

Analysis and review in  
Transcultural Psychiatric Research VIII 190-193  
To appear in Proceedings of the  
5th Annual Conference on Culture and  
Mental Health in Asia and the Pacific.  
S.S.R.C. University of Hawaii

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SHAMANS, CURERS AND PERSONALITY:  
SUGGESTIONS TOWARD A THEORETICAL MODEL

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May 11, 1972

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Introduction

The existence of shamans or curers (individuals who gain special healing and religious powers through a "spirit guide" of some type) is a characteristic of many non-western societies. Because of apparent gross differences between shamanistic behavior and Western European "scientific" healing models or Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, such behavior has always been of interest to many western anthropologists. This original interest, based on the somewhat ethnocentric notions of nineteenth century anthropologists, has been buttressed and changed by more contemporary interests in the relationships of such behavior to other aspects of culture and social structure and, by some investigators, its relationship to personality dimensions as well.

Shamanism in Cross-cultural Perspective

The presently extensive cross-cultural literature on shamans and curers can be sorted into a paradigm in which essentially polar positions have been taken. Based in part upon notions of the integrative function and integrated aspects of culture, in part viewed in terms of psychoanalytic theory and its psychiatric derivatives, and finally investigated in the perspective of social structural

shamanism among the Tarahumara, as does E.C. Parsons (1936) among the inhabitants of Mitla (Mexico), but do so in a traditionalist anthropological fashion; that is, they stress the functional aspects of shamanism, still however, noting that it is one of the socially integrative institutions in society.

Others, such as Amiel (1966), have simply described shamanistic curer practices ( in this case on the Ivory Coast) which are quite similar to those reported elsewhere. These types of studies generally stress that the shaman is an "odd bird" but they also stress that he serves a useful social function, essentially an ethno-psychiatric one, even if it is not spelled out as such.

The techniques used by those inhabiting the role of shaman have been described as "charlatanism" by some (Roheim, 1951; Opler, 1936; Nadel, 1946; Murphy, 1964) and as insightful by others, a discussion paralleled by the notion that has been advanced by some writers that some shamans are "true shamans" (Balikci, 1963; Posinsky, 1965; Sasaki, 1966; Boyer, 1962, 1964b) and others not.

The "adequate" vs. inadequate continuum of attitudes concerning shamanism is further complicated by a cross cutting dimension whose polar ends stress culturalogical vs. psychological explanations of the phenomenon. For example, cultural content has been seen as reflected in shamanistic practice by some (Kiev, 1968; Boyer, 1964b; 1964c), while others such as Silverman, (1966) have stressed only the psychological dimension.

As an example of the culturalogical end of this spectrum, Devereux (1956) suggests (among other things) that the shamanistic role is one way in which various cultures can provide prestigious roles to deviants. This position is generally accepted by the "cultural relativist" wing in anthropology. Adherents to this position (though Devereux cannot be characterized in this fashion and accepts absolute standards for judging normality) tend to be less concerned with the internal psychic process and individual meaning in shamanistic behavior, than with the broader cultural validation of the behavior. Also in this camp are those who propose quasi-functionalist arguments ordinarily not phrased in personality terms. Balikci (1963) in a variant of this position finds shamanistic client behavior to reflect the relationships between men and their gods. Using data gathered from the Netsilik Eskimos, he suggests shamans are always viewed ambivalently. He proposes that the potential for danger from the shaman is what really gives him his power; that is, if one can control the universe or its objects for good purposes, that power can be used for evil as well.

An example of ideas from the more psychoanalytic end of the cross cutting dimension is L. Bryce Boyer (1964a) who suggests that the real power of shamans lies in their ability to use primary process thinking to create transference. According to Boyer, the shaman never resolves this transference but uses it to create a social

conformity in his patient and to channel the patient's dependency needs. This particular technique, Boyer continues, introducing a cultural perspective, matches the needs of the Mescalero Apaches. In his studies, he found their "favorite" character disorder includes elements of hysteria and impulsiveness with a variety of schizophrenic tendencies and shows specific problems in the area of orality and dependency.

A parallel but not precisely similar point is made by Nadel (1946) who stresses that shamans among the Nupa, while having a high incidence of "insanity," seem to be able to "absorb" the mental problems of others. Moreover, Nadel attempted to relate Nuba shamanism to the incidence of mental disease. He tried to correlate the low incidence of insanity in a culture to a high incidence of shamanism. Failing in this, he alternatively suggested that shamanism was a preventive measure for mental health.

