

For other writings by Walter L. Williams, on Buddhist approaches, visit these websites as of 2009 <http://buddhistuniversal.org> and for The Teachings of Jesus visit <http://www.jesusandmary.info>

Shamanism Spirituality: a lecture in the University of Southern California class “North American Indians in American Public Life”

by Walter L. Williams. 1984-2010 at USC

I think a strong sense of helping others is one of the things that I most noted in my times when I was living in American Indian communities. It is such a contrast to our modern American individualized way of looking at things, where each person strives to increase their own individual wealth at the expense of others. Even today, traditionalist Indians have a much stronger group orientation. I think this is a continuing heritage of being descended from a band-level culture

In such a culture, people are much more equal than in state-level societies. But this does not mean that people in band cultures do not try to gain status. Just like people in other societies, band-level peoples want to have prestige and to be thought of highly by others. The difference is that in band-level societies, the main way to gain status is for a person to put the welfare of the group ahead of their own individual self-interest. The extent to which they AVOID promoting their own self-interest is the extent to which they are held in high esteem by others.

Although people in band level societies operate pretty much equally, there is one type of person who stands out and has the highest prestige in the group.

That person is the SHAMAN. This is a Siberian/Manchu word, derived from the word SHAM meaning “to possess knowledge” and AM meaning “the one who”

That is, it means “the one who possesses knowledge”

Many people think that it is SHA – MAN, implying that it denotes a man.

However, Shamans could be either men or women (the plural is not “shamen” but “shamans”)

In band-level cultures around the world, shamans filled 4 functions:

1. religious leader, the one who has knowledge of the spirit world, and the one who has knowledge of the ceremonies that placate the spirits.
2. the teacher, the one who has knowledge of the traditions, of the history.
3. medical doctor, the one who has knowledge of medicines, to heal physical illnesses (this is why shamans are called “medicine people”)
4. therapist / psychiatrist, the one who has knowledge to heal mental illnesses

We have to ask, why these four particular functions are combined.

In order to answer that question, I need to tell you something about shamanistic religion, which is the world’s oldest form of religion. There are remarkable similarities among

shamans in various parts of the world, including intensive studies that have been done by anthropologists working with band-level societies like the San !Kung in South Africa (who have one of the world's oldest continuing cultures), the Australian aboriginal people, the Central Asians (see Gary Seaman book, "Ancient Traditions: Shamanism in Central Asia and the Americas" Univ. Press of Colorado, 1994), the Saami ("Lapps" of northern Scandinavia Lapland), and Siberians, as well as numerous Native American groups.

According to the shamanistic worldview, everything that exists comes from the spirit world. Everything that exists has a spirit. I have a spirit, you have a spirit, all humans and animals and plants have a spirit, every rock, river and cloud has a spirit. This blackboard has a spirit. The desk you are sitting in, the clothes you are wearing, and the paper on which you are writing each has a spirit. Every spirit is alive, is imbued with a soul, and is animate (this is why some anthropologists call this form of religion "animism"). So take a moment to express gratitude to your desk for allowing you to sit comfortably, and your paper and pen for helping you to remember this lecture so you can pass the midterm.

Furthermore, not only are all spirits that exist animate, but they are also of equal spiritual importance. We humans have to remind ourselves to be humble, and not to self-centeredly think our spirit to be any more important than other human beings; or not to deceive ourselves by assuming that humans are any more important than the animals and plants and rivers and mountains and all the other wonderful things that make up the universe.

According to the shamanistic view, everything that exists is connected, and tied together in a cosmic whole that allows us to live, as a part of the ecosystem and the universe. The shaman is the one who knows this, who sees these connections in a way that the average person does not comprehend.

The very close similarities between shamanistic beliefs and practices among Siberians and American Indians is further evidence that the ancestors of Native Americans migrated from Siberia. For example, Siberians believe that a way to make a connection with the spirits is through drumming. Likewise, among American Indians, drumming is central to almost every ceremony. Even in pow wows, drums are blessed, and prayed over.

Another example, in Siberian shamanistic religions the eagle is considered extremely important. For example, the creation story of the Buryat of Siberia say that when diseases appeared among humans, the spirits sent an eagle to help people get well. But the eagle could not speak the language of the humans, and so to solve this problem the eagle had sex with a Buryat woman. From this union the first shaman was born. The symbol for a shaman is the eagle (see Mircea Eliade, book "Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy" Princeton Univ. press 1974, pp. 69-70).

