

Becoming a Shaman: Narratives of Apprenticeship and Initiation in Contemporary Shamanism (*excerpt*)

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Abstract: This article, based on an open-question survey completed in 2018, engages with McAdams and Manczak's approaches to life stories (2015) and Mayer's ten elements of the shaman myth (2008) to explore the way contemporary people based in the UK, who define themselves as shamans, talk about their becoming a shaman. Individual narratives point out the intricate meeting points between different shamanic traditions and the importance of continuous innovation. They highlight the complex network of human and beyond-human authority and problematize the place, meaning and agency of the self. Contemporary shamanism is a widespread, manifold and multifaceted phenomenon, which we argue is not as different from traditional forms of shamanism as some studies suggest.

Placing Shamans in Context

Shamanism is said to be one of the oldest forms of religion, with shamans as the traditional, indigenous and holistic specialists in charge of their trade. This view has been promoted and also criticized, the latter especially by pointing out its constructed, or in some cases 'invented', nature. Shamanism in a traditional sense is local, and its knowledge is culture-bound and linked strongly to a ritual system (Walsh 1990, pp. 15–17). However, there also are quasi-universal elements to be found across different types of local, ethnic or indigenous shamanism, elements which can make different local practices seem like variations of certain types of religious practices, namely shamanism. Thereby, cross-cultural definitions of shamanism have appeared (Eliade 1964; De Heusch 1981; Lewis 1989) which have shaped the understanding of what the contours of the category of shamanism are. Although they have been widely criticized in scientific circles, these universal categories are still very popular in contemporary practices (Noel 1997; Wallis 2003; Znamenski 2007; Boekhoven 2013). Thus, the tension between particular and universal traits and characteristics remains not only at the center of the discussion about shamanism in its traditional forms, but also at the center of its practice in its current forms. In our contemporary society, people 'who consider themselves to be shamans or to be doing 'shamanic' things' (Harvey 1997, p. 107 cited in Wallis 2003) are a rather large and diverse group.

These 'shamanic' things mentioned by Harvey are western in nature and mostly urban-based, but can be (to various degrees) connected to shamanic traditions, and in some cases are built on a mix of different traditions. They are known in the research literature as neo-shamanism (Wallis 1999; Davidov 2010), a term closely related to Core shamanism, Harner's modern, simplified and universalistic way of practice (Harner 2009). Both neo-shamanism and Core shamanism fall, according to Townsend, under the category of 'modern shamanic spirituality' (Townsend in Walter and Neumann Fridman 2004, pp. 49–58). People involved in these practices consider themselves either practitioners of shamanism or shamans. We are interested in the way people come to understand themselves and the things they do as shamanic, the way they appropriate a certain vocabulary and the type of words, images and metaphors they use in order to explain who they are and what they do, and most of all, in the process of becoming a shaman in a modern context. A crucial—and to our knowledge novel—means of understanding modern shamanism and especially its relationship to traditional shamanism is to examine self-narratives. Narratives allow us to probe people's understanding of how they became shamans and what their roles as shamans are. Given that both the transition into shamanhood and the understanding of what a shaman stands for are central features of the practice, narratives allow us to study critical features of shamanism that would be difficult to pinpoint with other methods.

To this purpose, we use the results obtained from an open-ended, internet based survey, which was based on the existing literature on shamanism and shamanic practices. In this article, we engage with the answers given by respondents from the United Kingdom who considered themselves a shaman and with questions related to the process, experience and definition of becoming a shaman. The extensive answers were analyzed as narratives, firstly by using McAdams and Manczak's construction of identity through life stories models (McAdams and Manczak 2015) for a structural comparison between different narratives and secondly, by using Gerhard Mayer's attributions of a shaman (Mayer 2008) for a thematic comparison between different narratives. At the core of the narratives are definitions of what a shaman is which are related to the identity of the narrator and the accounts of experiences in the process of becoming. We interpret these self-definitions and experiences, based on our two-fold analysis, and reflect on them through the characteristics of traditional shamanism and neo-shamanism as described in the literature, which we use as points of reference. In other words, in this article we are interested in comparing among narratives of becoming a shaman in order to understand how contemporary shamans see themselves and their practices, as well as to see how these narratives relate to accounts in the existing literature on different forms of shamanism. The narratives, therefore, are central to this article. By looking at self-narratives to understand contemporary shamanism and its relation to traditional shamanism, we sought to highlight the importance of using 'experience' and narrative as the object of research of contemporary forms of shamanism.