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Eighteenth and nineteenth-century interpretations

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Swedish traveller and journalist Jonas Jonsson Stadling (1847-1935) criticised the overwhelming variety of interpretations of ‘shamans’ and ‘shamanism’ and, above all, the extraordinary overgeneralisations of some interpreters:

To give a general description of the fundamental traits of the Shamanistic religion is no easy task, because this has to be made out of a chaos of often apparently contradictory details, which have not been preserved in written original documents but only in vague and fragmentary second-hand allusions, in constantly changing traditions, or in personal observations among the still living adherents of those tenets.¹

Stadling’s personal observations made him conclude that ‘shamanism’ was not a term known to those who were supposed to adhere to it. As a common denominator it was a European idea. Moreover, the Europeans who gravely misrepresented shamanism as ‘devil-worship’ and shamans as ‘sorcerers pure and simple’ primarily based their opinions on prejudice or ignorance. According to Stadling, there was a remarkable contrast ‘between man in books and man in real life’ as the differences ‘drawn up in the books between “the savages” of those inhospitable far-off regions and “the civilized” peoples of more favoured climes appeared to me to be mainly artificial and non-essential’.²

Indeed, when Stadling wrote his reproachful words in 1901, a multitude of interpretations of shamanism had emerged. These interpretations, constructed from the end of the seventeenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, are the subject of this chapter. In these two centuries, interpreters from different fields used the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ in accordance with the logic of the fields in which they took action and, as can be expected, they came to diverse and sometimes contrasting interpretations. Of course, even though Stadler was right about the common habit of making misconstrued sweeping statements about shamans,

²  Stadler, ‘Shamanism’, 94.
it must be recognised that through his reproving words, he positioned himself and his knowledge vis-à-vis these other interpreters and their knowledge. As an explorer, he implicitly argued, he had acquired knowledge that was more accurate than the knowledge of the Europeans who had acquired knowledge about shamans merely by reading about them. Stadling had travelled through Siberia and, as he had observed real-life shamans, this experience distinguished him from the majority of scholars, who had reached their speculative and generalizing broad view conclusions about shamans and shamanism without ever having witnessed any ‘real’ shaman.

As this chapter focuses on the interpretations of shamanism that were produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it is divided into two parts. The first part [1] will focus on eighteenth-century interpretations. It starts with the ‘discovery’ of shamans in Siberia and continues with three categories of eighteenth-century interpretations: the enlightened, the romantic and the theological. My account of nineteenth-century interpretations [2] begins with folkloristic interpretations of shamanism. The second category of interpretations were produced by comparative theologians. Nineteenth-century Dutch and British colonial projects and their use of the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ are covered by the third part. The fourth part is devoted to British and American anthropological perspectives on shamanism. At the end of this chapter theosophical and other occult interpretations of shamanism will pass the review. This chapter concludes with some early twentieth-century interpretations that were inspired by nineteenth-century socialism and esotericism.

**The eighteenth-century discovery of Siberian shamans**

Western Europeans could read the word ‘shaman’ for the very first time at the end of the seventeenth century when Adam Brand, a participant in the expedition from Moscow to Beijing led by the Dutch merchant Evert Ysbrants Ydes, used the term in his travel account in 1698. Ydes used the same term in his own travel account of 1704, and, subsequently, the term found its way into other European travel accounts and into the Völker-Beschreibungen (description of peoples) that were part of the new scientific practice of Völkerkunde or Ethnographia that developed in the context of the expanding Russian Empire. Indeed, as a western term, ‘shaman’

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originated in the preliminary phase of the discipline of anthropology. It was established within the context of the Russian colonial project that was aimed at Siberia. Ethnographers and travellers had adopted the term from the Russian colonizers of Siberia, who, in the seventeenth century, had put a diversity of Siberian healers, priests and other local experts on a par by designating them as shamans. Most of these native practitioners, however, did not call themselves shaman and most Siberians did not use the word ‘shaman’ for these experts. The indigenous groups of Siberia spoke different languages and not only did they use different names for all the individuals that later would be categorized as shamans, the practices of these experts differed considerably as well. Of all the indigenous peoples in Siberia, only the Tungusic-speaking people used the word ‘shaman’.

Yet shamanism soon became a category with great powers of attraction. Almost from the beginning of the emergence of literature on shamanism in the western world, western interpreters identified different sorts of specialists as shamans and, not surprisingly, they conceptualized the category in different ways. Consequently, the term shaman came to mean a whole range of different things in the various fields in which the term was used. For most interpreters, shamanism merely belonged to the category of the uncivilized and wild as the first Western observers thought that shamans were irrational figures or imposters whose shamanic behaviour sharply contrasted with their own civilized behaviour. For instance, the German professor of chemistry and botany Johann Georg Gmelin (1709-1755), who had spent ten years in Siberia, wrote in his travel books that a shamanic ritual was ‘a lot of hocus pocus and sweating’. His hostile perceptions were strongly coloured by the enlightened dispositions that would also guide many other unfavourable eighteenth-century interpretations.
Enlightened interpretations

The enlightened opposition to shamanism reached a peak with the debut of the play *The Siberian Shaman* at the St Petersburg Hermitage Theatre in 1786. It was written by the Empress Ekaterina II, the German princess who became known as Catherine the Great (1729-1796). Notwithstanding her Enlightenment-derived utilitarian religious toleration, her play, initially called *The Tungusic Shaman*, depicted the shaman as a charlatan who was drawn to money, even when in a trance. Catherine stressed that the shaman could only be successful in deceiving an audience if the audience wanted to be deceived. This is crucial, as Catherine, the monarch-playwright, intended to release her audience from the spell of shamans and other mystic imposters. For Catherine, shamanism was more than just a folly: it was her version of what the historian J.G.A. Pocock has called the ‘antiself of Enlightenment’. The shaman was her metaphor for freemasonry and all other treacherous forms of insubordination regarding her efforts to enlighten Russia.7

Catherine’s play was, in the terminology of Bourdieu, a cultural product.8 While counting on already existing enlightened tastes, she was also in the position to authorise and legitimise this taste, as she had the distinctive symbolic power to impose her likes and dislikes on her audiences. For information on shamans, the empress depended on the reports of her historians and cartographers who had travelled through Siberia. More vital for her interpretation, however, was the work of the French philosopher and writer Denis Diderot (1713-1784). He visited Catherine in Russia in 1773, after he had completed his *Encyclopédie*. In this seventeen-volume work, he wrote:

Shamans. This is the name that Siberians give to those imposters who perform for them the functions of priests, jugglers, witches and doctors. These shamans claim to have credit with the devil, who they consult to learn the future, to heal ailments and to make tricks which appear supernatural to ignorant and superstitious people. To do this, they vigorously beat drums, dancing and turning with surprising speed until they are dizzy with twisting and exhaustion. They claim that the devil appears to them when he is in a good mood. Sometimes the ceremony ends by pretending to cut themselves with a knife,

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which redoubles the astonishment and respect of their imbecilic spectators. These contortions are usually preceded by a sacrifice of a dog or horse which is eaten while guzzling brandy and the farce finishes by giving the shaman some money to which he is no more indifferent than other imposters of the same type.9

Catherine had invested in Diderot by buying his library and paying him a salary as librarian, primarily because it was en vogue to have a philosophe at her disposal, and she went along with his disapproving and sceptical interpretation of shamanism. It fitted her strategy to enhance her reputation as the enlightened monarch of Russia, which she wished to present as an honourable and glorious empire, especially in contrast with France. In her play, as in her convictions, shamanism represented ignorance, superstition, mysticism and all the other forms of backwardness that she was trying to eradicate from her empire.10

