1

Approaching shamanism

On the Monday evenings of October and November 2005 I attended a course in so-called ‘shu’em’ shamanism meditation in my hometown of Groningen, which is situated in the northern part of the Netherlands. The course was managed by the Asha Institute, which organises a range of other workshops and educational programmes in what they call ‘mystical shamanism’.1 As one of the meditation sessions came to an end and I prepared to go home, one of the workshop assistants approached me. I had met him before, on different occasions during the period of fieldwork, and I knew that he was a student of the Asha Institute. He knew that I was participating in their workshops because of my research project. At other meetings he had told me that shu’em shamanism had helped him to acquire bliss and deep spiritual insights. Now, he wanted to tell me about a book that he had recently discovered. It was a fascinating study of shamanism, he told me, and he wanted to know if I had ever heard of it. As a matter of fact, I had. And no wonder, his recent discovery was Mircea Eliade’s 1964 landmark study *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy.*

The conversation surprised me as it was the first time that I had heard a shamanist refer to a scholar whom I knew from my training in religious studies.2 A conversation about Eliade with an informant was atypical, as it linked the scholarly background of the term ‘shamanism’ with the contemporary practice known as shamanism. The shamanists I had met during my fieldwork practically never referred directly to scholarly works about shamanism, and yet I could not but wonder about their possible link. Could it be possible to compile a line of interpreters of shamanism that would include both Eliade and Dutch shamanists?

In this chapter, I will set out to explain how my early experiences directed me towards my genealogical approach. I will start with my introduction to the world of contemporary Dutch shamanisms, as these experiences had a considerable impact on the way I conducted my research project. The effect of these encounters are the subject of the second part of this chapter. The third part consists of an outline of the reflexive genealogical approach that I opted to use. I will distinguish my genealogical approach from three major historiographies of shamanism in the

---

1 For a few sites related to the Asha Institute, see www.shuem.com; www.shuem.eu; www.shuemsterdam.nl; www.asha-institute.org.
2 I use the term ‘shamanist’ for individuals practising contemporary Western shamanism.
fourth part and will introduce the approach of Pierre Bourdieu and that of James Beckford in the fifth and the sixth respectively, as their perspectives guided my research on the genealogies of shamanism. My argument and an outline of this book conclude this chapter. Ultimately, I use this chapter to introduce the ways I approach the genealogies of interpreters who have created, and still create, their own profile of the shaman, ‘from the shifting sands of what was published before them,’ as the late historian Gloria Flaherty (1938-1992) put it so nicely.3

Dutch shamanisms

I was introduced to shu'em shamanism at the Eigentijdsfestival, in June 2004.4 At this annual Dutch festival devoted to ‘Art, Spirituality and Nature’, the Asha Institute presents its shu'em shamanism amidst a range of other Dutch shamanisms. The festival lasts from Thursday evening to Sunday evening and takes place at a large camping site in between woods and tracts of heather. Hundreds of individuals and many organizations present over 500 different workshops in more than 100 tepees, yurts and other types of tents on different fields of the terrain. Approximately 1750 people can taste a massive assortment of dance, theatre, music, lectures, workshops in different kinds of healing, meditation, spiritual growth, and so on. Certain places on the terrain are singled out as ‘power spots’ and have ‘energy statues’ to which visitors can connect. One field is set up as a marketplace with booths filled with, for example, books, drums, crystals, clothes, incense, jewellery and dream catchers. Another field is fitted up as a ‘healing field’ where visitors can consult different kinds of healers who, for this occasion, practice their crafts in tents.

On Friday morning, after I had registered for the workshops I wanted to attend, I participated in a workshop on shu'em shamanism. The leader of the Asha Institute, Stefan Wils, told the participants to be inactive and relax on mats on the floor.


4 See www.eigentijdsfestival.nl. To translate Eigentijdsfestival is complicated as the word combines several word that have different connotations. The Dutch word ‘Eigen’ can be translated as ‘Own,’ ‘Private,’ ‘Peculiar,’ and ‘Intimate.’ ‘Tijd’ means ‘Time’ and thus ‘Eigen-tijds’ can be translated as ‘Contemporary,’ ‘Present-day,’ ‘Modern’ and ‘Private time’. So the name of the festival refers to the private, present and modern time, and it suggests that at the festival people can spend time on themselves on the road to emerging new times.
of the tent, while he and his assistants meditated, chanted and played the drums. With their activities, he told us, they would function like a strong electromagnet. They would facilitate an energetic setting in which we, the participants, could leave our standard rational mindset behind and explore our inner, ‘deeper dimensions of perception’ in a ‘mood of compassion and ease’. We were not supposed to share and discuss our experiences afterwards because talking about them would only bring us back to the usual, restless ‘dimension of perception’ of our everyday life. Wils explicitly told us that this ritual was not a New Age practice but based on an ‘ancient technique’.

On Friday afternoon I went to a so-called trance travel workshop in one of the seven tepees of the School for Shamanism. The instructors told us that while we were lying down on mats, they would make our trance possible by beating their shamanic drums. When in trance, we could start our journey by visualizing a tree and looking for an entrance at its base. The passageway behind it would lead us to the world of the spirits. Participants without previous experience should look out for a power animal, a spirit in the form of an animal that would guide us in the underworld. Those who had already met their power animal should enter the underworld with an intention in mind so that their power animal could help them on their quest. At the moment the rhythm of the drums changed, after twenty minutes, we were supposed to travel back, go through the passageway, leave the tree through the same door and come back to the room. Afterwards, we were invited to discuss our experiences. Impressive stories were told. People had passed through spectacular worlds, they had met exotic power animals and some wanted know how to interpret their adventures. Instead of telling us what she thought it all meant, one of the instructors told us that we should try to grasp the meanings of our experiences without her help. She advised us to use books of reference such as biology books and she mentioned Jamie Sams’s 1988 bestseller *Medicine Cards*. Ultimately, however, your own intuition was decisive.

The next morning, self-proclaimed shaman Searching Deer from my hometown of Groningen started his workshop with a lecture on ‘the healing tree’. While he lectured, we sat on chairs, but when he wanted us to recite and sing with him, he asked us to rise. We also had to stand up for an exercise in which we could experience the ‘life tree’ in ourselves by waving our arms in the air like the branches of a tree. When Searching Deer asked us who had ever experienced the energy of trees, I was surprised to see that almost everyone in the tent raised their hands. Trees, he explained, absorb our heavy and sombre feelings, just as plants get nutrition from

5 See [www.jamiesams.com/medicinecards.html](http://www.jamiesams.com/medicinecards.html). This website states that, ‘The Medicine Cards package contains an expanded text in a hardback book and a set of beautifully illustrated cards with the messages of animals. The animals teach us the evolving life-lessons that we need to embrace as human beings facing the new millennium and our continued healing processes.’

6 See [www.searchingdeer.nl](http://www.searchingdeer.nl).
dung and, at the same time, trees radiate a very light energy. At one point, Searching Deer told us to close our eyes and imagine ourselves walking through a forest towards a large tree in a field of grass. When he asked us what the guided fantasy had brought about, several people talked about the different kinds of animals they had met, and one man claimed that when he had looked up into the tree from below, the branches of the tree appeared to be his beard and the crown of the tree his head. Instead of leaving the interpretation to the participants, Searching Deer took the lead. For example, he told us that because squirrels climb up and down trees, they stand for mediators between the different worlds.

