The Shaman's Quest in Africa
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The word shamanism is, of course, a western elaboration of the vernacular Siberian, and especially Tungus term ‘shaman’, a traditional, spirit-inspired diagnostician, healer, and ritual expert who is a specialist in religious ecstasy. With this provenance, the term ‘shamanism’ has been quite widely applied elsewhere to refer to a range of religious phenomena, first by the early travel writers, and later by historians of religion, ethnographers and anthropologists. But its use outside its original Siberian context is, as we shall see, by no means unproblematic. Consequently, the extent to which shamanism represents a universal religious phenomenon, or set of phenomena, is a matter for debate.

As early as 1913 the pioneering German comparative ethnographer of Africa, Leo Frobenius, reported his discovery of a ramifying series of spirit-possession complexes stretching from west to east and southern Africa. These he identified as ‘African shamanism’ which, he claimed, was ultimately of Asiatic origin, having diffused from Persia to the African continent. Frobenius thus confidently placed Africa on the global map of shamanism. But forty years later, the scholar whose name is synonymous with the study of shamanism, the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade judged differently. His justly famous, exhaustive compendium, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, published in 1951, covers the entire world—except for Africa which is dismissed in a footnote!

As it turns out, it is not entirely inappropriate that Eliade should have omitted Africa from his encyclopaedic survey. For he is actually largely responsible for thrusting into general circulation a conception of shamanism—which he represents as that of the classical Tungus institution—that has led a number of influential subsequent authorities to maintain that shamanism is in fact rare in Africa. As we shall see, this, in turn, has prompted the development of a number of ingenious, but correspondingly flawed, theories of religious processes.

Thus, I think that Frobenius was right about African shamanism and that Eliade is wrong about Africa and more generally. In what follows I shall attempt to substantiate this assessment (although not of course

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exhaustively). I shall also suggest reasons, including Eliade’s perverse influence on terminology, for this, as I see it, mis-reading of the evidence from Africa.

Explicit Reports of African Shamanism

A cursory glance at the anthropological literature on African religious phenomena would certainly suggest that, in contrast to other regions (notably the Americas), shamanism is not widely recorded there. References to ‘spirit-possession’ occur frequently in relation to most parts of the continent, both in the context of indigenous religions and following the introduction (and acceptance) of Islam and Christianity. But explicit reports of ‘shamanism’ are rare. Certainly the exceptions stand out. Notable amongst these are the following: Nadel (1946) writing about the Nuba peoples of the Sudan; Tanner on the Sukuma of Tanzania (1955); Vansina on the Kuba of Central Africa (1958); Leiris on the Ethiopian zur-cult (1980); and Haberland (1960, 1963) on the same subject in southern Ethiopia.

What we must ask, do these anthropologists mean by the term ‘shaman’? Let us take them in chronological order. Nadel uses ‘shaman’ to translate the vernacular (Nyima) term kujur which, he reports, is applied to describe spirit-inspired priests who divine the future and diagnose and treat illness at seances while they are in a state of trance. The spirits concerned are anthropomorphic. They come to the shaman ‘from outside’, and when he is in trance gain hold of his body. In trance, the spirit ‘mounts’ the shaman as a rider does a horse and ‘enters his head’.

While actively possessing the shaman in the seance trance, at other times the spirit is passively incarnated and only normally leaves the shaman on his death when it may return to the limbo where spirits dwell, or seek reincarnation in another shaman. The shamanic vocation, which may be announced in dreams, by some dramatic misfortune or in other ways, represents a public ‘ideal’, a position of considerable status and a source of wealth. This religious cult, Nadel (1946: 25) specifically contends, ‘corresponds in all essentials to the classical shamanism of Central Asia and North West America [...]. it rests on the belief that spirits may possess human beings, and on the practice of establishing communication with the supernatural through human beings so possessed. The person possessed—the shaman—is more than merely a temporary and passive medium through which others place themselves en rapport with the spirit world [...]; through his ability to induce possession he is also a master of these supernatural powers’. Tanner applies the term shaman to priests, inspired by ancestor spirits, who play similar divinatory and therapeutic roles among the Sukuma. They control their own supernatural power and, with the aid of swishing rattles, are able to induce possession in
themselves and others in healing seances. Speaking in tongues is a
characteristic feature of shamanic trance. Vansina similarly refers to the
ecstatic priests of the Kuba, who are possessed by nature spirits, and
conduct trance seances, as ‘shamans’. As in the Nuba Hills, here the
shamanic career is typically assumed in the form of an annunciation, and
shamans are referred to as ‘divine healers’, curing with the help of their
spirit guides or familiars.