Meanwhile, the ethnological discourse that emerged from Völkerkunde effectively fitted the universalistic tendencies of European intellectual elites and their enlightened dispositions. Ethnologists positioned shamans low down on a scale of human development whereas, at least in their own perspectives, they figured in the top rank. The ethnographic metaphor of progress and the shaman as the embodiment of the primitive could not but attract European elites as it authorised and legitimised their dominant position.11 No wonder that in other parts of Europe enlightened elites also took an interest in shamans. For example, in its 1792 review of the Dutch translation of the bestselling travel accounts of Count Maurice August Benyowsky (1746-1786), the Dutch literary journal Algemeene Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen considered the story of the Count’s meeting with a shaman in Kamchatka interesting enough to cite. Benyowsky had invited a shaman to his tent to witness the practices of this ‘charlatan’ who passed as a soothsayer and who, according to the natives, had intercourse with the devil. The shaman undressed in the tent, put on a horned cap, took a drum and, after he had drunk something that, as Benyowsky learned later, was made of mushrooms and was reminiscent of

11  Vermeulen, ‘Anthropology in colonial contexts’ and ‘The German Invention of Völkerkunde’.
opium, the shaman spent fifteen minutes on the floor, motionless. Then, all of a sudden, the shaman started to scream and move frantically. After the shaman told Benyowsky that his journey would be successful, he fell asleep.\textsuperscript{12}

Were enlightened perspectives on shamanism all the same, then? No, they were not, as the first Russian \textit{philosophe}, the political writer Aleksandr Radishchev (1749-1802) demonstrated. He had tried to enlighten Catherine by criticizing serfdom, autocracy and censorship in his 1790 \textit{Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow} but, despite his progressive goals, Catherine rewarded him with exile to Siberia. Moreover, Radishchev’s radical enlightened dispositions guided him towards an interpretation of shamanism that was much more positive than Catherine’s.\textsuperscript{13} In a letter to a Russian friend and supporter, he wrote:

\begin{quote}
This custom known as Shamanism is regarded by the common people as a means of addressing the devil and often as a form of swindling aimed at misleading trustful spectators. I see in this ritual only one means revealing feelings towards the almighty recognizable being, whose greatness appears in the smallest things.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

\textit{Romantic interpretations}

Notwithstanding Catherine’s efforts and other Enlightenment projects, radically different perspectives on shamans also became fashionable. These were primarily produced by the interpreters who were attracted to what they imagined to be the unspoiled noble savages of primitive cultures. Not surprisingly, \textit{Völkerkunde} was a source of inspiration for these romantic interpreters, but as they opposed the idea of the ‘progress of the human race’ and focused, instead, on the originality and the nobleness of ‘folk-life’, their intellectual, aesthetical and philosophical disposition

\textsuperscript{12} N.N., ‘Gedenkschriften en Reizen des Graaven van Benyowsky, door hem zelven beschreven, naar de Engelsche Vertaaling uit het oorspronglyk Handschrift overgezet’, \textit{De Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen} (1792) 159-61. German and American audiences marvelled at Benyowsky’s Siberian adventures through the tragicomedy \textit{Count Benyowsky} (or \textit{The Conspiracy of Kamtschatka}) by the German playwright August Friedrich Ferdinand von Kotzebue (1761-1819). It had its premiere in the US in Baltimore in 1814, see T.M. Barrett, “Thrills of Horror”: Siberia and the American Melodramatic Imagination, in E. Stolberg (ed.), \textit{The Siberian Saga} (Frankfurt am Main, 2005) 131-44.


guided them towards distinctly different conclusions about shamans.\textsuperscript{15} Romantic conceptions of shamans had already been construed during the \textit{Frühromantik}, for instance by the poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). He considered shamans not as imposters but as creative personalities with sophisticated poetic gifts and the ability to appeal to the imagination of others. Herder did not think that the theatrical tricks of shamans deserved contempt. On the contrary, he appreciated them as people with a special gift who believed that they had the power to intercede in the world of spirits in which they and their tribes believed. Herder equated shamans with artists and viewed them as experts on perception and communication between souls who allowed ‘the common man to comprehend the meaning of birth, life, death and regeneration’.\textsuperscript{16}

Herder’s interpretations are noteworthy as he would become a major source of anthropological thinking at the beginning of the twentieth century, first and foremost through the influence of Franz Boas, as we will see in the next chapter.\textsuperscript{17} Herder is also significant for other reasons. By identifying the essence of shamanism as a charismatic and a-historical mastery over aesthetics, Herder and others affirmed their own charismatic position as they imagined themselves to be shamans of a higher civilization, claiming a distinct form of capital in the process. As the father of cultural nationalism, who argued that the bonds that linked members of a nation into a relational whole were shared meanings and sentiments that form a people’s collective soul, Herder positioned himself as a poet-shaman, as one of the elite with the gift to create the national soul. He, therefore, can be considered the first to position shamans in a cultural nationalist framework. Many later interpreters of shamanism would also be guided by cultural nationalist dispositions, albeit in different ways.\textsuperscript{18}

Herder was one of the most important instigators of the search for authenticity that was imperative for the ‘invention’ of the ‘folk’ category and the formation of folklore studies. This is important as folkloristic interpretations of shamanism form a highly significant category of interpretations that will return in later chapters. One of Herder’s main metaphors was ‘nature’ and in line with this he per-


ceived the *Volk* as an organic whole that contrasted with the artificial urban art, language and behaviour. Folk poetry was a treasury of truth and authenticity that constituted an expression of distinct peoples. As folk songs were archives of the folk from which they emerged, authentic poets, and thus in some cases shamans, expressed the distinctive *Volksgeist*.\(^\text{19}\)

Herder’s focus on authenticity was closely related to his primitivism, which is noteworthy as primitivism would structure many later conceptualisations of shamanism. In their classic work on primitivism, Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas described primitivism as the philosophical position that associates the best existence either at the beginning of time or in ‘nature.’ They distinguished two forms: (1) chronological primitivism, which locates the best human condition in terms of time, namely primordial times, and (2) cultural primitivism, which locates the best human condition in contemporary ‘primitive’ cultures, especially because of their perceived relationship to ‘nature’ or their ‘natural’ way of living. According to the anthropologist Armin Geertz the first type can neither be proven nor disproven, but the second type can be shown to be the product of misrepresentation.\(^\text{20}\)

The organic metaphor and the essentialist idea of an authentic *Volksgeist* would also form basic elements of later folkloristic interpretations of shamanism. As we will see in later chapters, some highly influential folkloristic interpreters of shamanism were religionists. That is to say, while they asserted the primacy and authority of religion in regulating society, they made use of the shaman concept to identify the natural ‘spirit’ of their people as religious. Primitivism would also shape the genealogies of shamanism as it would structure some of the major conceptualisations of shamanism. In addition to the interpretations based on the romantic or ‘Arcadian’ form of primitivism, in which primitive societies are seen as pristine, harmonious and therapeutic, however, some interpretations were founded on the idea that primitive society can be characterised by degeneration, disruption and pathogenesis or, in other words, on ‘Barbaric’ primitivism.\(^\text{21}\) Christian theologians, for instance, habitually equated shamanism with the supposed darkness of pre-Christian times.

