

## THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SHAMANISM

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### *Introduction*

The essence of this paper is that the Shaman's behaviour and acts are mechanisms which re-inforce or reestablish social cohesion within the group. More attention will therefore be paid to the Shaman's relationships with members of his own group (extended family, local group and tribe) rather than his supernatural relationships with spiritual beings and gods. The focus will be on shamanism as it occurs in Lowland South America.

Within the aboriginal context in which shamanism occurs the indigenous societies are predominately hunters and gatherers though some horticulture is also practised.

Characteristic of this type of economy is a relatively low level of social, political and legal development as regards specific mechanisms for authoritarian social control. It is in just such a situation (characterised by egalitarian organization) that the shamanic role is of utmost importance. Such societies not only lack specific control mechanisms but also possess very few avenues through which an individual can aspire to a specialist role. The Shaman thus occupies a major articulatory focus of such a society. Within himself he embodies a variety of roles and functions which have supernatural sanction but are of fundamentally social essence. This supernatural sanction itself is valid only through a social consensus which the Shaman must first achieve and then endeavour to maintain.

Before embarking on an analysis of this social function it is perhaps expedient to have a working definition of Shamanism. Both Firth (1964,1968) and Lewis (1975) make

an important distinction between Shamanism and Spirit Possession.

The Shaman exercises actual control of the spirits through developed techniques and is able to introduce them into his own body at will. The Spirit Medium however is possessed by spirits but does not necessarily possess them. Spirit Possession, as Firth rightly points out is probably "too broad a term to specify the social functions and 'active controlling role characteristic of the Shaman" (op. cit. 638). The most useful heuristic definition of Shaman then is "any specialist who is concerned with the maintenance or restoration of spiritual equilibrium of individuals or a society by ritual means".

Thus shamanic techniques which enable the Shaman to control the spirits emphasise the Shaman's intellectual qualities as leader of his group. It is important to realise that as an 'inspirational functionary' his visions and fantasies are generated by and limited to the unique occasion — the seance for a specific social purpose. Through the seance the Shaman can be seen to manipulate the symbolic objects and the symbolic reasoning of his group with culturally prescribed gestures, rituals and verbal formulae in view of the whole group and for the benefit of it. The important point here is that his spiritual power gives him ritually sanctioned social power, 'Le pouvoir surnaturel dont le chaman est investi et l'importance de son fonctions lui assurent un prestige et un torit considerables" (Metraux 1967, 98) The Shaman is not merely a magician or sorcerer though these functions can be subsumed in the role. Rather he reinforces the material and existential fabric of aboriginal society. He deals with the spirits basically as a mediator between the earthbound world on which he lives and the spirit world upon whose equilibrium the material world's well being ultimately depends.

There is a dichotomy of definitions in the phrase 'social function'. The first and obvious concept is that represented by the Shaman's duties as Judge, Politician, Curer and Spiritual Warrior. The second and more problematical concept is that everything he does, because it relates to his access to and control of the spirit world (socially sanctioned through initiation) is essentially social. Spiritual imbalance can have

a variety of causes. Members of the group may not have fulfilled their ritual duties, they may have ignored food taboos or they might have sent evil thoughts or spirits to afflict other. The Shaman is the only one who can intercede directly with the spirits on the group's behalf and restore spiritual and social balance. In a world where every social act is a result of spirit activity or has spirit world repercussions the social function and context of the Shaman is paramount.

### *Initiation*

The Shaman must be able to occupy a unique social position within his group in order to perform the unique combination of services and duties required of him. Initiation both confers and legitimises his position. The often complex rites of initiation further isolate the Shaman-to-be from his group and legitimise his role by making it socially acceptable. Initiation revolves around the acquisition of knowledge that will enable the Shaman to 'die' and be 'reborn' at will. The ability to transcend these planes is at the heart of the shamanic persona.

Arnold Van Gennep (1960, 109) has described shamanic initiation as a series of stages. "1) The novice is made especially sensitive by exhaustion and or fasting, 2) he goes to sleep and 'dies', 3) his soul ascends to the sky and then descends to the earth, 4) he awakens and revives as a Shaman". Underlying these stages are the themes of insolation, purification, ritual death and rebirth and the transition from one stage to another. Of vital importance in this initiation process is the so-called "intervening or liminal phase" (Turner, 1967) where the initiate is in an ambiguous transitional state — neither living nor dead — neither Shaman nor non Shaman. Both his experiences whilst in this liminal phase and his evident ability to "die" and be "reborn" serve to validate and legitimise his claims to the position of Shaman. This ability gives him his social consensus — his licence to practice.

