistoric dimension is without doubt introduced into research; certain questions are simplified; and the problem is brought onto the plane of natural history. There are scholars, as, for example, Bogoras, Jochelson, Zelenin, Ohlmarks and others, who start with the assumption that the shaman is a psychopathic type, while other scholars such as Eliade, Findeisen, to some extent even Uno Harva and several others, on equally good grounds dare to maintain the opposite, or at least think that illnesses have not played any decisive part in shamanism.

Certain evolutionist scholars have been inclined to bring out isolated, more or less rare phenomena and present them as survivals of earlier stages of development. On the basis of this they have drawn extensive historico-cultural or geographical conclusions. A large number of Russian scholars

grad 1936, pp. 352 ff.; Idem, "Die animistische Philosophie des sibirischen Schamanismus", *Ethnos* 1 (1936); D. Schröder, "Zur Struktur des Schamanismus", *Anthropos* 50 (1955); M. Eliade, *Schamanismus und archaische Ekstasetechnik*, Zürich-Stuttgart 1957; H. Findeisen, *Schamanentum*, Stuttgart 1957.

build their theory about female shamans and their priority in time to male shamans on such supposed survivals. The theoretical background to this assumption is made up of the evolutionist conception of history according to which the whole of mankind has gone through a matriarchal phase in which the woman was not only the head of the family but also a seer and priest. As further proof of this hypothesis they simply refer to isolated cases of female shamans who now and then occur among different ethnic units, especially among the so-called paleo-Asiatics. As another example of this I would mention the magic drum which is considered by some scholars to be a successor to the bow.<sup>1</sup>

Differences of opinion do not only arise on questions of detail, but even on the basic principles themselves. Such is the case for example with the very concepts shaman and shamanism. What is a shaman? What distinguishes him from the ordinary witch-doctor or nature healer? On what ideological grounds does shamanism rest? Even in these questions a dividing-line can be traced between, on the one hand, eastern-European marxist scholars, and, on the other, scholars of the West, but this is not to say that opinion on all these questions dealing with this basic problem is unanimous in the West.

According to the opinion accepted among western scholars it is the ecstasy which characterizes the shaman and differentiates him from ordinary fortune-tellers and quack-doctors. The well-known historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, calls shamanism simply a technique of ecstasy (*Technik der Extase*). The ecstasy seems to be the prerequisite condition for enabling the shaman to handle different types of demons, which according to prevalent opinion can do both good and evil, though mostly evil. Both these elements, ecstasy and spirits, appear of course in the conception of shamanism advanced by Russian scholars, but not as any final criteria.

The Russian scholars are of the opinion that shamanism has a long pre-history in which neither ecstasy nor spirits could have played any role worth mentioning. Both the ecstasy and the spirits belong to a later stage, or are the product of a long development of all that we usually characterize as shamanism. According to this conception which has been worked out on a

<sup>1</sup> Zelenin, *Kult ongonov*, p. 375; in greater detail E. Emsheimer, "Zur Ideologie der lappischen Zaubertrommel", *Ethnos* 9 (1944).

theoretical level by the well-known Russian ethnologist and philologist, Dmitri Zelenin, it is necessary to distinguish two main phases in shamanism which have developed along with certain changes in society. In the first phase which coincides with primitive communism the shaman was only a nature healer who by means of certain manipulations, mainly sucking, attempted to remove the cause of the illness from the patient's body. Such illnesses were believed to be caused by a live creature, as for example a worm, or illness demons which entered the body and there tried to annihilate the life-force. The second phase, which on a social plane coincides with the beginning of feudalism, introduces both the idea of spirits which seize the human soul, and the idea of the shaman who could oppose these malignant powers through certain transcendental actions and through his helping spirits. It is in this connection that ecstasy first begins to play a meaningful role, for it was only in a trance that the shaman could maintain control over the transcendental powers which were conciliated or combated by him.