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Theological interpretations

In fact, the first Christian authorities who studied shamanism radically disapproved of shamans. For instance, in his 1742 survey of religions, a British clergyman of the Church of England, Thomas Broughton (1704-1774) emphasized that shamanism was superstition, idolatry, pagan religion and thus, ‘an entire defection from the knowledge of the true God, and a transferring to the creature of that worship, which is due only to the Creator of the world’. About shamanism, he wrote:

Schamman. The name given to the principal, or superior, of the priests among the Tunguses, a people of Chinese Tartary. These priests wholly devote themselves to the study of magic, or the black art.22

Hannah Adams (1755-1831), an early scholar of religion, disagreed with Broughton’s hostile treatment of dissenting Christian sects, and this motivated her to present a comprehensive view of the religions of the world from an impartial perspective. As she even tried to consider non-Christian religions ‘impartially’, her perspectives on shamans were considerably more positive than Broughton’s. Did that make her an unbiased scholar? It did not, as she still argued that ‘Christianity broke forth from the east like a rising sun, and dispelled the universal darkness which obscured every part of the globe’.23 About shamanism, she wrote:

Sammans, Shamans, or Schamans (as the first letter is differently pronounced,) were originally worshippers of the heavens (in Heb. Shemim,) and the heavenly bodies. Such were the ancient Chaldeans, Syrians, and Canaanites, whose idol was Baal-Samen, or El-Samen, the Lord or God of heaven, by which they meant the sun; and they had a city and temple, called Beth-Shemesh, the city or temple of the sun, whose Hebrew name is Shemesh.

From these Sammans seem to have sprung the Sammanes, an ancient sect of philosophers in India, from whom Dr. Priestley thinks the Hindoo religion was originally derived. The Sammanians (or Sammans) being persecuted by

the Brahmins, and driven by them out of India proper, are thought to have taken refuge in Pegu, Siam, and other countries beyond the Ganges; and it is supposed that the religion of those countries was derived from their principles. The religion of the Lamas in Tibet is also said to be reformed Shamanism. See Thibetians. And from the same source this author, with great probability, derives the modern Schamans of Siberia.24

As the first woman in America to earn her living through writing, Adams was successful, influential and one of the most widely read authors in New England between 1787 and 1830.25 She based her interpretation of shamanism on the 1799 A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations by the Unitarian scientist and author Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). Evidently, Adam’s work was part and parcel of the intellectual and theological ferment typical of the New England of her time. Arminian-Unitarians and Calvinist-Congregationalists were passionately struggling over power and authority, and their theological disputes were closely connected with the differences between Republicans, who stressed freedom of conscience, and Federalists, who wrote apologetics for Puritan repression. In her case, a conflict with the Congregational clergyman Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) played a part as well. They had both produced an abridged New England history school textbook, but while Adams stressed the ‘ardent love of liberty’ of the first colonists in her book, Morse sympathized with the efforts of the Puritan fathers to control dissenters.26

Joseph Priestley’s book reflected the radical political and religious position for which he was famous and infamous in his lifetime. His attempts to take philosophy forward included the comparison of Christianity with other religions, as this would enlighten the Christian world. He argued that true belief came from revelation and that ‘in the tenets and practices of the Schamans we may see a faint outline of the religion of the Hindoos’ which meant, ultimately, that it ‘was formed on principles fundamentally different from those of the Hebrew scriptures’.27 Five years before he wrote this, he had settled in the United States as one of the most prominent celebrities among the immigrants. He had left England to get away from his opponents, to join in the struggles over power and authority in the United States that would later absorb Hannah Adams.28

Broughton, Adams and Priestley would not have a major impact on the genealogy of shamanism, but they are of interest here as their struggle was exemplary for many struggles to come. To be precise, their debates concerning the definition of shamanism were part of a larger religious, political and theological struggle within Christianity. Describing dissenters as true Christians went hand in hand with depicting shamanism in less denunciatory terms. As we will see all through this study, the interpretations of shamanism that formed the genealogies of shamanism should be understood as both the parts and the products of struggles that were closely related to other matters of interest.

What can we learn from the eighteenth-century interpretations of shamanism? Three points stand out: first of all, almost none of the eighteenth-century interpreters of shamanism based his or her interpretation of shamanism on direct observations of the practices of the individuals whom they had labelled as ‘shamans’. Second, the information on which they based their interpretations of shamans was potentially flawed, as Ronald Hutton has shown throughout his book on the European understandings of ‘Siberian Spirituality’. Third, the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ were habitually used as concepts in the political, religious, theological and/or philosophical struggles that engaged the interpreters. On the one hand, progressive and enlightened interpreters perceived shamanism as a category that consisted of the out-of-date superstitions that they wanted to abolish. In contrast, romantic interpreters attributed the timeless and charismatic qualities to shamans that they aspired to themselves. Theologians turned shamanism into a category of ‘false belief’ that stood out against their own ‘true religion.’ This common lack of precision, however, would not impede the growing magnetism of the terms ‘shamans’ and ‘shamanism’ during the nineteenth century.

**Nineteenth-century interpretations**

1846, he criticized shamanic practices and approved of Nicholas I (1796-1855) who had sent Roman Catholic priests to Siberia to put an end to the outrageous abuse of power of the ‘Schamannen’. Teenstra depicted shamans as a specific Siberian type of swindlers and quacks who could be found all over the world. Like other sorcerers and fortune-tellers, shamans turned the stupidity of the common people to their own profit. The nineteenth century would witness the construction of many other enlightened and romantic types of interpretations. In addition, as we will see in the next sections, several other types of interpretations would also emerge.

Folklore and nationalism

During the nineteenth century the concepts ‘shamans’ and ‘shamanism’ became major themes in several nationalist discourses that brought about several highly influential folkloristic interpretations of shamanism. A case in point is the work of the Finnish linguist and ethnographer Matthias Alexander Castren (1813-1853), who located shamanism in an ancient Finnish past and interpreted shamanism as an ancient indigenous form of spirituality. Castren set off to uncover the shared ancient mythological and linguistic roots of the Finno-Ugrian-speaking people and found its cradle in the Siberian Altai. His efforts were part of his struggle for the establishment of a Finno-Ugric nation. The region that is nowadays known as Finland had been part of the Kingdom of Sweden until 1809, after which it was ceded to the Russian Empire, becoming the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. Despite these changes, Finland was still governed by a Swedish-speaking elite, and the use of Finnish for official purposes was limited despite the fact that Swedish speakers constituted only 14% of the population. During his quest, Castren also talked to shamans. In one case, ‘der berühmteste Schaman in der ganzen Gegend (...) liess sich in seine allertiefste Geheimnisse eindringen. (...) Ausserdem theilte er mir eine Variante der ersten rune der Kalewala mit’.31

30 M.D. Teenstra, Verscheidenheden betrekkelijk Booze Kunsten en Wetenschappen door eene Phantastische Wereld geschapen en wel inzonderheid die der Tooverijen en Waarzeggerijen zijnde eene Rapsodie van Sprookjes van Vroegere en Latere Dagen (Kampen, 1846) 21, 27, 281; G. Zijlma, Marten Douwes Teenstra (Winsum, 1917); IJ. Botke, Boer en Heer. ‘De Groningse boer’ 1760-1960 (Assen, 2002).
His reference to the Kalevala is crucial. Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884) composed and presented five versions of the Kalevala between 1833 and 1862. This inventive collection of a multitude of oral fragments, effectively envisioned and written by Lönnrot, became the Finnish national epic. It was supposed to raise Finnish culture to the level of that of Sweden and Russia and it would become a vital element in the process that lead to the formation of Finnish identity during the nineteenth century and the foundation of Finland as a new nation, declaring independence in 1917. Still, most educated Finns could only read the work after Castren’s 1841 Swedish translation had appeared, since few of them could read Finnish, the language of the majority. As shamans were considered the source of the Kalevala and some of its chief heroes were recognized as shamans, Finnish folklore, nationalism and shamanism became strongly interwoven.32

A similar cultural-political struggle inspired a distinct group of Siberian ethnographers, the Siberian regionalists, from 1870 until the 1920s. They used the study of shamanism to upgrade the cultural status of Siberia. To counteract the prevailing idea that Siberia was just a backward region and nothing more than a place where convicts were dumped, they represented shamanism as a unique Siberian spiritual tradition that should be cherished. Some of these Siberian scholars claimed that shamanism was the origin of Buddhism, and one interpreter even perceived shamanism as the origin of the entire Judeo-Christian spiritual heritage.33