The final workshop I attended at the 2004 Eigentijdsfestival was the ‘shamanistic life tree’ workshop of the Institute of Siberian Shamanism. 7 I remember most vividly the technique in which we were supposed to travel back and forth in our family history to deal with spells that had been put on our ancestors by witches or sorcerers. While the instructors drummed, we moved through past generations of our family trees by taking steps backwards and forwards. One step backwards meant one generation back. Ultimately, in seven steps back and seven steps forward seven generations could be healed. The intense emotional outbursts of some of the participants, their shouting, screaming and crying, made me feel uncomfortable. One woman was so overwhelmed by the ritual that she almost vomited in the tent. Instead of reducing her anxiety, which I would have preferred, the instructors increased the pressure by encircling her and beating the drums even more forcefully. The workshop took more than three hours and I found participating in it emotionally so exasperating that immediately after it was finished I decided to skip the Saturday evening and Sunday morning sessions. I packed up my tent, grabbed my bags and left the festival.

Methodology

My early departure from the Eigentijdsfestival was a response to the acting out of other participants and was not motivated by the ‘inner’ or ‘spiritual’ effects of my ritual activities: my endeavours to travel into the world of spirits did not yield the spectacular experiences others seemed to have had. True enough, I had seen a cat during my first trance journey – the cat my parents used to have as a pet when I was a small boy – but this experience did not exceed my regular sensations of daydreaming or fantasizing. In none of my workshops did my experiences come even close to something that I would consider ‘spiritual’, ‘religious’, ‘mystical’ or ‘visionary’. I have not always been ‘religiös unmusikalisch’, as Max Weber claimed he was, but now I appeared to be like that. It did not surprise me, I must confess, as I already seemed to have lost the ability to have ‘spiritual’ experiences as a student.

of religious studies, years before I started to study shamanism. Accordingly, during fieldwork, I regularly fell asleep when I had to lie down to undertake a trance journey or while I made an effort to explore deeper dimensions of perception.

Soon, a methodological question imposed itself, namely what were the implications of my experiences for my study of shamanism? I was confronted with the classic sociological problem that the great German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1990) had already considered in his 1956 ‘Involvement and Detachment’. Indeed, in the words of Elias, I ‘faced myself’ and had to find a blend between involvement and detachment that suited my research project better.\(^8\) Needless to say, I directed my research towards a more detached approach. I could not identify with my subject in the way that the French sociologist ‘Busy’ Loïc Wacquant did, who became a pugilist during his fieldwork in a boxing gym in Chicago. I would not become an initiate in shamanism the way Tanya Luhrmann became an initiate in ‘the witch’s craft’ whilst investigating contemporary witchcraft in England.\(^9\) In other words, my experiences with the various Dutch shamanisms guided me away from the kind of ethnographic approach that is known as ‘experiential anthropology’ and that comes close to going native.

Then again, the remarkable study of shamanism of Galina Lindquist (1955-2008) inspired me, even though she did ‘go native and come back’ and absorb herself in ‘experiencing participation’ in her empirically rich 1997 *Shamanic Performances on the Urban Scene*. Because her work is such an insightful and empathetic study of ‘neo-shamanism’ in Sweden, her main arguments deserve extra attention here.\(^10\)

Lindquist described neo-shamanism as a set of notions and techniques borrowed from non-Western tribal peoples and adapted to the life of contemporary urban dwellers. She approached neo-shamanism as a social field, a concept that she adopted from Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), whose theory of practice I will introduce later in this chapter, as his notions also guide my study of shamanism. Lindquist’s rendering of Bourdieu, however, significantly differs from mine, as she argued that the logic of the field of neo-shamanism called for theoretical premises in terms of meanings, while characteristically, Bourdieu’s emphasis was on social positions and power struggles. Lindquist principally used Bourdieu’s analogy of a game, as the

---


idea of ‘playing’ was crucial for her basic argument. While I will perceive contemporary shamanism, also in line with Bourdieu, as an arena of struggles, Lindquist focused on neo-shamanism as a loosely patterned arrangement of multiple and open-ended meanings, or in her words, as a ‘particular ecology of discourse’.11

Lindquist perceived the field of neo-shamanism as a sphere of play that represents a distinct variety of spirituality in contemporary society. Cultural creation is one of the main themes of her book, and to study the ways of internalisation that are part of processes of cultural creation Lindquist participated unreservedly, using her own experiences as important sources of data. It is noteworthy that Lindquist interpreted neo-shamanism as a field largely informed by the values and concerns of the embracing society. Even seemingly exotic conceptualisations have roots in premises that are already shared and culturally accepted. Neo-shamanism, however, offers a ‘ludic space’ that provides experiences of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. This is important for contemporary urban dwellers, she argued, as their life is harsh. Most of them are familiar with the feeling of powerlessness and being trapped in circumstances not of their own making. The neo-shamans’ world, in contrast, is full of mystery and wonderment, like the world of fairy tales or make-believe children’s play.12

Lindquist distinguished three forms of cultural capital current in the field of neo-shamanism, namely mastery of the language (1), performative mastery (2) and the ability to clothe one’s shamanic experiences in a convincing and aesthetically satisfying narrative (3). All three are closely related to the ‘spirit of play’ that Lindquist identified as the crucial feature of neo-shamanism. Neo-shamanic play and performances are closely related to societal issues as they have the ability to expose the sores of society. A neo-shamanic performance is not only theatrical. It is, in Lindquist’s words, ‘a game of mirrors through which society sees itself, a tool of reflection and reflexivity’.13

Lindquist perceived contemporary shamanism as a ‘mirror of society’. Rather than as a mirror, however, I wanted to perceive shamanism as a dispersive prism, to make it represent a stage on which relatively common issues are thrown into sharp relief. Lindquist’s study also provided me with some interesting research questions. For instance, did I agree with her findings that the ‘disembedded and deculturalized nature of neo-shamanic practices, conceived by the practitioners as the universality of shamanism, is to a large extent responsible for their success in the West’? Are contemporary shamanists in the Netherlands also engaged in playful attempts to ‘re-enchant’ the world? Would I also find reflections of societal issues in contemporary Western shamanic practices?14

11 Lindquist, Shamanic Performances on the Urban Scene, 4-5.
12 Idem, 4-8, 121, 182-3, 284.
14 Idem, 123.
Thus, even though I understand the ways in which the aforementioned scholars bridged the distance between them and their subjects, I decided to refrain from using myself as an experimental subject the way they did. Although I still wanted to achieve verstehen, I chose to accomplish it without einfühlen. With Clifford Geertz, I agree that it is possible to find out ‘what the devil they think they are up to’ without ‘achieving communion’. I also took an important clue from Elias, who argued that in order to make sense of what is happening in the present, we need to know something of the past. To prevent Zustandreduktion, I would not ‘retreat into the present’ and I therefore decided to put current shamanic ideas and practices into a historical perspective. I set out to discover the patterns along which knowledge about shamanism was produced, the ways it had been transferred during the last centuries and how this knowledge had moved to Eliade and his contemporaries, then from them to contemporary interpreters, spokesmen and entrepreneurs of shamanism and, eventually, to the practitioners I had met.15

What, for instance, was the connection between the ‘ancient techniques’ of shu’em shamanism and Eliade’s Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy? How and where had these modern shamanists found their knowledge about shamans? Had they gathered it by reading about their supposed tribal counterparts? What about the specific shamanic knowledge they claimed to have? How could it be that both the archetypal shamans and the contemporary shamanists suggested that they invoked spirits in trance-like states? The shamanists’ affection for and appropriation of ‘ethnic’ themes and designs in clothing, chanting and ornaments also made me curious about the correspondences with the prototypical ethnographic Siberian, Native American or other shamans. I intended to find out more about the relationship between the Dutch shamanisms and the shamans that I first read about during my academic education in religious studies. I wanted to uncover the continuities with the past and turned to the genealogy of shamanism.

