

# Shamanism

Piers Vitebsky

*The religious systems loosely grouped under the term "shamanism" generally involve a specialist whose soul is perceived to leave the body during trance and, on behalf of clients, travel to other realms and encounter spirits or ancestors. As author Piers Vitebsky explains, the term "shaman" derives from the Tungus of Siberia, but was applied by early researchers—and later the general public—to perhaps thousands of religions thought to have something in common. In truth, there is no "-ism" to shamanism, and the breadth of the word's applicability is somewhat controversial in anthropology today. Nonetheless, many researchers find the term useful and can point to consistent basic features shared by practitioners.*

*Piers Vitebsky has conducted fieldwork among the Sora of Eastern India and has published numerous works on shamanism. In this article, he introduces the most important features of the shaman's role, with attention to the various intellectual concerns about definitions. He explains how the shaman is distinct from other forms of religious specialist, such as spirit mediums, and argues that the shaman must be understood in the context of such local cultural features as social structure, concepts of nature and personhood, and the economy. Vitebsky cautiously compares shamans to social workers and psychotherapists, as illustrated in extended examples from the Inuit and the Sora.*

*The article ends with examination of shamanic revival or neo-shamanic practices. In the urbanized West, these adaptations reconfigure shamanism as something that can be taught and learned, to be used as a form of therapy or spiritual enhancement. A different form of shamanic revival is occurring today among some of the peoples who lost their indigenous shamanic practices under colonialism.*

## The Terms "Shamanism" and "Shaman"

From the Stone Age to the New Age, the figure of the shaman has continued to grip the human imagination. Being chosen by the spirits, taught by them to enter a trance and fly with one's soul to other worlds in the sky or clamber through dangerous crevasses into terrifying subterranean worlds; being stripped of one's flesh, reduced to a skeleton and then re-

assembled and reborn; gaining the power to combat spiritual enemies and heal their victims, to kill enemies and save one's own people from disease and starvation—these are features of shamanic religions in many parts of the world. And yet they are generally regarded by the communities in which they occur, not as part of some extraordinary sort of mystical practice, but as a specialized development of the relationship which every person has with the world around them.

"Shamanism" is probably the world's oldest form of religion. It is a name generally given to many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of religions around the world. These are thought to have something in

---

*From: Indigenous Religions: A Companion, ed. Graham Harvey. London and NY: Cassell (2000), pp. 55–67.*



common with the religion of the Tungus hunters and reindeer herders in Siberia from whom the word "shamán" or "hamán" was taken. (In English the word is widely pronounced "sháy-man." The ending has nothing to do with the English word "man." Whichever way one pronounces it, the plural is "shamans.") It could thus be said that there are many shamanisms (Atkinson 1992), just as there are many monotheisms.

Among the Tungus peoples such as the Evenki and the Even, a shaman is a man or woman whose soul is said to be able to leave their body during trance and travel to other realms of the cosmos. The term is thus named after a central figure and refers, not to a single religion, but rather to a style of religious activity and a kind of understanding of the world. The term was not traditionally used in any indigenous culture, for two reasons: first, every language has its own words for figures who correspond to the shaman, such as the female *udaghan* and the male *oyuun* among the Sakha (Yakut) of Siberia, the *kuran* among the Sora of tribal India, the *angakkoq* of the Greenlandic Kalaallit (Eskimo) or the *Payé* in various languages of the upper Amazon. Second, the ending "-ism" carries an implication of formal doctrine which belongs to more systematized religions and ideologies from the "western" world and is inappropriate for the fluidity and flexibility of these uncoded religions from largely non-literate societies. The word's usefulness therefore depends on our ability, and our need, to perceive parallels between these many different religions. Even if we accept these parallels, it has been suggested that, rather than shamanism as a systematic form of religion, we should speak of "shamanship" as a skill or personal disposition which is manifested to a greater or lesser degree in various cultures and persons (Atkinson 1989; Vitebsky 1993, 21–2).

