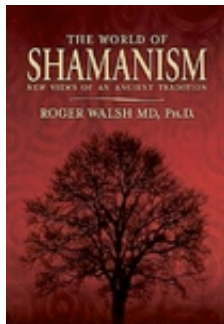


## Shamanism Revisited

A review of



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### **The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition**

by Roger Walsh

Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2007. 326 pp. ISBN 978-0-7387-0575-0. \$18.95, paperback

Reviewed by

[Stanley Krippner](#)

Shamanism, in any of its manifestations, is a complicated practice, and a treatment of the topic must, of necessity, position itself. Roger Walsh, of the University of California, Irvine, has chosen to present shamanism from the perspective of transpersonal studies and associated fields of inquiry. Aiming for a wide audience, but one skewed toward members of the health professions, Walsh designates shamanism as “a family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves or their spirit(s) interacting with other entities, often by traveling to other realms in order to serve their community” (p. 16).

Walsh's goals are to introduce his readers to shamanic practices and to examine these practices in the light of contemporary research, assessing how, when, and why they work. He also sets out to evaluate extreme claims about shamans, contending that they are neither charlatans nor saints, neither psychotic eccentrics nor superhuman sages (p. 8). Walsh describes his own interest in transformative practices (such as psychotherapy and various contemplative and spiritual disciplines), finding that shamanic practices fit this rubric. Although he admits that he has not engaged in fieldwork, he has enjoyed and benefited from his contact with shamans and has participated in "core shamanism" workshops (p. 10).

Walsh's (1990) earlier book, *The Spirit of Shamanism*, did not discriminate adequately among similar practitioners. The current work makes no such error, pointing out that priests commonly lead rituals but rarely enter altered states and that mediums may enter altered states but rarely "journey" to other realms. Many emotionally disturbed people enter altered states where they claim to meet "spirits," but they are victims and not masters of the process (p. 16). Indeed, one of Walsh's major contributions is his refutation, based on both field reports and psychological evaluations, of the notion that shamans are "hysterics," "schizophrenics," or "psychotics" (pp. 96–99), a claim made over the decades by several psychoanalysts and other mental health professionals (see Krippner, 2004). Indeed, Walsh correctly points out that psychology's contributions to this field have been "decidedly mixed," hampered by "superficial interpretations, insufficient anthropological data, and lack of personal experience of shamanic practices" (p. 7). He credits the turnabout to humanistic, transpersonal, and Jungian psychologies, research in altered states and placebo effects, and the psychologists who have undertaken shamanic training (or at least workshop attendance) themselves.

As a result, psychologists can marvel at the ubiquitous nature of shamanism (hence the book's title), its venerable status as, arguably, the world's oldest profession, and its ability to survive persecution from organized religion, colonialism, and (I would add) Marxist regimes (Balzar, 2003). As cultures evolve, so do their spiritual and health practitioners; historically, shamans tend to disappear as societies shift

from more egalitarian hunting and gathering tribes to sedentary, agricultural, complex societies. Nevertheless, their functions are retained by various specialists; the case can be made that clinical, cognitive, and ecological psychologists, as well as neuroscientists, have their roots in traditional shamanism (Krippner, 2002).

Walsh uses paradigms originally proposed by Ken Wilber, Stanislav Grof, Charles Tart, and others to add depth and perspective to his discussions. For example, he takes the seven central practices that he has found central to all major spiritual traditions (Walsh, 1999) as a springboard to discuss shamanic practices. The training of attention and the refining of awareness, for example, are necessary elements of shamanic training. However, he could have given more specific examples here (and elsewhere). The training of attention is exemplified by the Navajo chantway, in which every element of the shaman's narrative must be word perfect or the healing ritual must be repeated. The refining of awareness is central to the diagnosis of sickness as when an Andean shaman uses smell, taste, and touch as well as visual observations to make an informed diagnosis. Neither of these examples fits the stereotyped use of "altered states" or otherworldly "journeying" for assisting a client; instead, they reflect a keen attention to nuances in "ordinary reality" that a nonpractitioner would overlook.

Walsh compares the shamanic path to Joseph Campbell's (1968) heroic journey, observing how the shaman's sojourn is often internal rather than external but still culminates in bringing acquired wisdom and power back to his or her community. Walsh illustrates the shaman's "death-rebirth" experience with a series of drawings from several of S. H. Francis's (2001) evocative drawings of her LSD session. These drawings are so spectacular that I have used them myself in various educational settings, but they are not shamanic. The shamanic literature, past and present, contains artwork more germane to the topic of this book, including sculpture, paintings, and illustrations executed by shamans themselves.

