



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 5.2  
IJAR 2015; 1(10): 685-686  
www.allresearchjournal.com  
Received: 20-07-2015  
Accepted: 22-08-2015

**Mallika A Nair**  
Asst. Professor,  
Dept. of English Vimala  
College Thrissur- 680009

## From the Hunter to the Hunted: Shamanism as a Subaltern Narrative

**Mallika A Nair**

### Abstract

The term shamanism comes from the Manchu-Tungus word *šaman*. The noun is formed from the verb *ša-* 'to know'; thus, a shaman is literally "one who knows." The shamans recorded in historical ethnographies have included women, men, and transgender individuals of every age from middle childhood onward. The present paper tries to codify the Shaminitic practices as a mystical narrative and their far reaching implications as a subaltern ideology.

**Keywords:** Shamanism (/ʃɑ:mən/ SHAH-mən or /ʃeɪmən/ SHAY-mən) is a practice that involves a practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to encounter and interact with the spirit world and channel these transcendental energies into this world.

### 1. Introduction

Contemporary indigenous identity assertion contests denial both material as well as epistemic and claims rightful space in the mainstream episteme. Intervening in this debate, is the practice of Shamanism, a belief system that had flourished for centuries throughout the vast regions of Central Asia and Siberia, and to a lesser extent in Europe and other countries especially North and South America; the most prominent among them is Eurasian Shamanism, a community that still continue to remain the most epistemically benighted.

The present paper puts this misrepresentation under scanner by framing the whole practice of Shamanism as a subaltern narrative. Using insights of the formalist, structuralist theories, narratology exposes Shamanism as a mode of narration or narrative agency that includes individuals, ethnic groups, societies, institutions and cultures.

**Shamanism** (/ʃɑ:mən/ SHAH-mən or /ʃeɪmən/ SHAY-mən) is a practice that involves a practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to encounter and interact with the spirit world and channel these transcendental energies into this world.

The term *shamanism* comes from the Manchu-Tungus word *šaman*. The noun is formed from the verb *ša-* 'to know'; thus, a shaman is literally "one who knows." The shamans recorded in historical ethnographies have included women, men, and transgender individuals of every age from middle childhood onward.

The name 'Shamanism' was invented by Europeans, so giving the impression that there was only one fixed belief system, instead of a number of disparate beliefs having many facets and continually increasing as new situations arise, although retaining many of the old beliefs and overlapping traditions. Spirit possession is central to all forms of Shamanism, and plays a pivotal role in religious phenomenology and psychology. Lewis has pointed out that it is at the root of mysticism, and includes the concept of the Holy Ghost, Dervish dancing, fire-walking, transvestism, aggressive messianic cults as well as traces of all major religions based on the notion of a supreme spiritual deity.

Shamanism should not be thought of as a single centrally organized religion, as there are many variations. Yet, despite these cultural differences three things are shared by all forms of Shamanism:

- (1.) Belief in the existence of a world of spirits, mostly in animal form that are capable of acting on human beings. The Shaman is required to control or cooperate with these good and bad spirits for the benefit of his community.
- (2.) The inducing of trance by ecstatic singing, dancing and drumming when the Shaman's spirit leaves his or her body and enters the supernatural world.

**Correspondence**  
**Mallika A Nair**  
Asst. Professor,  
Dept. of English Vimala  
College Thrissur- 680009

- (3.) The Shaman treats some diseases, usually those of a psychosomatic nature and helps the clan members to overcome their various difficulties and problems.

Narratology theorizes these Shamanistic narratives as a transmission structure of intra/inter- cultural meanings about the nature of shared human reality, based on a set of universally valid meta-codes. The secret language of the Siberian Turkic Shamans, the paraphernalia of the Shaman's costume and every figure depicted on it, the rhythm of the drum, the ecstatic dance, all form part of this meta-code. The essence of shamanism lies not in the general phenomenon but in specific notions, actions, and objects connected with trance.