By a strict definition, "shamanism" should perhaps be used only for religions of the non-European peoples of the circumpolar north, and especially of Siberia, where many other peoples have similar religions to those of the Tungus peoples. This view is taken by some scholars specializing in the religions and cultures of this region (for good overviews, see Siikala 1978; Hoppál 1984; Balzer 1990). A broader and more common approach (Eliade 1964; Lewis 1989; Atkinson 1992; Vitebsky 1995a) recognizes shamanic kinds of religion around the world, partic-

ularly among the Inuit (Eskimo) peoples,<sup>1</sup> in Amazonia, in Arctic and sub-Arctic North America, and underlying other more mainstream or "world religions" in Mongolia, Tibet, Central Asia, Nepal, China, Japan, Korea, aboriginal India and Indonesia.

There is less agreement about how far the term should be applied to indigenous religions in Africa, Australia, the Pacific, North America south of the sub-Arctic, or ancient Europe. Such controversies generally concern the nature of the relationship between religious practitioner and spirits, and particularly the frequent absence of soul travel. In African religions, for example, with some exceptions (e.g. the !Kung Bushmen, see Katz 1982) the souls of specialists do not generally travel to the world of spirits. Rather, spirits more commonly visit this world and possess people here (de Heusch 1981). This is a reminder that, even if we believe that all early religions were based on direct relationships between humans and spirits, these can take many different forms.

In industrial or "western" society today, people interested in spiritual revival sometimes use the word "shaman" for anyone who is thought to have a special relationship with spirits. In this chapter I shall keep to the criterion of soul flight, since this constitutes a distinctive form of human religiosity with its own particular theological, psychological and sociological implications. This already contains enough diversity to make generalization difficult, but I shall try to highlight some widespread features which such religions have in common.

## Prehistory and Hunting

Broadly speaking, shamanic kinds of religion have tended to be marginalized or persecuted with the growth of urban civilizations, centralized states (Thomas and Humphrey 1994), and institutionalized priest-based religions (though their legacy can be seen, for example, in mystical experiences of ascent in Christianity and Islam). Their scattered distribution

1. Each of the different peoples of this family in Greenland, Canada, Russia, and Alaska has their own name for themselves. The name "Eskimo" is now considered insulting among some groups such as the Inuit ("Real People") of Canada. However, other groups reject the name Inuit and there is currently no name which is universally acceptable for the peoples of this family.



worldwide, mostly in small-scale societies outside the main orbit of these structures, raises the question of whether these religions could be relicts of some pan-human form of early religion.

Prehistoric paintings and petroglyphs, some dating to the paleolithic era, have been found in Europe, South Africa, Australia, Siberia and elsewhere, portraying figures which are part-human, part-animal. Though this is impossible to prove, some scholars have interpreted these as shamans undergoing transformation into animals. Less controversially, rock carvings in Siberia which are several thousand years old show recognizable modern Siberian shaman's costumes, complete with reindeer-antler helmets and drums stretched over a distinctive style of wooden framework. This at least suggests that, even if not unchanging, the religions of this region have a very ancient core.

Another possible link with prehistory is the close, though not exclusive, link between soul flight and hunting. In many societies the shaman's journey across the landscape or the sea echoes the movements and experiences of the hunter but also enlarges and intensifies them. Just as the hunter may try to share the mentality and being of his quarry by dressing in its skins and smelling, calling and moving like an animal, so the shaman may undertake a soul flight in order to locate game animals. But the shaman may also go further and experience turning into an animal, possibly even living for a while as a member of that animal's community and then using this knowledge to encourage members of the species to give themselves up to the community's hunters, or to become the shaman's own spirit helper. Such imagery is often quite male and contrasts with the more female shamanisms found in some agrarian societies in Asia (Kendall 1985).