Genealogical reflexivity

The contemporary genealogical approach was made popular by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Foucauldian genealogies do not search for origins but investigate lineages of development and, in general, they have a special

focus on power.¹⁶ For my genealogical project, Talal Asad’s 1993 *Genealogies of Religion* was most important. He traced some of the ways in which the notion of ‘religion’ was constructed and authorised. His argument, he stressed, was not just that religious symbols are intimately linked to social life (and so change with it), or that they usually support dominant political power (and occasionally oppose it). It is that different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any other representation) acquire their identity and truthfulness. (...) their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces.¹⁷

Along the lines of Asad, I wanted to explore the ways in which the notions of shaman and shamanism came to be constructed and authorised historically, within the specific ‘fields’ in which they acquire their ‘identity and truthfulness’. Without losing sight of the perspectives of the interpreters, I aspired to construct genealogies of shamanism in which I could arrange contemporary Western shamanisms. Obviously, this venture must be distinguished from the historiographies of shamanism that, in the line of Carlo Ginzburg, look for shamanic survivals. In his 1966 *Il Benandanti* (published in English in 1983 as *The Night Battles*), Ginzburg speculated on the possible ancient origins of the strange beliefs of the so-called *benandanti*, who were dealt with by the Roman Inquisition from 1575 to around 1675. Born with the caul, that is, wrapped in the amniotic membrane, these ‘well-doers’ or ‘good-doers’ from Friuli were supposed to battle with warlocks and witches to protect their own crops and those of their fellow villagers. The inquisitors were concerned, as the stories about night battles related to their own demonology. Gradually, as the fertility rites of popular culture and the demonology of the elite culture collided, the Inquisition’s stereotypes of witches were internalised by the Friulians. As a result, the latter-day *benandanti* became increasingly similar to their earlier foes, that is, warlocks and witches.¹⁸

Ginzburg interpreted this process as the gradual assimilation of an archaic belief system to the learned concepts of witches’ sabbaths under the constraints of inquisitorial interrogation. But he also traced the stories of the night battles back to an archaic belief system. Ultimately, he hypothesised that elements of the night battles, such as the magical flight of the *benandanti* and their metamorphosis into animals, derived from a shamanic origin. Indeed, Ginzburg proposed that he had

---

found traces of an extremely ancient shamanic nucleus. He elaborated on his spectacular thesis in his erudite and highly ambitious 1990 *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*. It is a complex book that cannot be summarised easily. For here, it is enough to note that Ginzburg analysed a range of cults with supposed shamanic traits in different regions: Friuli, Balkan, Caucasus, Hungary and Lapland. Astonished by ‘the resemblances between the ecstasies of the Euroasian shamans and their European counterparts’, he speculated about a complex process in which shamanic beliefs and practices diffused from Asia into Europe. Ginzburg’s work, impressive and admirable as it is, has some shortcomings that cannot be ignored, as different critics have also detected. One might ask whether the shamanic practices at the Eigentijdsfestival carry the shamanic nucleus into the twenty-first century. However, that is not my intention. Instead, I am going to focus my genealogical historiography on the construction of knowledge about shamanism.

There is good reason to distinguish between the ‘anthropological skepticism’ of a genealogical project and other kinds of approach that can be labelled sceptical. In 2002, two years before I started my study of shamanism, I published an article on Dutch shamanism in *Skepter*, the Dutch version of the *Skeptical Enquirer*. In the article I ridiculed those who claim to be practising shamanism in the Netherlands and argued that they are not practising ‘authentic’ shamanism. It was a shallow article, I must admit now, in which I merely wanted to show that contemporary shamanism is an invented tradition based on faulty truth claims. I disregarded the *longue durée* completely, did not try to approach contemporary shamanisms historically, and I completely disregarded the perspectives of contemporary shamanists.
Apart from this youthful indiscretion, I call attention to this kind of scepticism because it is widespread among scholarly interpretations of contemporary Western shamanism. Sure enough, most contemporary books on shamanism are written by advocates of contemporary Western shamanism, but in academic circles the dominance of sceptical approaches gives good reason to say that there is an academic ‘anti-shamanic polemic’ taking place. In this polemic, different interest groups are involved in a specific ‘struggle for recognition’ in which they try to control or even monopolize the right to conceptualize shamanism. They do so by debunking contemporary Western shamanisms and by devaluing their social esteem.

This devaluation is so prevalent that it cannot be neglected in any analysis of contemporary Western shamanism. So, before I say more about my genealogical approach, I would briefly like to shed light on some sceptical approaches to contemporary Western shamanism. First and foremost, sceptical scholars contest that contemporary shamanism should be considered as authentic shamanism. Their principle argument is that contemporary shamanism, or ‘neo-shamanism’ as it is called in this line of argument, should be distinguished from ‘traditional’ shamanism, which is considered authentic. A conspicuous example of this kind of scepticism can be found in the 2001 collection of articles *The Concept of Shamanism: Uses and Abuses*. In his review of the book, the scholar of religion Kocku von Stuckrad criticised the ‘strong moralistic tone’ of some of the articles that carry ‘out the title’s overconfident presupposition that there is “a” concept of shamanism (singular), and differing uses are “abuses”’. Indeed, the title suggests that it is possible to ‘abuse’ the concept of ‘shamanism’. Apparently, proper ways to use the concept of ‘shamanism’ can be distinguished from ‘abuses’ of the concept.


24 The term ‘anti-shamanic polemic’ is inspired by the term ‘anti-esoteric polemics’ that Wouter Hanegraaff uses to describe the ‘procedures of exclusion’ by which ‘Western esotericism’ is banned from the historiography of ‘genuine science’; see his ‘Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research’, *Aries. Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 5 (2005) 225-54.


Another case in point is *Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing*, in which Danish anthropologist Merete Demant Jakobsen juxtaposed an interpretation of what she considers historical shamanism in Greenland with an analysis of contemporary Western shamanism. She argued that contemporary Western shamanism should be termed ‘shamanic behaviour’ but not ‘shamanism’, as this term ought to be restricted to the real thing, so to speak. Alas, Jakobsen not only disregarded the problematic character of the term ‘shamanism’, but also the multifaceted nature of contemporary Western shamanism, as she equated its diverse forms with so-called *core-shamanism*, about which I will come to write later in this book. Moreover, she argued that people participate in ‘neo-shamanism’ solely because it brings solace to members of a fragmented, disillusioned society, even though she also asserted that they were intelligent, articulate, educated and well-informed. So, in her one-dimensional conclusion, she explained contemporary ‘shamanic’ practices by some unfulfilled ‘need’ on part of the seekers. Unfortunately, she did not provide a thorough analysis of what contemporary Western shamanism entails and did not uncover the rationale of the conceptualization of shamanism by the different contemporary Western shamanisms.27

Other scholars go even further in their misrecognition, claiming that contemporary Western shamanism is ‘inauthentic’ because it is produced by frauds and charlatans. For example, the famous Hungarian expert on shamanism, Miháli Hoppál, who is the editor of *Shaman: Journal of the International Society for Shamanistic Research*, argues that some shamans are ‘charlatans’, while others are ‘bearers of continuous traditions in the ethnographic sense’. This last category is ‘entirely authentic’, while the first is not.28 In consequence, Hoppál claims that some contemporary shamanisms not only use the concept incorrectly, they also make use of the concept ‘shamanism’ to deceive others. A vivid example of the same ‘pattern of disrespect’, to use a term from the German philosopher Axel Honneth, occurred at a meeting of my own research group at the University of Groningen in which I was invited to introduce the subject of my thesis. Right after I finished the presentation of my paper on ‘Shamanism in the Netherlands’ the chairman of the research group, a renowned scholar, exclaimed: ‘Charlatans!’29

Obviously, quarrels and discussions about the outlines of shamanism are crucial elements of the genealogy of shamanism, as it is shaped by the authorisation