The Shaman's secret language is an imitation of animal cries, or the sounds of birds. To bird language know enables one to understand all Nature's secrets and to prophesy. This language somewhat resembles the *Gossolalia* of the Christians. Odd archaic words are uttered, or words from a neighboring language are borrowed. Many Shamans claim it is the language of the spirits. They are thus freed from the responsibility of their prophesis. It may be that this is a way of entering swiftly in to one's own super- consciousness. The Shaman sometimes assume a new identity and becomes an animal spirit; the 'animal language' being a variant of the secret Shamanic 'spirit' tongue.

The most important object in a Shamanistic performance is the drum which symbolizes the universe as well as countless other things. Krader has pointed out that the Shaman's messages and visions are the techniques of a distinctive social role and cult and lays claim to their philosophy, psychology and morality. The rhythm of the drum excites the Shaman, even as it controls the psychic state of the audience. Without this necessary accessory, the Shaman could not enter the underworld. The drum is important in Siberian Shamanism as it functions symbolically as a 'horse' for the Shaman and when beaten rhythmically, transports him to the centre of the world, the place of the Cosmic Tree that unites the celestial world with the earth and with the Supreme Being. Siberian Shamans have their own sacred trees representing the Cosmic Tree. Some are trees planted with their roots in the air. This is one of the most archaic symbols of the world- 'the Inverted Tree' was known in Babylonia and India. The ancient Vedic text, the *Rigveda* (1.24.7) refers to a tree whose roots are on high; the *Katha -Upanisad* (vi.1) refers to the *a`svatha* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) as the Eternal Tree of Life whose roots are in heaven, that is, in the Divine Essence, the impersonal Brahman, and so represents Creation as a descending movement from above. The drum animal is the Shaman's chief spirit or alter-ego. When it enters the Shaman, he changes in to the mythical theriomorphic ancestor.....the primordial animal that is the origin of his tribe.

Claude Levi- Strauss, the founder of structural Anthropology, analyses the ideational and symbolic regimes of myths.....theorizing the myth as language and language as metaphor, he discovered the grammar of mythology, which has become the grammar of the narrative. The primordial metaphors of deities and spirits in Shamanism originate in the pre- historic world of nomads, hunters and gatherers, whose culture was dominated by animals and bird-like beings. This primitivism of the Shamans tags on to them a subaltern identity. All forests, trees, waters and animals have spirits or 'Masters' by whom they are animated. In other words, they are the vessels in which the spirits dwell.

Although Shamanism had flourished for centuries, its slow decline occurred when the Tsarist troops entered the country. Nevertheless, it took nearly 400 years before many of its traditions were destroyed or driven underground during Stalin's ferocious purges in the 1930s. Many Shamans were executed; others were sent to labour camps. Today, there are vastly more Russians in Siberia than Siberians, making it impossible for them to regain control of their own land. These unique and endangered tribes of ancient healers are now regarded by the world as unbalanced, neurotic individuals. In fact, Shamans may be innately creative, well balanced individuals with more mental capacity than the mainstream communities. They understand much of the phenomenon of nature, and are ready to help their community. More so because they function as intermediaries between the people and the spirits of other worlds.

Shamanism consists of much more than mere conjuring tricks, for the practitioners themselves are often in deep trance states, the details of which they are unable to recall. There is a hereditary rite to claim a Shaman's function, which may be transmitted in a family equally to boys and girls. When not represented on Earth by a Shaman or Shamaness it becomes dangerous to its own owner; therefore such a lineage tries to avoid not having a living Shamanic representative. The present day Ethnographic and Anthropological discourses must invariably seek to remantle the very notion of indigeneity to tread newer furrows of social stratification and free it from the clutches of subaltern modulations.

## 2. References

1. Hoppal M. ed. Shamanism in Eurasia. UK: Gottingen press, Print, 1984.
2. Hoppal M. with Howard, K.D eds. *Shamans and Cultures*. Budapest: print, 1993.
3. Hayden, White. The Context of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore: John Hopkins press, Print, 1987, 26-34.
4. Krader L. A Nativistic Movement in Western Siberia. in *American Anthropologist*, print. 1956, 58.
5. Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke. New York: Basic Books Inc. publishers, print, 1963, 31-54.
6. Stutley, Margaret. *Shamanism: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, print, 2003.