A much more influential pioneer in the scholarly study of shamanism, however, was the German linguist Wilhelm Radloff (1837-1918), who was also known as Vasilij Vasilievic Radlov after he moved to Russia. He became renowned for his collections and translations of Turkic oral poetry from Central Asia, the Altai and other Siberian regions, and his ethnographic letters, published in 1884 as Aus Siberien. Lose Blätter aus meinem Tagebuche, remained a main source for Asian shamanism in the West during the twentieth century. In his chapter on ‘Das Schamanentum und sein Kultus’, however, Radloff contended that it was difficult to describe shamanism in general, as the phenomenon of shamanism consisted of many diverging variants with contradictory elements. The absence of written sources also hindered the creation of an overall picture, he argued, and it did not

help either that shamans were not eager to share their secrets. According to Radloff, shamans were legitimate tribal spiritual practitioners for whom the boundaries between truth and poetry had dissolved, as was the case with priests of other religions. Ultimately, Radloff did not think shamans were worse than clerics from other religions.34

Comparative theology

Not surprisingly, because of their ‘double belonging and double play’, most scholars of comparative theology, in contrast, could not agree less with Radloff.35 For them, shamanism was merely a part of the almost undifferentiated world of primitive religion. Every now and then, a scholar of religion brought shamanism to the fore as a separate category of analysis, but even in these cases shamanism remained within the class of heathenism. For example, the British Reverend Henry Christmas (1811-1868), a librarian and the author of a popular treatise on ‘universal mythologies’, demonstrated this perspective in his 1840 article on ‘schamanism’ in the Church of England Magazine. According to him, ‘Siberian tribes’ were backwards, superstitious and ‘thoroughly sensual’, and even though shamans believed in one God they also venerated different ‘malevolent deities or devils’:

Of all the forms of heathen worship there are none which extend over so vast an extent of country as that which is called schamanism. Presenting an aspect little varied, among the nations which profess it, it is the dominant religion over nearly all the north of Asia, and the islands of the north-eastern sea. Great antiquity has been claimed for it, and it has been even said that the systems of Brahma, Budha, and the Lama took their rise from corruption of schamanism. Without spending much time to investigate an opinion so absurd as this, it may be granted that the religion under consideration has prevailed, to the exclusion of all others, ever since the countries where it is professed have been known. The term schaman is applied to the priest, though the signification of it is a lonely hermit, a man master of his passions, a title to which the schamans have but little claim.36

35 Bourdieu, ‘Sociologists of Belief and Beliefs of Sociologists’.
Comparative theology was practised by armchair scholars who had never observed the shamans they wrote about. The theologians who came into contact with shamans were not positive either. To be precise, the perceptions of Christian missionaries who had settled in Siberia, and whose accounts were vital for the interpretations of their armchair colleagues back home, were strongly coloured by the distinct Christian dispositions that also guided their missionary task to spread Christianity amongst non-Christians. It must be noted, however, that, just like the eighteenth-century theological interpretations, their dispositions were akin and not identical. Whereas the Russian Orthodox missions showed a certain amount of tolerance towards the natives’ spiritual world, the mission of Evangelical Protestants, sent out by the London Missionary Society, was downright hostile. For these missionaries, shamans represented the dark side of humanity.37

Yet, even while they influenced the Western perceptions of shamanism by demonizing it, Christian missionaries did lend a hand in promoting the study of shamanism. The 1884 prize-winning essay The Heathen World; its need of the Gospel, and the Church’s obligation to supply it may count as an example of the Christian trend at large. The author, the Canadian Presbyterian clergyman and member of the Foreign Missionary Board George Patterson, devoted a chapter to ‘Shamanism – and the devil-worshippers of Asia’. The ‘basic system’ of shamanism, he argued, was the worship of evil spirits.38

Was shamanism therefore a matter of interest for all scholars of religion? On the contrary. For instance, the scholars who were involved in the genesis of the international field of religious studies at the end of the nineteenth century did not treat shamanism as a key subject. One of the most prominent scholars in this emerging field, the German-British scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), scarcely mentioned shamans. The same is true for his main competitor for the title of founder of comparative religion, the Dutchman Cornelis Petrus Tiele (1830-1902).39 His younger Dutch colleague, Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Sausaye (1848-1920), even though he had read Castren and Radloff, merely described shamanism as the ‘eigentümliche Form (…) der Animismus und die Zauberei (of


38 G. Patterson, The Heathen World; its need of the Gospel, and the Church’s obligation to supply it (Toronto, 1884) 75-83.

the mongolischen Rasse’, in his long authoritative 1887 Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte.40

Dutch and British colonial projects

The horizon of the concept ‘shamanism’ expanded when British and Dutch colonial administrators and missionaries ‘discovered’ shamans in the field of study that is known as Orientalism. In this field the academic constructions of the concepts ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ were, in accord with Edward Said’s polemical 1978 Orientalism, highly imaginative and, furthermore, closely related to the political, religious and military domination and restructuring of the Orient.41 Exemplary for the Dutch field were the interpretations of the internationally acclaimed professor in ethnology and colonial administrator George Alexander Wilken (1847-1891). He detected shamanism in the Dutch East Indies, nowadays known as Indonesia, and described it as ‘the conjuring of spirits into certain people – in order to get the words of the spirits from these people (…) while the person is called a shaman’. According to Wilken, the first shamans were clearly lunatics and persons who suffered from hysteria, epilepsy or hypnosis. Their shamanic fits came naturally from their diseases. In a later stadium of shamanism, he argued, drugs evoked the fits and in the next phase, weak, sickly and excitable individuals were selected to become shamans because of their capacity to stir up these fits.42

Dutch ethnographers employed the term ‘shamanism’ for the various healers, mediums and necromancers they found in the Dutch colonies and they would still do so in the twentieth century, as the 1914-1917 Encyclopædie van Nederlandsch West-Indië, the 1921 Beknopte Encyclopædie van Nederlandsch Indië and the 1934

40 P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte I (Freiburg, 1887) 210.
41 E.W. Said, Orientalism (London, 1978). The book has many flaws and fallacies, as many critics have pointed out, but this is not a reason to denigrate Said’s comprehension of the pervasiveness of discursive power and ideology, particularly in Western representations of an assumed Orient. See J.M. MacKenzie, Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts (Manchester, 1995); D.M. Varisco, Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid (Washington, 2007).
The belief that persons during madness, epilepsy, and sometimes abnormal states of mind, are possessed by spirits has led to attempts to reproduce the same phenomenal conditions in order to get into contact with spirits to learn from them what medicines to apply or how to act in matters of importance. The medium through whom the spirits manifest themselves is the shaman, who is brought into a state of abnormality by artificial means, the rites employed for this purpose being multifarious among the peoples of Indonesia, but, in general, similar to what we find elsewhere – e.g., among the Buriats (q.v.).

Although Kern asserted that the function of shaman and priest ‘are not seldom analogues’, he also made a clear distinction between the priest, who ‘gives his decision based on knowledge on the books of his craft, in full consciousness’, and the shaman, who ‘acts unconsciously, under inspiration’.