---


of some definitions of shamanism on the one hand and the discrediting of other definitions on the other. The power to sanction definitions is a crucial element in my genealogical approach. I will not separate the ‘fakes’ from the ‘authentic’ shamans; I want to concentrate on the ways in which scholars and others claim and have claimed the authority to tell the difference between sham and shaman.30 Still, I think it is important to clarify the problems in the facile use of the labels ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’, as Alice Beck Kehoe did in her 2000 Shamans and Religion. In her ‘anthropological exploration in critical thinking’, she compellingly argued that the terms ‘shamans’ and ‘shamanism’ are used so loosely and naively by anthropologists no less than the general public that they convey confusion more than knowledge. That is to say, lumping healers, diviners and priests outside the global ‘religions of the book’ under the label ‘shamans’ primarily demonstrates misinformed and stereotypical thinking. Kehoe argued that anthropologists should apply the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ primarily to Siberian practitioners so called in their homelands. Instead of stating what shamanism is, however, my focus will be on the multiple ways definitions were and are constructed.31

Three historical studies on shamanism

As I turned away from experiential anthropology towards a more genealogical and sociological approach to shamanism, it appeared that some scholars had recently published their reconstructions of the history of shamanism, or to use a shorthand expression, their historiographies of shamanism. As a matter of fact, the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen no less than three historiographies of shamanism, a sure sign of the great interest in the subject. Ronald Hutton’s 2001 Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination, Kocku von Stuckrad’s 2003 Schamanismus und Esoterik. Kultur- und wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen and Andrei Znamenski’s 2007 The Beauty of the Primitive are all significant contributions to the study of shamanism.32 In spite of their excellence, they do not make my own project superfluous. By reflecting on these three books, in turn, I will distinguish my genealogical project from their historiographies.

The historian Hutton convincingly argues that ‘Siberian shamanism’ has been a problematic term ever since records of it began. While the Tungusic term ‘shaman’ is in itself a crude and convenient European label, the phenomena labelled as ‘shamanism’ did not entail a specific social institution. Moreover, most Europeans who contemplated shamans and shamanism based their interpretations on information that was potentially flawed, as the scholars and travellers that collected most information on shamans were often hostile or, at least, indifferent to the supposed shamans. Detailed information on shamanism from the period before Buddhist, Christian and Islamic missionaries were active in the area was lacking, and there were no direct testimonies from supposed shamans working in a traditional Siberian society.\(^{33}\) Although Hutton convincingly argues that the label ‘shaman’ is flawed, he still explores ‘what shamans did’ and ultimately, he even suggested that it ‘seems to be correct’ that ‘the traits which underpin Siberian shamanism occur naturally in individuals throughout humanity, although they are given different cultural expressions at particular times and places’.\(^{34}\)

As a deconstruction of knowledge about Siberian shamans, Hutton’s *Shamans* inspired me. Yet I wanted my genealogical project to include Western interpretations of shamans in general and not limit my focus to Western interpretations of Siberian shamans only, as Hutton has done. I also aimed at a sharper focus on the sociopolitical contexts in which knowledge about shamans was constructed.

The scholar of religion Kocku von Stuckrad, on the other hand, focuses on ‘communication and action’ instead of on ‘states of the mind’, as Hutton partly does.\(^{35}\) Von Stuckrad’s 2002 article ‘Reenchanting Nature: Modern Western Shamanism and Nineteenth-Century Thought’ argues that the ‘central leitmotiv’ of contemporary Western shamanism is nature and that the concept of nature as it was used in neo-shamanic discourse is a direct successor of Western mysticism and philosophy of nature. Von Stuckrad convincingly justifies his ‘construction of lineages’ (1) by pointing out that ‘the image of the shaman is the product of European imagination as early as the eighteenth century’, (2) by identifying the ‘intrinsic continuities’ of ‘nineteenth century philosophical thought to contemporary deep ecology (...) and shamanic discourse in Europe and North America,’ and (3) by indicating that ‘Euro-America forms an inseparable field of discourse’.\(^{36}\) Von Stuckrad argues:

---

33 Hutton, *Shamans*, 27, 47, 51.
34 Hutton, *Shamans*, 149.
often claiming a master perspective – for instance, because academic scholarship or religious experience is a highly complex enterprise. It necessitates a historical awareness of the formation of identities, the power of definitions, and the endurance of older concepts.37

Von Stuckrad developed his thesis about shamanism in more detail in his 2003 *Schamanismus und Esoterik*. Again, he focuses on ‘nature’ as a central concept. This time, he also presented the ‘soul’ as a central concept in contemporary Western shamanism, tracing its lineage from Platonic perspectives to the ‘Psychologisierung der Religion’ and the ‘Sakralisierung der Psyche’ that are crucial for the formation of contemporary Western shamanism. In the conclusion, he states:

Ich halte deshalb das neunzehnte Jahrhundert für die Formierungsphase des modernen westlichen Schamanismus. In der Auseinandersetzung mit Aufklärung, Mechanisierung des Kosmos und Desakralisierung der Natur wurden jene Diskurse geformt, die auch heute noch maßgeblich auf die religiösen Identitäten und naturphilosophischen Anschauungen einwirken. Damit ist freilich nicht gesagt, dass die Faszination des Schamanismus heute die gleiche ist wie die Orpheus-Idealisierung bei Rohde oder Rilke. Die je unterschiedlichen historischen, gesellschaftlichen und religiösen Kontexte gilt es selbstverständlich zu berücksichtigen. Allerdings muss man festhalten, dass die wesentlichen Stränge des schamanischen Diskurses, systematisch betrachtet, ein hohes Maß an Kontinuitäten aufweisen.38

Von Stuckrad touches upon important aspects of the genealogy of shamanism, and his historiography traces some of the main philosophical streams that shaped contemporary shamanisms. His historiography focuses on a selection of lineages of thought that are crucial for the development of contemporary Western shamanism, disregarding conceptualisations that do not fit these lineages but which, in their time and in certain milieus, were highly influential. My historiography differs in two respects: I also wanted to focus on the lineages that Von Stuckrad has overlooked and, moreover, I wanted to consider much more explicitly the socio-political contexts in which interpreters favoured some definitions of shamanism above others.

Andrei Znamenski’s 2007 *The Beauty of the Primitive* is the most comprehensive historiography of shamanism so far. It is an impressive and admirable piece of scholarship as the anthropologist Znamenski gathered more information on the lives of the major interpreters than any other scholar before him. Both Hutton and Von Stuckrad profusely praise the book as one of the best ever written on

38 Von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 272.
modern shamanism. Indeed, *The Beauty of the Primitive* describes, often in great detail, how, after explorers picked up the word shaman in Siberia at the end of the seventeenth century, writers, anthropologists and other scholars introduced the term in different Western contexts. Subsequently, a variety of interpreters, often overwhelmed by the supposed ‘beauty of the primitive’, imagined that the shaman suited their specific tastes.

Znamenski describes his historiography as an intellectual and cultural history that treats shamanism as a ‘metaphor’ and as a ‘living spiritual technique’. According to him, his book is ‘a story about those American and European seekers who pursue archaic techniques of ecstasy as spiritual practice’. Without dissociating shamanism from its contexts, he discusses the evolution of Western perceptions of shamanism from the eighteenth century to the present. In his 2004 ‘Adventures of the Metaphor: shamanism and shamanism studies’, he argues that shamanism became a convenient metaphor for all kinds of spiritual experiences involving direct contact with spiritual forces both in non-Western and Western cultures.