As far as the ecstasy itself is concerned, Zelenin sees it as a state of illness which is congenital and therefore to be regarded rather as a natural gift than as a cultural product. Moreover, he does not lay so much stress on the ecstasy itself as on the idea that ill people, especially the mentally ill, could allow themselves to be possessed by dangerous illness demons without any risk and later transfer them to certain animals. Therefore mentally ill people are often regarded as holy in primitive societies.

After considering the matter Zelenin came to the conclusion that the shaman was originally no less than a kind of totem, more exactly the successor of the totem-animal, which according to his opinion likewise controlled illness demons. The difference between the totem-animal and the shaman, according to him, consists in the fact that the totem-animal was intended for zoomorphic demons, the shaman primarily for anthropomorphic spirits.<sup>1</sup>

It was not until the later stages of shamanism that the pure trance began to play a larger role. Here Zelenin along with a number of other scholars makes a certain distinction between the black (inferior) and the white (superior) shamans. The black shamans comprise the great mass of witch-doctors who deal with hostile illness demons believed to dwell beneath the

<sup>1</sup> Zelenin, *Kult ongonov*, pp. 358, 361 f.

earth. On the other hand, the white shamans deal with friendly spirits that live in the upper regions in which the world is believed to be divided, and with whose help the shaman is also able to combat hostile demons. Moreover Zelenin takes the view that only the kind of morbid possession to be found among the black shamans is original and pure, while all other shamans, above all the white, are only imitators. So much for Zelenin's point of view.

As far as western research is concerned, I have already intimated in the introduction that it is usual to make a logical link between shamanism and ecstasy, and exclude the purely medical functions of the shaman provided that they are not carried out during the trance with the help of the special spirits that the witch-doctor has at his disposal. To this extent there is agreement about the concept of shamanism. But as soon as the question of the form of ecstasy and the original meaning of shamanism is raised in discussion, the views of different scholars diverge widely.

A large number of scholars, as for example Åke Ohlmarks,<sup>1</sup> Father W. Schmidt and others, are of the opinion that originally shamanism is an arctic phenomenon which is nowadays preserved by the so-called black shamans, who perform their manipulations in a deep trance characterized by unconsciousness and convulsions. This opinion is shared especially by those scholars who link the shamanistic ecstasy with possession and illness. This theory has been advanced with particular emphasis by Father Schmidt who considers that the so-called white shamans to be found among certain Turkish and Mongolian groups such as the Jakuts, Burjats, and Altaians, never fall into a complete trance during their performances, but only simulate unconsciousness. He therefore has reason for saying: "dass der weisse Schamanismus sich herausstellt nicht als ein natürliches, primäres Element der Hirtenkultur, sondern nur als ein spätes, sekundäres Element, das sein Entstehen der Reaktion der Hirtenkultur auf das Eindringen der Fremdelemente des eigentlichen, schwarzen Schamanismus verdankt". He can also say that "Der sog. weisse Schamane ist gar kein Schamane und der schwarze Schamane ist der eigentliche und einzige Schamane." The so-called white shaman in his view is rather a sort of "Himmelsdiener" who maintains contact with the world's higher regions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Å. Ohlmarks, *Studien zum Problem des Schamanismus*, Lund 1939.

<sup>2</sup> P. W. Schmidt, *Ursprung der Gottesidee*, vol. XII, Münster 1955, pp. 633 f.

Of quite another opinion in this matter is one of the best-known modern historians of religion, Mircea Eliade, who has subjected shamanism to an exhaustive investigation. According to him the type of shamanism to be found among the nomads of southern Siberia and Central Asia and which is bound up with the idea of the shaman's journeys through a multi-layered world, is not pseudo-shamanism as Father Schmidt presumes but rather the classical form of shamanism. Eliade says expressly that the shamanistic ecstasy is nothing else than a technique for passing unhindered through different layers of the world, and maintaining contact with different sorts of spirits, originally with the heavenly powers. Whereas for Schmidt it is the white shamans who are no true shamans, for Eliade it is the black shamans. This is evident from the following statement in which Eliade sums up the results of his investigations: "Einkörperung von Geistern und Besessenheit durch Geister sind allgemein verbreitete Phänomene, doch sie gehören nicht notwendig zum Schamanismus im strengen Sinn."<sup>1</sup> Here one scholar excludes the part of shamanism that another considers to be the most essential.

