

# Slippage: An Anthropology of Shamanism

Bruce Grant

Department of Anthropology, New York University, New York, NY 10003, USA;  
email: bruce.grant@nyu.edu

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## Abstract

If our knowledge of shamanism has been so abidingly partial, so impressively uneven, so deeply varied by history, and so enduringly skeptical for so long, how has its study come to occupy such pride of place in the anthropological canon? One answer comes in a history of social relations where shamans both are cast as translators of the unseen and are themselves sites of anxiety in a very real world, one of encounters across lines of gender, class, and colonial incursions often defined by race. This article contends that as anthropologists have cultivated a long and growing library of shamanic practice, many appear to have found, in a globally diverse range of spirit practitioners, translators across social worlds who are not unlike themselves, suggesting that in the shaman we find a remarkable history of anthropology.

## INTRODUCTION

Doing fieldwork 30 years ago among an indigenous people on Sakhalin Island, off the Russian Pacific coast, I knew to be diplomatic around the women of shamanic lineage. One neighbor with whom I spent time each day had the sharp eyes of someone who knew mental struggle, a condition sometimes linked to shamans, especially those who did not readily embrace their uncommon capacities. She once volunteered that her own mother had been a seer, but she insisted that the capacity for conjuring other spirit worlds skipped generations, at least in her family, and that there was no need for me to think I could tell her anything. Another, more elderly and with a regal calm, said that the spirits did not like it when you talked about them, even if you were asking indirectly about the shamans who called them up. Why unsettle things? I took that as good judgment to let the matter rest.

In a world where men seemed the outliers in most ritual practice after the demographic devastations of Stalinist purges and World War II, only one woman was publicly regarded in the small rural setting for her willingness to help those in need. She buttonholed me one day on the street, seemingly after some drink, to ask why I had never come by to see her and insisting that, yes, she could tell me things. I showed up the next afternoon at her flat in one of the small town's multistory buildings, off a muddy street that I did not know well, to find that she had given me the slip. Her daughter insisted that she had gone off without notice. Were there any shamans in this closed military zone of the Soviet Union's far eastern outpost in the twilight of socialism? Not least when Siberia has been long held to be the earliest recorded hearth of shamanic experience? Possibly? Probably. It's hard to tell.

Shamanism is found on every continent. It has been well mapped in the pages of the *Annual Review of Anthropology (ARA)* (Atkinson 1992) and is the subject of regular surveys (Dubois 2011, Pollock 2019, Winkelmann 2018, and Znamenski 2007, alongside Boddy 1994 and Luhrmann 2011 as cognate reviews). Despite the morphings of shamanism across time and space, there is general agreement on the ground rules: To be a shaman, as opposed to an oracle, sorcerer, diviner, clairvoyant, geomancer, witch, or warlock, you should be able to engage in two-way communication or, for that matter, simply merge with spirits at will. After that, the devil is in the details. There may or may not be trance; there may or may not be spirit travel; one may or may not serve as a guide or psychopomp to spirits who have lost their way. Shamans sometimes heal. Among the final, generally-but-not-always agreed-upon parameters put forth by Eliade [1964 (1951)] is that shamanism is not a religion, but a practice.

After that, things get a bit murky. For after all the work that has been done by scholars on death and dying (Engelke 2019, Fabian 1972, Kaufman & Morgan 2005, Vitebsky 1993), there is surprisingly little agreement on the contours of the afterlife, just that there are "technicians of the sacred" (Rothenberg 1985) who can sometimes visit, sometimes mimic, and sometimes become one with inhabitants of other worlds (along with other beings who may never have taken human form at all). Knowledge more formal than that eludes.

In a rich ethnography, *Not Quite Shamans: Political Lives and Spirit Worlds in Northern Mongolia*, Pedersen (2011) gives us a different kind of slip. The Darhad people of Mongolia's Shishged Valley, he suggests, recognized a spate of people who sometimes manifested shamanic actions but who could never entirely render themselves the same way as shamans in the past. Entire generations had grown up with half-realized shamanic potential, subject to frustrated outbursts over the need to calm the troubled waters of both violent past and economically fraught present. Spirits were rising in number, but the number of men and women who could respond to them were few.