Znamenski’s use of the concept of ‘metaphor’ is noteworthy and reminded me of Hayden White’s concept of ‘tropes’, or, in other words, figures of style that are relevant to narratives and stories that bring about history. As a metaphor, the term ‘shaman’ is part of the communication and action through which the genealogies of shamanism took shape. Ultimately, Znamenski concluded that the growing appreciation of shamanism in the West is part of increasing anti-modern sentiments, which have become especially noticeable since the 1960s. Yet, similarly to Hutton and Von Stuckrad, Znamenski came to his conclusion without critically reflecting on the sociopolitical contexts in which shamanism came to be appreciated.

Although the historiographies of Hutton, Von Stuckrad and Znamenski differ in scope and approach, they have all contributed to the understanding of the genealogies of shamanism. I have gratefully made use of the information they collected and their conclusions offered me some of the foci for my own research. My study differs from theirs, however, in several ways. Firstly, I want to focus more intensely on the sociopolitical contexts in which the notions of shaman and shamanism came to be constructed and authorised in past centuries. Secondly, my genealogies will include interpretations of shamanism that they left out of their historiographies and vice versa. A third aspect of my study that differs from theirs is that I

39 Both are cited in the blurb on Znamenski’s *Beauty of the Primitive*.
40 Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, ix.
make use of a distinctly different conceptual framework. The theoretical and empirical approaches of Pierre Bourdieu and James Beckford will help me to explore the ways in which the notions of shaman and shamanism came to be constructed and authorised historically, within specific fields. Therefore, before I embark on my journey along the types of interpretations, in the next sections I will present the specific methodology and terminology with which I intend to enlighten the historiography of the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’.

Pierre Bourdieu

Unmistakably, the Eigentijdsfestival illustrates that ‘shamanism’ is not a self-evident concept. Different individuals, institutes and ‘schools’ present different versions of shamanism in progress. Visitors can learn what shamanism is by attending trance travel sessions organized by the School for Shamanism, they can experience the ‘life tree’ with shaman Searching Deer and they can participate in a shamanic meditation session arranged by an organization specialized in a practice called shu’em shamanism. These shamanisms are not identical and the various shamanic creations are not static. Interpretations of shamanism are constantly adapted to the changing circumstances of the environment. The variable nature of shamanism is exemplified by the current development of a ‘shamanic’ version of the healing therapy called ‘family constellations’.43

Admittedly, interpretations of shamanism have always been produced in different and varying settings. All the way through the genealogies of shamanism, every distinct form of knowledge about shamanism was a product of specific circumstances. Every perspective on shamanism has always depended on the social and intellectual framework of the interpreter. The Eigentijdsfestival is a contemporary social arena in which different persons and organizations produce different versions or forms of shamanism. Other social arenas, such as the academic world, brought forth other kinds of interpretations of shamanism. In a sense, however, contemporary shamanisms at the Eigentijdsfestival are alike in that they are products of the same Dutch context. The creators invite and try to persuade the same groups of individuals of the significance of their specific shamanism. Scholarly interpretations also differ while they are also alike. What about these different conceptualisations? What about this variety of shamanisms? How are they related to each other?

The history and grouping of interpretations of shamanism can be fruitfully analyzed with the concepts of the theory of practice developed by Pierre Bourdieu. His concepts can facilitate an analysis of interpretations of shamanism as a range of fluid conceptualisations, constructed by active, inventive interpreters and their

43 See www.familyconstellations.net/ and http://familieopstellingen.startpagina.nl/.
intentions, without losing sight of the social contexts in which these constructions are engendered. It is important to perceive his model as a heuristic device with a specific focus. Indeed, it is a ‘locative map’ that ‘is not territory’. As such, it is a conceptual framework that makes it possible to examine the production of knowledge about shamanism and shamanic knowledge critically. The key notions, or conceptual tools, are captured by the short formula with which Bourdieu summarized his model: ‘[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice’.45

Fields and habitus

No interpretation of shamanism is created outside a ‘field’, which means that all interpreters of shamanism play a part in a social arena. A field is not an aggregate of isolated elements; it is a configuration of social roles or a network of relationships. Relatively autonomous from the external environment, a field is structured by its own internal mechanism of development. Organizations and persons engaged in a field tend to defend the autonomy of their field against other fields. Yet within a field all agents have a specific ‘weight’ or authority, so that the field is a distribution of power as well. The agents in the field struggle for control over valued resources, or forms of capital, and they occupy positions in relation to each other. Hence, they are in competition and make efforts to achieve certain goals. The people who are active in a field agree that the struggle is worth working for and they invest in it. The stakes are high because people active in a field have an ‘enchanted relation’ with the practices that are produced in the field. Bourdieu used the term ‘illusio’ for the conviction that what is at stake in their field is important. Individuals who take part in the illusio are engaged in the logic of the field and, even if they appear to be disinterested, they take their involvement and investment in the field seriously.46

Fields are regulated by specific philosophical, aesthetical and ethical dispositions that guide the ways people act, feel and think in the field. The term ‘habitus’


refers to these dispositions. Habitus is the way people are socialized in a field, or, in other words, the way the mores of a field are embedded in people. It refers to embodied and cognitive dispositions. The embodiment of one’s disposition is important as all senses, such as the sense of good taste and the sense of disgust, are incorporated in human bodies. There are compatibilities, elective affinities (Wahlverwandtschaften) between the durable ways of moving, speaking, dressing and walking and so on and they form a practical sense of knowing what to do in certain circumstances. These senses are products of history, just as the field and the creation of belief in a field are products of a specific ‘social alchemy’, that is, processes in which arbitrary relationships are transformed into legitimate relationships. This means that interpretations of shamanism are the results of strategic actions guided by dispositions that reflect the genesis and logic of a field.

It is crucial for the genealogy of shamanism that the genesis of any field is a ‘process of autonomization’ and thus that fields are institutionalised through specific socio-historical developments. Bourdieu emphasised that the struggle creates the history of the field. Yet ‘genesis implies amnesia of genesis’ as every field is a ‘universe of belief’ that misrecognises the workings of the social world: ‘The logic of the acquisition of belief, that of the continuous, unconscious conditioning that is exerted through conditions of existence as much as through explicit encouragement or warnings implies the forgetting of acquisition, the illusion of innateness’. Similarly, through a self-legitimising imagination a ‘happy few’ habitually account for their authoritative positions in the field with a ‘charismatic ideology’ that inscribes a quasi-creative power to ‘persons’. The artistic field, for instance, involves aesthetic dispositions that endorse the unique capacity of the ‘pure gaze’, which is a distinct break with the social world. The academic version of this illusion is the concept (or ideology) of ‘neutral and disinterested science’, or Fre-
ischwebende Intelligenz. It is the ‘official fiction’ that conceals the social conditions of the production of scientific works. The captivated academic ‘players’ that take action in the field can only see the game from their specific ‘scholastic point of view’. Homo Academicus uses learned language and other forms of capital to try to impose that definition of science that best conforms to his specific interest. Scholars play the specific games of their scientific discipline, so to speak. In academic fields, as in fields of art, in fields of religion and in other fields, people are engaged in processes of disqualification and distinction.\textsuperscript{50} The crucial point is that art, science and esotericism are social practices that are constructed in social interaction in broader social contexts.