*The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition* reads well and is beautifully organized, yet one could quibble about several statements made by its author. *Mediumship* is not the same as *channeling* (p. 96); the former term applies to information purportedly

provided by a deceased person while the latter material (whether it contains superficial platitudes or profound insights) is attributed to an impersonal "Source." Scott Peck's name is misspelled (p. 111); *Common Boundary* is a fine periodical but is not a "psychotherapy journal" (p. 140); the account (p. 147) of Hitler's World War I rescue by an "inner voice" (referred to as a dream in some accounts) is highly debatable (it is not related in *Mein Kampf*, a logical place for it to have made its appearance); the wrong citation is given to an otherwise accurate description of sidereal time (p. 232). Finally, Walsh uses the abbreviation OOB for "out-of-body experience" (p. 176) even though it was changed to OBE in 1974 (Alvarado, 2007).

Some of the highlights of this book are Walsh's "key dimensions for mapping states of consciousness" (pp. 238–239), a model deserving wider use. His contrast of hylozoism (the belief that all objects are imbued with life) to animism (the belief that every object is invested with mental qualities, more recently renamed *panpsychism*) reminds the reader that Walsh is a professor of philosophy as well as of psychiatry and psychology at his university. His contrast of Mircea Eliade's notion of shamanism as a crude religion with Michael Harner's description of it as a sophisticated technology finds the balance tipping in Harner's favor. Walsh's advocacy of "assumptive minimalism" (p. 10), the preference to make as few assumptions as possible, serves him well when he discusses the ontology of spirits and "power animals" and the purported parapsychological abilities of shamans. In addition, he leaves no doubt as to the "trickster" aspect of shamanism, devoting an entire chapter to the shaman's "tricks of the trade" (pp. 115–121). Incidentally, in my field work I have found that many members of the shaman's community know that he or she uses legerdemain but conceptualize it as a necessary part of the healing ritual. If clients and their families "see" a stone emerge from a sick person's body, they believe that the object symbolizes the nonvisible toxic material that has been expunged. Although I have found many shamans' communities to be more urbane than outsiders suspect, this is not always the case, evidenced by the nonsense that surrounds many indigenous "cures" for HIV/AIDS (such as that having sex with a virgin is the best treatment for the disease).

A valuable contribution of this book is its description of the shaman's universe, with its characteristic central axis (also called the *world tree* or *cosmic mountain*). Another section of interest is Walsh's discussion of the ontological status of "spirits." Are they social constructs, Jungian archetypes, creatures of the imagination, or entities dwelling at the limen or border of "ordinary" and "nonordinary" reality? Walsh introduces the term *incommensurability*, arguing that there can be major problems that arise in comparing differing worldviews. He writes,

Ontological indeterminacy implies that we may be unable to determine the precise nature or the ontological status of something: because the available data may be interpreted in many ways (undetermination of theory by data), and we have no absolute method by which to decide which interpretations are best (incommensurability). (p. 148)

Thus, people's' stances on "spirits" are ultimately governed by their world-hypotheses and their basic assumptions about the nature of reality. If this sounds postmodern in its tenor, it very well might be. Earlier, Walsh makes the point that the relationship between individual experience and collective culture is "at the heart of postmodern thinking" (p. 128), and I have suggested that a useful approach to understanding contemporary shamans is that they are "deconstructionists" (Krippner, 2002).

Walsh describes shamans as the world's most enduring "general practitioners" (p. 207) and explains how the skillful use of ritual, altered states, and what Western medicine would call the placebo effect contributes to their success rate. Unaccountably he puts little emphasis on the shaman's utilization of medicinal herbs, although he does a creditable job of describing shamanic utilization of such mind-altering plants as peyote and ayahuasca, the latter an herbal concoction that has spilled over from shamanism to institutionalized religious groups, primarily in Brazil but more recently in Western Europe and (thanks to a Supreme Court decision) the United States.

Some of the book's other highlights are its chapters on the

shaman's brain, the evolution of consciousness, and the role of shamanism in a changing world. Walsh concludes that there is much to learn from what shamans do, "the myths they live by, the understandings they gain, the training they undergo, the techniques they use, the crises they confront, the capacities they develop, the states of consciousness they enter, the understandings they gain, the visions they see, and the cosmic travels they take" (p. 271). Walsh's book serves shamanic practitioners well and presents this varied assemblage in an accessible fashion that will win them well-deserved attention and respect.

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How to Practice Shamanism. Shamanism is a term used to describe the rituals of many cultures around the world. In the Western world, the term is often used to describe more recent traditions that borrow from many cultures or invent their Shamanism is an ancient healing tradition and moreover, a way of life. It is a way to connect with nature and all of creation. The word shaman originates from the Tungus tribe in Siberia. Anthropologists coined this term and have used it to refer to the spiritual and ceremonial leaders among indigenous cultures worldwide. The word shamanism can be used to describe the ancient spiritual practices of these indigenous cultures. So what is your shamanic power animal? In my earlier post on petroglyphs, I wrote about how they are associated with shamanism. This reminded me of my own experience with this ancient practice. It is recorded in Lizard Diary, which I self-published in 2001. Lizard Diary. Let me say at the outset that this is not a plug for my book. A couple of years after its publication, I abdicated any financial interest in sales.