In this preliminary review of shamanic sightings, we come now to
Michel Leiris’s classic account of the famous zar-cult at the ancient city
of Gondar in Ethiopia: this is one of the cults outlined by Frobenius.
Leiris, whose subtle and sensitive account does for African shamanism
what Evans-Pritchard has done for African witchcraft, makes specific and
systematic comparisons between the cult’s cardinal features and those of
Siberian shamanism. And more recent studies of zar apply the same
terminology (Young 1975; Lewis, al-Safi & Hurreiz 1991). We are
concerned here with a cult which exists peripherally in ambiguous tension
with Christianity and Islam, and the majority of whose followers are
women or men of low status. Recruitment takes the form of an initiatory
illness, or affliction (as often also in Siberian shamanism), and the most
committed adepts are likely to graduate to become shamanic cult-group
leaders, conducting diagnostic and therapeutic seances with the aid of
their helping spirits. The cast of spirits includes the children of early
Ethiopian emperors as well as numerous Islamic saints. These and other
powers are believed to regularly ‘mount’ their human vehicles or ‘horses’,
particularly in the dramatic seances in which devotees honour them with
dancing, ritual, and sacrificial offerings. Each spirit speaks through its
human mount, in a dialect which indicates its provenance, and possesses
its own signature tune, characteristic dance gestures, and dramatic style.
Chronically possessed women—regular adepts—are considered to be ‘marr-
ried’ to their (male) spirit partners. As well as exacting expensive gifts
of clothes, jewellery, etc., for their spirits, female adepts participate in what
is in effect a mystery religion where trance is cultivated as a religious
experience. Variously elaborated, all these features of the cult which
fetishises illness and affliction, are found widely diffused throughout much
of north-east Africa, the Sudan, Egypt, the Maghreb and, outside Africa
in the Persian Gulf to which zar seems to have spread in the 19th century—
rather than coming from there as Frobenius supposed.¹

In these four ethnographic cases it is apparent that the term ‘shaman’
is being applied to a person of either sex who has mastery over spirits,
who incarnates spirits, and becomes actively ‘possessed’ in trance in the
controlled context of the seance which, among other things, is a form of
religious service. This usage is in complete harmony with the ideology

¹ For a fuller discussion of zar, see Haberland (1960; 1963: 503 sq.); Lewis
and practise of the Tungus from whom the term *shaman* derives. As our main authority here, S. M. Shirokogoroff (1935: 269), records: ‘In all the Tungus languages, the term (shaman) refers to persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over their spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people who suffer from the spirits.’ The shaman’s body is a temple or tabernacle for the spirits, a vehicle or receptacle, which Shirokogoroff himself calls a ‘placing’ and distinguishes from an icon.

Shamans and shamanism (meaning the associated cult phenomena) are far more general than these isolated references suggest. Although usually described in terms of ‘spirit-possession’ and ‘spirit-mediumship’, parallel phenomena can be found in virtually every part of the continent. Although their social contexts vary, this, for instance, I think applies to the various spirit-cults in west, central, southern and eastern Africa, described and analysed under the cautious title of *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* by Beattie and Middleton (1969). In this volume, M. J. Field and R. Horton discuss male and female priests incarnating spirits (*i.e.* shamans) in Ghana and Nigeria respectively. P. Verger describes Nago-Yoruba and Fon priests in Dahomey, who are the wives of the gods (orishas and voduns). This cult, of course, is of particular interest since it is partly the source of Haitian voodoo (as well as of other Latin American ecstatic syncretic religions). The Tonga and Shona mediums discussed by Colson and Garbett have the same shamanic features, as do those of the Zulu, Banyoro, Segeju, Somali, Lugbara, Alur and Sukuma.

