



# GEH1062/GEC1024 GHOSTS & SPIRITS IN SOCIETY & CULTURE

## Week 6 – Shamanism and Divine Communication

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# Lecture Outline

- Making Sense of Shamanism
- Altered State of Consciousness
- Shamanism in Contemporary Societies
- Concluding Remarks

# Making Sense of Shamanism

## ■ Introduction

- Tungus Evenki (North Asia) concept: a figure of importance among the aboriginal people of Siberia and the Eskimos – the Yakuts, Tungus, and other tribes (Howell, 1948)
- Central cultural institution at the dawn of modern humans some 40,000 years ago



# Making Sense of Shamanism

## ■ Introduction

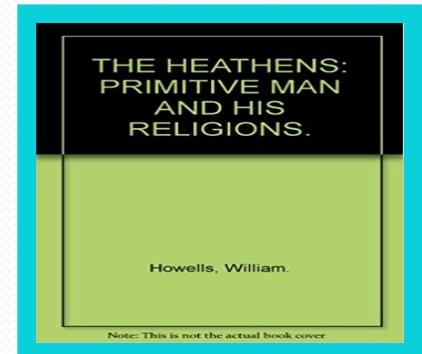
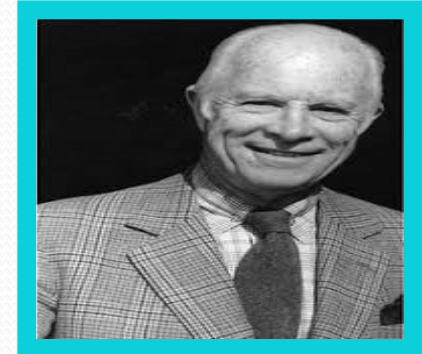
- An ecological-psychobiological adaptation of hunter-gatherer societies to biological structures, psychosocial processes, and therapeutic needs
- Many women as men become shamans, and each sex often takes on the behaviour of the opposite sex



# Making Sense of Shamanism

## ■ Introduction

- “...while the shaman knows perfectly well he is faking much of the performance he may at the same time work himself into a trance...” (Howell, p.104)
- “This is considered strange, as you might think, and it is not approved of by right-thinking people...”  
(Howell, p.107)



# Making Sense of Shamanism

- Different Definitions of “Shamanism”
  - A worldwide healing practice involving *ecstatic communication* with the spirit world on behalf of the community (Eliade, 1964)
  - Having access to, and influence in, the world of benevolent and malevolent spirits, typically entering into a *trance* during a ritual, and practices *divination* and *healing*



# Making Sense of Shamanism

- Different Definitions of “Shamanism”
  - Some scholars consider shamanism specific to Siberia (Siikala, 1978), while others consider shamans to be any practitioners who voluntarily enter altered states of consciousness
  - Part of a broader *animistic* framework that the visible world is pervaded by invisible spirits which affect the living



# Making Sense of Shamanism

- Key Functions and Beliefs
  - Spirits exist and they play central roles both in individual lives and in human society
  - Shamans can communicate with the spirit world
  - Shamans can treat and diagnose sickness caused by malevolent spirits or purely physical afflictions



# Making Sense of Shamanism

- Key Functions and Beliefs
  - Alleviating traumas affecting the soul/spirit restores the physical body of the individual to balance and wholeness
  - Persons may be cured by gifting, flattering, threatening, or wrestling the disease-spirit; or through *soul recovery*



# Making Sense of Shamanism

- Key Functions and Beliefs
  - Shamans can perform other varied forms of divination and foretell future events
  - Divination is the attempt to gain insight into a question or situation through a supernatural and standardised process or ritual. This should proceed by reading signs, events, or omens, or through contact with spirits



# Making Sense of Shamanism

- Key Functions and Beliefs
  - Shamans can employ trance inducing techniques to incite visionary ecstasy and go on vision quests
  - The shaman's spirit can leave the body to enter the supernatural world to search for answers



# Making Sense of Shamanism

- Main Characteristics
  - Training and professional practice based upon the use of ASC
  - Death and rebirth
  - Soul flight and soul recovery
  - Transformation into animals and control of animal spirits



# Altered State of Consciousness

- Training and Professional Practice
  - Selected through the outcomes of spirit encounters that occur in deliberately induced ASC (e.g., “vision quests”) or through spontaneous or accidental ASC experiences interpreted as signs of selection by spirits
  - Often inherited from shaman families, but anyone may be selected by the spirits



# Altered State of Consciousness

- Training and Professional Practice
  - Among the Buriats, a future shaman can be told while he is still a child, by certain signs: he is meditative and likes to be alone; he has mysterious dreams, and sometimes fits, in which he faints (Howell, 1948)
  - Long, dangerous and burdensome training, under the tutelage of an older shaman