\textit{Economies and capital}

Every field functions as an ‘economy’ in which several forms of capital are accumulated and exchanged. Not only economic capital (the most obvious form of capital: material wealth in the form of money, stocks and shares, property, etc.), but cultural capital (knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions), social capital (the possession of a durable network or membership of a group), symbolic capital (accumulated prestige, charisma, honour, or distinction) and other forms of capital are used in the struggle. In a specific field specific forms of capital are esteemed highly, for only certain goals are considered worthwhile in a specific field. The ability to write or speak the idiom that is fashionable in a specific field is cultural capital as well. In Bourdieu’s intricate vocabulary: ‘the power of words is never anything other than the power to mobilize the authority accumulated within a field (a power which obviously presupposes specifically linguistic competence – cf. mastery of liturgy)’. A good bond with an authority in the field is social capital and can lead to a central position in the field. This may lead to prestige or, in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘symbolic capital’.\textsuperscript{51}

Again and again, Bourdieu emphasised the significance of symbolic capital and symbolic power as these are fundamental for ‘the production of belief’ in any ‘economy of symbolic goods’. Drawing on Max Weber’s notions of charisma and legitimacy, Bourdieu stressed the major role of taken-for-granted assumptions in the constitution and maintenance of power relations. Symbolic power is based


on social recognition. This social recognition, however, is based on the misrecognition of interest or, stated differently, the ‘disavowal of the economy’. In other words, through ‘symbolic labour’ the specialists transform relations of power into forms of disinterested honorability. To quote Bourdieu again: ‘For the author, the art dealer, the publisher or the theatre manager, the only legitimate accumulation consists in making a name for oneself, a known recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature) or persons (through publication, exhibition, etc.) and therefore give value, and to appropriate the profits from this operation.’

One of the properties of capital is that it can be converted into other forms of capital. Economic capital can be exchanged for cultural capital by education and cultural capital can be converted into economic capital. Some forms of capital are converted more easily than others. Qualifications that are well respected in a field can help to gain a distinct position in that field. Distinction, prestige or status (symbolic power) can be achieved by accumulating forms of capital that are highly valued in the specific economy of a field. In other words, individuals achieve their distinctive, sometimes charismatic, position in a field by appealing to the assets that are highly valued in this field. A distinctive position in one field is not always compatible with recognition in another field, but in specific circumstances some forms of symbolic capital can help to acquire recognition in other fields. The authority that comes with an academic position, for instance, is often valued highly in other fields as it symbolizes profound scholarly knowledge.

From a Bourdieuan perspective, any interpretation of shamanism should thus be related to the economies wherein the interpretations were produced. It is, therefore, crucial for fields not to be strictly autonomous from the external environment. Fields overlap and interpretations of shamanism are often products of more than one field at the same time. For instance, some scholars of religion are involved in the academic field while they also take action in the field that they focus on as scholars, namely the field of religion. When an academic scholar of shamanism has also invested in economies of esoteric, aesthetic or political capital, it is important to take note of this ‘double belonging and double play’.

The term ‘economy’ should not be misunderstood. The economy of a field is not limited to those practices and exchanges of capital that are generally recognized as economic. Moreover, the different forms of capital are not only valued as a way to gain economic capital. When visitors pay to listen to scholarly or shamanic

---


53 Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’.

teachings, money is probably not the most important form of capital involved. The specific knowledge involved in the teachings is a form of capital with intrinsic value. To be recognized as a respected scholar, as a brilliant artist or as a renowned shamanic teacher is inherently worthwhile in particular fields. Capital is gained by making use of the talents that are precious in the economy of the field. The structure of fields is determined by the distribution of different forms of capital. So, in that sense, the accumulation of any kind of capital is an economic act.55

Strategies and games

Bourdieu’s notion of strategy is important but prone to be misunderstood. In his model, strategy is neither the product of an unconscious programme nor the product of a conscious, rational calculation. The players who take action in a field, be it the field of shamanism or an academic field, do not mechanically obey explicit, codified rules; there is freedom of invention and improvisation. People who take part in a social game conform to certain regularities that shape the action. Unlike other games, these social games have no fixed rules. Explicit norms are not written down, and the game did not begin with a referee laying down the rules. In other words, the players have specific ways of speaking, thinking, moving, dancing, laughing, eating and so forth. Individuals who are successfully socialized in a field have a ‘feel for the game’ or, in other words, a practical sense of knowing what is appropriate in certain circumstances. Playing the game successfully includes a cognitive as well as an embodied sense or knowledge of what the specific trump cards are in the game.56

The game analogy can spotlight the concepts of ‘play’ and ‘performance’, but the analogy should be used cautiously. People who take action in a field have an ‘enchanted relation to a game’ and this immersion means that the liberty of experimentation should not be overestimated. A game has an immanent logic. This means that the actors cannot do just anything and get away with it. In Bourdieu’s theory, ‘Players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief (doxa) in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning.’ The players agree that their game is worth playing and for that reason they invest in it. The concept ‘doxa’ stresses the naturalisation of ideas and alludes to the set of fundamental beliefs of players in a field. They do not even need to be asserted as they are taken for granted. The stakes of a social game are high because the players do not consider their activities as a game. Bourdieu argued that, ‘Each field calls forth and

gives life to a specific form of interest, a specific illusion, as tacit recognition of the values of the stakes of the game and as practical mastery of its rules.57

To consider scholarly or shamanic practices as play or performance is not to imply that the individuals who take action in these practices are merely ‘playing a part’ and that their ‘performance’ is not ‘real’. Shamanic practitioners object to these terms because of the equation of ‘performance’ with ‘acting’, ‘faking’, or ‘making up’, but these objections are not the main issue here. The issue is that all individuals can be described as ‘actors’ who ‘play’ in distinct fields in the way that all people are involved in ‘the presentation of self in everyday life’, to cite the sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982), with whom Bourdieu shared a fascination with the exotic minutiae of everyday life.58

Not surprisingly, Bourdieu reduced the religious field to religious organizations like the Roman Catholic Church, which was his frame of reference. His scope on religion was also restricted in another way, as he associated religion with oppression, indoctrination and exploitation. Moreover, Bourdieu interpreted religious power primarily as the power of religious elites to influence the practices and worldviews of lay people. His perspectives can be understood by applying his theories to himself. Bourdieu was a man of the left, a gauche de gauche, an anti-establishment French academic who worked in a field in which religion was not highly regarded. Guided by his anti-religious habitus and in accordance with his leftist political opinions, he erroneously claimed that religious capital could only be accumulated within the closed system of the hierocratic institutional frameworks by those who produce it, and he explicitly denied that lay people might accumulate and wield religious capital.59

Because of his own dispositions, Bourdieu had no eye for the more subtle dynamics of other religious fields and the comparatively recent but significant process in which different fields of religion have accepted the ‘ethic of consumption’ as a substitute for the traditional ‘ethic of obligation’.60 The subtle dynamics of con-

60 G. Davie, ‘From Obligation to Consumption: Patterns of Religion in Northern Europe at
sumption and manipulation of capital in contemporary fields of esotericism and shamanism will come into view in later chapters, however. Therefore, I will now turn to the perspectives of the British sociologist of religion James Beckford, who has made a name as a receptive and insightful scholar specialising in the theoretical and empirical aspects of the sociological study of religious topics.61

James Beckford

James Beckford’s social constructionism can fruitfully be applied to focus on contemporary power and power struggles in religion, and, in addition, to deal with the struggles over the definition of religion.

Religion

Fundamental to his line of reasoning is that in Western societies religion does not have the fixed position it used to have. It has ‘come adrift from its former points of anchorage’ and has evolved into a ‘free floating phenomenon’, which means that individuals and groups can use religious symbols and meanings in a bewildering variety of ways. The rise of opportunities for more extensive experimentation with the use of religious symbols went hand in hand with a process in which mainstream religious institutions lost the ability to control the definition and use of religious symbols. Accordingly, formal membership of religious groups has ceased to be the norm and religious leaders have started to authorize their specific religious practices in what is known as a spiritual marketplace. Religion has become transformed, and, simultaneously, interpretations of religion have changed. It is no longer the ‘sacred canopy’ providing meaning, identity, inspiration and consolation to very large numbers of people. Instead, religion has become a ‘highly variable set of social and cultural practices credited by many people with conveying the ultimate significance of anything and everything.’62

In fact, Beckford argues that religion has no fixed, timeless properties. It is formed by constellations of immensely variable beliefs and practices by means of which human beings attribute the highest significance to all manner of objects.