Amongst the Akawaio (Butt-Colson 1977) shamanic initiation is especially revealing. At first the initiate is isolated from his group and fasts. This has the dual effect of cutting him off from his cultural reference points and attracting

the spirits to him in order to support his life in the absence of food.

Acquisition of shamanic power begins with the initiate drinking an infusion of water and tree bark the latter of which has spirits called 'Kasamarawa' which enable the initiate to rise easily into the spirit world. Another spirit the 'Kalawali' forms a spiritual ladder by which the Forest Spirits descend into the initiates' body and his own soul can descend to its rightful abode. These spirits therefore facilitate the departure of the soul from the initiates body a prerequisite for the 'initiatory death' which is essential to illustrate to the group that he has mastered the boundaries of life and death.

In addition the initiate must also drink and vomit tobacco juice. Indeed only a Shaman or Shaman/initiate may do so as the juice is obtained from the spirits. Tobacco is seen as helping the spirits to descend to the seance and as aiding the Shaman's own spirit to 'fly'. Thus this act enables the initiate to practice the Shaman's essential skill - the ability to detach soul from body and later to re-attach it. Bird spirits also aid the Shaman's soul to fly and the initiate must also learn 'flight songs' taught to him by the spirits. All of these aspects must be experienced and mastered before the Shaman can enter his first public seance. This seance is seen as the public climax of all his training and is also the actual mechanism by which the Shaman gains recognition of his powers. Held at the initiates own house it is attended by a great number of friends and relatives. The initiate drinks a considerable amount of tobacco juice and falls into a trance as a result. His spirit flies off and if he is not a suitable candidate it may not be possible for his spirit to find its way back again. If the initiate accomplishes his task - the first formal penetration of the spirit world - he is a pupil no longer, though only subsequent experience will gain him a reputation. During this first seance there is a change in the status of the pupil - it is a test of his capacity as well as a public ritual or inauguration. "As an ordinary individual he 'dies' dunnng it, and is brought back to life. With a new status, having control over his own spirit and those of others and having made contact with the spirit world he is on his way to becoming e real Shaman - an 'eneoge', one who percieves" (Butt-Colson, *op. cit.* 63).

Thus the essential sequence of shamanic initiation underwrites his unique position in the society and allows him to perform vital social functions which take the form of magico-religious ritual. This 'works' because there is a belief in the spirit world that is shared by the Shaman and his patients and victims alike and also by the experiential expectations of the group as a whole (Levi-Strauss 1977).

### *Shamanic Roles*

In aboriginal Amerindian societies illness is often defined as either a reflection of spiritual imbalance, the result of soul loss or as a result of spirit attack by a Shaman or one of a myriad of Forest spirits. In such societies many though not all illnesses are social. Spirits can act disruptively because of social disharmony within the group. Such illnesses are to be cured not necessarily by just treating the physical manifestation but by entreating the spirits to leave or re-enter (as the case may be) the body of the victim. Because many illnesses are socially defined by treating the individual the Shaman also serves the wider society. The nature of many illnesses is therefore culturally rather than physiologically determined. The Shaman when acting as Curer spans both the religious and social spheres. By curing the Shaman reinforces and maintains social cohesion.

Indeed among the 'Makritare' of the Venezuelan Amazonas territory sickness can be specifically caused by a "transgression of the moral or ethical code of the tribe. A proper confession and propitiatory gifts made to the Shaman can effect a cure, but only subsequent observances of the cultural taboos can bring about a full restoration of health" (Wilbert 1972).

### *The Shamanic Curing of Illness*

Treating the sick and curing illness is the most common and fundamental duty of Shamans. For the Desana of Colombia disease cannot be described as being of any specifically natural or supernatural cause. For them there is only one "environment, one context in which the individual exists, and in this context seen and unseen disease agents mix and mingle in a very complex combination of pathogenic forces"

(Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976, 158). Dobkin de Rios in the context of her work in the urban slums of Iquitos Peru has described four such magical/social illnesses. *Susto* or magical fright is an intense psychic trauma often described as soul loss. "Dano" is suffered by people who are envied by others or because someone harbours feelings of vengeance against them. "Pulsano", characterised by anxiety and restlessness usually affects women and *Mal de Ojo* is characterised by nausea, weight loss and insomnia and is thought to be caused by the glance of another person. These are all very socially defined types of illness.