A noteworthy inclination among Dutch interpretations was the association of Islam with shamanism. For instance, one leading Dutch historian and ethnologist argued that the story of Muhammad’s journey to heaven could be explained as a case of ‘Muhammedanisierung älteren Musters’. The Dutch missionary Albert Christiaan Kruijt (1869-1949), in his turn, connected shamanism with Islam and contrasted shamans disapprovingly with priests, thereby making a case against

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both shamans and Islam. According to him, the shaman was the ‘human medium’ through whom spirits acted and spoke. He was ‘simply a medium who allows himself to be used as a mouthpiece of the spirits’. The priest, on the other hand, made ‘his soul-substance rise up to the lord of the heavens, (…) to reclaim the lost soul-substance of a man’. Yet it was not as clear as that, for among some ‘Indonesian tribes’ shamanism and priesthood had blended. Here, ‘priests perform some shamanistic actions’. The priesthood of the inhabitants of Halmahera and Parigi, for example, ‘has been resolved into shamanism’. Their priests were inspired by ‘a spirit called jinn’ and, Kruijt concluded: ‘It may be demonstrated with all but absolutely certainty that both these peoples have adopted shamanism from the Muhammadans’.47

Alternatively, the association of shamans with Tibet was a British construction. The 1829 London Encyclopaedia, for instance, already described the Dalai-Lama as ‘the great head of the Shaman religion’, and two years later the Encyclopaedia Americana did the same.48 In particular, the work of the Bengali Tibetologist and English secret agent Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917) was notable for the association of Tibetan Bon religion with shamanism. His publication in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal on ‘The Bon (Pön) Religion’ in 1881 became the authoritative source for Western representations of Bon. In his most important scholarly contribution, the 1902 Tibetan-English Dictionary, he defined ‘the ancient religion of Tibet’ as, ‘the kind of Shamanism which was followed by Tibetans before the introduction of Buddhism and in certain parts still extant’. Although Das did not specify shamanism precisely, he made clear that it comprised all the superstitious practices of Tibetans before Buddhism appeared.49

The idea that Buddhism had brought Tibetans most of the ‘little civilization’ which they possessed was still advanced during the twentieth century, for instance by the orientalist Laurence Austine Waddell (1854-1938). He even interpreted the ‘aboriginal pre-Buddhist religion’, or ‘Bon’, as ‘a shamanist, devil-charming, necromantic cult with devil-dancing, allied to the Taoism of China and, like the latter, [it] has become largely intermixed with Buddhist externals. But it still retains its essentially demonist character’.50 His negative understanding of Bon and shaman-

50 L.A. Waddell, ‘Tibet’, in Hastings, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics XII (1921) 331-4 at
ism as ‘animistic devil-dancing’ and his interpretation of Buddhism as a ‘religion of reason’ was, needless to say, closely related to the wider concerns of the British crusade in India and elsewhere. Waddell played a part in this campaign as he served as assistant sanitary commissioner for the Darjeeling district. Britain was actively seeking to control Tibetan Buddhism and considered the Tibetan Lamas as the Roman Catholics of Tibet, as they restricted their Buddhist learning to themselves, keeping the laity ignorant and superstitious. For Waddell, Lamaism was a kind of ‘Papism’ from which the Tibetans should be freed. As a colonial conqueror, Waddell himself played an active role in the English ideal of ‘rescuing’ the pure and original spirit of Buddhism by looting their monasteries and taking books and manuscripts to England. The deceit he used to gain information from monks and lamas exemplified his feeling of superiority; he convinced them that he was the fulfilment of a prophecy that an incarnation of the Buddha of Infinite Light would come from the west.51

Not all British scholars from this field were as negative as Waddell, however. For instance, the former English District Officer in India William Crooke (1848-1923) argued that ‘savage and civilized man’ differed in that ‘one expends his intellectual energy in directions which the other regards as unimportant’. In 1907 Crooke wrote:

Shaman, medicine-man, wizard, or warlock, is recognized as the agent who controls the unseen spiritual powers and compels them to cure disease, foretell the future, rule the weather, avenge a man upon his enemy, and generally intervene for good or evil in human affairs.52

What made Crooke different from Waddell? He was concerned with the future of ‘relations between the foreigner and the native races’ and ‘the decay of primitive industries in the face of industrial competition’, and he urged anthropology to do what it might to preserve what was seen as demising savage societies. The predominant goal of his salvage anthropology, however, was firmly colonial, as he intended it to serve stability in the colonies.53

333. See also idem, The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism with its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology, and in its relation to Indian Buddhism (London, 1895) 19.
52 W. Crooke, The Native Races of the Northern India (London, 1907) 259-60.
British armchair anthropology

The founding fathers of evolutionary British anthropology also perceived shamanism as part of the uncivilised ‘primitive world’. They set up an academic field that aimed at the discovery of universal laws of human development and, accordingly, they lifted a variety of ethnographic interpretations of shamanism out of context to formulate supposedly universal truths about shamans and shamanism. Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), for instance, who was, according to the obituary in American Anthropologist, ‘one of the very last figures rooted in the heroic age of nineteenth century science’, categorised Siberian shamans under the label ‘demonical possession’. He positioned shamanism in his sweeping evolutionary schemes and made it an aspect of animism that stood very low in his scale of humanity. In his renowned 1871 Primitive Culture he wrote:

Among Siberian tribes, the shamans select children liable to convulsions as suitable to be brought up to the profession, which is apt to become hereditary with the epileptic tendencies it belongs to. Thus, even in the lower culture, a class of sickly brooding enthusiasts begin to have that power over the minds of their lustier fellows, which they have kept in so remarkable a way through the course of history.54

At about the same time, one of the other ‘giants of the founding evolutionary generation’, the banker, biologist, politician and archaeologist John Lubbock (1834-1913), gave shamanism a more prominent position. Lubbock, also known by his title Lord Avebury, created an evolutionary scheme of religion in which shamanism was a separate stage in the intellectual development of humanity. Shamanism followed the stages of atheism, fetishism, nature worship and totemism, and preceded the stages of anthropomorphism, monotheism and, finally, ethical monotheism. In the shamanic stage of progress the gods were supposed to live in another world where they did not care much for life on earth. The shaman, however, was visited by the gods from time to time and, when he received their permission,

could enter their world. Although the word shamanism originated in Siberia, Lubbock wrote, the religious standpoint of shamanism is universal.55

Tylor, Lubbock and their peers thought of themselves as agents of improvement, as their scholarly work could help to accelerate the pace of evolution. Their main ambition was to eradicate survivals of non-rational beliefs and practices from modern society. Yet they also provided scholarly justification for colonial rule and were thus part and parcel of the broader Western colonial project. Furthermore, they derived their psychological and intellectual theory of primitive religion primarily from introspection, as E.E. Evans-Pritchard rightly remarked. Most of them had never seen any of the ‘primitives’ they wrote about and they interpreted the thought and mental state of ‘primitives’ in terms of their own psychology, in the ‘if I were a horse’ manner of thinking.56 It is no wonder, then, that almost from the beginning of the anthropological study of shamanism, scholars analyzed shamans in terms of psychiatric disorders. In fact, in the subsequent scholarly study of shamanism this psychological perspective became dominant; more often than not, scholars characterized the shaman as insane, hysterical, psychopathic or mentally disturbed.