Likewise, among American Indians the eagle is so highly respected that even a feather of an eagle is considered to hold great spiritual power.

Plains Indian headdresses are typically made of eagle feathers.

In 199_ in a Native American gathering that I attended in British Columbia, I was bestowed with an eagle feather, in honor of my research and scholarship in American Indian Studies. It is one of my most valued possessions. [***** WW bring in eagle feather to show class]
[Wear blue beaded necktie with eagle symbol made by Cherokees as a birthday gift for WW]

A third example of the similarities of Siberian and Native American shamanism is the way a person becomes a shaman. Among both Siberians and Native Americans, since everything that exists comes from the spirit world, it is a common belief that for a person who is different from the average person, the spirits must have paid particular attention in making that person different and unique. And so, instead of being threatened by individuals who are different from the norm, in most Siberian and Native American cultures unique individuals are highly respected, and considered twice as spiritual as the average person. Uniqueness is prized, and instead of being condemned as “sinful” or “abnormal,” difference is looked up to as “exceptional.”

Another way that a person becomes a shaman, both in Siberia and in the Americas, is by having an extraordinary experience that pulls them away from the regular world. One way this might be done is if a person gets very sick, loses consciousness, and comes close to death. If a person becomes unconscious they might have a dream or a vision, in which a spirit gives them directions for how to become a shaman. They might be given instructions in how to heal people, in how to conduct religious ceremonies, in how to help the band survive. This belief that a person can attain spiritual insight by losing consciousness, and then coming back from the dead, is strong among both Siberians and Native Americans. Their recovery is seen as a spiritual rebirth, accomplished with the aid of the spirits. Because the spirits paid particular attention to bring this person back from the dead, their experience of being in the spirit world made them powerful shamans.

The fact that these shamanistic beliefs are shared by both Siberians and Native Americans also proves how ancient shamanistic religion is. If the ancestors of Native Americans left Siberia between 30,000 to 12,000 years ago, then that means shamanistic religion was established BEFORE those dates.

A person became a shaman essentially by their own choice. A particularly introspective youngster, especially one who becomes interested in the ceremonies and in healing, would gravitate toward learning from an older shaman. The elder shaman taught the younger shaman, one on one. But the youngster might come up with their own teachings, from their experience in a trance.

SHAMANISTIC TRANCE

Both Siberian and Native American cultures shared the idea that a shaman gained knowledge from the spirit world. For example, in Joan Halifax book, “Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives” (Dutton 1979, p.37), she reports a Samoyed shaman from Siberia. A boy named Sereptie became a shaman after his experience when he was age 11. Sereptie had a vision that a spirit took him down through the roots of a tree, into the earth. The spirit took him to an underground stream, and along this stream guided him to nine tents. In each tent, Sereptie learned a lesson about how to be a shaman. In one tent, the spirit showed him how to make a sacred drum, a cloak, and sacred pendants of a shaman. In other tents, he learned how to conduct religious ceremonies and how to cure illnesses. Some of the visions he saw were quite disturbing, he said, and he was afraid and wanted to turn back. But the spirit

guide insisted that he must continue, and become a shaman.

This idea, that the shaman learns knowledge during a trip to the spirit world that is overseen by a guardian spirit, is extremely common among both Siberians and Native Americans. Another commonality is the idea that a shaman can receive knowledge by going into a trance. Entering the trance involves the shaman going into a state of meditation, where after a period of meditation lasting maybe twenty minutes up to several hours, the shaman is suddenly struck by the force of the spirits. The shaman may be transformed into different animals, or experience some other kind of transformation, and this spiritual transformation allows the shaman to ask questions of the other spirits. Through communication with the other spirits, the shaman would be able to determine the answers to the questions sought. [ref. John Grim, book "The Shaman: Patterns of Siberian and Ojibway Healing" (Univ. of Oklahoma Press 1983)]

SHAMAN AS HEALER

The shaman is the one who possesses the knowledge of ceremonies, that were passed down to her or him by an older shaman from a previous generation. The shaman takes advantage of this inherited knowledge and this exceptional insight, in order to perform the rituals and ceremonies that will placate the spirits. It is important to keep the spirits placated, because if you do not, then they will be offended and may cause you great harm.

Band-level peoples believe that illnesses or disasters are caused because the spirits have been offended. It is therefore very important for the shaman to do the correct rituals in order to bring about health and success. The shaman is the person who stands between the world of the spirit and the world of the flesh, to intercede on behalf of the group. The shaman blurs the distinction between the secular world and the spiritual world, the shaman moves back and forth and is the intermediary between people and spirits. Group welfare is the prime responsibility of the shaman, and that is why an effective shaman has such high prestige.

Because illnesses are believed to be caused by a violation of the spirits, curing is tied in closely with religion. This is why shamans are both religious leaders and medical doctors. Shamans not only have the knowledge to do the healing ceremonies correctly, but they are also skilled in the medicinal uses of plants. In fact, many of the medicines that we use today were originally discovered by Native American shamans. In recent years, medical anthropologists working with native South American shamans in the Amazon rainforest have brought a number of valuable new medicines to light. These medicines are made from plants growing wild in the jungle, that Western scientists did not previously know about.

I remember one time when I was living on the Cherokee reservation, I had to give a speech. But when I woke up that morning I had a terrible sore throat and could hardly speak. A Cherokee shaman told me to wait a minute, while he went out into the woods. When he returned, he held a twig from a particular kind of bush. He told me to chew on this twig. When I chewed it, I could feel immediate relief. Within a few minutes my voice had returned to normal. I have never seen a medicine have such a quick effect, and ever since then I have had a great respect for a shaman's knowledge.

SHAMANS AS HEALERS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Native American shamans emphasized that curing was not only needed for physical ailments and injuries, but also for mental ailments. So, in their role as healer the shamans also served as therapists and psychiatrists. They might prescribe mind-altering substances that would affect a person's mood, helping them to deal with the stresses and problems of life. But more importantly, curing ceremonies done by the shaman had a significant psychological aspect that helped the person get well mentally.

I remember one time when I was living on the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation in South Dakota, I was a participant in a Lakota UWUPI ceremony. This is a ceremony led by a shaman to help cure a person who is suffering.

In this case, the ceremony was being held for an old Lakota woman

The ceremony involved very intricate actions by the shaman. He did this, then he did that, then he did something else. Each of his actions was done to help promote the healing of this old woman. Then he had each of us present in the room to say a prayer calling for the spirits to help this woman. Then we all closed our eyes and prayed for the spirit of an owl to enter the room and bestow its blessings on the old woman and indeed on all of us.

Now, some people might look on this as a silly superstition, but let me tell you that the intensity of the shaman's ceremonies, as well as the verbalized prayers of every person in the room, entered into that old woman and made her feel much better. Even if she was not physically cured, she saw the love and concern that everyone was doing in her behalf.

In Western medicine, it is only recently that studies have proved the strong psychological element in healing. When people feel that others care for them, and are wishing them to get well, they are more likely to respond in a positive manner. The support of others helps them to be strong and fight off the illness. This is precisely the wisdom that the shamans possessed, from ancient times. Dismissing their rituals and ceremonies as superstitious ignores much evidence that such psychological healing is very important.

Furthermore, shamanistic ceremonies can serve an important social function. If someone is ill, it might be because they or a relative violated the rules of the hunt, or acted in an anti-social way. The worse things that somebody could do would be to act with jealousy or miserly selfishness.

Being ungenerous is considered as the most serious fault. Traditionalist Indians even today want to be considered generous by others. Generosity is extremely highly valued, and those who show their generosity by being helpful to others are the ones who gain the greatest respect and have the highest status in society.

This is why the shamans are the most prestigious persons in band-level societies, because they are the ones who devote themselves most unselfishly to helping others and the group as a whole.

The role of the shaman is to connect people to the spiritual essence of the universe, to this great reality in which nothing exists in isolation but everything is interrelated and connected.

Most people, operating in the logical world of the five senses, cannot see this larger reality. Shamans try to go beyond the limits of the logical world, to open themselves to alternate views of reality. Many children do this when they have imaginary friends. Most adults dismiss this as a silly thought process by a young child. But the shamanistic view would say that these innocent children have not yet had their perceptions blunted by the dictates of logic, and they are able to perceive an alternate reality.

Shamans try to do this by getting into an altered state of consciousness, by developing their ability to reach ecstasy, so that they can gain access to a deeper reality than the logical world. Real wisdom occurs when one finally gives up on trying to explain events in terms of what we have grown up to think of as “logic” and “reality.”

The shamanistic view says that the world is not to be explained by logic or rationality, but is better understood by appreciating the power of “magic.”

Now, when I say magic, I do not mean pulling a rabbit out of a hat, or card tricks. Magic, in the Native American sense, means
“that which we do not understand.”

Shamanistic religion does not put its emphasis on “God,” but on the mystery of life. For example, the Lakota word “Wakan Tanka” is often translated into English by the word, “God” but I don’t think this is accurate. A literal translation of “Wakan” means “mystery” and Tanka means “the greatest.”

Therefore, Wakan Tanka means “the greatest mystery,” or “that which we cannot comprehend.”

Unlike many other religions that have strict dogmas which cannot be challenged, even if scientific investigations show them to be false, shamanism does not see a conflict between science and religion.

Shamanism acknowledges that scientific discoveries can indeed explain certain things that were not understandable before. As science learns more, that does somewhat decrease the great mystery, and that is all to the good.

But, the shamanistic view holds, science (or rationality) cannot explain many important things, so there is still much much more that remains a mystery. We should not worry about this lack of understanding, but just relax and accept that we humans are limited in our insight and understanding. Don’t take ourselves too seriously, or think that we are better than other beings.

If we do not have too high an opinion of humanity, we will not be so disturbed when we find people acting vindictive or petty or cruel. We just accept the fact that humans are limited, and often act for irrational reasons.

Having this perspective has helped me a lot in dealing with people over the years.

The shaman is the person who can help us connect with the Great Mystery.

A shaman may have a strong sense of intuition, which is seen as an “inner voice” from the spirits. The shaman may go into a death-like coma, to bring knowledge back from the world

of the dead, or may receive information by dreaming. Dreams are seen as very important messages from the spirits, not to be ignored. Dreams were never considered to be important in Western thought, until what person? Sigmund Freud “interpretation of dreams”

The object of spiritual ceremony is to get beyond the logical, rational, world. This can be done by meditation, by chanting mantras, by fasting, by taking hallucinogenic drugs, by self-torture, or by sensory deprivation.

For example, when I was living on the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation in South Dakota, a shaman put me through a “vision quest,” a religious ceremony to gain spiritual insight. Early one morning the shaman had me take off all my clothes and crawl into a small round tent-frame covered in thick tarps. When I went inside, the entrance was closed so that I could see no light at all. I was to sit there in total silence for an entire day. The idea was to deprive me of the senses of sight and sound, so that I could reach inside myself to the larger reality.

Before I crawled inside, the shaman did a blessing chant. I was really thinking I was going to be totally bored sitting naked in a dark tent for a day, so before I crawled inside I asked him “What should I think about, while I’m inside.” The shaman said, “Don’t think. Just pray for spiritual guidance.”

I don’t know quite what happened during that day. But not once did I feel bored or hungry or thirsty or sleepy or restless. I didn’t even have to go to the bathroom. I just felt totally relaxed and going deep inside myself.

It is something I cannot logically describe in words, but the time passed so fast that when the shaman came back to get me late into the night, I was resentful that my vision quest had ended.

I think one reason I liked it so much is that, before that ceremony, I had always been busy, and had a strong consciousness of not wasting time.

In this vision quest, I was literally doing nothing for the whole day.

I was not accomplishing one thing in a rational, logical sense.

Yet, I consider this to be one of the greatest experiences of my entire life, something I will always treasure, even though I cannot really describe to you in words why it so affected me. What I have seen in myself since that event is a different orientation toward time. Since then I am much more likely to take time off from productive busyness, to sit and appreciate nature, or beauty, or just to go beyond rational thought and try to get deeper into that alternate reality. But this does not really convey the major part of the impact of that experience on me. I really cannot describe it.

The shaman later told me that when I was inside the tent, he and some other Lakota people were praying and singing for me to gain spiritual insight.

While I was in the tent, he told me, an eagle circled over the tent for a long time. He said he had never seen an eagle do that with a white man, and said it denoted some spiritual potential in me.

DANCE IN SHAMANISM

Another way to gain spiritual insight is through dance and music. Many Native American ceremonies involve dancing. Anthropologists have found that there are very few things which appear in all cultures of the world.

But one of those few things, which has been observed in every single culture that anthropologists have studied, is music and dance. In occupation sites of early humans, archeologists have found flutes and other evidence of music, and ancient rock art has shown human figures posing in what looks like dance moves. There is no logical reason why music and dance should be so important.

