

The Importance of Shamanic Sickness in Recruiting

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Various methods are used by the tribes of central and northern Asia to recruit shamans. These methods include heredity, election by the divine, voluntary commitment, and selection by the tribe. Of these methods, heredity and election seem to be the primary recruitment methods and the most common methods within this area. While voluntary commitment and being selected by the group are important methods of recruitment, these shamans are considered less powerful than those who inherited the role and those who were elected by the divine. Regardless, the recruit will not become a shaman unless he or she has a valid ecstatic experience.

The education of a shaman includes some type of ecstatic experience and traditional teaching methods. While the ecstatic experience remains important, the techniques of the shaman, the names of the spirits and their functions, the mythology and the genealogy of the clan, and the secret language of shaman must be taught through traditional teaching.

Psychopaths or not, the future shamans are expected to pass through certain initiatory ordeals and to receive an education that is sometimes highly complex. (Eliade 14)

The initiation of the shaman varies from a public ritual to an initiation during an ecstatic experience. The information and power transferred to the shaman through the initiation is much more important than the technique used to recruit the shaman.

It is only this twofold initiation—ecstatic and didactic—that transforms the candidate from a possible neurotic into a shaman recognized by his particular society. (Eliade 14)

As stated earlier, different tribes include different methods of recruitment; however, most involve some type of apparent sickness for validation of the one selected. The future shaman among the Vogul experiences epileptic seizures during his adolescent years. Also, the future shaman among the Yurak-Samoyed has visions, sings during sleep, and wonders about alone. Recruits among the Tungus of the Transbaikalian region exhibit mental derangement. Eliade said that among the Yakut:

One destined to shamanism begins by becoming frenzied, then suddenly loses consciousness, withdraws to the forests, feeds on tree bark, flings himself into water and fire, wounds himself with knives. (Eliade 16)

It seems that having some type of abnormal behavior or mental disorder is a validation for being connected to the spiritual realm for some tribes. However, it is important to note that quite often the child is reared to becoming a shaman from an early age. For example, among the Tungus of Manchuria, perhaps throughout the child's youth it is suggested what is required to become a shaman; thus, allowing the child to choose to embrace the path of the shaman by embracing these certain behaviors or not.

However, not all of these "sicknesses" are forms of conditioned behavior. Eliade points out that there is only one difference between someone who has epilepsy and a shaman from the arctic. That is, the shaman can induce seizures whereas an epileptic is unaware as to when he or she will have a seizure. Perhaps environmental factors, such as extreme cold and isolation, are contributing factors to the nervous disorders among the arctic people. In the sub-arctic region, shamans do not exhibit these epileptic symptoms; instead, they use narcotics to induce trances in order to achieve a similar ecstatic experience. In other areas, the disease has disappeared entirely, but the people continue to act out its symptoms.

. . . Indonesian shamanism has originally been a real sickness, and it was only later that the genuine trance had begun to be imitated dramatically. (Eliade 25)

It is even suggested that perhaps the reason shamanism is hereditary is because these illnesses are passed down through genetics. A sound argument could be made in favor of this theory, especially since these certain illnesses are singled out by the tribe. Perhaps early in the existence of the tribe, the continuance of a disease throughout a family was considered an important trait of that family. Thus, making a family distinct from the rest of the group and making them the obvious choice for religious leadership.

The sickness does not necessarily have to be a mental disorder or abnormal behavior. The

sickness could be any childhood illness or other physical illness, like dwarfism, which the future shaman overcomes.

. . . Candidates for shamanism among the Araucanians of Chile “are always sickly or morbidly sensitive, with weak hearts, disordered digestions, and subject to vertigo. They claim that the divinity’s summons to them is irresistible and that a premature death would inevitably punish their resistance and infidelity.” (Eliade 25-26)

Because the future shaman is able to overcome the illness, the clan views this person as able to overcome the illness repeatedly and able to help others overcome that illness. Since illness is generally associated with sorcery or spirit in the Americas, the future shaman is seen as having some type of spiritual power that is able to overcome it. But as you see in the above quote, sometimes the illness occurs because of a resistance to the call of the spirits.

A strong contrast appears here. In one instance, the continuance of the sickness, either mental or physical, is considered to be a spiritual possession and is a good thing. On the other hand, another group views the conqueror of the sickness, that is the one who has overcome the sickness, as being the spiritual person. With the latter, the sickness disappears and the person is initiated as a shaman. However, in the other instance, the shaman must be able to maintain the sickness, or appearance thereof in ritual, in order to continue to be a shaman. Earlier, we discussed how some tribes will no longer consider a person’s bid for the role of shaman if such sicknesses disappear. In the Sudanese tribes, the sicknesses are not even viewed as important at all.

Most shaman show no sign of mental derangement; however, the exact opposite is true. It is interesting to note that some shaman perfect their skills as athletes and perfect their mental capacity, but still they have ecstatic experiences which would consider them psychopaths in Western society.

In general, the Siberian and North Asian Shaman shows no sign of mental disintegration. His memory and his power of self-control are distinctly above average. (Eliade 30)

In everyday life, the shaman does not display any form of mental illness or suffer from seizures.

The shaman is able to enter these ecstatic states at will. This is true for the Sudanese as well as the Australian tribes. It is pointed out that the cosmology of the tribe is far too complicated to be understood by people with mental instability.

While sickness plays an important role in most shamanistic paths, different tribes have remarkably different views of the sickness and the role of the shaman. There is no doubt that sickness plays a major role in the recruiting of new shamans. Maintaining the illness or appearing to maintain the illness would validate a candidate's claim to the role of shaman in one instance, but in another it would not. It is important to keep in mind that even though the shaman appears to have some form of mental illness, he or she is completely capable of carrying out his or her task at hand. And quite often, the shaman is completely sane and healthy individual, perhaps even the most physically fit and intellectually capable person among them.