Many other shamanic cults, albeit unrecognised by the ethnographers concerned, can be discovered in this Africanist literature. Prominent examples are: the well-known Hausa *bori* cult (the West African analogue of the East African *zar* cult with which it intersects and interacts in North Africa and the Sudan; the *rab*-cult among the Lebou and Wolof (Zempleni 1966); and, moving back to East Africa, the *waka* cult among the Oromo (Haberland 1963, Knutsson 1967). Of particular interest also here is the *jok* cult among the Dinka (Lienhardt 1961) and other Nilotes (*e.g.* the Nuer, famously well-known through the work of Evans-Pritchard). It is


3. This remarkable White Russian medical doctor spent some eleven years amongst the Tungus in the 1920s. His sympathetic and deep understanding of Tungus culture and religious and medical concepts is so revolutionary, not least in its freedom from Eurocentric bias, that his work merits consideration as a pioneering achievement in what is now known as ethnopsyhiatry.

4. PROVENCS (1913: 561) called the *zar-bori* complex the ‘African variety of Shamanism’. On *bori* specifically, see TREMAINE (1914), NICOLAS (1967), MONICA NICOLAS (1972), and the articles by J. H. Abdalla, M. East, and S. Echard, in LEWIS et al. (1991: 37-80).
remarkable to note that Godfrey Lienhardt’s sensitive and subtle account of Dinka religious enthusiasm contains over twenty indexed references to possession and descriptions of seances with ecstatic, spirit-inspired ‘diviners’ and ‘prophets’. But there is no trace of any reference to shamans or shamanism. If this book had been written by an American anthropologist outside the British structural-functional tradition, I think the terminology might have been rather different. Under such sponsorship, Dinka shamans would surely have achieved a justifiably secure place in the ethnographic record.

In contrast to these examples, where shamanism has generally passed unacknowledged in the British anthropological canon, there are now a number of more recent reports on other African cults where the authors do not hesitate to employ the dread term shamanism. These include the Islamised Zaramo of Tanzania (Swantz 1970); the Zinza, also in Tanzania (Bjerke 1981); and, off the coast, similar cults on the islands of Mafia (Caplan 1975) and Mayotte (Lambek 1981). More recently still, several French anthropologists have described and analysed shamanism in francophone West Africa amongst the Songhay-Zarma, Minyanka, and Mandingo (Olivier de Sardan 1994; Colleyn 1988; Gibbal 1982). These references suggest that the tide is turning in favour of the explicit recognition of African shamanism.

Eliade’s Legacy

Part of the responsibility for not recognising the importance of shamanism in Africa earlier (and, indeed, for often still failing to recognise it when it occurs) can, I think, be traced to the misleading conception of the phenomenon developed by Mircea Eliade, and rather uncritically applied by his successors (cf. Lewis 1993).

Purporting to take his readers back to the original Siberian Tungus material which he discusses at second hand, Eliade presents the shaman as an inspired priest who in ecstatic trance states ascends—in spirit or soul—on mystical journeys. In the course of these celestial trips he meets and communes with the celestial powers in the interests of his fellow men. Spirit possession is not directly involved here. According to Eliade (1972: 434): ‘The specific element of shamanism is not the incorporation of spirits by the shamans but the ecstasy provoked by the ascension to the sky, or by the descent to hell: the incorporation of spirits and possession by them are universally distributed phenomena, but they do not belong necessarily to shamanism in the strict sense.’ For Eliade, these two elements belong to different historical periods. ‘The celestial ascent of the shaman is a survival, profoundly modified, and sometimes degenerated, of the archaic religious ideology—centred on faith in a Celestial Being—, [...] the descent to Hell, the fight against evil spirits, and [...] the
increasingly familiar relationships with spirits which aim at their incorporation or at the possession of the shaman by them, are all innovations . . .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insertion of soul/spirit</th>
<th>Expulsion of soul/spirit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shamanism A (shaman restores soul to patient, i.e., cures soul loss)</td>
<td>Shamanism B (shaman extracts cause of sickness from patient)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insertion of spirit/soul</td>
<td>Extraction of foreign entity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession A (‘authentic’)</td>
<td>Possession B (‘inauthentic’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIG. 1**

So, for Eliade, there are two historical strata, or evolutionary stages: the authentic shamanistic celestial ascent, and the subsidiary and diluting possession by spirits. The former—‘pure shamanism’ (sometimes called ‘white shamanism’)——Eliade (and others) tend to associate with prehistoric Siberian hunter-gatherers and paleolithic cave art.