## Trance, Cosmology and Reality

Shamanic believers generally say that many features of the world, whether animals, trees, streams, mountains, heavenly bodies, even man-made objects like knives and drums, may be imbued with some form of spirit. These manifestations of spirit represent the very essence of these phenomena: the beariness of a bear, the treeness of a tree, the musical power of a drum. At the same time, they resemble human consciousness in that they are capable of experience and

volition. They notice how we treat them and can give or withhold from us. They also represent a principle of causality in human affairs. Just as bears, trees and knives interact with us physically according to their qualities and powers of growing and cutting, so their spirits may have effects and cause events in our lives in accordance with their own nature and desires.

The shaman's journeys allow him or her to perceive the true nature or essence of phenomena, to understand how this is implicated in the causation of events in this world, and to act upon this understanding in order to change undesirable situations and sustain desirable ones.

This dimension of reality is not accessible to ordinary people, or in an ordinary state of consciousness. The shaman's switch to an altered state of consciousness is expressed as a journey in space. This imagery conveys the otherness of the spirit realm, but it also opens up a whole topography of mental or spiritual states. This topography is elaborated by different cultures in very different ways. Though the shaman may also fly around the known local landscape, it is also very common to travel up and down through a many-layered cosmology in which our world occupies a position somewhere in the middle. For example, in various parts of Siberia there may be several lower worlds as well as seven, eleven or more upper worlds, of which the higher ones can be reached only by shamans with appropriate skills and training.

Though the shaman's journey to another world suggests a theology of transcendence, the fact that that other world also animates the phenomena of this world shows that this theology is also deeply immanentist. Rather than occasional theophanies, shamanic religions tend to emphasize concentrations or intensifications of a divine presence which is continuously in the world, while humans are not separated from the divine but shade into it, or partake of it, through forms of shared soulhood.

This emphasis on immanence can also be linked to what may be called a shamanic view of time. Unlike the linear historical time of Semitic religions, with their strong concern with eschatology, shamanic thinking tends to conceive time as cyclical or steady-state. The Inuit shaman's journey to the bottom of the sea and the Sora shamans' journeys to the Underworld described below are intended to ameliorate a situation, but they do not provide a permanent solution. The sea spirit may withhold whales from hunters again on another



occasion, the Sora patient who gets better today may be ill again tomorrow and will eventually die. Similarly, the shamanic community's cosmos may contain a finite amount of soul-force, so that animals hunted must be paid for by trading in the lives of humans (the Tukano of Amazonia, see Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971) or parts of a seal must be honoured and thrown back into the sea to be reincarnated (some Inuit of the Arctic).

This is not because these religions are theologically undeveloped. Rather, it is because they regard the problematic nature of life as existentially given, rather than as a situation of ignorance or sin awaiting a historical redemption. Shamanic rites are based on an acknowledgement of the essences and processes of the world, combined with a willingness to use them to achieve one's goals.

## Person, Powers and Initiatory Experience of the Shaman

In many societies there can be several kinds of shaman, who shade in turn into a range of other specialists such as midwives, diviners, exorcists, bone-setters or herbalists. Some shamans may use techniques of soul journey to fulfil any of these functions, as well as those of doctor, priest, mystic, social worker, psychoanalyst, hunting consultant, psychopomp, astronaut and many others. It often seems that a shaman has to encompass the totality of possibilities of being, transcending boundaries of gender, species and other categories. The ability to make a soul journey is linked to special skills at transformation. Shamans may be transvestite or sexually ambiguous, may speak languages of other peoples or other worlds, or may transform themselves into animals or other beings.

The trance of an experienced shaman is a technique of dissociation with a high degree of control, entered into more or less at will. It is often established with the aid of rhythmical drumming, chanting and dancing, or invocations describing the imminent journey, obstacles which will be encountered, and anticipated battles with hostile spirits and monsters. Other aids, especially in Amazonia, can include the ingestion of psychotropic plants which are said to teach the shaman by revealing what cannot be seen by other means (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975; Schultes and Hofmann 1979).