---


events, ideas, values, sentiments and ways of living. The boundaries of the religious are constantly being negotiated, contested, and renegotiated.63

This struggle of different groups in our advanced industrial society to conceptualize religion has important implications for the study of shamanism. Like religion, shamanism is the subject of social struggles, not only at the Eigentijdsfestival. As I will show in the next chapter, ‘shamanism’ has been a contested and problematic concept from the start of its long genealogy. In the same vein that Beckford argues that religion is a continually shifting state of affairs, I suggest that the notion of ‘shamanism’ can and should be interpreted as a continually shifting state of affairs. Therefore, I shall not start with a definition of shamanism. To assume that there are generic qualities of shamanism and to search for them would put the scholars’ criteria and boundaries of shamanism at the centre of analysis, while the focal point of this study is, and should be, the conceptualisation of shamanism. The variety of conceptualisations should be approached, therefore, by aiming the analysis at the various situations in which concepts and practices of shamanism are constructed, attributed or challenged during the long genealogy of shamanism.64

**Power**

Power is one of Beckford’s key notions. He claims that in general sociologists of religion have wrongly limited the meaning of the notion of power to the ability or function of religion to provide meaning and identity. This misunderstanding was primarily caused by their interpretation of religion as world-view or system of meaning. However, as Beckford argues, this classic sociological model puts the ‘theoretical cart’ before the ‘empirical horse’. In other words, the sociologists’ interpretations of religious phenomena have been mistaken for their subjects’ motives and intentions.65 According to Beckford, religious actors do not respond to questions of meaning and identity directly; they respond to perceived sources of power. Whether their actions do or do not supply meaning and identity is an empirical question and not one that is solved by a definition of religion. Despair, doubt, confusion, misgivings, rationalisations and evasiveness are also common characteristics of religious life. Like Bourdieu, Beckford argues that scholars should focus on power and power struggles in religion, but in his analysis power is more than

the power and influence of religious groups or the religious legitimisation of the positions and privileges of powerful groups and individuals. Beckford includes the different perceived manifestations of power in his perspective, which means that religion should be perceived as a source that is used by different groups of people to acquire a more powerful stance in the world. In that way, Beckford argues, religion can empower the believer to be more effective in daily life and cope more adequately.66

It is noteworthy that Beckford uses his theoretical outlook to analyse so-called New Religious and Healing Movements (NRHM), a category that is of importance here as it bears a resemblance to Dutch shamanisms in which healing is one of the key concepts. One of the main characteristics of NRHMs is their holistic imagery. Holism signifies a distinctive understanding of the self in relation to others, an integrated view of spirit and matter and a worldview that considers all of nature as interconnected and integrated. Holism refers to perceptions of deep reciprocity between a whole and its constituent parts. Holistic imagery is typically integrative, associative, remedial and monistic rather than analytical, dissociative, conflictual and dualistic. One of its basic assumptions is that mind and body are one and, connected to this, that health is the key to unlocking personal potential. ‘Wholeness’ can be achieved by unblocking or releasing flows of energy that permeate the body/mind. In the process, the ‘true self’ can be discovered and enacted.67

According to Beckford, membership of an NRHM can empower people. Participants can get ‘the chance to cultivate various spiritual qualities, personal goals or social arrangements’ and they can perceive the healing power of religious phenomena. This power is not dependent on the objective physical outcomes of a healing session. When a healing session is experienced as powerful, then it serves as a source of power for the one who experiences this healing power. In such a case, the symbolic power of healing, which is based on the recognition of its power, becomes a source of empowerment for the healer and the healed.68

While many scholars depict alternative healing practices as a series of excessively individualistic activities, Beckford argues against this tendency. Contrary to the often too simplified portrayals of these practices as strictly self-centred, narcissistic, subjective or individualistic, Beckford stresses that self-centred and selfless practices coexist in what is referred to as ‘New Age’, which he calls a ‘notoriously slippery’ term. The word ‘self-religion’ may be ‘appropriate for the many new and


alternative forms of spirituality and religion which encourage practitioners to draw inspiration and guidance from within their own minds and bodies rather than from external texts, traditions or human authorities, but this does not mean that ‘true self’ is conceived as an island or atom. It can also be thought of as ‘social, compassionate and attuned to the rhythms of the natural world.’ Indeed, ‘from a truly holistic point of view’ experiencing wholeness can only be achieved in harmony with other people and the physical surroundings. Furthermore, Beckford denounces the suggestion that so-called New Age believers use inner sources of authority instead of outer sources as too dichotomous, as the distinction between inner and outer sources of authority is not always clear.69

For the study of changing religious ideas, forms and practices, Beckford encourages the critical assessment of macro-sociological processes. He emphasizes that the imagery and ethics of new religious movements closely relate to present-day conditions of life. At the same time, however, religious movements create what Beckford has called a ‘free space’, in which religious experimentation can take place. Even though these experiments should not be interpreted too easily as resistance against the hegemony of larger societal developments, this ‘free space’ allows people to experiment with new meanings and new forms.70

The argument

The overarching goal of this book is to explore the ways in which the notions of shaman and shamanism came to be constructed and authorised historically. To arrive at my goal, I embark on a long genealogical journey in which I focus on the successive interpretations and conceptualisations of shamanism and the ways in which they were and are authorised in distinct fields. In this expedition we will encounter a range of conceptualisations and interpretations from a variety of truth-seekers who have struggled to demonstrate and authorise their knowledge about shamanism by deploying the specific kinds of capital that are valued in the fields in which they took or take action.

Bourdieu’s framework will help me to chart several aspects of the genealogy of shamanism. The concepts ‘habitus’, ‘field’, ‘capital’ and ‘strategy’ form the framework of a perspective that interprets conceptualisations of shamanism by relating them to the fields from which they emerged. This framework can be used to shed light on the genesis of fields and the specific logic of these fields. This logic includes the perspectives of individuals who, guided by specific dispositions, take or have taken actions in these fields from distinct positions. In other words, the

70  Beckford, Social Theory & Religion, 172-9.
approaching shamanism concepts enlighten the logic of past interpreters of shamanism who, working from a variety of fields, were crucial for the different ways in which the terms 'shaman' and 'shamanism' were used and negotiated. Finally, Bourdieu’s theory of practice will help to interpret the genealogy of shamanism as a collection and succession of strategic actions of scholars, artists and other cultural guides or ‘taste-makers’ within a variety of sometimes overlapping fields that culminates, in this study at least, in the genesis of the field of shamanism in the Netherlands.

Beckford’s social constructivist approach, on the other hand, can and will help me to explore the genealogies of shamanism as a continuing struggle about the boundaries of the concept of ‘shamanism’. Yet Beckford’s perspectives come into focus more explicitly in the later chapters of this book, as he, above all, enables me to interpret the recent development of contemporary Western shamanism, which is, from his social constructionist perspective, a ‘free floating phenomenon’ that people experiment with for the sake of empowerment.

As I have argued before, it would not be fruitful to start with an essentialist definition of shamanism. To conclude with such a definition would also be un-rewarding. It may be superfluous here, but I must stress that my genealogies of shamanism do not include a search for the essence of shamans or shamanism. On the other hand, my genealogies do include interpretations of the construction of essentialist definitions of shamanism. A quote from the scholar of shamanism Caroline Humphrey may illustrate my point, as she convincingly argued that shamanic practices ‘should be seen as reactive and constitutive in relation to other forms of power, and this may be a means by which we can understand, in a broad regional context, their character at given places and periods, and their transformation through history’. This is in accordance with my perspectives as I intend to try to understand the character and transformation of conceptualisations and interpretations of shamanism within their contexts. That is to say, I perceive shamanism as a contested concept that constantly evolves because individuals have defined, created and challenged shamanism in various continuously changing fields. In other words, I understand the production of knowledge about shamanism as a social practice that involves power and authority.