Without accepting these evolutionary assumptions, the Belgian structuralist anthropologist, Luc de Heusch (1962) has developed this thematic dichotomy between celestial ascent and spirit possession into an intriguing and very ambitious theory of contrasting religious phenomena. Shamanism is considered an ‘ascensual metaphysic’ (a de-possession) and opposed to possession which is treated as an incarnation. Like Eliade, De Heusch sees these as characteristic of different cosmologies and religions. He draws a distinction between involuntary possession by evil spirits which are exorcised, and voluntary possession by good spirits which are incorporated. The first process De Heusch identifies as ‘inauthentic’ possession in contrast to the second which he qualifies as ‘authentic’. By applying the same distinctions to shamanism, the four-fold matrix shown in Fig. 1 is generated.

More recently, partly in response to criticism, De Heusch (1971: 245-285) has modified his rather rigid original schema. He now seeks to trace ‘transformations’ between the four categories of religious phenomena distinguished—which he tends to see as various types of trance. In terms of this revised schema, De Heusch concludes that ‘authentic shamanism’ scarcely exists in Africa (cf. Hultkrantz 1989: 47). Specifically rejecting those earlier African cases, described as shamanism, by Nadel, Tanner, Vansina and Leiris—with which we began, De Heusch can find only one African example of the genuine article. This is the Venda (‘Vandau’).
‘mad doctor’ who is a ‘clairvoyant’, endowed with the ‘extraordinary facility of seeing the spirits, of discovering them, and of knowing their secrets, and with the power of exorcising them’. Thus, following Eliade, but elaborating his basic conceptions about shamanism, De Heusch reaches, in effect, the ironical conclusion that if Eliade felt he had neglected Africa, he was right to do so! Although they do not necessarily accept his negative conclusion about African shamanism, others—such as the American cultural anthropologist Erika Bourguignon (1976)—have followed much the same path, taking as a point of departure the distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ possession. Much less subtly than De Heusch, Bourguignon seeks to classify the cultures (and societies) of the world according to whether they include possession without trance (P) or have both possession and trance (PT). These P and PT distinctions she attempts, very unconvincingly, to correlate with different patterns of child-rearing in different societies (see Lewis 1996). Finally, more recently, the French structuralist ethnomusicologist, Gilbert Rouget (1980), has laboriously sought to restore these problematic distinctions with the claim that shamanism and possession involve different ideologies of trance, with music playing a correspondingly different role in each. Music triggers trance, whereas ecstasy is silent.

The problem with all these formulations, however ingenious, is that they suppose that specific religions, or qualities of religious experience, are characteristic of particular cultures and societies. In fact, however, the previous binary schemas are too monolithic, too simplistic and by no means do justice to the multi-layered, multi-textured complexity of religion and religious experience. In reality, even within a single culture, the spectrum of mystical experience is likely to embrace all those states so far distinguished. We can easily establish this, and verify how aptly our African data fit this pattern, by referring to the classic Tungus ethnography itself. In fact, the Tungus actually recognise, and distinguish between, possession (P) and possession-trance (PT), and between ‘desired’ and ‘undesired’ possession by benign and evil forces. All these are integral parts of the composite shamanic complex present in their culture. Within this context, the distinction stressed by De Heusch and Bourguignon between ‘inauthentic’ (negative) and ‘authentic’ (positive) possession experiences corresponds to sequential phases or stages in the stereotypical model for the assumption of the shamanic career. Although not all inauthentic/negative possession experiences necessarily have this outcome—the response to some may be exorcism (cf. Lewis 1996: 137)—they regularly constitute a typical stage in the process of shamanic initiation.