The element of will and control in trance makes shamans very different from some other kinds of

spirit mediums who stay in this world and are possessed or dominated by spirits which come to visit them and take over their body. Eliade (1964) and Shirokogoroff (1935) have emphasized the shaman's "mastery" of spirits, but it should be remembered that the degree of this control is always precarious. The shaman's involvement with spirits is very dangerous and there is said to be a constant risk of insanity or death.

Though there is much variation across societies, shamanic power and practice are often inherited within a lineage or kin-group. But at the same time it is generally said that a future shaman does not choose his or her profession, but is chosen by the spirits themselves to serve them. The young candidate may be made aware of this through dreams or by other signs. Their first response is often to refuse to accept such a life of suffering and hardship. The spirits then torment them for months or years until they submit, threatening to kill them if they resist, driving them mad, dismembering them in visions, sending spirit animals to devour them, or forcing them to live up trees eating bark or rush crazily across mountains and snowfields.

The symbolism of transformation and rebirth is often very clear. The candidate comes to understand the true nature of things by being dismembered and reassembled as someone greater and more complete than before. These additional powers are represented by animal helpers whose properties of skill or strength the shaman acquires. Other power objects can include crystals, drums and costumes, melodies, spells, and parts of animals such as a deer's paw for swiftness or (in Nepal) porcupine quills to fire as darts at evil spirits.

Here is part of an account of his initiation in the lower world given by a Siberian shaman to a Russian anthropologist earlier this century (Popov 1936, 84ff., translated in Vitebsky 1995a, 58–61; for other shaman's narratives, see Halifax 1979):

The Great Underground Master told me that I would have to travel the path of every illness. He gave me a stoat and a mouse as my guides and together with them I continued my journey further into the underworld. My companions led me to a high place where there stood seven tents. 'The people inside these tents are cannibals,' the mouse and stoat warned me. Nevertheless I went into the middle tent, and went crazy on the spot. These were the



Smallpox People. They cut out my heart and threw it into a cauldron to boil. Inside this tent I found the Master of my Madness, in another tent I saw the Master of Confusion, in another the Master of Stupidity. I went round all these tents and became acquainted with the paths of various human diseases.

Then I went through an opening in another rock. A naked man was sitting there fanning the fire with bellows. Above the fire hung an enormous cauldron as big as half the earth. When he saw me the naked man brought out a pair of tongs the size of a tent and took hold of me. He took my head and cut it off, and then sliced my body into little pieces and put them in the cauldron. There he boiled my body for three years. Then he placed me on an anvil and struck my head with a hammer and dipped it into ice-cold water to temper it.

He took the big cauldron off the fire and poured its contents into another container. Now all my muscles had been separated from the bones. Here I am now, I'm talking to you in an ordinary state of mind and I can't say how many pieces there are in my body. But we shamans have several extra bones and muscles. I turned out to have three such parts, two muscles and one bone. When all my bones had been separated from my flesh, the blacksmith said to me, "Your marrow has turned into a river" and inside the hut I really did see a river with my bones floating on it. "Look, there are your bones floating away!" said the blacksmith and started to pull them out of the water with his tongs.

When all my bones had been pulled out on to the shore the blacksmith put them together, they became covered with flesh and my body took on its previous appearance. The only thing that was still left unattached was my head. It just looked like a bare skull. The blacksmith covered my skull with flesh and joined it onto my torso. I took on my previous human form. Before he let me go the blacksmith pulled out my eyes and put in new ones. He pierced my ears with his iron finger and told me, 'You will be able to hear and understand the speech of plants.' After this I found myself on the summit of a mountain and soon afterwards woke up in my own tent. Near me sat my worried father and mother.

