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“Anthropological Modes of Health and Healing: Shamanism”

Anthropology takes a distinct approach to health and healing. Its approach usually takes health, healing, and medicine outside of the confines of cultural bias and practice to get a more holistic understanding. A result of this approach is a diverse understanding of the topic across history and geographical location. For the west, this approach means taking away the biases of western medicine known as biomedicine and taking up non-western models of healing as legitimate. It not only means looking at non-western models as legitimate but also as possible models that can be integrated with biomedicine to bring health. In this paper I approach shamanism as a non western model with a unique history of origin, practice, and possible integration to the biomedical model.

Shamanism is very difficult to define in one or even two sentences. To this day there are still conflicts about how to categorize shamanism and its practices.¹ For the purposes of this paper I will use the definition provided by Amanda Porterfield. She defines shamanism as “a type of ritual practice” and shamans “as performers who interact with spirits and attempt to manage the influence people believe spirits have in their lives and environments.”² In a possibly too general statement, the practice of shamanism is a kind of “spiritual healing that is based on animism, the belief that all things are living and has a spirit.”³ Illness is always interpreted as

¹ Winkelman, M. (2009). *Culture and health : applying medical anthropology*. Jossey-Bass, Cop, 386

² *Shamanism and Religious Healing*. (n.d.). Rsonline.org. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from http://rsonline.org/index4ff7.html?option=com_content&view=article&id=537&Itemid=630

³ The. (2017). *The Origins of Shamanism: Shamanism Beliefs & History*. Gaia. <https://www.gaia.com/article/how-much-do-you-know-about-shamanism>

spiritual in root and hence spiritual in remedy. In regards to its history and origin, shamanism is widely accepted to be as “a cross- cultural phenomenon”.⁴ For these reasons there are nuances in the practices and beliefs of shamanistic societies throughout history. There is no orthodoxy that can tie them all together aside from the fact that the spiritual contact necessary for healing is done by particular people in a community. Some of the things that shamanism is successful in healing are mentioned by “textbook name” as the recovery of lost souls, divination, and physical healings.⁵ The diverse nature of practice should also be mentioned. There are some forms of shamanism that are aided by plants and alcohol while others are natural (not aided by some form of ingestion). Particular examples include the South American shamans that make tea from the *Banisteriopsis caapi* plant to induce an ecstatic state.⁶ Examples of shamans who do not use these tools are known to sing, dance and use drums as well as using water or blowing on a patient in a more symbolic fashion.⁷ Shamans themselves also have distinct roles and paths of training depending on their culture. There are three possible ways amongst the practice by which people can become shamans. These are personal quests where a shaman has learned in solidarity from the spirits in a pilgrimage type process that is then acknowledged by the people. Another is by being initiated and elected by particular shamans in the community. And the last known way is by birth and the kind of birthright that comes from one’s ancestors. For example North American shamans are known to receive their roles through both inheritance and election⁸.

I think that the two most important things to understand for biomedical practitioners if they were treating someone with a history of shamanistic practice is the concept that all things

⁴ Winkelman, M. (2009). *Culture and health : applying medical anthropology*. Jossey-Bass, Cop. Pg. 386

⁵ Winkelman, M. (2009). *Culture and health : applying medical anthropology*. Jossey-Bass, Cop. Pg. 387

⁶ The. (2017). *The Origins of Shamanism: Shamanism Beliefs & History*. Gaia.
<https://www.gaia.com/article/how-much-do-you-know-about-shamanism>

⁷ Winkelman, M. (2009). *Culture and health : applying medical anthropology*. Jossey-Bass, Cop. pg 391

⁸ The. (2017). *The Origins of Shamanism: Shamanism Beliefs & History*. Gaia.
<https://www.gaia.com/article/how-much-do-you-know-about-shamanism>

have spiritual weight and value and the other being what kind of shamanistic healings makeup their belief? (fully natural or herbal aid). The first can be important because although biomedical practitioners do not believe it, they must be willing in some ways to assure their patient that the issue at hand is being dealt with. If the practitioner only explains things in the context of his or her training, he will talk about all the biological things that will be fixed if the patient is treated, however that is unsatisfactory ab initio. The belief does not need to be fully upheld by the practitioner or even vocalized. However a possible listening and reinterpreting of the process in a vocabulary that brings ease and assurance to the patient might be helpful. In conjunction with this is to understand if the kind of shamanism the patient believes in practices using herbal aid or if it is fully natural. If it is herbal aided I believe that it is easier for the practitioner to make analogies to the medicine of the biomedical model. There are academic grounds to believe that shamanism can be “characterized...as “techniques of ecstasy”—ritually-induced altered states of consciousness (ASC)—used in community ritual interactions with the spirit world for purposes of healing and divination”⁹. If that is the case there is a connection between the use of particular substances that can get the healing a patient desires. Although there is no particular ecstatic state, the practitioner can try and get the patient to understand that the medicine is an advanced form of the same herbs used to help them under shamanistic practice. I think that psychology can also benefit from understanding shamanism because the basic tenets of psychology are to “modify attitudes, behaviors, and experiences that clients”¹⁰ In treating patients of shaman backgrounds, the psychologists might be able to encourage other forms of therapy such as music and dance that allow the patient to speak of their problems because it connects to the natural forms of

⁹ Winkelman, Michael James (2021), The Evolved Psychology of Psychedelic Set and Setting: Inferences Regarding the Roles of Shamanism and Entheogenic Ecopsychology *Frontiers in Pharmacology*, 12 1663-9812

¹⁰ van Os, J. (2007). EDITORIAL. *Archives of Clinical Psychiatry (São Paulo)*, 34, 159–159. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0101-60832007000800001>

healing in shamanism. With enough knowledge, the psychologists may be able to semi-accurately and at best accurately re-interpret the things happening in the patient's psyche. This would help patients get past trauma that the patient understands as soul recovery for example.

When it comes to my community, Neolyth in Montclair and A Shaman's Love in Asbury Park are some of the close places of shamanism. One reason why I do not believe that Shamanism would help the problems I addressed earlier in this semester primarily stem from my disagreements with the foundational tenets of the model. Animism or the belief that all things have spirit and some spiritual connection is hard for me to believe. I do believe that particular parts and factors of healing in the practice are of value. One of these are the natural herbs used by shamans to induce states in the psyche and others that have healing properties for the body. When it comes to pollution in urbanized areas it seems the problem is not in the psyche but in the body's response to the environment. I would disagree there is a way to take out the pollution in the air because spirits are mad or sad. And so when it comes to the natural herbs for the body that I believe can be used, I would say do not need the attached beliefs to work and have an effect. For those reasons I believe shamanism would not help me personally as is although in some parts I have some respect for the model.

In conclusion I believe that all non western models of health and healing are worth looking at. They help us understand the diversity in history and more importantly, sets up the kinds of integration that help the weaknesses in other models. In this way I think that anthropology is on the right track to step outside of the biomedical model, because it has very serious failings in the humanities part of human health. In regards to shamanism, it is a practice that is old yet has its lasting permutations in religious systems as well as outside of them as a purely health and healing philosophy. Although some of its tenets are extremely hard to

incorporate into the biomedical model, there is value in learning so that there is more success in the biomedical field helping patients with that background.

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