Despite these imprecise though interesting formulations, Nadel also notes, as has Boyer, the variety of shamanism from fake to sincere and the fact that shamans themselves rely on trance states which is at least partially indicative of some disturbance. He finally suggests shamans can cope with psychological disturbances in acculturation without the collapse that others show, which is reminiscent of the formulations of Kris (1952) in which he talks about the ability which some people, such as artists, have to regress in the service of the ego.

Bourignon and Pettay (1964), Bourignon (1965) and Boyer (1962), however, suggest that shamans may be very well-integrated indeed, which also seems to support Nadel's work. Pfeiffer (1966) taking an approach related to that of Boyer's, also sees shamans as reflecting the "favorite" disorder of their community, and thereby personally integrating the modal pathology of the group.

Even so some writers have found limits to the ability even of the "adequate shaman". Murphy (1964) using a psychiatric approach similar to that of Boyer, while noting the value of shamanism in treating mental illness, also suggests that it is limited objective therapy relying essentially on dependency and integration into the group. His findings also seem to imply that, while some degree of personal integration is present for the shaman, he does not resolve the transference he elicits.

Other writers have suggested still other levels of theories in shamanistic studies which are at times supportive of those using psychological models but couched in cultural or social structural terms. V. Turner, for example, (1964) notes the great ability of the Native witch doctor in Rhodesia to comprehend social relationships involved in emotional upset. Obviously, if the witch doctor can do so, this provides him with a special tool for refining his analysis of the interpersonal problem which may be at the root of the psychic disorder, and therefore permits some kind of directed therapy to solve the problem.

Billig, Gillin and Davidson (1948) have investigated the personality of the curer in Guatemala using yet another approach. Though they find *curanderos* to have psychotic tendencies, they have also noted that *curanderos* are less rigid than the rest of the society and have a greater potentiality for creativity. This also seems to reflect Boyer's (1962) findings.

Some writers have attempted to view changing shamanistic styles using a variety of both cultural and psychiatric approaches. Redfield and Tax (1952), for example, note the ubiquity of *curanderos* in Mexico's American Indian society and detail some of the changes in *curandero* techniques which come about as the result of internalizing selected aspects of modern medical theory. Along these same lines, Sasaki (1963) has described syncretic aspects of shamanistic religion in Japan. Both Bloom (1964) and Hes (1964) have also indicated the changing roles of Native healers in two different cultures under acculturation. Bloom finds rural curers among the Zulus to be more conservative and traditional, reflecting pressure against cultural change. Hes finds that the Yemenite *mori* (shaman), upon coming to Israel, tends to change specifically from a physical folk-healer to a kind of folk-psychiatrist. These studies seem to suggest that shamans change their tactics with their cultural milieu.

Others who have discussed the tactics of shamanism have noted the instrumental competence of shamans and their general personal shrewdness. Kiev, for example, (1966) notes that the *hungman* (shaman) in Haiti becomes rich by exploiting the poor. The recurrent goat sacri-

face which he performs from time to time seems to act as symbolic murder to channel some of the aggressions directed at him toward an object representing him. Thus, it would seem that his instrumentality is integrated with a sophisticated expressive activity. Madsen (1964) also notes the reality testing ability of the Mexican-American *curanderos* who will not take terminal cases, and who demand that the client believe in him before they undertake his case. Such realism no doubt promotes the cure rate for the *curandero* and in turn increases local belief in his power. M. Opler (1936) similarly to Madsen, however, has suggested that Apache shaman successes were enhanced by their shrewdness in picking patients, in that they avoided those who were skeptical of their ability and treated only those who had high expectations of relief. Opler's findings then also suggest that either the shaman possesses no special psychiatric ability, or at best is merely a clever manipulator.

The issue of adequate vs. inadequate is further complicated by the fact that some authors have recognized that both aspects may be present in the same shaman. Posinsky (1965), for example, specifically suggests the essentially ethno-psychiatric function of shamanism among the Yurok and notes, as does Boyer, the high incidence of transvestism among shamans. Such behavior in western cultures would be taken as a clear indication of personality disorder, yet the case does not seem so simple in analyzing shamans. Posinsky and Boyer also note that there is a wide variety of levels of competence in shamanistic



behavior which further complicates the problem of a simple discussion of shamanism. Posinsky goes on to describe ritual fasting and dreaming as part of shamanistic training, as does Dundes (1963) who relates ritual fasting to oral dependency needs. Such behavior suggests the possibility of personal pathology among shamans which would be difficult to relate to the personal competence which these authors also ascribe to shamans.