The most influential British armchair study of shamanism was published by the Polish-born Maria Antonina Czaplicka (1884-1921) at the end of the ‘long’ nineteenth century. Her famous 1914 *Aboriginal Siberia* gained a considerable reputation, especially outside the academic world. For many scholars the book was particularly valuable because Czaplicka had made use of Russian sources that were not accessible to most of her colleagues. In her study, she connected the psychological characteristics of shamanism to the ethno-geographical characteristics of Siberia and concluded that shamanism seemed to be the ‘natural product of the Continental climate with its extremes of cold and heat, (…) of the hunger and fear which attend to long winters’. According to her, ‘arctic hysteria’ lay at the bottom of the shaman’s vocation and this is what most readers seemed to obtain from reading her book. Yet, in fact, Czaplicka’s interpretation was not that straightforward. Even though arctic hysteria was especially prevalent in Siberia, it was not distinctively ‘arctic’, as the same symptoms could be found ‘among the people of the Equatorial regions’. Therefore, Czaplicka suggested, extreme climates instead


of the arctic climate might account for the development for the disease.\textsuperscript{57}

The difference between shamans and ordinary patients of arctic hysteria was that the shaman possessed an ‘extremely great power of mastering himself in the period between the actual fits, which occur during the ceremonies’, Czaplicka argued. She also gave weight to ‘the mystical change of sex among shamans’. In most cases, this involved male shamans, ‘soft men’, who arranged their hair like women and wore women’s clothes. According to Czaplicka, this strange behaviour was more evidence of the special rights and position of the shaman.\textsuperscript{58}

Czaplicka had studied geography in Poland, where she was associated with a Polish socialist, anticlerical and pro-emancipation radical journal. Subsequently, she went to Britain, where she became a student of one of the last British armchair anthropologists, Robert Ranulph Marett (1866-1943). Marett, who was Tylor’s successor and biographer at Oxford, intended to use ‘social psychology’ as the method to study religion and criticized the ‘method of Individual Psychology’ of his predecessors. Marett emphasised the emotional aspects of religion rather than the intellectual aspects, as Tylor had done. He perceived religion essentially as a mode of feeling, its characteristic emotion being awe.\textsuperscript{59}

Her geographical education and the views of her tutor had guided Czaplicka’s interpretation. Probably, her own melancholy was also important. Her downhearted moods took over when her academic career remained unsuccessful, her financial problems increased and, in addition, there was unrequited love. She poisoned herself in 1921.\textsuperscript{60} Shortly before she died, however, she was considered enough of


\textsuperscript{58} Czaplicka, \textit{Aboriginal Siberia}, 168-9.


an authority on ‘Ostyaks’, ‘Samoyed’, ‘Siberia’, ‘Slavs’, ‘Tungus’, ‘Turks’ and ‘Yakut’, to be invited to write about these topics in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. In her contributions, she described a variety of categories of shamans, all connected to the specific physical and cultural conditions in which they practised.\(^61\)

It is worth mentioning that, at that time, the idea that shamanism was not a strictly Siberian phenomenon had already made its way into anthropological thinking. For example, in 1877, the German authority on Australia and Oceania Karl Emil Jung (1833-1902) told the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* that native Australian ‘superstitions’ could be described as shamanism. Australian sorcerers, like sorcerers or shamans all over the world, Jung argued, were credited with the powers to heal or to bring disease (‘humbug’, according to Jung).\(^62\) Shamanism was now perceived as a worldwide phenomenon, to be found on all continents. The continents that became especially important for the genealogy of shamanism were the Americas, where anthropologists found shamans among the Native Indians.

**American art and anthropology**

The first US professor of anthropology, Daniel Garrison Brinton (1837-1899), acquired his chair in Philadelphia in 1886. He was an evolutionist who focused specifically on human ‘races’, some of which were, he argued, superior to others. According to him all humans had a common psychic heritage, but long-term effects of the environment allowed certain races to become superior to others, mentally as well as physically.\(^63\) His interpretation of shamans was clearly guided by his white supremacy disposition, as he argued in his 1868 *Treatise on the Symbolism and Mythology of the Red Race of America*:

Shamans, conjurers, sorcerers, medicine men, wizards, and many another hard name have been given them, but I shall call them priests, for in their poor way, as well as any other priesthood, they set up to be the agents of the gods, and the interpreters of divinity. No tribe was so devoid of religious sentiment as to be without them. Their power was terrible, and their use of it

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unscrupulous. Neither men nor gods, death nor life, the winds nor the waves, were beyond their control. Like Old Men of the Sea, they have clung to the neck of their nations, throttling all attempts at progress, binding them to the thraldom of superstition and profligacy, dragging them down to wretchedness and death. Christianity and civilization meet in them their most determined, most implacable foes. But what is this but the story of priestcraft and intolerance everywhere, which Old Spain can repeat as well as New Spain, the white race as well as the red? Blind leaders of the blind, dupers and duped fall into the ditch.64

His racist and evolutionary theories would not make a lasting impression on the American anthropological genealogy of shamanism but, rather unpredictably, his 1894 pioneering work on so-called ‘nagualism’ would. According to Brinton, naguals were priests of ‘secret cults’ who used ‘intoxicants’ such as tobacco and peyote during their ‘secret rites’. As we will see in chapter 7, during the 1960s the terms ‘nagual’ and ‘shaman’ would become almost interchangeable psychedelic concepts, mainly through the bestselling works of Carlos Castaneda. Brinton, however, did not even use the term ‘shaman’ in his work about naguals, and he clearly disapproved of these ‘sorcerers’ and ‘magicians’ as he described nagualism as ‘the Central American system of the black arts’.65 Nagualism, he argued,

has been recognized as a cult, no less powerful than mysterious, which united many and diverse tribes of Mexico and Central America into organized opposition against the government and the religion which had been introduced from Europe; whose members had acquired and were bound together by strange faculties and an occult learning, which placed them on a par with the famed thaumaturgists and theodidacts of the Old World; and which preserved even into our own days the thoughts and forms of a long suppressed ritual.66

Not all nineteenth-century American anthropologists were so negative about shamanism, however. As they found shamans in their own backyard, so to speak, their interpretations of shamanism were not related to a colonial project in far-off territories. Most British anthropologists made efforts to understand primitives by distinguishing them from their own civilised selves, and Brinton was, of course, concerned with the same issue. In contrast, many other American anthropologists were part of the broader American struggle to construct an American identity in opposition to European identity. In their cultural nationalist project, American

nineteenth-century ethnographers gradually adopted the Indian as their classical heritage, as the American alternative for Greece and Rome. Through a combination of literary and scholarly vocations and a nationalist streak, they converted the figure of the Indian into the national theme that became a figure around which a white nation could be constructed.67

In fact, some American ethnographers presented remarkably positive views on shamans. This was related to their positive views on Native American Indians. For example, in his paper on ‘the prayer of a Navajo shaman’ for the Anthropological Society of Washington on 3 January in 1888, Irish-born poet, ethnographer and US Army surgeon Washington Matthews (1843-1905) told an intimate story of his collaboration with the ‘venerable Navajo shaman’. Matthews presented his English translation of the ‘Navajo prayer’ in a remarkably positive tone. Even more noteworthy was the discussion that followed. One of the anthropologists present called attention to the resemblances in thought and expression between the Navajo prayer and ‘similar productions from Eastern countries’. The position of the shaman even reminded him of the contemplative Buddha he knew from temple images.68

Matthews was a clear example of an ethnographer for whom Native American Indians were also the subject of his literary work. He depicted Native American Indians and their history from an obviously romantic stance, calling them ‘pagan martyrs’. In one of his poems, he described his entrance to the ‘estufa of the Zuni’, in which were chanting ‘learned priests who hold / A law as ancient as the code Mosaic, / A cult as that of Baal and Indra old’.69 With his poetry, Washington was involved in the cultural phenomenon called Indianism or, in other words, the advocacy and emulation of Indian culture by non-Indians. Anthropologists and poets such as Washington contributed notably to the ‘imperial nostalgia’ of white Americans and the process in which the figure of the Indian became the national icon. Not all Indianism involved shamans, but in some cases, such as Washington’s, the figure of the shaman spiced up the distinctly American classical tradition.70

At about the same time, the romantic, picturesque and spiritual image of the national ‘savages’ also became a source of inspiration for more fulfilling ways of life, as they came to represent nature, the past and the land, in opposition to the socio-

economic developments that characterized America at the end of the nineteenth century, namely industrialization, immigration, urbanization and a rapid growth of powerful corporations. Even when people acknowledged that modern life offered more comfort and less suffering, they also thought it offered less intense experiences and was becoming impersonal and bland.\textsuperscript{71} The fast changing environment was thought to strain the nerves and bring about psychosomatic reactions. In this context, most physicians routinely diagnosed white Americans with neurasthenia, a disorder with an array of symptoms including anxiety, emptiness, exhaustion and other indicators of ‘lack of nerve strength’. The disease did not affect the so-called primitive people, however, as they did not suffer from the ills of modern society.\textsuperscript{72}

