

Indeterminacy &

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Introduction

We usually think of order as confronting chaos, pitting structures and plans against random unpredictability. But another approach is to distinguish different types of order precisely in terms of how they interact with indeterminacy. A type of order that was in some way open to indeterminacy might learn to be more subtle and complex, with a wider range of possible responses to the unexpected. A type of order that never interacted with indeterminacy would, in contrast, stay fixed and closed. Whatever the advantages of openness however, the open type of order clearly has a problem which the closed type doesn't: how does the system ensure that the input of indeterminacy doesn't directly erode, and even finally dissolve, its own organisation?

Human cultures have, I suggest, adopted a specific solution to this problem: openings to the indeterminate occur only at specific places and times, or "phases", these being clearly distinguished from the other more widespread phases during which indeterminacy is immediately assimilated to determinate models. The cultural practices identified as religion and art provide the main contexts within which these special phases happen. However, religion and art also offer modes of retrospective integration of the indeterminate, with religion typically re-presenting it as an expression of universal order.

What they utilised of chance in divination practices was absolutely not considered as such but as a mysterious web of signs, sent by the divinities... (who were often contradictory but who knew what they wanted) and which could be read by elect soothsayers.

Iannis Xenakis Towards a Philosophy of Music in Formalised Music.

From amongst the many types of phases for the interaction of order and indeterminacy within human cultures, this article will single out shamanism. I will argue that the technique of the shamanic trance is a method for deliberately exposing the shaman to the aleatory within the human psyche as a model or equivalent for the larger indeterminacies of the natural environment.

Indeterminacy and Shamanism

My argument will partly build on, and partly depart from, what I consider to be the single most important work of modern ethnography on Siberian shamanism, Roberte Hamayon's *La Chasse l'Ame*. Towards the end of this work, Hamayon sums her account of the functioning of shamanism into the phrase *la gestion de l'atoire*. (roughly, *the management of indeterminacy*, although *gestion* has less administrative connotations in French than *management* in English). It is still possible within this perspective to read the shaman's relations of exchange with the spirits, expressed in alliance (for hunters), or filiation (for pastoralists), as an interaction between order and indeterminacy. But for Hamayon the act of shamanising, or conducting a shamanic seance, is no more nor less than the symbolic exchange itself. Only in her conclusion does she retreat from this unyieldingly semiological account of what happens in a shamanic trance, to remind us that, if the sociology of shamanism can now be

sketched in—perhaps more than sketched for cultures where information is adequate—the psychology of shamanism still waits to be written.

It is the hint of this opening left by Hamayon that I shall use to introduce a distinct but complementary reading of the data—a reading based on the notion that, although the indeterminacy which shamanism explicitly addresses may be in the external environment, in the form of uncertain food supplies (for hunters), or uncertain health (for pastoralists), the act of shamanising activates the potential indeterminacy of the human mind and is therefore not reducible to a symbolic exchange dependent on, and conducted by, a continuously present and responsible narrative self.

Indeterminacy and Self

I draw from the work of Daniel Dennett the idea that the continuity of the human conscious self is an illusion made necessary by a cultural need for the continuous narrative projection and interaction of all members of society. In fact, according to Dennett, in day to day life, consciousness constantly suffers micro-lapses which it then papers over, so to speak, to project to itself, and potentially to others, an appearance of ongoing control. Much of the time, says Dennett, experience just happens: the integral sense that is given to it is a retrospective construction, and the all-powerful all-active decision-maker seated at the centre of the human mind is simply an illusion.

The real matrix of experience is what he calls the parallel architecture brain, or PAB. This is not an integrated structure with a central decision-making core, but a cluster of many different kinds of modules, all with different yet flexible modes of functioning, all having evolved in different evolutionary epochs as responses to the changing demands of Darwinian evolution.

One implication of Dennett's account is that, if it is narrative that defines the sense of self and is the essence of the human psyche's auto-structuring process, then societies could, at least in theory, suggest not only other narratives but other kinds of narrative. I propose that types of symbolic exchange that putatively involve direct encounters with other worlds, such as those of the spirits, will require a local and temporary lapse in the normal social narrative. Dennett's unified narrative self, or UNS, is not only an actor in this kind of exchange, but the bearer of a symbolic value that is here given up and then returned. For this to be the case, the relation between the UNS and the parallel architecture brain has to be abnormal. The UNS has to enter a phase of temporary abeyance, allowing in a lot more from the PAB, and only later reconstructing the significance of the new material into a narrative. The micro-lapses of everyday living that are usually constantly reabsorbed into the continuum of the social narrative and its self, now become a continuous and prolonged lapse.