Amongst the Akawaio (Butt-Colson 1965/6, 151-186) sickness is regarded as the result of one of three causes. Either a person has committed a social misdemeanour, e.g. breaking a food or sex taboo or there is inter-personal or inter-group hostility. In the latter two cases "sickness is the result of disharmonious relationships implicit in opposing groups and therefore give rise to evil thoughts and intentions" (Butt-Colson, *ibid.*). Therefore from a particular type of social order a set of structural relationships and accompanying sentiments sickness and disease may come. Many illnesses amongst the Akawaio are obviously a result of the disruption of the social fabric.

The Shaman as curer deals with magic substances that are thought to cause illness. Arrows, crystals and thorns are really the materialisation of shamanic power. It is these same 'weapons' that are inserted into the Shaman during his initiation. Significantly because he has society's sanction to hold and use these weapons he does not fall ill himself. 'The Shaman therefore can play (with impunity) the dual role of sorcerer and curer because the control of these weapons is part of his power. It is fundamental that the cures performed by the Shaman "demonstrates the coherence of a psychic universe, itself therefore a projection of the social universe" (Levi-Strauss *op. cit.* 183).

The social and cultural context of illness is amply demonstrated in a case related by Joanna Kaplan for the Piaroa (Kaplan 1975: 150-1). In this instance a boy who had been jilted by a young girl of his tribe did not look favourably on her impending marriage to another group member. When he became ill with fevers the local Shaman

told him that her father was using sorcery on him because of this belligerent attitude. Once the boy realised this he "allowed" himself to be ritually cured by the Shaman even though all of the Anthropologist's antibiotics could not alleviate his condition beforehand. Here then illness, its cause and cure were intimately linked to the pervading social realities surrounding the girl's marriage. In curing illness the Shaman, the patient and the group as a whole communitively within a symbolic system validated by myth and belief and structured by songs, chants and ritual knowledge that only the Shaman possesses and is sanctioned to use.

### *Politics*

Although subject to specific cultural patterning the social validity of the Shaman's functions are bound to have (in certain instances) political importance. Giveii also the fact that the sacred and secular are inextricably bound together and that the facts of social and cultural reality are a result of the Shaman's ability to intercede with and manipulate the constituent parts of the spirit world, this may be an all too obvious point. A Politician is a manipulator of social circumstance — the Shaman by controlling the spirits thus manipulates the mechanism which itself is believed to produce social circumstance.

Dole (1973, 296) states that "the Shaman tends to preserve the integrity of the society by reducing anxiety and conflict amongst its members and supporting the social norms necessary for its political existence". From Dole's reports it seems that the Shaman's role among the Kuikuru of the Upper Xingu is crucial in the political sphere. As she herself says "the prestige and ritual power attracted to the Shaman at this evolutionary level are then crystallised to the political at the next level" (Dole *op. cit.*, 295). Among the Kuikuru formal leadership is weak and the extended family organization of the community is unstable and irregular. In addition fear of sorcery accusation and subsequent retaliatory action effectively curtails direct methods of social control. Indirect methods are thus resorted to. Shamanism here gives some degree of social control. Popular faith in the Shaman allows him to pass judgements and suggest punitive

action without engendering resentment as he is merely relaying the wishes of the spirit world.

Dole relates a case where the local Shaman 'Metse' had to divine who was to blame for a village house burning down. After interrogating the villagers to ascertain the popular consensus opinion he was able to formulate a verdict which he knew they would accept. In trance he blamed the fire on strangers who had shot fire arrows onto the house. This was exactly the explanation that the villagers had put forward. Metse however added a significant rider i.e. that the strangers had first tried to burn his house down but failed. By doing this he illustrated that he was at the forefront of their defence and that whoever it was who had shot the arrows was really striking at the focus of the groups existence i.e. at Metse himself.

Another case which occurred in the same village also illustrates this very social aspect of shamanism. Here Metse divined the guilty who had stolen some fruit. The boy accused belonged to a family which was generally disliked. Metse's prestige and the boy's inability to defend himself made the accusation stick. The spirits, through the Shaman's mediation pointed to this guilty person but the social reality was that the boy occupied a marginal (almost scapegoat) position within the group and so by accusing him Metse reinforced the unity of the rest of the society. There were thus excellent social reasons for divining his guilt.

