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Music in Shamanic Healing



Shamans fulfill several social roles in their societies. These may be: 1) to act as healers; 2) to conduct sacrificial rites; 3) to offer divination (e.g. regarding the weather, the outcome of a hunt, the whereabouts of lost objects, etc.); 4) to help with childbirth, introducing the child into life; 6) to act as a poet or bard; 7) to act as political leaders (leading hunts and warfare); 8) to act as a performing artist (latter-day shamans appear at festivals, where they represent their people as preservers of ethnic folklore and identity, cf. Hoppál 2002). Naturally, these functions overlap in practice, with each shaman or shamaness fulfilling several roles or practicing several skills simultaneously.

Predictably, the role of healer is the most important one. This function is almost never lacking, while one or several of the others may differ from culture to culture.

Shamanic Imitation by Singing

All over Eurasia, the first traumatic experience a potential shaman underwent was to suddenly fall ill. This was a sign of having been chosen by the spirits. In most cases, the illness grew worse and was difficult to cure. Vilmos Diószegi collected this statement from a Karagas (Tofa) person:

“I also became ill, when I was about to become a shaman. First my head began to ache, then my hands. Around full-moon my head was splitting with pain. I had been ailing for about three years. In the meantime the spirits came to visit me. While I slept, my tongue was chanting. It chanted like the shamans do. But I did not know anything about it. When I awoke, my mother and father and my sister told me, ‘You were chanting shaman songs.’ After such occasions I always felt better for a few days. After three or four months the sickness overpowered me. My head was aching all the time and when I slept my tongue was chanting shaman songs again. It went on like this, alternating every three or four months, for three years. One keeps suffering and suffering. When you want to rest or sleep, your tongue would be chanting. But not all the spirits chant equally well. Some chant beautifully, some chant hideously. The great spirit chants best. I was twenty-seven years old when I heard him chant. The little one, the little spirit used to come to me. He had flown into my mouth and then I used to recite shaman songs. When I had no more strength left to suffer, finally I agreed to become a shaman.” (Diószegi 1968, 142–143)

The informant, an elderly erstwhile shaman, reveals that he first found his helping spirit in the form of a tune or song. To be more precise, it found him: he was chosen by the spirits, who cured him so he could cure others. In the process of initiation, the shaman’s equipment was made by the members of the community (often only by close relatives), who empowered the objects by singing (cf. Walker 2003, 46, who quotes data from Russian researchers). Music in a ritual context transformed a manmade object into a shamanic device imbued with holy power. For example, until they could get their first drum, shamans in Tuva were given only a shamanic stick with small rattles: a very simple instrument for making a sound. Such sticks were also used by Kirgizian shamanesses (see Hoppál 2003, 139) and by Daur shaman women, as I observed near Hailar in northeastern China.



Kazak healer shaman (*baksi*) playing on Kobuz, early 20th century



The last Nanay shamans calling the spirits, 1993

Healing by Music

The first element of any healing séance is that the shaman(ess) calls his/her helping spirits. This usually occurs in an invocatory chant which is typically accompanied by an instrument.

The most reliable descriptions of Siberian shamanic rituals come from researchers who are members of the indigenous nations and, more importantly, who still live among their own compatriots. Leonid Lar is a Nenets researcher who fits the above description. He has published several volumes of texts collected during his fieldwork. In one of these, he gives an authentic explanation of the role of shamanic song in rituals.

An indispensable part of the shamanic séance is the shamanic song. The shaman used to call his helping spirits in song and talked with them in song, accompanying the whole process on his drum. Each spirit had its own song through which the participants of the rite recognised the spirit – this was how they knew that one or other of the spirits was present. Essentially, the singing was not done by the shaman but by the spirit that had come to possess him. The songs of the various spirits differed widely in their tune and rhythm alike. The drum accompaniment was also very different depending on which spirit it was referring to. (Lar 1998, 39).

The Nenets believed that the combined sound of the shaman's drum and song could invoke the benevolence of helping spirits, who ultimately exerted a positive influence on the outcome of the séance.

During the healing séance, the shaman had to discover the reason for the illness. This is why the shaman's spirit had to journey through the "upper"

and “lower” worlds (Kazekevitch 2001) to bring back the soul of the sick person from one of these worlds. The song described this journey in detail. It stated the names of the helping spirits who had been invited and the names of those who actually came. The tunes of the spirits differed from one another and were easily distinguishable based on their melodic structures and rhythms. Onomatopoeia was a characteristic feature because these songs represented animal-shaped helping spirits (e.g. bear, loon, reindeer or mouse) by imitating the characteristic sounds they make (Dobzhanskaya 2002, 84). Onomatopoeia is the origin of music, the first emergence of the musical capacity in humankind. Ethnomusicologists suggest that shamans’ songs preserve memories from the era when music first emerged.