## The Shaman in Practice

A shaman's practice will vary enormously across numerous diverse cultures. It may also cover a wide range of domains which industrial society regards as very separate. In theological terms, it represents a

communion with the divine; medically and psychiatrically, it can represent a movement from sickness to health; socially, it leads from a dysfunctional situation to one of communal harmony. So while it is reminiscent in some ways of mystical experience in the mainstream historical religions, shamanic journeying is at the same time extremely pragmatic and goal-oriented.

In many rites one can discern a re-enactment of the central experience of transformation from the shaman's initiation, but on a smaller and less drastic scale. Some rites, such as offerings, are performed regularly or seasonally to maintain order. Others are performed in response to a problem. When a person falls ill because their soul has been abducted by spirits, or the community begins to starve because animals refuse to give themselves to hunters, the shaman must go on a soul journey to visit the spirits concerned and persuade or coerce them to change their behaviour. This widespread format can be seen clearly in a classic example collected earlier this century from a community of Iglulik Inuit (Eskimo) in northern Canada (summarized from Rasmussen 1929, 123–29).

When there was an incurable sickness, a hunter was particularly unsuccessful, or an entire village was threatened by famine, this was thought to be due to the anger of the sea spirit Takanakapsaluk, who had become contaminated with the community's accumulated sins and breaches of taboos. She was a woman whose father had cruelly cut off her fingers, which then turned into the different species of sea creatures on which the Iglulik Eskimo depend and which she grants them or withholds from them at will. This immediately highlights a central dilemma of traditional Inuit life. Not only do they have to take the life of animals to live, so that those animals must be treated with respect and gratitude, but these animals are also part of the flesh of the sea spirit and humans are able to live only as a result of her suffering.

Anywhere in the world, a shaman's response to this kind of problem may be to enter a trance and go on a soul journey. In this case, the shaman prepares for a difficult journey to Takanakapsaluk's house on the sea-bed. The community gathers in a house and the shaman sits behind a curtain. After particularly elaborate preparations he calls his helpers, saying again and again, 'The way is made ready for me, the



way opens before me!", while the audience reply "Let it be so!" Finally, from behind the curtain the shaman can be heard crying "Halala – he – he – he, halala – he – he!" Then as he drops down a tube which is said to lead straight to the bottom of the sea, his voice can be heard receding ever further into the distance: "Halele – he!", until it is lost altogether.

During the shaman's absence, the audience sits in the darkened house and hears the sighing and groaning of people who lived long ago. These can be heard puffing and splashing and coming up for air in the form of seals, whales and walruses. As soon as the shaman reaches the sea-bed, he follows a coastline past a series of obstacles to the sea spirit's house. He has to dodge three deadly stones which churn around leaving hardly any room to pass. The entrance tunnel to the sea spirit's house is guarded by a fierce dog over which the shaman must step. He is also threatened by her father.

When the shaman finally enters the house he finds Takanakapsaluk with a great pool of sea creatures over the floor beside her, all puffing, blowing and snorting. As a sign of her anger, she is sitting with her back to this pool and to the blubber-oil lamp which is the only source of light. She is in a pitiful state. Her hair is filthy and uncombed and hangs over her eyes so that she cannot see. Her body is also filthy. This dirt represents the sins and misdeeds of the human community up above. The shaman must overcome her anger and slowly, gently turn her towards the lamp and the animals. He must comb her hair, for she has no fingers and is unable to do this for herself. When he has calmed her, he tells her, "Those above can no longer help the seals up by grasping their foreflippers," and she answers, "The secret miscarriages of the women and breaches of taboo bar the way for the animals." When the shaman has fully mollified her, Takanakapsaluk releases the animals one by one and they are carried out by a torrent through the entrance tunnel into the sea, to become available again to hunters.

Just as when a patient's soul has been kidnapped, a shaman will regain possession of it in preparation for restoring it to the patient's body, so here the shaman has moved the situation decisively towards a resolution. He has done this by precipitating, and winning, an encounter. Here, he achieves his goal by tender persuasion, though in other situations a shaman may have to beg a great

spirit lord for mercy, or lead serried ranks of helper spirits in a pitched battle against armies of hostile demons.