A clue to this complex relationship of apparent pathology and apparent competence is offered by Romano (1965), who, in a study of folk-healing among Mexican-Americans in Texas, corroborates this emphasis on oral organization by noting the need for the male to abandon male role directives if he is to be nurturant enough to be a healer. What seems implicit in Romano's work is that what would otherwise be considered as pathic cross-sex anxiety which is common for Mexicans (Hippler 1969) is creatively integrated into nurturant nearly feminine behavior. Such behavior, however, is apparently both personally and socially integrative.

Pfister (1932), along these same lines and similarly to Boyer's formulations, suggests that the access the Navaho shaman has to the unconscious of his patient as well as his own is one of the chief abilities that he possesses which permits him to heal. This finding of Pfister's tends further to support the theory that shamans may in fact have some real ability and not merely be lucky charlatans.

Exactly what psychiatric function the shaman performs and how he performs it has been discussed in some detail by several authors. Roheim (1951), in a discussion of Hungarian shamanism, suggests that the shaman defends people against phallic women and that in the process oral aggression is defended against in a phallic manner. The material he presents in the form of folk tales suggests shamanistic regression to infantile omnipotence states as well. If this is so and if it is done effectively and creatively, it would seem that shamans can regress in the service of the ego.

Devereux (1957) takes the position that the shaman (who among the Mohave creates his "spirit songs" from myths he has reworked in his dreams) essentially offers in his behavior an explanation of, and a social sanction for, what are called in western society psychoses and border psychoses thereby reducing anxiety about them. This tends to suggest that shamans offer an ego-supportive role. However, the reworking of myths in dreams to provide a spirit guide also suggests true creative ability.

Rogler and Hollingshead (1961), also noting the use of trance states by shamans in Puerto Rico, suggest the social function of shamanism is to offer a culturally acceptable non-stigmatized role for the deviant. Once again this suggests that the shaman is simply not psychically healthy. Kiev (1962c) sees the shamanistic behavior of the cult leader as a way of handling re-elicited ambivalent effects concerning god as protector, rival and punisher. The *hungman* or shaman in Haiti focuses the aggressions and instinctual urges of the group

and permits them an acceptable outlet. Kiev's formulations suggest much more strongly the creative aspects of shamanism.

Even identifying the shaman has been a problem. Boyer (1962) suggests there is much confusion as to who is a shaman and what level of competence various shamans occupy. In discussing how to identify a shaman as well as how to understand him, he investigates Devereux's (1956) feelings that all shamans must be judged by absolute standards of genitality, comparing this to Ackerchnecht (1943) who suggests that shamans and other deviants be judged only in terms of their own community and its attitudes. Thus, he focuses once more on the key problem we have noted -- that of adequacy versus inadequacy, sick versus well, charlatan versus honest healer -- as descriptive aspects of shamanism.

Since Boyer feels the typical Apache is neurotic, this would mean the statistically normal Apache is "abnormal" in western psychiatric terms. Boyer, who is inclined to absolute standards in judging personal integration, finds shamanistic personality to be much the same everywhere. Moreover, he suggests that the true shamanistic integration is nonetheless a healthy one. In this sense we may see the statistically "abnormal" Apache as approaching psychiatric normality of a type.

Finally, Kiev (1962d) in discussing the origin of shamanism uses an economic and social structural argument. He suggests that it is the food surplus which exists in hunting and gathering societies which allows shamans to specialize in folk medicine. Since there are no societies in which there is no surplus, it is difficult to assess such an argument. Further, since shamanism is ubiquitous, it does not appear to assess its meaning on this basis.

### Shamanism in an Integrative Approach

Basically, the broad range of literature on shamanism suggests the following: shamanism is variously a method of working out individual psychological problems, a role which permits the deviant some degree of comfort, an ethno-psychiatric healing technique which in the absence of insight therapy permits some degree of personal reorganization with group support, and a mature integrated life style of a special creativity.

The literature further suggests that shamans are viewed ambivalently and may or may not be to some extent conscious fakers. The shaman is felt to owe his success to his ability to deal with unconscious materials, the faith of his clients, and to the generally higher tolerance for deviance (his own as well as that of his patients) which tends to exist in primitive cultures. He is seen as shrewd and competent, conservative and adaptable, and highly disorganized.