An important characteristic of healing shamanic music is that each shaman not only has his or her own helping spirits, but also has his or her own distinguishing tune, sometimes more than one. This is the case in distant South America no less than in Eurasia.

Some South American Examples

In the course of the healing séance, the South American Indians in the Peruvian Amazonian city of Iquitos also believe that the tunes they need to learn for their initiatory rites possess healing power. Whistling is the first skill that a potential shaman practices during the hallucinatory *ayahuasca* séances.

“Most healers during their period of apprenticeship (which can last several years) seclude themselves in open jungle, learning the effect of different plants on their bodies, and how to prepare special medicines ... They work closely with a teacher, and also whistle with him a series of traditional *ayahuasca* melodies. Basic melodies are learned during this period, although healers tend to improvise and innovate on these themselves ...

... Since much of the music found in *ayahuasca* sessions consists of whistling incantations, it is important to mention the widespread belief in the area that whistling is the way in which the spiritual forces of nature and the guardian spirit of the vine itself, can be evoked by the healer.” (Katz – Dobkin de Rios 1971, MS. p.3).

As we also saw in the case of the shaman in Tuva, whistling is the point of departure for the healing rite and the initiation. This is so because whistling was very likely the earliest and most personal form of communication with the spirits, even predating music.

Likewise in the Peruvian Amazonian region, we see that a local shaman receives the tunes of healing power (*icaros*) from his area’s local hallucinogenic “plant-teachers”. “By singing or whistling the *icaro* of the plant-teachers, their spirits present themselves to the shaman... *icaros* are especially effective for curing illness caused by witchcraft, or due to the action of evil spirits. But there are also *icaros* to cure other illnesses, for example snakebite ... It is believed that it is the melody itself which has curative powers.” (Luna 1984, 7–8).

Thus it is not surprising to learn that the power of the individual shamans is measured by the number of songs they know. In other words, a shaman’s power is in his songs, and the power of the instruments is only an additional force. This is the impression I received in February 2003 when I saw a Daur



Korean shamanic orchestra accompanying a seance



Korean shamaness (Mundang) in a seance (kut), 1991

shamaness who, after the healing seance, continued singing to her patient for a long time, giving instructions and advice to the young girl who, upon hearing the dramatic song, sobbed and received the healing chant while kneeling and bowing to the ground. My impression was that the healing power emanated from the singing voice (cf. Newman 1998: 267–272).

Repetition and Rhythm

Repetition is another important element that deserves mention when talking about music in shamanism. Films about the last shamans of the Uganasan people, who live in the far north (among others, the classic shots of Lennart Meri from 1977), clearly show that repetition is one of the most potent features of the shamanic song. Among the Uganasan, who live on the Taymir Peninsula, this was the task of the shaman's helper (*touptusi*). Carolyne Humphrey evocatively describes this phenomenon in connection with Dahur shamanic song:

“The refrains, which had to be repeated by competent assistants leading the whole audience, were essential to raise the shaman's soul energy. The shaman's body channels were opened by means of the smoke of a sacred plant (*smaih*) to enable soul energy to travel out and spirit energy to come in. Rhythmic words, melody and vibration inspired soul energy, enabling the shaman to sing ever more loudly, dance with vigour and liveliness, and carry the heavy human sufferings loaded on mirror or drum. A shaman's physical weakness was overcome not by wild improvisation but by constant repetition of the plain rhythmic patterns, the beloved tunes of the refrains (*iro*) sung by the assistant.



Manchurian shaman during an evening ceremony, 2004

The more fluid, trembling, or improvisatory notes of the shaman were supported by the overlapping voice of the assistant, who sang – sometimes almost shouted – accented and high rhythmic short themes.” (Humphrey 1996, 234)

In some ways, the same idea is referred to by a Finnish ethnomusicologist in an article analyzing Selcup shamanic songs. “Shaman songs have somewhere an element of recurring pulse structure.” (emi 2001, 156) Thus it may be no accident that some people say that shamanic music talks “straight to the heart.” “The shaman sees with the heart. Music speaks to the heart. It is not surprising that songs and shamanism are synergetic for healing.” (Mokelke 2004, 25).

The Shaman as Singer

It is worthwhile to give some thought to observations made by the Russian ethnomusicologist Yuriy Sheykin in connection with the shamanic songs of Paleo-Asian peoples, based on several decades of experience. As he explained at a conference, one of the distinguishing signs of shamanic song is its emphatic character, which is heard in intonations of the fear, entreaty, pain, suffering and terror that express the shamanic condition. In the languages of the Chukch and the Koryak, the phonological form of the word for “shaman” (who was both sage and healer) is connected to the words which signify “song” and “music”. Thus, among Paleo-Asian peoples, the shaman can actually be identified by the semantic field of a “person singing magical songs” (Sheykin 1992; for more relevant data, see Sheykin 1996 and the volume of conference proceedings Sheykin ed. 2000). These linguistic factors hearken again to the pre-

history of shamanism and suggest that song and shamanic healing probably emerged simultaneously and in the very distant past.