The supposed Native American healthiness became a kind of capital that was strategically used, for instance during Indian Medicine Shows, a popular form of entertainment at which alienated white people quenched their ‘thirst for the primitive’, and focused on the mystique of the Indian. These shows portrayed Indians as natural physicians with secret healing powers. While the hired Indians and Indian impersonators sang, danced and chanted, their employers sold Sagwa and other brews of roots, herbs and barks. At about the same time, mediums in white spiritualist circles regularly claimed to be speaking as Native Indians, sharing their knowledge of herbs and plants, praising God and hailing whites as bearers of the gospel of their lands. According to Catherine Albanese, the process ‘transformed “savage” Indians into better Christians than whites’. One could also argue that the mediums converted the alleged spiritual nobility of Native American Indians to their own use. By adopting Indianness from the ‘savages’, mediums gained capital that helped them to acquire a distinct position in the field of spiritualism.\textsuperscript{73}


At the turn of the century, this supposedly authentic source of power also attracted artists, some of whom settled in colonies in New Mexico, to paint Indian culture before the advancing civilization could destroy it. They were guided by dispositions assumed to be countercultural as they included an aversion to mass culture. Nonetheless, their art, infused with the designs and colours they found on Indian pottery and blankets, primarily became successful with the help of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railways (ATSF). Through its purchases and by utilizing the paintings for its calendars, the ATSF played a major role in the establishment of New Mexico as an internationally recognized cultural centre. In exchange for paintings they transported artists, and because they also brought tourists into the region, the ATSF helped to establish the romantic, so-called antimodernist view of traditional Indian life. The amalgamation of artists and cultural nationalists strengthened the romantic view of traditional Indian life. Gradually, in this process, the shaman became one of the major metaphors for the pure and uncorrupted aesthetic authority, and slowly but surely, shamanism came to be perceived as a natural and authentic form of spiritual and artistic mastery.74

*Theosophy and other esotericisms*

It is therefore hardly surprising that shamans and shamanism also grabbed the attention of several fields of esotericism, that is, fields in which participants focused on the realization of hidden and revealed knowledge that they considered ‘real’ and absolute. Fields of esotericism blossomed at the end of the nineteenth century.75 The most crucial case was the Theosophical Society that the Russian-born cosmopolitan ‘priestess of the occult’ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) founded in 1885. In Blavatsky’s evolutionary scheme shamans figured as occult adepts, which was, in her field, a very positive depiction. In 1877, in her first major work, *Isis Unveiled: A Master Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, she attributed to the shaman marked telepathic and other extrasensory powers. In the highly improbable account of her journey from Kashmir to Tibet, the guide, a Tartar shaman, proved unequivocally that his ‘astral soul was travelling at the bidding of (his) unspoken wish’. Later in the story, the shaman used his powers to call a party of horsemen to her rescue when Blavatsky was in serious trouble. Even


so, Blavatsky declared that the shamans of Siberia were all ignorant and illiterate. Their shamanism was a perverted form that could not match up to the original shamanism of their ancestors. Siberian shamans were merely mediums, and so they were nothing but victims of the spirits. The shamans of ‘Tartary and Thibet’, on the other hand, were learned men ‘who would not allow themselves to fall under control of spirits of any kind’. They were magicians who were ‘learned in the mysteries of the priestly colleges of Thibet’ and thus with ‘great knowledge of the nature of invisible enemies’.

In Blavatsky’s theosophical glossary, posthumously published by her personal secretary George Robert Stowe Mead (1863-1933) in 1892, she described shamans as follows:

An order of Tartar or Mongolian priest-magicians, or as some say, priest-sorcerers. They are not Buddhists, but a sect of the old Bhon religion of Tibet. They live mostly in Siberia and its borderlands. Both men and women may be Shamans. They are all magicians, or rather sensitives or mediums artificially developed. At present those who act as priests among the Tartars are generally very ignorant, and far below the fakirs in knowledge and education.

Madame Blavatsky and her associate Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) founded the Theosophical Society in an attempt to uplift the spiritualist tradition, which they considered morally backward and philosophically naïve. They wanted to wake up the Western world from what they thought of as a dogmatic Christian slumber and at the same time they challenged science, which, according to them, was too limited. In other words, they created a field in opposition to both the academic field and others in the field of esotericism. Secret laws had to be scientifically investigated in order to seek knowledge of God and the higher spirits. The knowledge of the secret forces of nature would bring a new era. A key innovative element in the theosophical doctrine was that instead of mediums, as spiritualists believed, ‘adepts’ were the cause of spiritual manifestations. These adepts were initiated into ancient mysteries, were able to manipulate secret forces in accordance with secret laws, and they could tap into the secret and eternal record of past thoughts and events. In Blavatsky’s esoteric doctrine, magic was science, a divine science. Magicians – and thus shamans – had a profound knowledge of the secret forces in nature that scientists did not acknowledge.

In theosophy, as in other fields of esotericism that embraced the concept of shaman, knowledge about shamans and shamanism often came to be presented as shamanic knowledge. This suggested that it was a scarce, secret and precious knowledge in the possession of a select few. Through the discursive strategies of occultists, shamanism acquired a distinct value in the specific economy of exchanges that characterized the field. Shamanic knowledge acquired specific differentiating properties because it was experiential knowledge that only the ‘experienter’ could claim. Habitually, shamanic knowledge came to be associated with knowledge of the innermost self and the process of understanding was thought of as a way of knowing oneself.79

The impact of the Theosophical Society can hardly be overemphasized. As a matter of fact, theosophy was a key force in the genealogy of shamanism and therefore it is appropriate to pay extra attention to it here. Theosophy was part of a powerful cultural torrent of occult knowledge and practices that developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Regularly, but erroneously, occultism is analyzed as a vulgar opposition to the trend towards enlightenment. Descriptions of occultism as a reaction against science and secularism, as an anti-modern enchantment against the disenchantment of the world, or as a by-product of secularization, can be interpreted as part of a polemical discourse or, in the words of Wouter Hanegraaff, as a ‘procedure of exclusion’ that obscure the tensions and contradictions within the modern world. Fin-de-siècle occultism can and should be interpreted as an alternative and modern form of enchantment, closely related to and in accordance with a variety of modern trends and fashions.80

The doctors, lawyers, teachers, artists and public intellectuals that theosophy attracted set up local societies in, among other countries, England, America, Germany, Switzerland, Russia and the Netherlands. Technological advances in printing made theosophical publications readily available in all urban areas in Europe by the end of the century. These were crucial for the dissemination of occult doctrines and, moreover, they gave theosophical doctrines a distinctly cultured and intellectual standing by presenting them as scholarly texts. Theosophical societies and publications became a repository of professional occult knowledge and they changed the fragmented field of occultism into a more or less coherent discourse.81


As an esoteric school, the Theosophical Society intended to teach an esoteric philosophy in which the recovery of ‘ancient wisdom’ wherein religion and science were undivided was one of the main ingredients. This supposed perennial philosophy was the source of all the great religions of the world, and thus they all taught the same secret doctrine. Blavatsky and Olcott converted to Buddhism in 1880, but they lamented modern Buddhism as a degenerated outgrowth while they lauded the ancient form, which they defined as identical to their own mystical cosmology. Asian gurus and magicians were Blavatsky’s principal teachers and not shamans. Yet, in her philosophy, shamans were magicians too, and so they were supposed to have access to the divine principle that, in her view, lies behind all that exists. Characteristic of this perennialist outlook and the way shamans fit in it is the way The Path, a theosophical magazine that was published from 1886 until 1896, alternated quotes from Blavatsky, Zoroaster, Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tse, Jesus, the Bhagavad Gita, the Rig Veda and ‘kabbalistic books’ with quotes from shamans.82