### *The Legal aspects of Shamanism*

"Shamans also had a hand in the administration of justice for whenever misfortunes or deaths were attributed to witchcraft the Shaman was called upon to unmask the sorcerer" (Metraux 1947, 596). If shamanism is a mechanism for exercising social control for political ends then it must have quasi-judicial functions also. A skillful Shaman exercises control over inter-relationships and individual behaviour and it is therefore necessary to consider shamanism in its socio-political and legal context, i.e. as part of a system of thought and action of the community within which it operates. The Shamans legal role emerges out of this context and as a natural adjunct to his quasi-political functions.

Political and legal roles are two sides of one coin and if shamanism is a mechanism which helps preserve the form of society and maintains it in working order then a Shaman must fulfill judicial obligations to that society.

A case study concerning the disappearance of rice supplies has been recorded by Butt-Colson (ibid) which amply demonstrates the relationship between illness, reinforcing accepted modes of behaviour and the immediate social context. Apparently two villagers in an Akawaio settlement were stealing rice for themselves without sharing it amongst the other members of the village. Subsequently one of the pilferers became ill and during a seance help by the Shaman to divine its cause the spirits warned against the patient eating too much rice. Here was a public diagnosis of an illness. Its effects had obvious social implications as the pilferer/patient took the hint and gave the rice back. The beauty of this particular shamanising act was that the seance was an indirect approach which avoided direct social confrontation. It was the spirits that made the pronouncement and threatened consequences; it therefore had the effect of publicly upholding the tenet that it is wrong to steal. The Shaman's seance was in effect a masterpiece of diplomacy and social management.

The seance therefore has legal functions — it probes for causes and allows for everyone's behaviour to be scrutinised and for the spirits through the Shaman to deliver homilies on correct conduct and to denounce malpractice. Seances can be seen as primitive courts of law with the spirits as barristers, the patients relatives as the victims and the audience as witness and judge. The seance is, a controlled social setting which provides for the public working out of social problems of which illness is an outward symptom. The placing of the enquiry at the spirit level helps remove the personal element.

Among the Canelos Quichua of Ecuador the Shaman plays an important role in the social, cultural and legal identity of the group — the Ayllu. Ayllu structure is conceived of as a network of linked souls extending back to ancient times. The Shaman is the crucial link to these times (Whitten 1972) because of his acquisition of the souls of the ancients. Shamanistic power therefore conjoins the ayllu structure of partially controlled soul-linkage with the world of spirits.

All adult Canelos Quichua possess a Grandfather Shaman-ancestor or Uncle Soul Possessor (Jacti) and a man is recognised as a Shaman only if men in the descending generations call him such.

Perhaps the most important quasi-legal aspect of Canelos Quichua shamanism is the fact that a particularly powerful Shaman can become the founder of a new and autonomous village community. This community is formed by inter-married ayllu members and is in effect a religiously sanctioned secular settlement. The shamanic role therefore provides a mechanism for the physical expansion of Canelos Quichua society. It would be difficult to find a more political role performed by a Shaman.

Therefore on social, legal and political grounds the Shaman is an interpreter of the moral basis of society and guardian of the social order. Thus aspects of the shamanic role in Akawaio, Kuikuru and Canelos Quichua society serve to compensate for the lack of any specific legal and political institutions. The Shaman in these societies plays a role that is often the only truly specialised role (with any real power) within such an egalitarian milieu. It is thus understandable that this role is above all of prime social importance in aboriginal societies.

### *The Ava-Chiripá: A Test Case in Social Function*

Essential to the shamanic role is its holistic aboriginal context — the social and cultural system in which it is embedded. What happens when this context changes, develops or even collapses completely? Does shamanism adapt or even survive? Because shamanism is an important part of the Amerindian Cultural Tradition it is obviously closely bound up with the aboriginal belief system. Given this its ability to adapt will depend on the nature of the society affected and the nature and intensity of the outside stimulus.

Among the Ava-Chiripá, a Guaraní subgroup of Eastern Paraguay, the functions of the Shaman have increased in proportion to the changes taking place in the environment (Bartolomé 1979). These changes involve contact with White and Creole populations and the Shaman's role has been called

that of an "inter-cultural agent". This role however does not detract from the traditional one which has been described above. Indeed in fulfilling his 'new' role he is essentially mediating between the known and the unknown i.e. his world and that of the encroaching groups with their Western ideas and values. These ideas & values as well as the increasing use of alcohol are regarded as imperfections which prevent the Shaman from attaining the state of perfection that is his cultural ideal. These imperfections attack and undermine the philosophical bases of Ava-Chiripá life and permeate every aspect of their culture.

