

# A little Shamanic background

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The word 'shaman' comes from the Siberian Evenk and Manchu word *šaman* (or *samman*), and means either 'to know,' or 'to become heated' (excited).

It does not have any relationship to any Sanskrit word. There is a persistent, erroneous myth - created by ill informed linguists in the C19th - that the word comes from *śamāne*, a Sanskrit word for a Buddhist monk. This theory has long been discredited, although it gets repeated on Facebook, and in other places very often.

The word *šaman* was introduced to the Russian language by scholars in the C17th and C18th century, and from there was passed into French, and changed to *chaman*. From France *chaman* spread to England and America, and the word morphed to *shaman* - the word we use widely today.

The word *šaman* itself is a male word. Women are not called shamans, the proper word for a woman 'shaman' is *udigan*. If the C18th Russian scholars had not been so typically patriarchal, and had spoken to the women, we would perhaps be discussing 'udiganism' rather than shamanism.

The word *šaman* is not used by neighbouring tribal groups in Siberia, they have their own names instead, such as *Boo*, *Kam*, *Kaman*, *khamma*, *ayun*, *gam*, *baksy* and *tadibey* - which all mean 'shaman' as we know it. These are all male words. In all these tribes the word *udigan* is used for a woman 'shamans'. This shows that the word for women shamans is older than all the words for male shamans,

and implies that the first shamans were women. Further evidence of this can be seen in the fact that the ritual clothes of many male shamans are ritualised forms of female dress.

The word *Shamanka* is a modern Russian creation. the suffix 'Ka' means female, like *Vodka* (*Vod* is water - *Ka* is 'female' or 'little').

In the C19th, the term 'shamanism' began to be applied to all sorts of 'tribal' spirituality and healing - from medicine men to witch doctors. The anthropologists of the time used it because it was fashionable - much like the new age uses it today - and applied it in error, without any real understanding about the true nature of shamans. This misuse of the word has gone into popular language, so now many things get called shamanic.

In new age culture this has become even more evident, as the word 'shamanic' is sexy, and sells things. So books, and workshops, and other things get the word attached to them, to help them sell. Hence we get things like 'Shamanic Reiki' and 'Shamanic Yoga' and even a 'Shaman Extra Body hair shampoo'.

In the last 50 years or so there has been a growing attempt to be accurate with the term 'shamanism' and not apply it to all sorts of other things, which have little relationship to the traditions of the Evenk and others.

Specialist anthropologists - Shamanologists - have arisen, and they use the term more





accurately. There is an ongoing endeavour to educate the public about the correct use of the word, and to focus its meaning to gain more clarity about the process. This is very much what i try to do - I use a shamanologists definition of shamanism, not the rather wooly popular definition, which is a left over from in accurate C19th thinking.

Another enduring myth is that shamanism is the 'root of all religions.' It is not. The probable root of all religions is 'animism' - the belief everything is alive, and has a soul. Shamanism arose from out of animism, but it is considered to be a fairly new development, perhaps only 5,000-10,000 years old at most.

There is evidence of ancient ritual found in cave paintings etc, but this would likely to have been animistic - although no material evidence can ever really tell us anything for sure - we can only guess, as we dont know exactly what was going on in ancient ceremonies; we don't know the cosmology of the people performing them; and we were not in their heads, and so don't know what they experienced.

The first actual account of shamanism is about 2000 years ago, and comes from China - before that it is all conjecture, but the general opinion of expert shamanologists is it's a much later development, probabaly no older than about 5,000-10,000 years in age.

Shamanism - in the correct usage of the word, as used by shamanologists - is also not a worldwide thing. It does not occur everywhere, but is mostly found in Central Asia and Siberia. It is generally thought that it arose in that area too.

It does occur in other places, but a lot of the reason for this

is because people migrated from Central Asia and Siberia to those other places. These include: Korea, SE Asia, Finland, Hungary, Alaska, Greenland, and the Pacific NW coast of North America. Those are the main places true shamanism can be found.

There are other places which have traditions similar to shamanism - and these probably arose independently. These are places like the Amazon and some tribal groups in Mexico. However, some anthropologists don't classify these as shamanistic, but I think personally they can and should be. Some shamanic like traditions also occur in a few groups in North America too - here and there - such as the Cree and the Ojibwa, but it's harder to define those cultures as shamanic. The edge of where shamanism ends and starts is blurred and around the edges it hard to say what is in and what is out.

Some shamanic-like traditions also occur in Africa, for example the San people of Southern Africa and the Gnawa traditions of Morocco.

As a rule of thumb, it can be







said that all shamanic cultures are animistic - but not all animistic cultures are shamanic.

Here is a brief definition of shamanism... A shaman is someone chosen by the spirits; and who can go into a controlled and repeatable, deliberate trance state, during which they:

A) experience 'spirit flight', where they go to the spirit worlds and meet spirits, who they either fight with, negotiate

with, or trick, in order to create change in this physical world.

B) are often taken over by the spirits (normally ancestral shaman spirits, or local land spirits) while in this physical world - the spirits using the shaman's voice and body to heal, or give advice to members of the shaman's community.

Without the spirits, and their blessing, a shaman can not exist or function. Without the trance state it is not shamanism.