# Altered State of Consciousness

- Death and Rebirth
  - Young shamans undergo a type of mental suffering and sickness that pushes them to the brink of death when they cross over to the underworld
  - Spirits and animals attack and destroy the body of the shaman
  - The initiate is then reconstructed with the addition of spirit allies that provide powers to the shaman

# Altered State of Consciousness

- Death and Rebirth
  - This happens so s/he can venture to its depths to bring back vital information for the sick and the community
  - Shamans must become sick to understand sickness and how to overcome their own sickness
  - Death and rebirth experience reflects processes of self-transformation that occur under conditions of overwhelming stress and conflict, producing a new level of self and identity

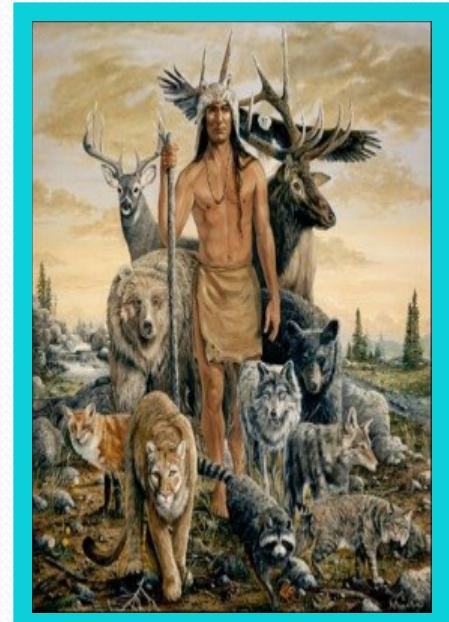
# Altered State of Consciousness

- Entering Supernatural Realms
  - The shamanic worldview includes a multileveled universe including upper and lower worlds connected by an axis mundi, often a “sacred tree” through which the shaman travels between worlds
  - Acquisition of spirit familiars who guide shamans in the spirit world



# Altered State of Consciousness

- Entering Supernatural Realms
  - Yakut shamans have two familiars: *emekhet* and *yekyua*
  - Familiars give shamans power: through their familiars, shamans might travel into supernatural realms and recapture the lost souls of villagers in the community



# Altered State of Consciousness

- Entering Supernatural Realms
  - Ecstasy, trance, or ASC is achieved either auto hypnotically or through the use of entheogens
  - Enthogens: psychoactive substances used in a religious, shamanic or spiritual context
  - Drumming and dancing, fasting, other forms of auditory stimulation (e.g., clapping, singing, and chanting), prolonged periods of sleeplessness, temperature extremes, and painful austerities

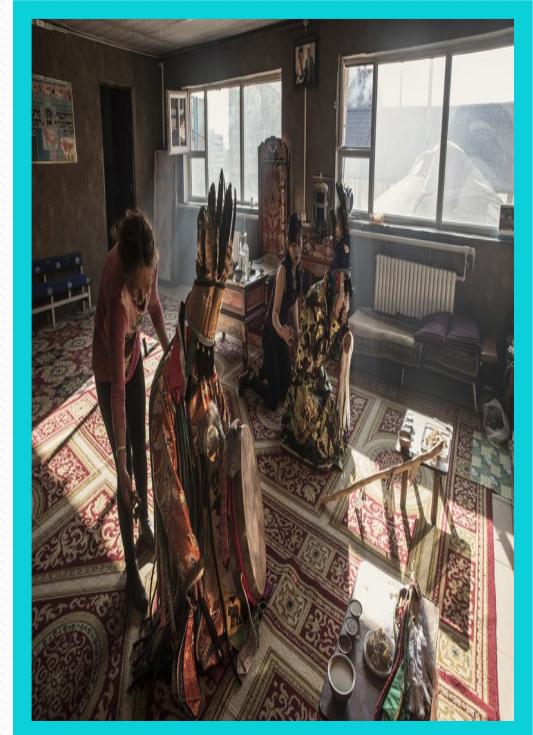
# Altered State of Consciousness

- Entering Supernatural Realms
  - All shamans dress the part – e.g. In Siberia, it is their coat which distinguishes them like a collar turned around (all over the tunic are embroidered or appliqued the figures of real and mythical animals, to represent those they must face on their travels in the spirit realms