I have purposely chosen and presented the opinions of three different writers on shamanism to show how diversely it can be defined and interpreted, when the subject is approached from quite different and prejudged positions. In this matter one not only takes up a position with regard to the subject's meaning, but also demarcates at the same time its distribution over the world. Zelenin who links shamanism with primitive etiology and the art of healing on an animistic and animatistic basis, sees in it a transitory stage of development which from time to time has been known all over the world. Schmidt limits shamanism to the Arctic, whence it has spread to the Subarctic, and there been corrupted. In his turn Eliade builds his theory on pure ecstasy, and finds reason to extend the potential occurrence of shamanism almost to the whole of mankind, although with this reservation that shamanism in the northern hemisphere has its own individual character and history. In the presence of such controversies among leading scholars, one does not feel any better placed than the Swedish pioneer in the subject, J. Stadling, when exactly fifty years ago he wrote the following lines: "A systematic study of Siberian shamanism in its various stages of development

<sup>1</sup> Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 248, 261 f.

and many-sided forms—in this field an important amount of research has already been carried out—requires nevertheless a somewhat wide-ranging investigation in considerable detail into such an immense and heterogeneous field of research, involving so many difficult problems, the solution of which demands lengthy studies by dedicated and trained specialists, that there will not perhaps be time to resolve every point before it is too late.”<sup>1</sup>

I do not regard myself as a true specialist in shamanism, but still take the liberty of pointing out some of the deficiencies in the research that has been carried out so far, and of trying to remedy them. Nothing can be objected against descriptive and phenomenological surveys, nor against attempts to establish the theoretical lines which future research will follow. The mistake with existent major comparative research consists mainly in the attempt of scholars to seek a short cut straight to the meaning and origin of shamanism. By concentrating on the origin they have, so to speak, lost their way in it, and wish at any price to achieve a solution. But the results attained so far in that direction cannot lay claim to any objectivity. If similar mistakes are to be avoided in the future, it is necessary to undertake a large number of detailed historico-cultural investigations, which cover both terminology, the shaman's equipment, different sides of the shaman's activity and related religious ideas. Modern investigations on these lines are not lacking, but they are few in number. By way of example, I refer to Shirokogoroff's investigations on shamanism among the Tungus.

But ethnology and the study of religion are not only a sort of historical account, in which the primary objective is the question of origin and development. Equally important in research is the functionalistic view-point which when we investigate details helps us not to lose sight of the structural unity. All our efforts would be in vain if we were not able to place shamanism in a functional relationship with human existence in its widest sense, that is, with its social-economic system and religious ideas. Without such a holoistic view of the matter, the question of origin and development is left floating in a theoretical vacuum, lacking any contact with reality.

The two above-mentioned aspects of research do not necessarily exclude each other as a number of scholars believe. *If historical research is to be suc-*

<sup>1</sup> J. Stadling, *Shamanismen i norra Asien*, Stockholm 1912.

*cessful, it must not lose sight of the overall unity of human existence including shamanism and its various functional aspects,—and on the other hand, functionalistic scholars should bear in mind that even the functional and structural relationship has a history behind it.* It is very desirable that one or several scholars should submit the social functions of shamanism and the shaman to such combined research. That such a form of research can be fruitful is shown by Shirokogoroff's brilliant investigations among the Tungus.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See for example the relevant chapters in his large work on the Tungus: *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus*, Shanghai 1929, and *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, London 1935.