Discussion on Shamanic Performances: 
Issues of Performativity and Comparison

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Prelude

As a brief introduction to ourselves, we are the long-standing 
Editors of the Journal of Ritual Studies and the Series Editors for the 
Ritual Studies Monograph Series with Carolina Press. We are also the 
Co-Editors for the Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia and the 
Indo-Pacific. [Our webpage lists further information about our research 
and publications: (www.pitt.edu/~strather).]

We have worked with Dr. Hu Tai-li and Dr. Liu Pi-chen to formulate 
the concepts for this research group on Shamans and Ritual Performances in 
Contemporary Contexts. The workshop today (22 December 2007) is the 
beginning for the coming together of scholars on this topic.

The importance of ritual experts known in the ethnographic 
literature as shamans is well-known for the Austronesian-speaking groups 
in Taiwan, parts of New Guinea and South-East Asia, and many other areas 
of the world. These experts, female or male, play leading roles as 
healers, diviners, and mediators in processes of conflict and the 
establishment of political power in local contexts.

The classic topic of shamanism has recently been reconsidered from 
a number of perspectives. These perspectives include general definitional 
and comparative issues (Kehoe 2000; MacDonald 2002; Znamenski (ed.) 2004); 
universalist and evolutionary considerations (Winkelman 2002); 
neo-shamanism and shamanic practices in the contemporary world (Blain and 
Wallis 2006); and aspects of shamanic activities connected with conflict, 
aggression, and cosmology (Strathern and Stewart 2004; Whitehead, 2002; 
Whitehead and Wright 2004 (eds.).

In the approach of this research group emphasis will be placed on the
central performative healing and mediating roles of shamans among the indigenous peoples of Taiwan and on the idea of performance in relation to shamanic practices in general; and a special Reading List (attached at the end of this paper) on performance and performativity in ritual has been compiled by ourselves for collective use by this research group's members. This literature can be related back to the information on shamanic practices in the Taiwan context and can be used also to guide future field research.

By focusing on Shamanic Performances, past and present, and examining how these relate to wider processes of change, adaptation, or conflict within the society at large, we plan to bring together the study of ideas and practices and to understand the flexible power that is generated through shamanic activities. The phenomenon of shamanic actions and their contexts of performance will be seen as an index of a number of vital social and cultural processes at work in contemporary indigenous communities.

Introduction

The terms shaman and shamanism are general descriptive or classificatory words that have been extracted originally from particular contexts. As such they raise the usual problems that such descriptive terms do: how general can the terms be, what do they cover, can there be a universal definition that is useful to employ, or are we dealing with a loosely strung together set of features? Similar arguments have revolved in the past about terms such as lineage or totemism.

We do not aim in our presentation today to settle these definitional questions. It is enough for us to note that the term shaman has been in practice used comparatively to refer to the actions of leading ritual experts in communities in many parts of the world, for example Amazonia, Korea, North America, and South-East Asia as well as in Siberia, the South-West Pacific including New Guinea, and also Taiwan. The emphases of definition and function vary from place to place. Three important elements are: the role of these ritual experts in community affairs and politics, their role as healers, and the specific cultural underpinnings of their power in their capacities for journeying into the spirit world through trance behavior. Not all of these elements may be found together.
As a result of historical changes, for example, the political role may be constrained or attenuated. Also, the ritual basis of power may be hidden from outsiders. The capacity for healing may remain the most historically enduring attribute, partly because it can operate largely out of public view. The mechanism of trance or some other special form of pathway into the spirit world also is a key to the enduring significance of these experts in their community settings. Shamans, then, are a type of ritual expert. If we see them as a kind of ideal type, any given case may approximate to that type without being exactly the same as the other examples. Especially in an ethnologically related region such as that of the indigenous Austronesian-speakers, comparisons based on similarities will be easier to make. But comparative points can still be derived from a broader field of studies.

Here our special interest also lies in performance and performativity. These two foci are crucial for understanding the social and communicative contexts in which shamanic practices persist and change and most particularly continuities and changes in how people and shamans themselves see what it is they do with their ritual powers. For example, if we are concentrating on healing, how exactly does the shaman heal persons, or is seen to do so, and what is the perceived source of continuing power in the shamanic performance? We know that these issues are deeply affected by wider historical changes, so a focus on local ethnography must be complemented by broader contextualizations of experience.