After the travel episode, the shaman sits down and starts telling stories about what he has seen on his journey, and at the same time the spirits repose who helped the shaman on his journey.

Triinn Ojamaa: The Shaman as the Zoomorphic Human

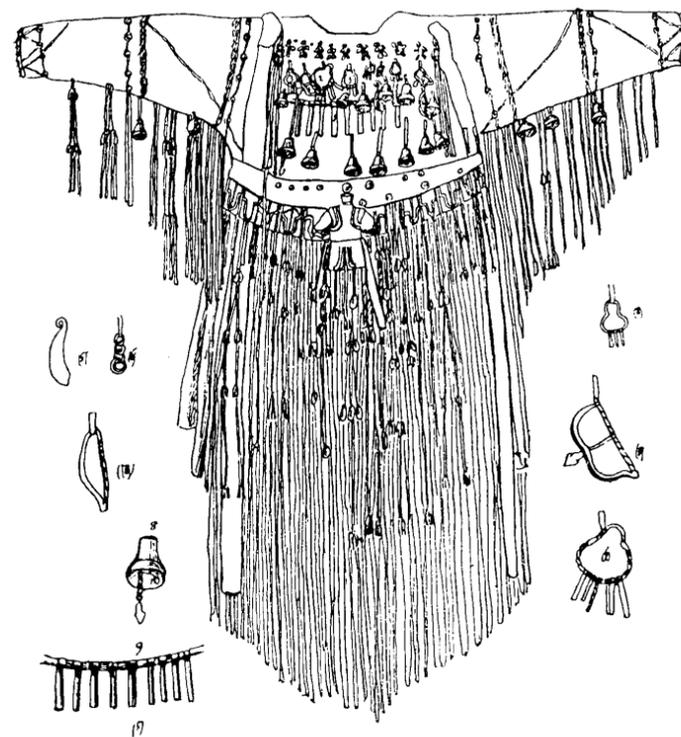


FIG. 2.

Shaman's ceremonial coats

Ritual

If this is so, then the problem of description shifts from the indeterminate element in shamanic practice to the determinate element. That is: in what way, and to what extent, is the information activated in the shamanic trance organised? It is important to understand this question as not being dissolved by the usual semiological or functionalist procedures which assume a fundamental continuity between all types of practice occurring in a culture. That is: the answer will be in terms of a type of articulation between determinacy and indeterminacy strongly different from that proposed for other types of social practice.

Even though a shamanic trance is an opening to indeterminacy, the trance is evidently set in motion and brought to a conclusion by the use of determinate ritual sequences that are carried over from one session to the next. This is what makes shamanising a method, and distinguishes the trance from an attack of madness. The elements of these sequences carry determinate meanings. That is: the ritual is not the indeterminacy itself, but the method for opening and closing a bounded zone of indeterminacy right inside the ordered cultural system.

In fact I define ritual as a technique for separating out phases that are normally intertwined and in mutual dynamic balance. On a psychological level ritual reorganises the rhythm of experience, and, where it is used for shamanic trance, this leads to episodes during which the narrative of the self is postponed. Right now, however, I want to apply this definition of ritual to the macro-level of the culture as an informational system. On this level, ritual frames or separates out different phases in the total informational process of the culture. It is not a completely different category of actions but a set of formal changes in the informational aspect of whatever objects, words or actions are brought into its sphere. These formal changes have long been identified in anthropological literature as exaggeration, stereotyping, and repetition. They represent a disruption of the formal surface of functional communicative modes, and this corresponds to an important shift in the

shamanism



FIG. 1.

relation between signifier and signified.

The terms “symbol” and “sign” can be used to define the limits of the range of possible relations between signifier and signified. The symbol is defined as having a highly present signifier, tending to split into many parallel repetitive redundant intrances: singly or together, these indicate a signified that remains fluid, absent, and relatively undefined. Within the communicative field of the culture, the symbol then allows certain limited operations involving a meaning that remains ambiguous and indeterminate.