5. Mary (1983), another contributor to the debate, elaborates De Heusch’s argument, proposing a clear dichotomy between ‘visionary’ shamanism on the one hand, and possession on the other.
More fundamentally still, De Heusch and Eliade are mistaken in seeing possession and shamanism as intrinsically opposed, or mutually exclusive phenomena. As we have seen, the Tungus shaman is literally a master of spirits. Frequently, he permanently incarnates spirits in his own body which may manifest themselves when he is shamanising in trance in a public seance. Indeed, as in our African examples, the Siberian shaman is also considered to be ‘married’ to at least one of his helping spirits (cf. Hamayon 1993: 201-203). In general, moreover, the spirits involved here cannot. Shirokogoroff (1935: 121-122) insists, be categorised simply as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and treated accordingly. The Tungus do not classify spirits in this simple, unambiguous way. According to them, any spirit can be malevolent, benevolent, or neutral, depending on the context in which it manifests itself and whether or not it is ‘mastered’ by a shaman.

Eliade’s presentation of Tungus shamanism (attributed to Shirokogoroff) emphasises the theme of mystical flight to the ‘upper world’ (further elaborated in De Heusch’s notion of ‘ascensial metaphysic’). But Shirokogoroff actually reports that the Tungus shaman’s mystical voyages (his ‘trips’ in modern parlance) more frequently take him to the ‘lower world’! In many instances, in any case, shamanism is not concerned with either of these realms but with mastering spirits in this world. In all circumstances, moreover, the essence of the Tungus shaman’s role, Shirokogoroff emphasises, lies in his ability to incorporate potentially dangerous spirits in his own body, so neutralising or ‘mastering’ them. In this respect, the shaman is rather like a lightning conductor.

No one is considered a shaman unless he (or she) can control spirits and introduce them or expel them at will. The onset of the shaman’s vocation is, typically, announced by a traumatic experience associated with wild, hysteroid behaviour which is interpreted by the Tungus as uncontrolled possession. It is the mastering of these spirits and the control of the ecstasy associated with them that marks the role. Such controlled ecstasy in the shamanic seance is stimulated by various techniques, including staring fixedly into a brass mirror (itself a spirit ‘placing’); drumming and singing; inhaling resinous smoke; smoking pipes of tobacco; or drinking large cups of vodka. We should note, finally, that among the Tungus, the power to control spirits—which is the essence of the shaman’s role—can diminish with age, and in competition with rival shamans seeking to demonstrate their superior spirit mastery. The role of shaman is, thus, essentially confrontational and is continuously contested.

Thus, for the Tungus as for the African possession cults to which I
have referred, we can now construct an ideal model of shamanic initiation. Here an initial traumatic experience or illness, interpreted as possession, is typically the preface or introduction to a progressive involvement with spirits which leads to the assumption of the roles of spirit medium and the more active, managerial role of shaman—master, or mistress of spirits. Of course, the ambiguity of the initial possession experience permits two contrasting responses—either the accommodation and domestication, or taming (De Heusch’s ‘adorcism’), implying increasing mastery by the human host, invoked in our model of shamanic initiation; or, the contrary response of exorcism and rejection of the shamanic career. As Anna-Leena Siikala (1978) has acutely pointed out, these apparently contradictory interpretations and reactions are likely to be mutually reinforcing within the same cultural tradition, rather than characteristic of different world views. At the same time, the unsolicited, uncontrolled and essentially traumatic nature of the initial spiritual encounter, heralding the onset of the shamanic vocation, demonstrates beyond all doubt the bona fides of the new recruit as one impelled, against his will, into the service of the spirits. He (or she) has no option, since it is the spirits who choose their devotees without reference, so it is proclaimed, to mortal wishes or desires. This pattern of divine election is the hallmark of the authentic mystical calling. Of course, in objective terms, the distinction between ‘desired and undesired possession’ is highly ambiguous (cf. Lewis 1989: 59-89).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase I</th>
<th>Phase II</th>
<th>Phase III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involuntary</td>
<td>Accommodated</td>
<td>Controlled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncontrolled</td>
<td>Domesticated</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsolicited</td>
<td></td>
<td>Solicited Trance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Possession**
(or other seizure
* e.g. illness or other trauma)

**Patient**
(cliche: agony and ecstasy)

**Healer**
Initiation rite
Traumatic annunciation of divine calling

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As our diagram (Fig. 2) illustrates, there are at least three major stages in the assumption of the shamanic vocation. Having learnt to master spirits and to control ecstasy, the shaman can of course, in a single seance readily move through the roles or states distinguished by the terms ‘possession’ (and/or ‘soul-loss’), spirit medium, and master of spirits (shaman
Shamanism and Cosmology

Having now, I hope, recaptured the authentic spirit of the Tungus shaman which has been so misconstrued by Eliade, De Heusch and their followers, we can venture to define the wider concept of shamanism. In my opinion, this is best specified along the lines proposed by the modern Russian specialist on Eurasian shamanism, V. N. Basilov (1981; 1984). Shamanism, he writes, 'is a cult whose central idea is the belief in the ability of some individuals chosen by the spirits to communicate with them while in a state of ecstasy and perform the functions of an intermediary between the world of spirits and the given human collective'.