In order to pursue these topics in a comparative way, we are going to take materials from three different regions: first from a very recently published work on the Yukaghirs, a people who belong to the north eastern part of Siberia; second from Korea, where the materials are ethnographically very rich and contemporary; and third from one of our field areas in Papua New Guinea, the Duna area, where the work of ritual experts has generally not been categorized under shamanism, but may fruitfully be considered in this way. We will not, at this stage, deal with cases from Taiwan, although these are of great interest and are the focus for this workshop. These cases will be developed and discussed as we continue to work together over the coming year. For now, we will leave these cases for those of you who have more first-hand knowledge of them. But we hope to provide comparative pointers that may help to guide research into these practices here in Taiwan.
Siberia

Siberia is a classic original area for the study of shamanic practices. Often, it is pointed out that in this area shamanism has to do with hunting. Rane Willerslev has recently re-examined this topic in his book Soul Hunters on the Yukaghir people (Willerslev, 2007). This case study is one that we will discuss further in our oral presentation today.

Korea

Korea is famous for its shamanic traditions, not confined to hunting contexts, but with a long continuity in both agricultural and urban conditions. Korean shamanism is deeply connected with healing practices, and also with highly aesthetic elaborations of performance, including ritual chants, which can produce interesting comparisons with materials from New Guinea (as well as, we suggest, with Paiwan in southern Taiwan). Materials from Korea will be discussed in our presentation today.

Papua New Guinea

The term shamans has not been very widely used in the New Guinea ethnography. Here we take some materials from our research in the Duna area that we have previously described, and re-examine them in the context of our present discussion.
A female spirit, the Payame Ima, was held by the Duna to have the power to possess both men and women and to grant to them certain special abilities. This spirit could protect people against the powers of witchcraft, it was said (Stewart and Strathern 2004). One person, actually from the Bogaiya area near to the Duna, told the following narrative (adapted from Stewart and Strathern 2002b:95):

If people don't accept her [the spirit] when she comes to them, she can give trouble to them, but if she comes inside a man and he accepts her, she reveals all kinds of things to him and he sees them. . . . If a man goes hunting in the bush for cassowaries [large flightless birds], he may see a special flower, and when he gets home he is dizzy and he begins singing or hears whistling at night. This happens only if he is unmarried. Later, if someone dies, this man can now use the divining stick for witches. Through him the spirit can see witches, and the stick identifies them.

A Duna leader from the Aluni area gave another account (adapted from Stewart and Strathern 2002b:103):

This spirit can empower women as well as men. These women then know how to paint the bodies of sick people with earth pigments and determine if the sickness is caused by witchcraft. They may find pieces of bamboo or stone flints inside the patients body, as marks of a witch attack. They rub yellow ground on the bodies of people, because this ground belongs to the spirit. After they find the bamboo splinters or flints, they remove them and get rid of the witchcraft.

Another, younger, leader of Aluni gave this account regarding his own mother (adapted from Stewart and Strathern 2002b:106-108):

My mother went out into the forest one day and she was possessed by a wild male spirit of the bush. She herself ran wild and stayed out there for a long time. Later the female spirit found her and corrected her condition and gave her healing power. She rubbed earth on sick people to make them well. She would take a pig to a pool of water belonging to the female spirit and sacrifice it to the spirit there. She made songs, praising all the watercourses. After she married, the female spirit left her. [This parallels the situation for men.] The pool was considered dangerous for people to approach after that. This skill my mother had for healing was called aruatome.

These three accounts reveal the following:
1. A pattern of spirit possession that could affect unmarried men and women.

2. The spirit gave men powers to divine for witches by means of a special divination stick.

3. The spirit gave women healing powers through the use of earth pigments rubbed on the sick persons skin.

4. The spirit gave a few women enhanced healing powers associated with possession and a period of isolation in the bush.

The special female healers here could also be considered to be shamans; while the males might be considered spirit mediums. Processes of re-categorizing data in this way would facilitate comparisons between, for example, Papua New Guinean and Taiwanese materials.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have briefly surveyed three areas: the Yukaghirs in Siberia, Chongho Kims field studies in Korea, and the Duna area in Papua New Guinea. We have used these three case studies to make a number of points for comparative work:

1. The Yukaghirs case shows the external circumstances of the historical decline and eventual extinction of a shamanic tradition.

2. The Korean case shows the specialization of women as shamans. However, it also shows the relative stigmatization of shamanic healing practices and contrasts this with the more recent state-based elevation of shamanic performances as a kind of popular theater. We also saw here the elaboration of pansori epic ballads out of earlier shamanic forms of chants: that is, the emergence of art from ritual as a kind of cultural revival.
3. The Duna case from Papua New Guinea shows the potentialities for bringing Papua New Guinea materials into comparative alignment with materials from other parts of the world where the term shamanism has been more often used.

4. In terms of performance and performativity, we have seen that when shamanic practice is deflected into theatrical displays its performative significance is fundamentally altered away from private contexts of healing or dealing with misfortune and into the public arena of popular or state-supported art.

This 2007 workshop should provide us with a venue to further formulate our research on these topics. The forward plan is to hold a conference at the end of 2008 in which we can again gather to present our research results and materials.

References:


A Reading List for use by members of the Shamans and Ritual Performances in Contemporary Contexts research group will be distributed on the day of our talk: