
SHORTER COMMUNICATION

A NOTE ON OCEANIC SHAMANISM

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This note was inspired by the publication in this journal of an article, “Shamanism in Tonga: An assessment”, by Meredith Filihia (2008).

Until the publication of Mircea Eliade’s classic study of Siberian shamanism in English in 1964 most scholars who studied animistic cultures used the terms “shaman” and “shamanism” very broadly. The Russian ethnographer V.M. Mikhailovski (1892: 67) had defined the shaman as “an intermediary in man’s relations with the world of spirits”. After 1964, Eliade’s concept of the shaman as a “master of ecstasy”, and shamanism as “a technique of ecstasy” became dogma in Western anthropology and it still is among luminaries who shone in the 1960s.

When I first began to study Polynesian religion in the 1960s I was taken to task by the late Derek Freeman for referring to a Samoan *taula* as a shaman. There was a great difference, he told me, between the *taula* who was a spirit medium claiming to be possessed by spirits and a shaman who actually claimed to visit the spirit world. So effective was his admonishment that for the next two decades I avoided using the term. At that time I did not know that Freeman himself had referred to the *taula* as a shaman in his early writings (Hempenstall 2004).

While Eliade’s study remains a classic account of Siberian shamanism it has been effectively marginalised by developments since the 1980s, first by the revival of serious shamanistic studies in tandem with the “discovery” of shamanism in popular culture, and secondly by further work on other non-ecstatic features of Siberian and East Asian shamanism, particularly the powers of the master shaman. Hundreds of books on shamanism are now available, both popular and scholarly. The popular works range from “do it yourself” manuals to the writings of Carlos Castaneda (e.g., 1991). Scholarly works include the studies of Ioan Lewis (1971/2003), Michael Harner (1980), Richard Guisso and Chai-shin Yu (1988), Mihaly Hoppal and Otto von Sadvoszky (1989), I.P. Couliano (1991), Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey (1994), Piers Vitebsky (1995), Caroline Humphrey and Urgunge

Onon (1996), Jeremy Narby and Francis Huxley (2001), Roger Walsh (2007) and Nancy Connor and Bradford Keeney (2008).

Of seminal importance was the founding of the International Society for Shamanistic Research (ISSR) at Seoul, Korea on 25 July 1991 and the First International Conference held in Seoul between 22 and 28 July of that year. In a seven-page review of the first conference in the *Korea Journal*, Italian folklorist and anthropologist Maria Silvia Codecasa (1991:181) argued that, technically speaking, adherence to Eliade's strict definition of shamanism "would radically restrict the field of shamanic research mainly to Northern Asia". Even Korean shamanism, considered as belonging to the North Asian tradition, she felt, would be excluded except for a "tiny minority" who would be considered true shamans according to Eliade's definition. The organisers had drawn attention to the "difficulty of defining the limits of shamanistic studies, owing to the complex nature of shamanism and to the worldwide distribution of primitive [*sic*] magico-religious practices of shamanic type that apparently share some common features and at least reveal 'a common mystic-worldly attitude'" (Codecasa 1991:181). Dr Codecasa then reviewed many of the 93 papers presented, outlining the role of the shaman—"the mediator between the community and the spirits' world" (p. 182)—and the many differing but complementary definitions of shamanism that emerged.

A second conference was held at Yakutsk between 15 and 22 August 1992 on "Shamanism as a Religion: Origin, Reconstruction and Traditions". The Second International Conference was held at Kulturinnov, Budapest in July 1993 where even popular shamanism got a hearing and representatives from the Pacific gave papers including one on the "Dancing Religion" (of Japanese derivation) in Hawai'i. At the same time a new scholarly journal *Shaman* was launched and adopted as the official organ of the ISSR. The new literature has produced new definitions and distinguishes between "general shamanism", "ecstatic shamanism" and even "lowly shamanism" (Hultkrantz 1993).

It does not take much imagination to discover shamanic survivals in even the more developed religions such as the three "religions of the book"—descending into Sheol, ascending to the heavens via Jacob's ladder or a fiery chariot, turning a rod into a serpent, walking on water and the healing miracles to name a few. My ideas on shamanism as the underlay of Oceanic religions, particularly Polynesian religions, were expressed in the paper which I gave in Budapest (Gunson 1995) and in my chapters on the Pacific in Ninian Smart's *Atlas of the World's Religions* (Gunson 1999a) and in Arthur Cotterell's *Encyclopedia of World Mythology* (Gunson 1999b).

In all Polynesian societies there were two or three distinct types of religious practitioners. There were the experts and specialists in traditional lore (PPN *tufuga) accorded high priestly status such as the *kahuna* of Hawai'i and the

Māori *tohunga* and hereditary chief-priests (PPN *‘ariki) serving a cult god, sometimes co-existing, sometimes not and there were the spirit mediums, shape-shifters and popular healers (PPN *taaula) who could induce spirit possession or who claimed to travel to the spirit world. Oral sources as well as early observations provided evidence that when cult gods (war, fertility) appeared to fail, or cult gods were not dominant as in the Marquesas, there would be a proliferation of spirit mediums. This pattern repeated itself in the Society Islands, Tonga and Samoa and to a lesser extent in the smaller groups in times of crisis.