Recent research on the cognitive evolution of our Paleolithic ancestors has sought to substantiate this hypothesis (Frolov 1988; Winkelman 2002). According to one American researcher.

A range of evidence indicates that shamanistic elements were already part of the cultural practices of the Middle Paleolithic. This evidence includes: 1. the hominid basis of chanting, music and psycho-emotional group ritual activities based in mimetic capabilities, and 2. the soul of shamanic practices in meeting a number of individual and societal needs for shared identity and communication. Music's effects include the induction of slow-wave brain wave patterns typical of other altered states of consciousness. Music's adaptive role includes its ability to promote group cohesion and coordination, enhancing synchrony and co-operation among group members (Winkelman 2002. 78–79).

In other words, groups of humans who struck bones together to play a shared rhythm (Frolov 1988. 3) were practicing a simple form of cooperation under the leadership of their shamans. Collective dancing and drumming were another developmental step which led to further evolution of cognitive structures, i.e. the ability to distinguish different rhythms.

Drumming and Healing

The aforementioned train of thought explains why it is important to examine the impact of shamanic drumming on human beings. It has long been known that the sound of the drum and the noises made by other percussion instruments can induce a peculiarly altered state of consciousness (“... Percussive sound, especially the drum is used throughout the world to initiate and accompany the shamanic trance and journey, it is proposed that the drumming itself may have an effect on emotional and physiological states relevant to healing ... The purpose of the studies was to explore the relation between the effects of shamanic drumming, immune responses and mood states ...” Harner – Tyron 1992, 197). It has been experimentally shown that the monotonous sound of drumming activates the immune system, which leads to an increased sense of wellbeing and a reduction of feelings of fear or anxiety. A study of endorphin activity, conducted more than a decade previously, reached similar conclusions (Prince 1982) and showed that in certain situations, the human body produces substances which cause the individual to experience a vast sense of relief, a lack of tiredness, and an overwhelming feeling of joy, and that all this may occur under the influence of ecstatic dancing or rhythmic music. An excellent monograph has also been written about the mutual relations between music and trance (Rouget 1985).

To sum up, it is highly likely that the communal production of music, its ecstatic effects, and the psychic energies released by singing and dancing together helped people to recognize and create the cognitive universe that has always fused them into a community. They knew the healing power of music.

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Musik in der Heilkunst der Schamanen

Schamanen wirken als Ritualisten, Wahrsager, Sänger, Anführer, Künstler und vor allem als Heiler. Mit der Initiation eignen sie sich einen helfenden Geist an, der sich in Gesängen offenbart. Diese berichten von Reisen in die oberen und/oder unteren Welten, wo der Schamane die Seele eines kranken Menschen zu finden und wiederherzustellen sucht. Jeder Schamane singt oder flötet seine eigene Melodie. Die Flöte ruft die Geister zu Heilungsritualen, die Melodien, Wiederholungen und Rhythmen besitzen heilende Kräfte. Der Schamane ist eine »Person, die magische Lieder singt«. Der Gesang und die schamanische Heilung haben sich vermutlich gleichzeitig und in grauer Vorzeit entwickelt. Das Trommeln der Schamanen regt das Immunsystem an, stärkt das Wohlbefinden und vermindert die Angst. Gemeinsames Musizieren, seine ekstatische Wirkung und die dabei entbundenen seelischen Energien helfen den Menschen, das Allumfassende wahrzunehmen, das ihn in eine Gemeinschaft einbindet.

La musique dans la médecine des chamans

Les chamans agissent comme ritualistes, devins, chanteurs, guides, artistes et surtout comme guérisseurs. Par leur initiation, ils s'approprient un esprit qui se manifeste dans les chants. Ceux-ci parlent de voyages dans les mondes supérieurs et/ou inférieurs où le chaman se met en quête de l'âme d'un malade pour le guérir. Chaque chaman chante sa propre mélodie ou la joue à la flûte. La flûte invoque les esprits pour des rituels de guérison, les mélodies, les répétitions et les rythmes possèdent des pouvoirs de guérison. Le chant et la guérison par le chaman se sont vraisemblablement développés simultanément et dans les temps les plus reculés. Le tambourinage du chaman stimule le système immunitaire, accroît la sensation de bien-être et réduit l'anxiété. La musique que l'on fait à plusieurs, son effet extatique et les énergies spirituelles ainsi libérées permettent à l'individu de percevoir l'universalité qui l'intègre dans une communauté.