The question is, why is something that seems so useless, so universal?

This was one of those great mysteries that I never understood. I knew that I myself enjoyed music and dance, but I never logically understood it.

I also never understood why so many cultures have the dancers wear masks while performing the dance.

I think I gained some insight into this phenomenon when I was living in Indonesia. I was doing research on an ancient folk dance in the province of Ponorogo in eastern Java, called Reyog Ponorogo. It is the central event that defines traditional Ponorogo culture. It is a huge elaborate musical production, like a cross between a circus, an opera, and a high mass.

One night I was in attendance at a Reyog practice, and I was taking photos of the dancers. The main character in Reyog dance is the Tiger King. The dancer that performs this role has to hold a heavy wood tiger mask (with a stuffed peacock on top of his head), holding this heavy mask by a wood insert that he clinches in his teeth. After this practice had gone on a long time, the Warok (or spiritual person) who was directing the dance practice, suddenly grabbed my camera out of my hands and dragged me onto the dance floor. He took the Tiger mask off the dancer and put it over my head, forcing me to grasp the wood insert with my teeth. Then the music started up, and everybody whooped and clapped as they encouraged me to dance.

I did not really know the steps to the dance of the Tiger King, but I started doing some American Indian dance steps that I had learned while living at the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation. The Ponorogans went crazy over this, snapping photos of me dancing with the other dancers.

At first, I thought my dancing was just for fun, though I could not laugh because I was holding the heavy wood Tiger mask with my clinched teeth. But as I continued dancing, something very strange happened to me. As I moved around dancing in the dark night, the light of the fire and several torches punctuated the darkness, and the movement of the other dancers broke up my view even more so. As I peered out of the little long and narrow slits of the eyeholes in the Tiger mask, my head and body movements allowed me to see only small parts of the scene. But as the mesmerizing music built in intensity, and I got more and more into the dance, it was like something flipped in my brain.

realities, but as they threw down food for him to eat, and as they moved about in the cave, the only thing the imprisoned man could see were the shadows from the people moving in front of the fire.

The prisoner's senses, the things that he actually viewed with his own eyes, were the shadows. So, from his perspective, this was the true reality to him.

Plato suggested that most people are like the man in the cave, seeing only the surface things that are in reality only a pale shadow of the true reality.

The surface things that we see with our eyes are limited, only a partial reflection of another level that we cannot see. T

Plato said that the more important reality, beyond the surface, was what he called "The Ideal." This "ideal," in my opinion, is very similar to Native American shamans' views of the need to look inside, to the spiritual essence.

SHAMANISM SUPPRESSION AND REVIVAL

As we shall see later in the semester, since the coming of the Spanish to Latin America, and the English to North America, the Europeans strongly condemned Native American shamanistic religions. They saw the shamans as satan worshippers, and "in league with the Devil," and they have tried, for the last five hundred years, to wipe out shamanism.

Interestingly, both the Euro-American Christians and the Communists in the Soviet Union condemned shamanism. From the 1920s, Communist Party leaders banned the practice of shamanistic religion among the native peoples of Siberia and Mongolia. Shamans were imprisoned on the charge that they were "spreading anti-Soviet propaganda." It was not until the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, that shamanism has started reviving in Mongolia and Siberia.

In a very similar fashion, from the late 1800s until the 1930s United States government agents on Indian reservations, prompted by lobbying from Christian churches, prohibited the practice of shamanism and imprisoned shamans.

Yet, despite these intensive campaigns against their native peoples' shamanism, by both the American and the Soviet governments, shamanism has survived and is growing today both in Asia and among Native Americans. A shaman in South Dakota told me:

"When the white people came, they took or destroyed every physical thing that we Indians had. They took our land, our physical possessions, our physical life of freedom. They even took our independent thought, when they forced our children to attend Christian churches and missionary schools. The white people took the world of the here and now, of rational reality. But when Indians hold onto their spirituality, then the whites cannot take the separate reality of the supernatural world. "We shamans have found ourselves holding onto the only thing left uncontested, the supernatural world. There, the white man has never ventured. In fact, he does not even have the idea that it exists." In other words, what this shaman was saying is that whites are limited to the rational, and do not appreciate the extra-rational. A student once asked me what the most important lesson I have learned from living with the Indians. I thought about it & said, "Learning to appreciate how much we humans do NOT understand." Many academics are "post-modern," I am "post-rational"