One might be tempted to see Pedersen's work as a pronouncement on a necessarily incomplete, early twenty-first-century approximation of shamanic traditions gone by, distinguished somehow

only by their pallor. Yet to do so would miss not only the more important parts of Pedersen's Mongolian example, when he challenges us on questions of shamanic form, but also the crucial role that intellectual histories of shamanism have played in the colonial encounter, in the making of anthropology, and as projections of political life writ large. In this article, I explore that role and attempt to theorize its enduring attraction.

Whether we think of the slippage between mundane practice and ideal type in shamanic life as a form of deferral, distance, or delay (Fabian 1983, Pharo 2011), we have ample evidence that this disjuncture has long set the terms for histories and ethnographies of shamanic experience. In his cardinal study, Eliade [1964 (1951)] set this stage for a shamanism that could have ever been fully captured only *in illo tempore*, at another time, when shamans really did fly and when an *axis mundi* clearly delineated cosmological space (see also Jaynes 1976). The rest of us are late to the game, where Vitebsky's *Life Without the Dead* (2017) is an elegy.

My lead question in this review is, therefore, if our knowledge of shamanism has been so significantly selective [Eliade 1964 (1951)], so surprisingly uneven (Tomášková 2013), so deeply varied across time and space (Atkinson 1989, Bacigalupo 2016, Flaherty 1992, Thomas & Humphrey 1994, Taussig 1987), and so enduringly skeptical (Lévi-Strauss 1963a,b) for so long, how has its study come to occupy such pride of place in the anthropological canon?

One answer, I suggest, comes in a history of social relations where shamans are cast as translators of the unseen and are themselves sites of anxiety in a very real world, a world filled with encounters across lines of gender, class, and colonial incursions often defined by race. In *Wayward Shamans: The Prehistory of an Idea* (2013), Tomášková joins earlier work on gender in shamanism (Bacigalupo 2007; Boddy 1994; Buyandelger 2013; Humphrey & Onon 1996; Kendall 1985, 1988; Van Deusen 2001, 2004) by expertly mapping how a sea of evidence showcasing female spirit leaders in the archaeological record was set aside in favor of patriarchal archetypes in a long history of gender panic.

Taussig (1987) set the gold standard for challenging narrative patterns of shamanic knowledge in a richly documented study of terror and healing in Colombia. In Taussig's rendering, the power exerted by the Spanish upon indigenous peoples of South America soon became the stuff of legend among colonizer and colonized alike. Records indicate how Spanish and mestizo colonial officials sought healing among the very spirit practitioners of the highlands from whom they extracted resources and whom they held in debt peonage. Indigenous highlanders sought spirit aid among the lowland peoples whom they sought to control and exploit at subtler registers, much as lowland shamans would, centuries later, use the image of colonial armies in their dealings with spirits themselves, closing the circle.

What Tomášková and Taussig point to is a direct link to an age of European colonial encounter where the act of exploration and the need for intermediaries encircled the figure of the spirit practitioner. Shamans satisfied the "savage slot" of which Trouillot (2003) wrote so richly, a category of knowledge that enabled observers from wealthy economies to legitimize their domination. On the heels of the utopian writings of Thomas More, the fictional adventures of Robinson Crusoe at the pen of Defoe, or the more studied political theories of Rousseau, Trouillot (2003) observed, "It mattered little to the larger European audience whether such works were fictitious or not. That they presented an elsewhere was enough. That the Elsewhere was actually somewhere was a matter for a few specialists" (p. 16). And thus, anthropology was born. "Ever since the West became the West," Trouillot observes of the Age of Enlightenment, "Robinson has been looking for Friday" (p. 17).

In thinking along these lines, I take lead from the foundational essay by Pietz (1985), "The Problem of the Fetish." In arguing that Portuguese understandings of the *fetisso* (a word that shared etymological roots from the Latin with "factitious") were the products of a highly politicized

colonial encounter between Europeans and West Africans, Pietz made the case that Portuguese traders were less skeptical of West African social traditions than they were fearful of and eager to subordinate them. The simple but long neglected observation we can draw from this view is that the “ism” of shamanism, along with other classic precepts in the anthropology of religion (Asad 1993), has been born of decidedly fraught encounters.