Now the shaman starts to return. He can be heard a long way off returning through the tube which his helper spirits have kept open for him. With one last "Plu – a – he – he," he shoots up into his place behind the curtain, gasping for breath. After an expectant silence, he says, "Words will arise." Then, one after another, people start to confess their misdeeds, often bringing out secrets which were quite unsuspected even in a small community living at close quarters. In particular, many women confess to a breach of taboo which the sea spirit finds particularly offensive, the concealment of miscarriages. (After a miscarriage, all soft skins and furs belonging to everyone inside the house must be thrown away. This is such a serious loss that a woman may try to conceal any miscarriage or irregular bleeding.) By the end of the seance there is such a mood of optimism about the next hunt that people may even feel grateful to the women whose behaviour caused the problem in the first place.

This example shows how intensely the community is involved, both in commissioning the shaman's soul journey and in participating in it from a complementary position as audience or congregation. The shaman's activities are intensely embedded in the local social structure. The entire practice of shamanism must therefore be understood with reference not only to indigenous theology, but also to local concepts of nature, humanity and the person, the meanings of life and death, and even the workings of the economy. Many writings about shamans ignore social context or even deny the shaman's social role, promoting an image of the shaman as some kind of solitary mystic (Eliade 1964, 8; Castaneda 1968). But as the earlier initiation narrative shows, a shaman may pass through eremitic or psychotic phases, but must always be re-socialized and psychologically reintegrated to serve a social function within the community. The mystic is also a social worker.

The public role of the shaman also emerges clearly among the Sora, an aboriginal tribe in eastern India (Vitebsky 1993). The Inuit shaman's trance, like that of the Siberian shaman, is a rare and highly dramatic occasion. But in every Sora village, almost every day, one of the many shamans will go into trance, allowing groups of living people to hold dialogues with the dead, who come one at a time to



speak to them through the shaman's mouth. Here, instead of being called in for a crisis, the shaman is involved in a constant regulation of social relations.

The shaman (usually a woman) sits down and invokes her predecessors and helper spirits with a rhythmic chant. When she enters trance she experiences her soul clambering down terrifying precipices to the underworld like a monkey. This leaves her body vacant for the dead to use as their vehicle of communication and one by one, they begin to speak through her mouth. (Here, the technically distinct "shamanism" and "possession" are combined into one system.)

Every case of illness or death is thought to be caused by the dead. The living respond by staging dialogues in which they summon the dead persons responsible, interrogate them in an attempt to understand their state of mind, and negotiate with them. Closely related groups thus find themselves in constantly recurring contact: mourners crowd around the shaman arguing vehemently with the dead, laughing at their jokes, or weeping at their recriminations; family conversations and quarrels continue after some of their participants have crossed the dividing line between what are called life and death.

In this way, everyone engages in a continual fine-tuning of their mutual relationships and each dialogue is only a fleeting episode in an open-ended relationship which explores and ultimately resolves a range of emotional ambiguities in the lives of the participants.

After death, a person's consciousness becomes a form of spirit called *sonum*. Sonums are a powerful causal principle in the affairs of the living. But they are also a contradictory one. On the one hand, in certain moods or aspects, sonums nourish their living descendants through the soul-force they put into their growing crops, giving them their continued sustenance and their very existence; but on the other hand, they 'eat them up' and destroy them.

A person's susceptibility to the effects of sonums depends on a subtle interplay between their own state of mind and that of the numerous other living and dead persons who are caught up in the ongoing dialogue. Different categories of sonum are located in different features of the landscape. As a living person moves around this landscape, he or she may encounter sonums and become involved with them. But this happens not at random, but as a develop-

ment of their long-term relationships with the various dead persons who now reside in those places. What seems at first sight like a person's medical history also turns out to be a comprehensive social and emotional biography.