Although certain imagery and some symbolic motifs (e.g. the equestrian and sexual terms used to describe the relations between spirits and shamans) tend to occur cross-culturally, the specific cultural context of shamanism is highly variable. Contrary to the way in which some Western New-Age enthusiasts seek to interpret and appropriate it, shamanism, thus, is not a specific or distinctive religion or cosmology in itself. It is rather a set of religious or ritual techniques, applied by the shaman, which can be found in many different religious traditions and which exist potentially in all religions. Hence the shaman is not a property of a specific shamanic cosmology (cf. Hoppal, in Siikala & Hoppal 1992: 129). At the same time, the conspicuousness and prominence of shamanism in a given society and culture will obviously depend on the extent to which the shaman and his rituals dominate the religious field.

Consequently, it does not matter how the balance between possession and soul-flight (or 'mystical flight') is pitched, whether a tripartite cosmology is present, or whether the image of the 'cosmic world tree' is emphasised. This motif, which is perhaps most familiar to a British audience in the form of Enid Blyton's 'faraway', has, it so happens, been widely traced in Africa by the French ethnographer, Viviana Pâques (1964). These and many other symbolic motifs, in various combinations and proportions, are widely if not universally associated with shamanism.
and more extensively distributed in Africa than is generally recognised. It is important to add also, that as with other religious phenomena, whether in its classical Tungus setting or elsewhere, shamanism is typically dynamic and syncretic, and sensitively registers changes in its ambient socio-economic and political environment.

Both Shirokogoroff (1935: 150, 260) in relation to the Tungus, and Nadel (1946: 32) in relation to the Sudanese Nuba, rightly emphasise the innovatory role of shamans in inventing and introducing new ideas, as well as in cannalising novel experiences which are common to their communities. This may result in syncretic new local religions, embodying elements from such world religions as Buddhism, Hindouism, Christianity, or Islam. It may also reflect and register the marginalisation of a traditional local religion, displaced by one of the world religions. In such circumstances, a religion which was formerly of central social and political significance may be side-lined to the status of a cult which then becomes a monopoly of subordinate sections of the population—including women in male-dominated societies (Lewis 1971: 96). This is typically the situation with the widely ramifying African zar and bori cults mentioned earlier.

As I have argued elsewhere (Lewis 1989) where, however, such ecstatic religions are unambiguously the central morality cults of a society, shamans appear usually to be men. The gender of shamans is thus not a matter of whether mystical flight is involved or whether the accent is on spirit possession, as a recent feminist writer on the subject appears to suppose. It is rather a question (and also an indicator) of the socio-political status of the cult.

In this connection it is interesting to note that in Shirokogoroff's classic account of Tungus shamanism he reports that shamans are of either sex. Interpreting this in the light of his assessment that by 1920 when he was doing his research, the Tungus generally had become nominal Christians, this might indicate the marginalisation of traditional Tungus shamanism and its increasing appropriation by women. On the cosmological level,

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7. As already indicated, as with their counterparts elsewhere, African shamans are frequently believed to engage in 'mystical flight' to identify the causes of affliction and to recover and restore the life-force (i.e. 'soul') of bewitched or otherwise afflicted patients. This is a capacity which they share with witches. This ability is not a monopoly, nor indeed particularly distinctive, of Eurasian shamans (cf. Lewis 1993).