While our actual knowledge of spirit worlds may remain remarkably spare, perhaps even slippery, this article contends that, in shamans, many scholars relievedly found one steady reference point in a world of unknowns, with shamans acting not only as metonymic figures for a greater beyond, but also as the gateways to those worlds, their dragomans, cicerones, translators, and guides.

In this review, I nod to the excellent work presented by Atkinson some 30 years ago and draw attention to the clearest revolutions in shamanic literatures since that time: a deep historicizing turn and a broad set of conversations around animism, ontology, and the more-than-human. My premises are two: First, as anthropologists have cultivated a long and growing library of shamanic practice, many appear to have found in shamans men and women who are not unlike themselves, as travelers between worlds, as translators across difference, and as brokers who carry the belief that knowledge wrought from one world may effect good in another. Second, with a library so sated, I suggest that we find in the shaman a remarkable history of anthropology itself.

“Slippage,” in this context, emerges as a theme rather than a handicap. It takes central stage because such a rich archive has proven surprisingly reluctant to recognize its own shortcuts: in the formation of the concept of the shaman under often dramatic circumstances of colonial rule; in the hesitations of the very beings with whom shamans are in conversation to tell us actually very much about their realms; and in the simple isomorphisms between shaman and anthropologist, translators across worlds that defy easy knowing.

## POTTED TALES AND THEIR LIMITS

Has “shamanism” outlived its usefulness? Much hand-wringing has taken place over the durability of the idea, inviting debate on whether the time has come to free spirit brokers from an academic frame. With a concept that signals practices and settings so diverse as to make generalization difficult, some have continued to ask if the generality is not itself the problem. In her study of shamanic ritual among Wana peoples on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia, Atkinson (1989) was among those to launch a new standard with a more practice-based focus than found in many earlier studies, offering the flexible rubric of “shamanship,” a term which favorably rehearsed the same division in the Russian language between *shamanstvo*, that which shamans actually do, and *shamanizm*, the bundle of ideas surrounding them.

This flexibility has not won over everyone. In a masterful study set in conversation with Ur-gunge Onon, a Mongolian man whose life had once been part of wandering bands, clan structures, military cantonments, the theocratic Buddhist state, and the rise of communism before Onon migrated to England, Humphrey contemplated presenting this epic life story without using the words “shamanism” or “religion” at all (Humphrey & Onon 1996, p. 49). Absent any single metaphysics, cosmology, or unified theory, the weight of such a transcultural category can risk overwhelming what shamans actually undertake (p. 63).

For centuries, the reigning understanding established by German travelers and scholars, including many who were in the service of the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences, is that the Ur-shamans were from among the Tungus-Manchurian speakers of North Asia, a broad mix of hunter-gatherers, reindeer herders, and fishermen (Flaherty 1992, Tomášková 2013, Znamenski 2007). So began a distinctly Slavonic tradition of scholarship where scholars from the former empire and now formerly socialist world have dominated the canonic works. Among the most

prominent twentieth-century interventions are the finely tuned ethnographies of Bogoraz (1899), Iokhel'son (1900), and Shternberg (1893); the popular glosses offered by Czaplicka (1914); early foundational work on Tungus worlds by Shirokogoroff (1935); and the trenchant ethnological studies by Alekseev (1980), Basilov (1984), Novik (1984), and Smoliak (1991) (see also Balzer 1990 and Humphrey 1980). Still, few challenged the fundamental distance in both time and space that has long been adopted with regard to shamanic life, a position that crystallized with Eliade [1964 (1951)], who stated that while shamanism once took spark in a cold Russian north *in illo tempore*, it was now everywhere in decline and could be known only through symbolic approximations in a modernizing world.

As the twentieth century wore on, and materials on spirit communication poured in from every continent, the Siberian origin story largely went unquestioned. Laufer policed the terminology with brio in 1917 when he rebuffed the entirely reasonable possibility that German Orientalists may have taken interest in the “shaman” given the family resemblance to the Chinese term *śā-men*, itself understood at the time as a borrowing from the Pāli/Sanskrit *śramanā*, indicating a Buddhist monk or mendicant (Laufer 1917). Decades later, Siberian “ownership” of the shamanic tradition, a proprietary moment baked into every origin story, remains largely in place owing to regular rehearsals of these eighteenth-century German reports. No doubt, pointing to a single hearth makes sorting through a vast corpus of material more manageable, and some continued to advocate for its containment at the end of the twentieth century with the same energy by which Laufer began it (Kehoe 2000, p. 102).

This story could be told very differently. We could begin by pointing out that what German travelers to Siberia found was not hardly new, given the centuries-old interest in Greek magic and Arab mystical philosophy among European thinkers (Flaherty 1992, p. 3; Tomášková 2013, p. 42). The irony is that reindeer herders, by design, travel far and wide, and the Tungus-Manchurian language family draws on a decidedly diverse group, today embracing the related but very different traditions of Even, Evenk, Nanai, Negidal, Orok, Udeghe, Ulch, and Yukaghir peoples, to name only some of the northern Tungusic peoples, without yet mentioning Manchu-language-family speakers of contemporary China. One of the most telling contemporary glosses in the Even language, for example, comes in slippage between the now ubiquitous *shaman* and its companion word, *haman*, building on the root *hama-* for “knowledge” and offering us, most simply, “the person who knows” (Robbek & Robbek 2004, p. 281). Shirokogoroff (1935) long ago made a similar point in his work on the even larger, nomadic world of Evenki. Instead of the launching of a loose category, however, one born of intercultural encounter and wrought by outsiders, the more confidently presented shaman, “a generic label of Slavic origin via German transcription with negative connotations” (Tomášková 2013, p. 43), took hold. It was also ready evidence for what Franz has described as the rise of a unified “trans-Siberian indigenous culture” that took root at this time, largely flattening the enormous range of peoples and practices across a vast land (Franz 2019, p. 189).

With so much wonder to be held in an age of exploration, the centrality of the shaman-as-embellishment offered much. Flaherty (1992) tells us of the “shamanic discussion. . . raging in Europe” (p. 16) in the eighteenth century and demonstrates how this bridge figure explicitly inspired the varied works of Diderot, Goethe, Herder, and Mozart. Tomášková (2013) adds that the discoveries themselves followed ready patterns, including the repeated demonstration that “when German ethnographers encountered practices and beliefs in magic in the eastern region in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they were neither surprised nor unprepared” (p. 7). Shamans and their attributes were now on a checklist of items and persons to be sought out, found, and cataloged. Yet while German scholars expressed marvel at the mystical figures who could fly and change shape, evidencing exotica abroad, Russian ethnographers, by contrast, “soberly commented on a slowly vanishing world”

(p. 10), coming to “almost opposite conclusions about the same people” (p. 116) in assuring readers that the Russian Empire’s modernizing mission was moving ahead without fail (and without shamans).

Pietz’s intervention on the cognate concept of the fetish again illuminates. From the Portuguese word *feitiço*, which in the late Middle Ages meant “magical practice” or “witchcraft,” when married to the Latin *facticius*, for “manufactured,” came the pidgin *fetisso*, a term that emerged in the cross-cultural spaces of colonial extraction and merchant trade on the west coast of Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Pietz 1985, p. 5). This normal course of events, he argued, instructs all of us to anticipate new terms rising to meet the need to “translate and transvalue” objects and persons “across radically different social systems” (p. 6), such that the fetish itself emerged “in the space of cultural revolution” (p. 11). Instead, as Asad (1993) has argued so extensively, the rise of seventeenth-century liberal European thought gave us an understanding of “religion,” which was decidedly divorced from the worlds of commerce, history, or politics. The revolution, in brief, was short-lived.

In these lights, Buyandelger (2013) helps us to identify shamanism as “modernity’s disowned creation” (p. 28), akin to what Tomášková (2013) calls the paradoxical “agnatology” at the heart of shamanic scholarship, “a cultural and historically induced willingness not to know” and “a stubborn desire not to find out” about shamanism’s direct provenance from the colonial encounter (p. 53). “Shaman,” instead, rapidly became “a word in motion” (Gluck & Tsing 2009) with global traction.

How might things have gone differently had the category of “indigenous,” for example, never been invented? What world would we inhabit today had the peoples known under this rubric been understood, instead and more simply, as just other people, as “coevals” in the sense advocated by Fabian (1983), capable of demonstrating the same diverse range of practitioners of the sacred—with their own priests, sorcerers, magi, magicians, charmers, diviners, soothsayers, augurers, idolaters, and prophets—as any society? Extensive literatures from the past three decades have angled to decolonize, disarticulate, and historicize shamanic practices as one way of delivering on answers and of reclaiming earlier disowned creations.

## HISTORY, EVERYWHERE

Fabian once wrote of a long-standing “schizogenesis” in anthropological practice—the divide created when a fieldworker who is ever-present in the moment of encounter, even humble, can briskly lose that humility when they return home and put pen to paper. Suddenly, the men and women who acted as hosts are “lost in time” (almost always, somewhere back) (Fabian 1983, p. 21). Hence, when Eliade [1964 (1951)] presented one of the most enduring ethnological surveys of shamanic life, its practitioners were already “archaic.”

In more contemporary literature, Thomas & Humphrey’s (1994) *Shamanism, History, and the State* is perhaps the most oft-cited counterargument to this longtime allergy, with Taussig’s (1987) earlier work, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, remaining its most vivid illustration. Since that time, the last 30 years have seen shamans appearing on all fronts, including work at the interstices of socialism and capitalism (Buyandelger 2013, Pedersen 2011); in cities (Balzer 1993, Humphrey 1999); in navigation of the Global North and Global South (Bacigalupo 2016); in the helping of South Koreans to negotiate new forms of political economy and the International Monetary Fund (Kendall 2009); in resistance to contemporary military occupations (Gordillo 2003, 2004); at the junctures of life after Mao (Chao 1999); in the denouncing of white settler-colonists in the Amazon as the People of Merchandise leading us toward global

destruction (Kopenawa & Albert 2013); in the mutual constitutions of Soviet governmentality and indigenous life (Ssorin-Chaikov 2001); on the ruins of the Soviet gulag system (Ulturgasheva (2017); and in attempts to stop the malefactions of Russian politicians (Jonutyté 2020), to name only a few.

Humphrey's remarkable collaboration with the Mongolian shaman and scholar Onon (Humphrey & Onon 1996) does an excellent job of setting the terms of debate. Responding to classic notions that shamanism was somehow a perennially outlawed practice at the margins of state power, the authors write,

We do not take this view because shamanism has sometimes been a central practice of the rulers of states. . . . Shamanism did not define itself in relation to a dominant polity so much as create its own way of operating in the world and all its facets. However, shamanism was concerned with the manipulation of the diverse energies or powers in the world, and political domination was one of these. (p. 2)

Chronicling a world where all manner of beings (not merely humans) “articulate with their own energy and force” (Humphrey & Onon 1996, p. 3) takes some deftness when the work of shamans feeds so directly on worldviews (p. 51). Shamanic action, in short, can change quite fast. Gordillo (2003, p. 109) offers vivid examples of how indigenous Toba people of the Argentine North promoted charismatic shamans as figures in opposition to repeated legacies of military defeat, land grabs, and debt peonage. Echoing earlier work by Taussig, Gordillo (2003) writes that “shamans and ordinary people turned, openly and aggressively, the negative imagery of witchcraft preached by the missionaries against the missionaries themselves” (p. 116).

Active conversation between shamanic landscape and institutional power is central to essays by Ssorin-Chaikov (2001) and Ulturgasheva (2017), set in formerly Soviet Siberia. Working among Evenk reindeer herders, Ssorin-Chaikov steps away from any notions that their ritual systems ever existed separately from Soviet life. Most Evenks, for example, have long exercised careful avoidance of *bubadyl*, or the invisible beings that are associated not only with dead people but also simply with old things. Hence,

Outsiders of a given home or family run the risk of falling ill. . . if they make their presence too obvious—for example, by greeting people upon arrival or departure. You should not say “hello” or “good-bye,” and you also should not touch old things. . . . People who are most predisposed to catch the *bubadyl* are not merely guests or outsiders. . . but also spouses, who come from other families, and particularly newly born children for whom catching the *bubadyl* can prove lethal. (Ssorin-Chaikov 2001, p. 3)

Soviet practice increased this contagion by locating state buildings near or even on top of former cemeteries, as well as by concentrating old things in museums and then obliging generations of schoolchildren to visit them. In the end, he notes, it was not state power but the bonds of kinship that made many Evenki so vulnerable and their need for shamans so great, for it is kinship that keeps you around spouses, babies, and the elderly (Ssorin-Chaikov 2001, p. 14). Ulturgasheva (2017) speaks to a similar form of “cosmological entrapment” among Even persons further to the east, whose own popular ideologies of “open bodies” leave them particularly receptive to the ghosts of gulag prisoners in whose former barracks some individuals now work and atop whose mass burial plots many now live (pp. 32, 36). Here we find nothing of the kinds of ready, sometimes even elegant incorporations of the dead into the land of the living that Kwon (2008) illustrated for postwar Vietnam. Instead, there are flat-out hauntings and even evictions of the living from their homes by the dead. The point is that Even cosmology transforms (as do the chronicles of Soviet history) as non-Even are folded into the world of ghosts.

Of these many contributions, Bacigalupo (2016), working at the border of Chile and Argentina with a remarkable Mapuche Indian shaman or *machi*, and Quijada (2019), writing on post-Soviet Buryatia, are the most explicit in suggesting that shamanism offers its own historiographic registers. In a world of Mapuche multitemporality, Bacigalupo (2016) writes, “Machis’ effectiveness in ritual depends. . . on their ability to embody and transform the suffering of the spirit from the ‘before time’ and the historical past of ‘today time’ in order to gain power in the present and create a better future for the collectivity” (pp. 100–1). Chao (1999), however, reminds us that no matter how powerful the historical setting, shamanic arts are just that, and they depend on the skill of the artist. Working in a relatively poor village in southwest China in the 1990s, Chao recounts how an unusual shaman showed up one day to convince a troubled family that illness was a result of their shortcomings in Communist Party ideology. “I came to save the madman because I pity him!” the shaman sang. “The madman is one of the wretched masses! We invite Mao Zhuxi [Chairman Mao], Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping to come and save the madman!” In doing this, Chao (1999) explains, “she symbolically replaced a local ritual structure comprising the gods of heaven, mountain, and earth with a nationalized ritual structure presided over by this deified postrevolutionary trinity” (p. 509). Most did not buy it.

This active rewriting of shamanic life over the past three decades continues earlier preoccupations with gender. Tomášková (2013) observes, “One particular aspect of Siberian shamanism fascinated and repelled the early ethnographers: the apparent ability and willingness of men to change into women in order to perform ritual functions” (p. 140). Bacigalupo (2007) again offers rich elaboration, showing how the efficacy of Mapuche ritual action hinged greatly on the morphing of men and women into alternative gender forms. Echoing Boddy (1994), Buyandelger (2013) demonstrates how, in contemporary Mongolia, “male practitioners are called shamans because their souls travel, while females are referred to as spirit mediums because their bodies are possessed” (p. 28).

Across these deeply historical accounts, time, space, and shaman morph in key ways. Pedersen (2011) cites the majestic study by Hamayon (1990) when he notes how

as one moves from the forest of Siberia to the steppes of Mongolia, patrification takes over from alliance as the dominant mode of kin relatedness; the breeding of domestic animals gains importance at the expense of the hunting of wild ones; and an otherwise “horizontal” spirit world is slowly elevated into a more ancestralized, and therefore verticalized cosmos composed of beings that are mostly “ontologically different from the human soul.” (Pedersen 2011, p. 166; see also Humphrey & Onon 1996, Ortner 1995)

This pull between the horizontal and vertical could, at times, even shift encounters between communist leaders and “wild” Darhads, where the former needed the latter to make their rule legible, effectively reprising the earlier role of Buddhist monks, a “weighty center,” challenging the relatively “weightless (shamanic) margin” (Pedersen 2011, p. 146). In this analysis, he writes, “Shamanism is not so much a symbolic projection of one type of content (‘politics’ or ‘economics’) onto another type of content (‘religion’). . . . [Instead] shamanism is the (impossible) form assumed by the world in northern Mongolia after socialism. Shamanism is, so to speak, an ontology of transition” (p. 35). As in the Amazon, he adds, it all comes down to the form that beings assume and the shapes of the spirit world they join.

## THE PLURIVERSE

Around the time that Atkinson was preparing the last review on shamanism for the *ARA*, Latour was among those who set in motion a different way of thinking when he released a call to give up



long-standing claims to humankind's purported modernity and move, instead, into a nonmodern world, one where the lines between human and nonhuman blur. He writes,

Modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of “man” or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of “nonhumanity”—things, or objects, or beasts—and the equally strange beginning of a crossed-out God, relegated to the sidelines. (Latour 1993, p. 13)

It was time, in short, for hybrids or, as Haraway (1992) once wrote, for some monsters.

When philosopher William James (1909) once contemplated the need for a “pluriverse” in order to best accommodate human difference, it is unlikely that he anticipated the term's rise in fashion 100 years later. At the time, for all his own anti-imperial sentiments, he leaned in large part on liberal notions of cosmopolitanism, a term that carries its own profoundly normative and, ultimately, flattening effects (Ferguson 2007, Savransky 2019). Reviving a different kind of pluriverse, some asked what would happen if we conjured another social order, one that makes possible a confrontation with the “freight of gods, attachments, and unruly cosmos” earlier set aside in most Western political philosophies (Latour 2004, p. 457), and where the place of the “idiot,” to borrow from the ancient term indicating the foreigner who does not speak Greek, slows down the readiness that so many have to speak on behalf of others (Stengers 2005, p. 1003).

In the world of shamanism, Viveiros de Castro (1998) led the way. Repurposing the mantle of an earlier structuralism (and with a significantly corresponding willingness to assign secondary status to historical context), he brilliantly took up the cause of shared ontological systems across human, animal, and a host of invisible beings. Why should “culture,” he asked, prove so difficult to translate? Instead, it should be nature, or more specifically the perspectives that one brings to the same phenomenon, that matters, an almost-Amazonian rewrite of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty with a nonhuman twist. In place of a flawed cosmopolitanism or a flawed multiculturalism came “multinaturalism” [with Descola (2013) and Kohn (2013) among the key elaborations].

Anthropology's ontological turn elicited debate from some of the brightest minds in the field, including those who identified its limits (Bessire & Bond 2014, Turner 2009, Weismantel 2015). One of the most concise arguments comes from Ramos (2012). “Intercourse between human and nonhuman beings is a recurring fact in fieldwork, regardless of one's research focus,” she writes. “Nevertheless, this does not entitle us to propose that, for the Indians in general, culture is constant and nature is variable. First, because there are no Indians in general; second, because the very idea of nature as we use the word, be it one or many, is mostly alien to indigenous peoples” (p. 483). The problem therefore comes in a flattening of the ethnographic record for South America, rather than in a new opening.

A fascinating question that emerges from these conversations is a return to not only “what shamans actually do” (Atkinson 1989, Humphrey & Onon 1996) but to who (or what) they become while doing it. Do some, in effect, “remain themselves” while entering into communication with other beings, or do they morph into something different? Remaining squarely in Amerindian territory, this time among Chachi Indians of northwest Ecuador, Praet (2009) sets this question in excellent relief. Joining a long line of those who have asked if the language of spirits and souls introduced into South America by Christian missionaries was ever right for shamanic actors, he offers an alternative. Instead of thinking about differences between material and immaterial planes, or worlds of the mortal and immortal, he asks, What if we thought about shapes, instead? (p. 738). In this context, illness itself becomes a form of shape-shifting, where the role of the shaman in healing is to cease being human long enough to merge with the ghosts and monsters in order to restore things to their proper balance. Weighing a series of events in everyday Chachi life, Praet (2009) concludes that “there is no absolute distinction between what is usually referred to as

‘shamanism’ and ‘ritual’; the difference is one of degree rather than one of kind” (p. 748). Nor is shape-shifting necessarily the provinces of shamans only: “It is much more common. . . and much less spectacular than one might think” (p. 748).