The sign, in contrast, has a signifier detached from any one manifestation in time and space; its signifier is that aspect of the concrete thing that can be abstracted, generalised, exchanged with another one similar. Meanwhile the signified becomes less fluid, more fixed. So the sign spans less of the possible distance between presence and absence than the symbol. But it spans it more functionally because it enables the absent signified to be configured as a distinct and determinate idea, and at the same time one concrete situation to be compared with another.

It is not surprising then that there is a very concrete side to the way in which ritual frames the shamanic trance. The ritual situates and frames the trance in the now and the here. There is always the aspect of an attentive re-situation and restitution of the participant(s) into the moment and place in which they are present. The participants are deliberately withdrawing from the mobility of the sign offered by the cultural system: they are re-embedding the sign in a conspicuous tension between presence and absence. And, as I suggest below, it may be a special concentration on the highly present that triggers the shaman's imaginary absence or journey into the domain of the spirits.

Symbols rather than signs also characterise the transmission of information from older shamans to novices during training. This knowledge does not explain how something works but involves familiarity with all the specific occurrences of a phenomenon. Ritual activity requires repeating a procedure until all the concrete intrances in a set have been exhausted. In

some forms of shamanic training every individual part of the initiate's body must be individually “consecrated” by a spirit if the shaman is not to risk death during healing seances.

The Training of a Siberian Shaman - Leonid Lar

And, as every ethnographer knows, interviews with shamans usually start with the shaman displaying her or his knowledge in list form even if the question was intended to avoid just that. Again what is important here is not the “content” of the lists, the fact that each item can be allocated a cultural meaning to be decoded or not decoded by the ethnographer, but the repetitive parallelism of the form.

This distinct organisational character of ritual and symbolic information shows that the nature of the determinate elements in shamanic practice is such as to preclude their recuperation into the semiotic totality of the culture. Such a recuperation is reductive because, judged as a sign, a symbol is inefficient, ambiguous, and polyvalent, so that semiological interpretation leaves out the main thing that symbols do, which is to herald, activate, or refer back to, zones or phases of indeterminacy.

In some episodes of the shamanic trance we see the shaman acting out memorised ritual sequences, whereas in others he or she appears physically disorganised, or at least differently organised, and so incapable of intentional action, and perhaps dependent on help from an assistant. If shamanising is nothing else but symbolic exchange, this lack of control must be a theatrical effect geared to a symbolic and communicative function. Are shamans then just actors? Is the shamanic trance in fact a theatrical performance in which the shaman pretends to communicate with spirits—presented as autonomous and volatile—whilst actually enacting a symbolic exchange according to the rules of that exchange so as to arrive at a predetermined or otherwise determined result—the verdict, diagnosis, or healing?

Hypnosis

There are parallels here with the current debate about hypnosis; do hypnotised subjects just simulate being hypnotised or do they really enter a different state of mind? The psychologist John Gruzelier identifies two main characteristics of mental behaviour under hypnosis that indicate what can legitimately be called a different state of mind. The first of these is that the brain “turns in on itself”, losing interest in sensations from the external world and paying more attention to products of the imagination. The second is that the brain stops testing, criticising, and verifying perceptions; therefore products of the imagination become more credible.

I suggest that the shaman engages in partial self-hypnosis and that the lapse in the UNS and opening towards the PAB is achieved via the inhibition of both attention to the outer world and criticism and verification of perceptua. Furthermore, the shaman's withdrawal of attention from the outer world seems often to be achieved by the intermediary step of focusing the entire attention on a highly present object to the exclusion of everything else, just as it is in hypnosis with the focus on the hypnotist's voice. The shaman's personal equipment (in which I include not only actual objects and their ritual uses but also mental images and sensations acquired by training) contains one or more element that func-

Images: Siberian landscape Photos: Tim Hodgkinson



tions as the equivalent of the hypnotist's voice: that is, it is an object towards which the shaman has built up the mental habit of exclusive attention. It triggers the characteristic state of mind of the shaman during the trance.