In Ava-Chiripá society it was (undoubtedly) the Shaman who was the chief protagonist in resisting change to the traditions of the social and religious system. The present day Shamans by their understanding and control of the spirits are the "archetypal sustainers of the social and cosmic order of mankind" (Bartolomé *op. cit.* 121). The Shaman's power derives from the powers that rule the universe and maintain earthly and human order. In Ava-Chiripá society the greater the number of outside imperfections threatening the social fabric the greater the unifying role of the Shaman and the greater must be the understanding he has of the social and cultural tensions produced in his society.

This revitalised importance of the shamanic role is reflected in the nature of shamanic initiation. Today the Ava-Chiripá shamans choose their own heirs in order to force the young to continue tribal traditions and avoid Westernizing influences. These influences affect relationships that are social economic, religious and moral. They therefore strike at the very heart of the Indian's own conception of his universe. The process of rationalising and mediating these influences "can only be carried out by men who can sail in the frontier seas of both worlds, the Western and traditional' (Bartolomé, *op. cit.* 175). This factor was well demonstrated by the Shaman who asked the Anthropologist (Bartolomé himself) to become a Shaman for his tribe. When Bartolomé replied that he wasn't an Ava-Chiripá the Shaman answered that this might be so but that he (Bartolomé) did have all the knowledge of the Whites and had been taught the ways of the Ava-Chiripá as well. Thus he was an ideal choice for a Shaman — he was able to straddle the

metaphysical fence between the known and unknown — a characteristic feature of shamanism.

As illness is often a social phenomenon such contact pressures can mean that the Shaman has an ever increasing number of patients to be ritually cured. Ceremonies are the vehicle for ritual and whereas in the past curing ceremonies were held only once a year it has increased significantly in recent years in direct relation to increasing cultural contact. From January 1968 to January 1969 it was held no less than six times. This increase implies a "determined response in cultural terms to assimilative pressures" (Bartolomé, *op. cit.* 136). In other words through this increase in ritual ceremony the society reaffirms its own identity and maintains its cultural integrity. There seems therefore to be little doubt that the rewarded increase in the number of such celebrations is proof of the increased social tension produced by growing cultural pressure from external Westernizing factors. There is then an increased need for reaffirmation of cultural identity and solidarity. Obviously for the Ava-Chiripá the mediating role of the Shaman is of paramount importance. As Bartolomé himself has commented "tribal communities which lose their Shamans tend to disintegrate for the lack of someone to give a sense of cultural values" (*ibid.*).

The Shaman then is the embodiment of the totality of Ava-Chiripá social, economic, legal and political life — he is the social focus. Amongst his people his most important duty is to reinterpret the new socio-cultural contact reality on the basis of his culture's own symbolic code and he is thus able to influence new conditions by following traditional patterns. In this case at least shamanism has proved to be adaptive.

### *The 'Hallelujah' Cult*

Perhaps one of the most revealing examples of the adaptation of Shamanism to Western religious and cultural ideals is the rise of the so called Hallelujah cults amongst the Akawaio (Butt-Colson, *Ibid.*). Hallelujah owes its origin and mainstream of inspiration to the British Missions and the fact that one Akawaio Indian called 'Bichiwung' was taken back to England during the 19th Century and given a Chris-

tian teaching. **Significantly** he interpreted this induction in basically shamanic form. Told that he **had to follow** a path of good moral conduct in order to find god he preferred to think of it as **an actual spirit way** i.e. the Shamans **path**. This was **elaborated** upon by his description of his **meeting with god** and his being **escorted** by spint guides — another basically shamanic **concept**. Bichiung returned home to spread the word and **significantly died** of **supernatural sorcery** — the **typical Shamans death**.