When I gave my paper on Tongan historiography at the first Tongan History Conference in Canberra in January 1987 (Gunson 1990), I was less concerned with shamanic origins—the underlay—and more concerned with shamanic survivals, the cyclic view of time and history in contrast with the linear view. In fact it was the anthropologists present who drew attention to the shamanic nature of ‘Aho‘eitu’s dismemberment and empowerment. I developed these ideas in two papers (Gunson 2010), which I presented in succession at Tongan History Conferences in Hawai‘i in 1992 and in Tonga in 1993, on the nature and functions of the Tongan priest-king, the Tu‘i Tonga.

Like the ancient shaman-kings of Korea the Tu‘i Tonga seemed to belong to a shamanic tradition that was not covered by Eliade’s definition (see Codecasa 1991). The Tongan king had been, in fact, originally a master-shaman, as the myth records in telling us that he was cut up by his brothers and reconstituted. He dwelt in the Tongan space-time continuum known as *kuonga* (usually translated as ‘reign or sphere of a god or sacred ruler’) and that was why the *tufunga* in Tonga had either never acquired the prestige of the *kahuna* or *tohunga* or had been completely eclipsed by the Tu‘i Tonga many centuries before. Apart from the gods themselves such as Tangaloa Tufunga there was room for only one sacred *tufunga* in Tonga.

When presenting my papers I made it plain that they were “an experiment in Tongan history” and asked for comment. Adrienne Kaeppeler kindly referred me to documentation in the Palace Office that confirmed that Pau was the last Tu‘i Tonga to receive the sacred knowledge, conveyed in his day by the royal women. Wendy Pond reaffirmed her conviction that choreographers of the Tongan *lakalaka* dance are masters of a shamanic technique of ecstasy, and that *faiva* create a pathway for the gods. Throughout Polynesia, indeed throughout most tribal societies, ecstatic dancing creates access to the spirit world.

Now clap your hands and raise the cry!
 Ye Gods, descend down from on high!
 Clap, clap your hands and beat the drum!
 The Gods, the Gods, Behold they come! (quoted Gunson 1995)

I received no further comments until Meredith Filihia published a negative assessment of my views, some of them then unpublished, in this journal (Filihia 2008).

Actually Filihia makes a well-argued case to show that what I regard as shamanism is not North Asian shamanism, is not “ecstatic shamanism” and is not Eliade’s classical shamanism. The same arguments could be brought against many if not most of the papers given at the ISSR conferences and published in *Shaman*. Personally I *do* believe that there are elements of ecstatic shamanism that survived in Tonga, notably ecstatic dancing and other manifestations of *faiva* and genuine traditions of flight to the spirit world. Dr Filihia seems not to realise that myth is a shamanic way of thinking and that it can be taken both literally and figuratively. She quotes the myth of the journey to Puluotu as if it has only one mythic function but it is also a classic account of a spirit journey as are many of the tales of Maui.

More seriously Filihia seems to imply that because I state that Tongan religion evolved from shamanism it was still shamanic in character. Nowhere have I said that the religion of Tonga was shamanistic *per se*. Tongan religion before Christianity, as everyone should know, was polytheistic, but I did say there was a powerful shamanistic underlay which surfaced in times of crisis. Nor did many of my statements about shamanic survivals refer to the ethnographic present or even the immediate ethnographic past. That Pau wore a feather headdress (of shamanic origin) no more makes him a practitioner of shamanism than it makes Queen Anne a shaman because she wore a crown and touched for scrofula.

NOTES

1. Lewis was one of the first to challenge Eliade’s distinction between the spiritual processes of the ecstatic shaman and the spirit medium. A few popularisers such as Drury (1982-1996) accept Eliade’s definition uncritically. For other works, particularly those dealing with shamanism in Africa and the Americas, see the titles in the References below including an old classic (Lissner 1961). For current thinking on definitions see Walsh 2007: 11-16.
2. In the Marquesas the *tau’a* or shamans were higher in rank than the *tahuna* who were merely ritual experts.
3. Wendy Pond (1995) observes that performers of the Tongan *lakalaka* dance experience ecstatic transportation. Tongan experts in the composition of choreography, music, and poetry for dance are called *pulotu*, a word that also refers to a realm of the gods. See also Lawson (1989) on transportation in Kiribati dance.

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ABSTRACT

This note shows how Mircea Eliade's classic study of shamanism as "a technique of ecstasy" has been effectively marginalised by developments in shamanistic studies since the 1980s, allowing for wider definitions. It traces the evolution of my ideas on Oceanic shamanism particularly in relation to shamanic survivals in Tongan religion, the origin of the Tu'i Tonga, and the shamanistic underlay in Polynesian religions which surfaced in times of crisis.

Keywords: Oceanic shamanism, Polynesian religions, Tu'i Tonga