At the end of the long nineteenth century, some remarkable esoteric interpretations of shamanism were produced by British utopian socialists. Like the theosophical circles, they identified shamans as occult exemplars for individuals who wanted to transform society by means of the perfection of individual lives. Mainly through the works of the ethical reformers and sexual liberators Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) and Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), who were both world famous at the turn of the century, the shaman came to represent sexual and spiritual freedom.83

Edward Carpenter was a world fellow at Cambridge and ordained priest, but he renounced his holy orders and resigned his fellowship to become a university ex-


tension lecturer. He journeyed to the United States to visit his hero, the poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892). Inspired by him and an interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* that was reminiscent of the theosophical interpretation, Carpenter developed a religious socialist philosophy in which history was the evolution of an immanent God and socialism the final realization of the unity of all. His socialist ideal could only be attained, he thought, if people would transform their personal lives and link up with their inner selves. In addition to his struggle for religious socialism, the ‘English Whitman’ also became known for his struggle for homosexual equality. In the exceptional evolutionary scheme that he set up to fortify his ideals intellectually, he put shamans in a leading position.84

Shamans were precursors on the road to civilization, as Carpenter suggested in 1914. They were the first sole representatives of the class of ‘intermediates’, transitional types of men and women who formed a kind of superior being who helped the human race to reach a higher pedestal of civilization. Shamans, ‘almost invariably, in some degree or other, of Uranian temperament’, were ‘supervirile’ and inspired and uplifted their contemporaries in both prophetic and divinatory ways. The successors of shamans, Carpenter claimed, branched out in the directions of art and science.85

His construction of the shaman fitted well in Carpenter’s combination of progressive evolutionist ideals, his sexual principles and his belief in the simple life, a return to nature and the elimination of possessions. These were related to his idea that the paradisiacal state of ‘simple consciousness’ of primitive man had been lost in modern society. Carpenter was not a theosophist and would not become one, notwithstanding his friendship with Annie Besant (1847-1933), the important feminist and socialist who became the president of the Theosophical Society in 1907. According to Carpenter she had failed to penetrate the ‘ideas and inspirations of the ancient East’ and she lacked the ‘intuitive perception, the mystic quality of mind, which should enable her to reach the very heart of the old Vedantic teaching’. He even wrote Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* off as ‘rot and confusion’. Carpenter’s scolding of theosophy must be seen as part of his struggle to establish himself as a guru of mystical utopianism within the larger field of esotericism.

where, of course, theosophy took a more dominant position. As an intermediate himself, similar to the shamans before him, he positioned himself as a harbinger in the ‘evolution of consciousness’ that would, ultimately and triumphantly, lead to a universal brotherhood of socialism.86

Shamans also appeared in the works of Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), the ‘intellectual titan’ who struggled for socialism and sexual freedom alongside Carpenter.87 Ellis’ interest in mysticism, occultism, psychic phenomena, ‘primitives’ and self-development had already developed when he started to experiment with mescal buttons, also known as peyote, in 1896, together with, inter alia, the Anglo-Irish poet and occultist William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). British avant-garde artists who took steps in the field of esotericism habitually used hashish and opium to pursue mystical experiences. Ellis and his team were the first to try mescal. It is noteworthy that they did not associate their use of hallucinogens with shamanism; this combination would only become established during the 1950s. Ellis was impressed with the results of peyote; ‘a certain consciousness of energy and intellectual power’ and ‘an orgy’ of brilliant visions that revealed ‘an optical fairyland’, where ‘all the senses now and then join the play, but the mind itself remains a self-possessed spectator’. Ultimately, he concluded that mescal was ‘the most democratic of the plants which lead men to an artificial paradise’.88

In Ellis’s utopian philosophy, shamans featured as primitive mystics who excelled in ‘the art of dancing’ and in ‘the art of religion’ and, Ellis argued in 1911, shamans combine the functions of priests and sorcerers and medicine men. It is nearly everywhere found that the shaman - who is often, it would appear, at the outset a somewhat abnormal person – cultivates solitude, fasting, and all manner of ascetic practices, thereby acquiring an unusual aptitude to dream, to see visions, to experience hallucinations, and, it may well be, to acquire abnormally clairvoyant powers.89
Years later, in 1923, at the time that Ellis was widely read among those American artists and anthropologists who, as we will see in the next chapter, embraced the shaman metaphor to signify authentic and pure aesthetic experiences, Ellis wrote:

> It is the business of the Shaman, as on the mystical side we may conveniently term the medicine-man, to place himself under the conditions – and even in primitive life those conditions are varied and subtle – which bring his will in harmony with the essence of the world, so that he grows one with that essence, that its will becomes his will, and, reversely, that, in a sense, his will becomes its.\(^9^0\)

According to Ellis, this ‘harmony with the essence of the universe’, or, in other words, ‘the art of finding our emotional relationship to the world conceived as a whole’, was nothing but the ‘quintessential core’ of religion, which is ‘best termed “mysticism”’.\(^9^1\)

**Conclusion**

So, what can we conclude from this history? The main point is that from its very beginning in western thinking, the term ‘shaman’ was used for a collection of very different individuals from an overwhelming variety of distinct social and cultural contexts. Most eighteenth and nineteenth-century interpretations of supposed shamans and shamanism were ‘grave misrepresentations’, based on ‘prejudice or ignorance’, as Stadling noted. Indeed, the early phase of the genealogy of shamanism demonstrates that, as Tomoko Masuzawa correctly observed, ‘Poor grammar, fuzzy semantics, or uncertain orthography can never stop a phrase from gaining currency if there is enough practical demand for it in the spirit of the times’.\(^9^2\)

Stadling was not the only one to recognise the problematic character of the term ‘shamanism’. Others also realised that it was a product of simplified distortions of the complex ethnographic realities of Siberia. Yet the few critical observations on the complexity of the term did not prevent the expansion of the meaning of the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ in different directions, especially after they were used to make sense of various colonial projects around the globe. Indeed, a critical view on the variety of early interpretations of shamanism reveals that they form a spectrum of interpretations too complex to understand through broad generalisations.

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\(^{91}\) Idem, 37.

The anti-shamanic perspectives of most Enlightenment intellectuals and the romantic-primitivist conceptions of counter-enlightenment thinkers seem to represent the basic opposite positions with regard to shamanism, but it is too simplistic to play down all stances as positions in one of these two camps. For instance, while both can be found on the romantic side of this crude scale, Siberian regionalists offered a distinctly different perspective on supposed shamans than German counter-enlightenment artists. The same is true for anthropologists and theologians. Both groups occupied evolutionary positions vis-à-vis shamans, but their perspectives on shamans – and religion in general – differed considerably. Similar to both groups, theosophists positioned themselves at the peak of evolutionary progress but, unlike the others, considered the supposed ancient shamanic knowledge of shamans as a valuable asset.

Along its specific genealogical routes, a number of significant clusters of meanings stuck to the term shamanism. In short, shamanism became a metaphor for prehistoric or ancient religion, sorcery, knowledge or wisdom, and the shaman became a symbol of the unsophisticated imposter or devil-worshipper on the one hand and, on the other, a recognized symbol of an authentic personality with distinct creative and/or occult gifts. Indeed, the concept ‘shaman’ gradually became a powerful metaphor, representing both the essence of religion and its opposite, representing both the ills of supposed primitive irrationality and a potent antidote to the supposed ills of excessive rationality. Yet again, romantic and idealistic interpretations of shamanism cannot simply be explained as an anti-modern undercurrent in the margins of the process of modernisation.