**Hallelujah** was brought to the Akawaio **proper** by the Shaman Abel. He discovered that his purely aboriginal **shamanistic trances and seances** were not **able to reach** god and **that he could only** do so by **praying** and founding a **church**. **Nevertheless** Abel **received** his **inspiration** for Hallelujah in spirit flight **whilst asleep**, i.e. he gained sacred knowledge **through** spirit experience during dreams. In spirit flight he encountered nature and Forest **spirits** and they were dancing not the old spirit dances but the new Hallelujah **dances**. Reinforcing the shamanic concepts even more **was** the fact that just as the Shaman **retrieves the soul** of a sick person during **spirit flight** returning it to the owner to make **him well** so Abel **returned** from god **with** a good spint to increase **Akawaio strength**. Abel **also died** a Shamans **death** by **sorcery**. **Interestingly** these Hallelujah prophetes were **all ex Shamans**. They did not mind taking over the **doctrines** of the Christian Missionaries and **subsequently claiming** them as **their own** and **proceeding** to reject the authority of **these Missionaries** who had introduced the concepts to them **in the first place**.

**Analysing** the Hallelujah phenomenon with a view to understanding **social context** **several important features** emerge. Almost all the Hallelujah leaders were **people** of the 'Kukui' tribe — **possibly because** the **area** in which they lived was **the first to receive** the new religion. Abel taught this Kukui **relatives** and **riverside kin** group and these by example and **marriage** attracted and taught **affinal kin**. The new religion was therefore expressed in **understandable shamanic concepts** and spread with maximum **speed** according to a **network** of kinship and loyalty **ties**.

Another social **aspect** of Hallelujah was the **fact** that it was the Shamans who were the **prophets**. Given the **important social functions** that the shamans fulfilled in the **abori-**

ginal context it was obviously the responsibility of the shaman to restore the social religious and cultural balance that may have been upset by increasing contact with Whites and the Christian Missions in particular, Social and cultural pressures on Akawaio souety were such that this new religion stressed that god was giving it to the Indians alone and not the Whites. By its very nature of being semi Christian the Indians who beleived could thus justify themselves and their aboriginal conceptions in terms of the White Man's religion — they were no longer inferior but were themselves God's Chosen People. The Halleluljah prophets were still functioning essentially as Shamans inasmuch as they were reaffirming in a new way the cultural iderity of their respective groups in the face of acculturation. Hallelujah was a social phenomenon as much as a religious one and it allowed the Indians hope and cultural integrity whilst encompassing the White Man's schema.

### *Conclusion*

“Religious concept spread beyond their specifically metaphysical context to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience, intellectual, emotional, moral — can be given a mechanical form” (Geertz 1966: 40). Shamanism is a religious and social mechanism — the gods and spirits are not just prayed to but are also manipulated and controlled. For Amerindian aboriginal groups Shamanism renders their ethos intellectually reasonable by showing it to represent a way of life that is suited to the conditions of actual existence. Shamanism therefore has much to do with the social, political and moral aspects of group existence.

Shamanism differs from other religions in that it provides a mechanism for negotiating and coercing the spirits and not just relying on their whims. The spirits and gods are 'social' in the Shamans universe inasmuch as they are amenable to persuasion and mediation — their power is great but can be deflected or diminished by shamanic intervention. The Shaman plays an intermediary role between the natural and supernatural worlds — though the distinction between

the two is qualitatively different in Amerindian society that it is in our own.

The Shaman exists in what Wilbert (1972) calls a "participatory universe" — he therefore must foster and propagate belief in the metaphysical for it is the nature of the link between the metaphysical and real worlds that justifies his position. The social fabric of his society is defined and maintained by his ability to intercede with the spirits. The Shaman thus acts for the survival of his group by appealing to the supernatural world which itself only exists in the 'communal' mind of the group. Thus the social context within which the Shaman functions is readily apparent but his group unlike the majority of Western societies make no distinction between the sacred and the secular and so the Shaman is only acting in accordance with his culturally defined and socially sanctioned role. It happens however that from a Western viewpoint the essential features and functions of this role are classified as social.

## SUMARIO

El shamanismo en este estudio se enfoca básicamente como un mecanismo social que provoca la cohesión interna de un grupo y su integridad con relación a influencias externas.

El shamán frecuentemente ocupa el único papel especializado que existe en las sencillas sociedades igualitarias donde el uso de la sanción legal no está desarrollado.

El shamán, como articulación de este grupo, manipula los objetos simbólicos y el razonamiento del grupo. Esto refuerza su propia posición y tiende a valorizar la particular visión de su sociedad.

El shamán funciona en las fronteras de lo "conocido" y lo "desconocido" y por tanto deliberadamente ambiguo de su naturaleza y en sus actitudes. La ambigüedad le permite meditar entre los espíritus y el mundo terreno al que su grupo pertenece. Así finalmente el shamán y sus actividades refuerzan el aparato social de la sociedad y racionaliza lo irracional.

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