Willerslev (2007) makes similar points. Beginning a long engagement with thinking on animism dating back to Frazer and Tylor, he encourages us to join Yukaghir hunters of the Siberian North in a hall of mirrors, where every being has multiple copies that it can assume. One does not need to be a shaman to know this. He writes,

Rather than being at one with the world, the Yukaghir self is in a state betwixt and between: its soul is both substance and nonsubstance; it is its body and its soul, itself and a reincarnated other; it is both human and the animal hunted; it is both predator and prey, and so on. In this world, in which everyone is never solely themselves but always at the same time something else as well, and anyone can transform into virtually anything else, much everyday activity is not just routine and unreflective practice. Rather, here everyday practical life demands a kind of “depth reflexivity” as a form of defense mechanism against the dissolution of the self, which faces a real risk that identification with the world of other bodies, things, and people will become so complete that all difference will appear to vanish and an irreversible metamorphosis will occur. (Willerslev 2007, p. 25)

Echoing Pedersen and others, Willerslev (2007) notes that “the common hunter is in fact at a stage that is halfway toward full shamanship” (p. 133).

Back in the Amerindian world, one of the more luminous recent accounts of shamanic life joins in some of these sentiments. Shaman Davi Kopenawa is among the Yanomami Indians best known to the international world through his long-standing public stance on protecting indigenous rights and lands. Repeatedly citing metamorphosis as the central physics behind shamanic action, Yanomami ingest *yākoana* powder to not simply engage with a world of *xapiri* beings, but become them (Kopenawa & Albert 2013, p. 277). As his father-in-law and mentor explains to him, spirits want “to make you become a spirit like them. . . . This is why they recognize you and come to you so easily now! You do not become a ghost without reason!” (p. 76).

Does this mean that shamans visit those ghosts, or are they already inside of us? One of the most original attempts to reconcile these debates comes in a superbly written book from anthropologist and naturalist Giraldo Herrera (2018). By again dispensing with the language of Christian missionaries to map South American spirit worlds (Giraldo Herrera 2018, p. 25), and by reviving the shamanic science debates of decades past, he asks, What if we looked at the very microbes that circulate through all of us, including but not limited to the contagions that catastrophically upended so much of Amerindian life with the arrival of the Spanish? The result is a careful reading of the microbes, entoptics, and other neurotransmitters in motion during shamanic action. “Dealing with microbes,” he writes, “some of which are pathogens, seems by definition to be directly related with the shaman’s trade. The permeability of shamans to pathogenic agents could be understood as openness to systemic infection; becoming infected, the shaman could identify the pathogen in himself and assist the patient’s diagnosis or the assessment of zoonotic microbes in the environment” (Giraldo Herrera 2018, p. 75). The best place to start decolonizing anthropological writing on shamanism, he contends, is to look, quite literally, inside ourselves.

## CONCLUSION

The contention of this brief survey of literatures on shamanism over the last three decades has been that shamanism’s indexical relationship to the field of anthropology remains firmly in place, continuing to chart concerns in the discipline, much as it has in religious studies and related area-studies fields (Dubois 2011).

In her reflections on the ontological turn in Amerindian scholarship, Ramos (2012) lands at a telling moment that speaks to the isomorphisms between shaman and anthropologist with which I began this review. Once again, she writes, “The Indians have cosmology, whereas the Westerners have theory” (Ramos 2012, p. 484). “Intellectual efforts notwithstanding, we still find the old ethnographic division of labor between those who know (the ethnographers) and those who let themselves be known (the natives)” (p. 490). Her assessment takes on added resonance when we return to the Even (s)haman as “the one who knows,” bringing us back to the heart of the matter. Who, in the end, has the power to know?

Writing a better anthropology of shamanism comes down to the challenge of all anthropology, understanding the limits, the fragilities, and also the pathbreaking possibilities of good translation (Gal 2015; Giraldo Herrera 2018, p. 9; Pharo 2011, p. 6). Some will always rightly bridle at the “ism” part of shamanism, given that trade-offs incur when any typology or model is advanced. Every transcultural category runs this risk. So how best can we render spirit worlds?

In his classic essay, “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin (1968) relied on Pannwitz to guide the way. Pannwitz wrote,

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. (cited in Benjamin 1968, p. 80)

How patient is any among us, Benjamin and Pannwitz ask, to remain open to radical difference? A look back at the earlier anthropological record indicates that structural patience, at least, was often in short supply, when shamans have been cast for generations as decidedly male, all-knowing, gallantly traveling, and doing good on behalf of others. Moving away from these models takes a leap of faith that has nothing to do with the supernatural: conceding a mastery over knowing and finding inside ourselves worlds that we may never entirely comprehend.

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