Illness arises out of the playing out of an emotional attachment and healing consists in altering the nature of that attachment over time. When a dead Sora encounters a living one, it is said that the dead person's attachment can be so strong that, even without meaning to, they overwhelm and engulf the living. During the course of several years' dialogue, living and dead will discuss and develop their relationship to the point where the deceased is gradually persuaded to move into ever less unwholesome places on the landscape and less disturbed and threatening categories of sonum. Finally, the deceased becomes a pure ancestor, who is supposed to have no remaining aggressive impulses but to recycle his or her name into a new baby among their descendants and to watch over this baby. This is the final resolution of a range of ambivalences which can be emotional, sociological and even legal, concerning inheritance.

If the Inuit example directs us towards one aspect of shamanic way of thinking, namely the intimate and complex relationship between humans, animals and morality, the Sora show us something else: a system in which shamans use their trance to act as conduits for a shifting and constantly renegotiated concept of personhood. It would be hard to conceive the Sora person without these dialogues since the Sora person seems not to have a unitary core but to be composed almost entirely of the confluence of the person's relationship with other persons.

Shamans have often been compared to psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, and here we see how both Inuit and Sora shamans not only engage with spirits, but also use dramatic enactment to conduct a form of psychotherapy and sociotherapy. The Inuit shaman makes a sharper contrast between the roles of shaman and audience, while the Sora shaman bows out as the dead arrive and leaves the living clients to face them unaided. Either way, however, there is a profound theological contrast with psychoanalysis concerning the presumed reality of spirits. In the Sora view, the dead not only exist but are equal partners in their encounters with the living. In Freud's model of bereavement, the dead have ceased to exist and the mourner who continues to speak with them



is suffering from a "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (Vitebsky 1993, 238–47)—just as in zoology, marine mammals have no spirit keepers.

## A Shamanic Revival?

In the West, there is a growing fascination with indigenous and synthetic forms of shamanism (see e.g. *Shaman's Drum: A Journal of Experiential Shamanism*). Forms of so-called "shamanism" flourish in popular magazines and weekend workshops, under the guidance of a new profession of "urban shamans." As organized religion retreats ever further from the lives of millions and as institutionalized medicine is subjected to unprecedented criticism, increasing numbers are wondering whether what they call shamanism may offer an appropriate new way of thinking and acting in the industrial and post-industrial world. The evaluation of shamans themselves has shifted from their earlier dismissal as crazy and deluded, to a respect and awe for these people who are said to go to the edge of psychosis, perceive reality and return to serve society (see Walsh 1990 for a survey of shamanic and related states of mind).

However, such movements do not deal easily with the embeddedness of shamanic beliefs in their social structures, and some neo-shamanic practitioners advocate a composite form of "shamanism" based on ideas of universal human spiritual poten-

tial (Harner 1982), arguing that shamanism is not religion but a technique which anyone can learn. This contrasts strikingly with the claim in many traditional societies that a shaman is a rare person who has been specially chosen by the spirits.

While shamanic revival is a major strand in Western life today, it is also appearing among the people who were the world's earlier shamanists but who abandoned shamanic religions under colonial pressure. But revival cannot mean a return to an old way of life. Modern indigenous "shamanisms" have become linked to ethnic identity, environmental protest, democratic ideals or a backlash against the militant atheism of communist regimes (Vitebsky 1995b). Moreover, even the remotest tribal shamans may now have relationships, not only with white people, but increasingly even with shamans from other, separate traditions of which they are only just becoming aware.

So, perhaps as in the paleolithic era, there is a possibility that shamanism may now become a sort of world religion. But this is most likely to come about only in a globalized form in which diverse shamanic ideas and practices are severed from their roots in numerous small-scale societies, largely at the hands of white outsiders. For the foreseeable future, the term "shamanism" will be the subject of intense controversy centering especially on questions of definition, authenticity and appropriation.