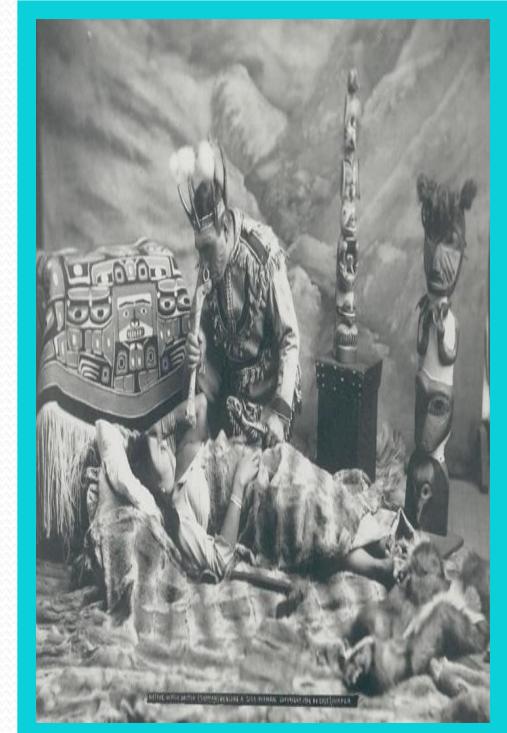
# Altered State of Consciousness

- Soul Flight or Journey
  - Flying to other worlds with spirit allies, or encountering other supernatural entities, or transformation into an animal
  - Representation of shamans' transcendence
  - Control spirits and do not experience possession



# Altered State of Consciousness

- Soul Loss and Soul Recovery
  - Central shamanic illness, which is characterised as an injury to the core of one's being
  - Reintegration of the souls to the self is central to healing
  - Soul recovery involves shamans' dramatic enactment of battles with threatening spirit images



# Altered State of Consciousness

- Shamanic Therapeutic Processes
  - Mediated through song, chants, music, and percussion
  - Physical therapeutic practices, including: rubbing or massaging the body; laying on of hands to transfer healing energies; sucking on the patient's body to extract objects and infections; incisions to extract foreign objects; and herbal or natural substances



# Altered State of Consciousness

- Shamanic Therapeutic Processes
  - Visualisation, or mental imagery cultivation through collective rituals
  - Typically occurs in a community context, strengthening group identity and commitment, enhancing cohesion by reintegrating patients into the group and countering anxiety and uncertainty



# Shamanism in Contemporary Societies

- Dominant views of shamanism as “primitive”, “superstitious”, “backward” and “outdated”
- Ex-shamans ceased to fulfill the functions in the community they used to, as they felt mocked by their own community
- Rise of neoshamanicistic and “tradition-saving” movements



## Making Sense of Shamanism

- What is shamanism and how are their practices and rituals understood?
- What are the key functions, beliefs and characteristics of shamanism?

## Altered State of Consciousnes s

- How are shamans initiated and what are the processes involved to induce ASC?
- What are the processes involved when shamans journey to supernatural realms?

## Shamanism in Contemporary Contexts

- What accounts for the decline in significance of shamanism in some societies?
- What are some cases which see this decline countered in other modern societies?

## Conclusion

- What is the relevance and resonance of a very old practice such as shamanism in different societies and cultures?

# Announcements

- Mid-Term Assessment will be held during lecture in Week 7,  
**Friday 6 October (Open Book)**
- **Time: 2.15pm to 3.15pm in LT12**
- You cannot refer to the internet during the assessment
- ALL topics before recess week i.e.  
Weeks 1 to 6

# Announcements

- Bring your own laptop to type both of your answers
- Please make sure your laptop has sufficient power
- Remember to save your answers periodically to prevent any loss

# Announcements

- Format: 2 questions (not essay based)
- Length: 1/2 page to 1 page per answer, typed single-spaced
- Please save your answers in a Word document using this format:  
**your DG\_name** (e.g. TE1\_LeeKuanYu)
- Email your document to  
**nus.geh1062@gmail.com**

**Q: Identify the key difference between witchcraft and sorcery. Assess the relevance of this distinction in relation to Southeast Asia.**

- *The key difference lies in the emanating source of power and agency to supernaturally effect an outcome or change (Evans-Pritchard)*
- *Witchcraft: the basis of their ability rests as an inherent faculty or a disordered personality*
- *Sorcery: the basis of their ability is the manipulation of objects, words and spirits*
- *Extent of resonance in SEA (Ellen): Ethnographic cases from different societies to disrupt framework*

# References

- Eliade, Mircea (1972/1964). *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P.
- Howells, William (1948/2001). 'The Shaman: A Siberian Spiritualist', in Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers (eds.) *Magic, Witchcraft and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, London, Toronto: Mayfield.
- Siikala, A. (1978). *The Rite Technique of the Siberian Shaman* (Folklore Fellows' communication 220). Helsinki: Souomalainen Tiedeskaremia Academia.
- Winkelman, M., & C. Winkelman (1991). 'Shamanistic healers and their therapies'. In W. Andritzky (Ed.), *Yearbook of Cross-Cultural Medicine and Psychotherapy*, Berlin: Verlag