My task, therefore, will be to identify the repositioning of the concepts ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ and to identify the sometimes hidden dispositions of shamanologists, shamanovelists, shamanthropologists and other individuals who have conceptualised shamanism. Their policies, methodologies and approaches are significant aspects of the genealogies of shamanisms, as well as their power, authority and position-taking within distinct fields. Of course, it is impossible to explore all the interpretations and conceptualisations of shamanism and to describe them all as

---

strategic steps within fields in one book. Therefore, my genealogy is a somewhat simplified reconstruction of a complex and multifarious history. To get a better grip on the material, I have arranged the interpretations of shamanism regionally and chronologically. I start with the eighteenth-century discovery of Siberian shamans and finish with the contemporary field of shamanism in the Netherlands. For the sake of my argument, however, as we will see in most chapters of this book, I have to deviate occasionally from the chronological order. There is no easy way to map the disorderly territory of interpretations in an orderly way.

Before I turn to the outline of this book, I must introduce and clarify some of the terms that will be used in the following chapters. For instance, as I have already noted, I use the term 'shamanist' for individuals practising contemporary Western shamanism. The term 'shamanology', on the other hand, refers to the scholarly study of shamanism. Again, I must stress that shamanology is not a term preserved for the study of 'real' shamanism, so to speak, but a term that refers to the study of subject matters that are labelled shamanism. Shamanology is studious and can be practised in academia as well as in other fields. A field of shamanology, therefore, is the social arena in which scholarly knowledge about shamanism is produced by academic and other scholars who conceptualise shamans and shamanism. In this field academic and other scholars struggle to get their conceptualisation or interpretation of shamanism recognised as legitimate.

A field of shamanology is not the same as a field of shamanism, which is structured by people who offer shamanic goods. This field consists of shamanists and shamanic experts who offer products that they classify as shamanistic. In the field of shamanism or, in other words, an economy of shamanic goods, shamanic goods and expertise are authorised by a claim of shamanic knowledge, which refers to practical and experiential knowledge of shamanism. As I have already argued, fields overlap, and shamanic experts often also claim to have knowledge about shamanism, which is the kind of scholarly knowledge produced by scholars in the field of shamanology. Some renowned scholars of shamanism are shamanic experts and, conversely, some shamanic experts are also scholars of shamanism. As we will see, their double belonging and double play decisively shaped the genealogies of shamanism.

Outline of the book

My panorama of this collection of uneven paths starts in Chapter 2 with a representative selection of the interpretations that appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I will note that from the moment that the terms 'shaman' and 'shamanism' grabbed the attention of Western observers, most of them drew their speculative and generalising broad conclusions without ever having witnessed any
‘real’ shamans. Alongside the theological interpretations, most of these early interpretations can be categorised as either enlightened or romantic, but the complexity of the variety of interpretations does not permit them to be classified along a crude scale of modern versus anti-modern.

Chapter 3 focuses on the American genealogies of shamanism of the first half of the twentieth century. This meandering string of interpretations began with Franz Boas and his anthropological students. Some of them were closely related to the American avant-garde artists who gave a boost to the idea that shamans were holders of timeless wisdom. To complicate the picture of this lineage, however, some of the interpreters also took steps in the field of esotericism. In Chapters 6 and 7 I will return to the development of American genealogies of shamanism during the second half of the twentieth century. First, however, I turn to some other genealogies of shamanism.

In Chapter 4, twentieth-century European interpretations of shamanism will pass the review. One part of the chapter is devoted to British social anthropologists, who habitually used the term ‘spirit possession’ instead of the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’. When they used the terms, however, they used them as analytical labels to refer to a social category. Their interpretation differed radically from other European interpretations of the same period. Historians of religion, for instance, habitually equated shamanism with mysticism, and some of the most influential European interpretations of shamanism came from folklorists, amongst whom were historians of religion, who used the term ‘shamanism’ for the ancient religious foundation of the cultural identity of their nation. A considerable part of Chapter 4 considers the renowned interpretations of Sergey Mikhalovich Shirokogoroff, whose much-cited 1935 *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* still is very influential but who is, as I will argue, habitually misrepresented by later interpreters. The chapter concludes with a short examination of the genesis of the scholarly field of shamanology in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century.

Chapter 5 captures Mircea Eliade’s seminal publications on shamanism and the fields in which he took action when he constructed his interpretation of shamanism. To interpret his work, the chapter focuses on the remarkable steps that took him from Romania to Chicago, where he eventually became known as the ultimate scholarly authority on shamanism. These steps will be crucial for my interpretation of the dispositions that guided his scholarly work. Ultimately, however, the chapter is devoted to one of the social networks that was vital for Eliade’s success, namely the network that I call ‘the Bollingen connection’. Named after Carl Gustav Jung’s Bollingen Tower, this loosely constructed network of scholars, artists and therapists comprised the people surrounding Jung. The chapter thus also features Jungian interpretations of shamanism and interpretations of shamanism related to these, such as those of the anthropologist Paul Radin and the mythologist Joseph Campbell.
In Chapter 6 I turn to American countercultural images of shamanism that were created from the 1950s onwards. The supposedly countercultural revolts will be put in a sociological perspective by relating them to the simultaneous socio-economic changes in American society. I will also concentrate on the institutionalisation of countercultural shamanic visions in the fields of psychology, psychedelics and literature. The story continues in Chapter 7 with a look at the genesis, growth and logic of the American field of shamanism. I will argue that the establishment and success of this field was closely related to the socioeconomic changes that came with the implementation of neoliberal capitalist structures. However, the chapter starts with the 1960s institutionalisation of psychedelics in the academic field of anthropology and the subsequent transfer of anthropological psychedelic anthropology into the field of esotericism. In short, the chapter focuses on the transformation of 1960s American shamanology into the flourishing economy of shamanic goods from the 1980s onwards.

Chapter 8 is a case study that focuses on the genesis and logic of the field of shamanism in the Netherlands. In order to grasp the logic of the Dutch economy of shamanic goods I will first interpret the structuring structures and the manoeuvrings of the main players in the field through an historical perspective. I will argue that the genesis and growth of the Dutch field of shamanism, similarly to the American field of shamanism, are part of the rise and dominance of neoliberal capitalism. Nonetheless, as the agents and groups involved in the ‘consecration’ of shamanic practices in the Netherlands differ from their American colleagues, the field of shamanism in the Netherlands differs from its American counterpart. Many actors in the field are guided by scholarly dispositions, similarly to American shamanists, but in the Netherlands the academic field was not involved in the genesis of a field of shamanism and, moreover, the Dutch field lacks academic positions. The focal points of the final part are the four main players in the field whom I already introduced at the beginning of the chapter.

Chapter 9, finally, will recapitulate some of the main points of the preceding chapters. Using the case of a shamanic ceremony in the Netherlands that involved a Siberian shamanca, I will consider the logic of fields of shamanism, the continuities and discontinuities of the genealogies of shamanism and the classification of shamanism. The epilogue starts, however, with a brief reflection on my own struggles in the academic field. This is necessary, given that, in the words of Bourdieu, ‘the reflexive return is not the expression of a sort of epistemological “sense of honor” but a principle that leads to constructing scientific objects into which the relation of the analyst to the object is not unconsciously projected’. I cannot but reflect on my strategic manoeuvring in a world that is ‘the site of an ongoing struggle to tell the truth of this World’.72

72  Wacquant, ‘Towards a Reflexive Sociology’, 33-5