8. Sered (1994: 187, 190) argues that the 'boundaries of the feminine ego are very thin', 'more permeable' than males, and thus more prone to possession by spirits. Spirit possession, hence, is rooted in women's physical experiences of heterosexual intercourse and pregnancy (of being physically entered). The socialisation process 'produces women who are willing (and often desperately eager) to accommodate "possession" by men, by babies, and sometimes by spirits'. In contrast, men, by their socialisation, are trained to have more defined and stronger egoboundaries, better suited to transcendent mystical flight.
the process of Christianisation was accompanied by syncretism between traditional religious forces and those of the new religion. Shamans became saints. Thus, the Russian St Nicholas was assimilated by the Tungus to the Grandmaster of shamans. It is not difficult to appreciate the shamanic element here. There is surely a striking correspondence between this protean figure and our contemporary European (and North American) image of Santa Claus, mystically flying through the skies with his reindeer-drawn sledge, laden with miraculous gifts.

However this may be, these remarks may, perhaps, serve to reinforce my view that the cultural elements of shamanism, in any particular historical setting, are less significant than its socio-political role. In Africa and elsewhere, shamanism may play a marginal or central role and, sometimes it would appear (perhaps in transitional circumstances), both.

I suspect that the idea that, to be properly designated as ‘shamanism’, cults should play a central, male-dominated role may also have contributed to a serious misreading of the evidence on African shamanism. As well as the misapprehensions of Eliade and De Heusch, there thus seems to be a whiff of gender bias here. One does not have to be a post-feminist anthropologist (as I consider myself), to appreciate that shamans can be of either gender.

But these are not the only factors involved in failing to recognise the authenticity of African shamanism. Originating in Siberia and the arctic, the term ‘shaman’ diffused quite naturally across the Bering straits into North American cultural anthropology, in the wake of Franz Boas and other diffusionists. The disinclination of British structural-functionalist anthropologists and their successors to apply this term not only in Africa, but outside its original provenance is consistent with their well-known hostility towards diffusionist anthropology. For their part, in Eastern Europe contemporary specialists on Siberian and Eurasian shamanism still broadly adhere to the diffusionist and evolutionist ethnographic traditions, and, by concentrating on the classical shamanic regions, have reinforced the impression that shamanism begins and ends there (e.g. Siikala & Hoppal 1992; Hoppal & von Sadovsky 1989).

More generally, the difficulties we have discussed in applying the concept of shamanism universally are similar to those experienced with other emic, culturally specific terms such as ‘caste’, ‘mana’, ‘potlatch’, ‘tabu’, ‘totem’, and from our own cultural tradition, ‘feudalism’ (and ‘vassalage’), and indeed ‘democracy’. But this is not the place to embark on a discussion of the difficulties (which are well-known) posed by these...
similar emic (or vernacular) terms, each of which has its own history and a vast accompanying literature.

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Mircea Eliade’s classic survey of shamanism across the world explicitly omitted Africa from consideration. Ironically, this has encouraged the misleading impression that there are virtually no shamans in Africa and that the theme of ‘mystical flight’ is also absent. This view, elaborated by Luc De Heusch and many other anthro-
pologists, ignores (or underestimates) a great deal of evidence to the contrary, and can be traced ultimately to Eliade’s evolutionary and fundamentally misleading representation of the classic Siberian data on shamanism. As far as British social anthropologists are concerned, the reluctance to apply the term ‘shamanism’ to African phenomena illustrates their persistent hostility towards descriptive categories which they associate with diffusionism.

RÉSUMÉ

À la recherche d’un chamanisme africain. — L’étude classique de Mircea Eliade sur le chamanisme à travers le monde laisse volontairement de côté le continent africain. Curieusement, cette absence a conduit à accréditer l’idée qu’il n’existe pas de chaman en Afrique et que le thème de l’‘envol mystique’ y est absent. Cette analyse, que l’on doit à Luc De Heusch ainsi qu’à un grand nombre d’autres anthropologues, ne tient pas compte, ou sous-estime, toute une série de données opposées et elle peut, en dernière analyse, être rattachée à l’interprétation évolutionniste et à la représentation fondamentalement trompeuse, que Mircea Eliade propose à partir des études classiques sur le chamanisme sibérien. Dans la mesure où l’anthropologie sociale britannique est concernée, l’attitude qui consiste à refuser d’appliquer la notion de chamanisme à des réalités africaines témoigne de son hostilité persistante à utiliser des catégories descriptives associées de façon négative au diffusionisme.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Africa/Afrika, Tungus/Tungus, shamanism/chamanisme, possession/possession.