I have found that, when questioned about what happens during trances and rituals, shamans emphasise seeing—meaning inner seeing. This is consistent with the observation that where attention is withdrawn from the external world, brain areas normally occupied in processing sensory information begin to present experience on the basis of random fluctuations and feedback within the sensory system. For visual centres this tends to produce a raw material of symmetrical and geometrical shapes, which are then interpreted as substitute visual impressions of things that they resemble, with their appropriate emotional and contextual connotation filling in the image, fleshing out, so to speak, the geometrical bones. At the same time, the shaman typically dances and drums, so that the visual information is dynamic. Physical movement dynamises and shapes the fluctuations in the sensory systems. Hence images appear and disappear, move, approach, lead away, fly, and so on. The state of mind of the shaman might be compared to that of a person manoeuvring a canoe down a fast-moving stream: the difference is that the stream is now inside the person and not in the outside world.

My conclusion is that shamans are not just actors. They do not maintain the continuous narrative self that an actor maintains when acting a role. In a particularly revealing interview with a Tuvan actor specialising in playing the part of shaman in touring theatre performances, the actor

described how he was sometimes mistaken for a real shaman and invited to heal people: the reason he did not do so was that "He did not see."

This is underscored by the fact that sometimes even real shamans fail to see. In Friedholm Brückner's documentary film *Boo Nar* on the shamans of Mongolia, at least one of the trances is abandoned quite early on as the shaman decides that it is not going to work on that occasion; this despite all the preparations having been correctly made, an audience assembled, and so on.

Provisional Conclusions

Evidently religion and ritual have long been identified as distinct objects or fields of academic study. The types of explanation or analysis offered for these objects have tended nevertheless to see them either as results of the general social structure and social process or as the cause of effects required by that structure and process. Whatever can't be explained this way is allocated either to the transcendent itself, for those who "believe", or to psychology, for those who don't. In the case of shamanism studies, the political history of this territorial division is particularly evident. Thus the terms "ecstasy" and "trance" were applied early on and reflected a Christian horror of illegitimate and pathological forms of transcendence.

(Ironically enough, by divorcing shamanic practice from its social background this later made shamanism highly exportable to post-Christian western societies.) Furthermore, anyone involved in shamanism studies still has to reckon with the enduring charisma of Mircea Eliade and his fascistic idea of a transcendent cosmic imperative: this alone provides a strong incentive to explicate religious experience exclusively in terms of social structure and social meaning. This is the background against which we must understand Hamayon's assertion (1993) that:

According to the symbolic representations of shamanic societies, the shaman's ritual behaviour is the mode of his direct contact with his spirits; hence it is functional behaviour that follows a prescribed pattern.

My answer to this is that if the shaman's ritual behaviour is the mode of contact with the spirits, then ritual behaviour must be understood in the broad sense of everything that happens to, or is done by, the shaman. In this case the shaman whose behaviour literally and exclusively follows a prescribed pattern is either doing a small ritual which does not require a trance as such, or is not a very good shaman. There may well be prescribed patterns which the shaman learns during training, but in an actual trance the shaman will mentally grapple with spirits with their own highly unpredictable behaviours. It is not that symbolic exchange with the spirits does not take place, but that the transactions, negotiations, and dialogues with the spirits are open, left open by the rituals, and that their openness is precisely why they take place at all. This, in turn, is why these exchanges must be represented specifically by symbols and groups of symbols, that is to say, by using the particular open relation between signifier and signified that we find in symbols, to mediate between indeterminacy and determinate meaning.

Although ritual as we know it in ethnography may be rendered obsolete by certain types of historical change, no unifying historical project, such as that of socialism or of market-based democracy, can substitute itself for the discontinuity of cultural phase structures responding to the objective demands of human complexity. Cultures simply cannot be considered as continuous entities. Nor can their special phases be considered as functional on the level of the culture itself, only on the level of the total context inhabited by the human

being. Considered sociologically, therefore, ritual is social only in that it arises out of the problematic of a social being, but it does not express a given social logic, only how that logic engages with what is intractable to it.

Notes

1. For reasons of brevity, this article is absolutely not exhaustive in terms of covering even the main headings under which shamanism is normally considered: in particular I have had to refrain from situating my analysis in relation to other analyses in the literature. In a general way I have drawn on my own field notes and recordings made in Siberia during several extremely informal study trips made since 1990.
2. The idea of linking shamanism to hypnosis is absolutely not original, the classic version being the adaptation made of Shor's work by Siikala (see bibliography).

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