Some aspects of these positions appear to be in obvious conflict with each other, though many may be true at the same time. Our own observations and study of the literature on Eskimo shamanism suggest that there is an integrated perspective which may help to order some of these diverse comments.

### Eskimo Shamanism

Shamans, traditionally among the Eskimo and to the extent that they still operate, appear to have certain characteristics, to fill certain roles, and to have a special cultural meaning. We suggest

that it is difficult to discuss shamanism apart from these three interdependent dimensions of culture, social structure and personality.

Two aspects of Eskimo shamanism stand out immediately in any observation. First, shamanism and shamans are covert, not openly discussed, and surrounded by an aura of positive respect and negative fear or dislike. Second, present day reputed shamans apparently do have significant contact with and tolerance of personal emotional chaos. Eskimo shamans, whether or not they have ever used such "psychedelic mushrooms" such as *Amanita muscaria* (with which Alaska abounds), are familiar with and responsive to such notions as "bad trips," oceanic feelings, a sense of merging with the universe, and the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of all actions and ideas -- all of which are common in the dissociative reaction which accompanies psychedelic agent use. Shamans, however, tend to view this dissociative state, whether natural or drug induced, tolerantly. That is, they (the "true shamans") tend to exhibit a sense of personal security without the need for massive support from obsessive compulsive or phobic behaviors, as would many other people who experienced psychoto-mimetic or proto-psychotic episodes such as they do.

The particular shamanistic ideation, which we have observed and also noted in the literature, seems to include very strong oral aspects such as incorporation, nurturant support by the universe, and body destruction fantasies; which aspects are also true of certain dissociative states. These feelings, however, tend to be handled by

the shaman with an optimistic fatalism rather than in a pessimistic or frightened fashion. That is, the shaman does not appear to feel bedeviled but at least partly in control of or, more accurately, integrated with the powers he uses. This is probably in part related to Eskimo "basic personality," and in part to something common in shamans everywhere.

Eskimos tend to be oral optimists in that lenient child rearing provides a basic security which not easily undone by the vicissitudes of life. This is, however, complicated by the cultural need to train against aggression and selfishness, and by the apparently paradoxical cultural value of permitting any person to do what he wishes. This is more easily understood if we note that the infrequency of early childhood frustration does not help the Eskimo develop a tolerance for frustration. Childhood frustration, as well as that of adult life apparently in the past was viewed magically as talion punishment for some unknown transgression. That is the universe was and is invested with generally optimistic and nurturant but unpredictable qualities. In the past, failures of any sort were attributed to taboo breaking, and taboos were too numerous to avoid.

We suspect that this belief has its genesis at least in part in the infrequent apparently inexplicable but harsh teasing which the infant receives from its parents. The teasing is usually concerning the child's desire for the breast, and ends as inexplicably as it begins. This, we feel, must confuse the child and convince

him that the universe has a tendency to be arbitrary even though nurturant. The child, by the way, responds with rage, which is usually thought humorous by his parents.

If nothing ever overtly displeased the parent, something inexplicable (to the infant) must cause the occasional frustration of nurturance. It is probable that part of the genesis of the adult fear of frustrating someone and intolerance for frustration is also talion anxiety for oedipal urges strongly elicited by the close sleeping quarters of Eskimo households. In any event, phobic and counterphobic acts were, we believe, invented both to explain and to deter these lapses in the maternal (universe) nurturance and to reduce anxiety over oedipal urges, and these often took the form of taboos.

The shaman traditionally suggested which taboos had been broken when difficulties occurred and acted to overcome the effects. He provided, through a form of confession, an instrument for explicating taboo breakage and provided new counterphobic magic for that which had failed.

This form of shamanistic behavior reflects rather well the passive oral optimistic but fatalistic Eskimo value system. Childhood omnipotence and powerlessness fantasies become intertwined and both projected and introjected. The omnipotent non-frustrated child, when faced with frustration, can find no reason for it. As an adult, he is also dependent upon magical techniques for rescue from his fate,

but again he has no control over these techniques. This tends to suggest that Kiev's (1966) formulations which state that ethnopsychiatric tactics will probably reflect socialization patterns, might well be extended to shamanism.

The shaman also embodies this optimistic fatalistic and passive ethic, but has been able to (1) introject more of the omnipotent parental imago and (2) has been able to fuse with projected power and work in concert with it. Thus, while not "owning" the technique (control of the universe), he nonetheless may operate with it.

This power is, of course, viewed with awe and fear by non-shamans and results in ambivalence toward the shaman as toward the occasional inevitably, incomprehensibly frustrating mother. This is further complicated by the fact that in aboriginal times the expansive touchy ego of the adult Eskimo often brought him into violent confrontation with others of a similar emotional organization. Though a complex system of conflict avoidance existed, murder was common. The "bully-like" attitude which some persons could develop from this kind of socialization meant that, if they were strong enough, they could take what they wanted (including wives) from other men. Since there was little in the way of organized social control in the form of a legal system, the only alternatives open to the victim were avoidance, submission or murder.

The continual fears of Eskimos, realistically based both upon their recognition of their own carefully buttressed aggressiveness, and the fact that species did disappear at times, were often solved



by shamanistic intervention. The shaman, at one with all life in his oceanic expansiveness, could not only securely bring back missing game but also acted as a threat to the local bully whom he could kill by magic. Thus, the "true" shaman served a social integrative purpose.

On the other hand, some shamans themselves became bullies and terrorized communities until they were killed. All shamans appear to have been equally feared. You could never tell when the "socially useful" shaman would become the local bully. It would seem that the "true" shaman did have the power to regress in the service of the ego, deal with difficult objects, and serve socially useful purposes. However, "bad" shamans might also have some of this power, all of it, or a simulacrum of it. Further, a "good" shaman could become "bad" and vice versa.

We suggest that, in this peculiar phenomenon of variance in shamanistic form, social need and individual psychology can be applied more universally than simply for Eskimos, and we suggest the following general propositions for the study of shamanism.

Regardless of the core modal emotional organization of the group, we hypothesize that the "true" shaman would show unusual ability to organize unconscious needs and concerns whether they were anal, phallic or oral.

We further hypothesize that the form of his shamanistic acts would be directed toward precisely those unconscious needs which were dominant in the group and would clearly reflect them.

Thus primarily anal concerns might well be responded to by shamanism, stressing sadistic or retentive elements directly related to identifi-

cation with the aggressor or body protection devices. Such a formulation has in part already been proposed by Kiev (1966) as we noted above in which he discusses research that has shown strong correlations between socialization practices and the form of "pre-scientific" psychiatry, and also integrates Boyer's (1962) notions on shamanistic ability. It would be most instructive to view the results of research directed in the same fashion toward shamanistic behavior itself.

Such hypotheses as we are proposing would suggest why shamanism inevitably would not be insight therapy but essentially counterphobic. It also suggests that the shaman needs power more overwhelming than the incipient (unconsciously derived) danger, and therefore explains the commonly noted cross-cultural need for massive social involvement in the process of healing. Another aspects of such a model would be an attempted explanation of the variety among shamans -- that is, why there may be differences between shamans and pseudo-shamans and how they can be distinguished, at least by other shamans, which would support Boyer et. al. (1964) in their discussion of true and pseudo-shamans.

We further hypothesize that true shamans would very likely not be seriously disturbed as some have suggested, but fairly well-integrated and with a high tolerance for unconscious material and primary process thinking. "Pseudo-shamans" and those less capable of success would be those for whom the role provided a haven and an explanation for their personal disorganization.

Finally, we hypothesize that the distribution of such individuals might well be on a continuum and, in fact, individuals might grow from one state of emotional integration to another (or conversely regress).

In fact, if such a model is used, it might offer a degree of explanation for how some individuals grow easily into the role (the better organized shamans) and others feel it thrust upon them and are frightened by it (those less well-organized).

Thus, it is possible that "shamanism" in the broadest sense can be both a refuge role for the seriously disturbed deviant and a role for the more maturely integrated, emotionally labile and unfrightened "normal." It could provide a life style for the insightful observer of his own community who could act easily within its cultural limits and still, on the other hand, provide a necessary identity to the individual who is almost schizophrenic.

The content of the shaman's acts would then reflect dominant psycho-sexual concerns but such concerns would be creatively integrated, though their content would differ from culture to culture and to the degree of ability to "regress in the service of the ego" of the individual shaman.

Hopefully, an approach similar to this would have power for more than the study of shamanism. It may provide some elements of a framework for an integrated view of culturally-shaped expressive emotional life in a much broader sense.

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