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Animism rather than Shamanism: new approaches to what shamans do (for other animists)

Graham Harvey (The Open University, UK)

What shamans do is sometimes said to involve possession by spirits. However, shamanism has also been defined in opposition to spirit possession. This chapter proposes that approaching shamans and their activities, ideas and communities via the perspective provided by recent re-examination and re-definition of “animism” may improve and enrich scholarly understanding and analysis of the activities and involvements of shamans. “Possession”, like “shamanism”, deserves considerable debate, contest and care because it can be applied to diverse and contradictory phenomena and does not have one simple, self-evident or uncontested referent. The profligate variety of scholarly application of both terms is hardly disconnected from their invocation in a wide range of religious, social and therapeutic discourses. Judgements of the value of acts, ideas and experiences that can be so labelled vary wildly, and academics have not stood aside from these tangled polemics. At least part of the problem of understanding and researching putative shamanic and possession phenomena is that many of the terms in use are forcefully propelled by a heavy historical legacy that makes alternatives difficult to speak or think. If our observational lenses can easily turn into distorting mirrors so too can our analytic tools become burdensome hindrances. This is especially so when we fail to reflect radically on inherited “Western” notions and approaches and thereby reduce the effectiveness of our scholarly work.

What is proposed here is that a significant alteration of the language used in relation to shamans will improve academic debate and knowledge about a range of phenomena. Current themes in academic debate may be seen in a new light if we attend to the possibilities and perspectives of alternative and in this case indigenous perspectives. In brief, this chapter’s argument is that the activities of shamans, including their performance of what might or might not appropriately be called “possession”, deserve to be revisited in the wake of the recent rethinking about “animism” (especially see Nurit Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2005). Older notions of animism are implicated in still prevalent notions of shamanism and possession because these terms are frequently defined in relation to “spirits”. A summary of this older approach to animism, associated with Edward Tylor, may aid understanding of what is distinctive in the new reconsideration, associated with Irving Hallowell. It will also anticipate some problematic themes in the study of shamans, spirits and possession. The new approach to animism aids a richer understanding of the relational activities of shamans, but it also requires more precision about the beings with whom shamans relate (cooperatively or aggressively) than the inherently vague term “spirits” allows. Conversely, critical debate may be greatly enhanced if we attend to the complex resonances and associations of the term “possession”, especially by linking it to kinds of ownership and relationship rather than to putative inner states.

### *Tylor’s Animism*

In Edward Tylor’s monumental proto-anthropology (1871), “animism” is defined as “a belief in souls or spirits” and is used as a synonym of “religion”. Tylor had considered labelling his theory “spiritualism”, but that was already strongly associated with a particular religious movement. (It might be significant that Spiritualism was gaining popularity in the late nineteenth century, contrary to the decline of religion that Tylor anticipated.) The term animism, however, carried associations with the “souls” and “spirits” that Tylor saw as central, definitive matters of religious belief in *all* religions. It

had been previously used by Georg Stahl (1708) in a failed attempt to define the difference between living bodies and dead matter as the presence of a physical, chemical element, *anima*. All that is left of this theory in Tylor's work is the implicit question "how are living beings distinguished from dead matter?" or, more simply, "is it alive?". Religious people continue the "primitive" error of interpreting dreams and hallucinations as evidence that souls and spirits animate living beings and sometimes possess others. Metaphysics (an error by definition in this rationalist discourse) posits the existence and effects of these constituent parts of beings to distinguish them from inert matter. In accepting such beliefs, religious people make a category error of projecting life where it does not exist (e.g. in rocks) or human attributes such as intentionality on to non-human creatures (e.g. eagles). From the belief in souls and spirits they also extrapolate a further false belief that these make their possessors at least potentially immortal. From there, vast edifices of different religious cultures evolved a panoply of supernatural notions. Of particular interest here is the ability of some spirits to possess other beings' bodies, perhaps even displacing the host spirit.

Tylor's evidence for this grand theory of the nature of religion was drawn from data gathered from colonial sources globally as well as at home in Victorian Britain. Among many other kinds of religious practices, it includes both indigenous possession cults and British Spiritualist séances. It has an explicit polemical purpose: the furtherance of rationalism against the mistakes of religious belief. Tylor's animism should not be mistaken either for a categorisation of a type of religion distinct from "monotheism" or for the name of a particular religion distinct from "Christianity". Tylor's animism *is* religion. He claims to be defining religion as distinct from science, politics, entertainment or any other human endeavour. Nonetheless, because Tylor's animism is reputed to have arisen from the first thought-mistake of a religious kind, its foundational nature contributed to a debate about what kind of religion was the earliest. The Victorian contest between prevalent styles of Christianity and nascent forms of evolutionary theory are visible in the replacement of the theory that religion derives from (monotheistic) divine revelation but has degenerated into diversity, sometimes and in some places at least, by the theory that "primitive" spirit-belief religion slowly progressed towards its own replacement by rationalism.

It can seem possible to encounter Tylor's animists because many people in many places do talk about "spirits" or "souls", or use words that can be translated in this way. Some do talk as if the death of trees was as personally meaningful as the death of humans, or as if deceased relatives continued to communicate with their descendents. Alan Campbell illustrates this with reference to the Amazonian Wayapí, noting that their "conversation shifts between" suggesting "that all sorts of things round them are simply alive" and "that all these things have a soul or spirit in them that makes them alive" (Campbell 2003: 136-7). Nonetheless, Campbell objects to the use of "animism" as a "religious tag" of the sort used by people who produce "colour-coded maps of the world" indicating where particular religions predominate. In these, much of West Africa and Amazonia can be labelled "animist" where people are neither "Christian" nor "Muslim" (although this can depend on who is defining any of these religious complexes). Campbell does not, as he suggests, contribute to the sharpening of Tylor's blunt signpost (mixing his metaphors), but to the understanding of a different approach to animism that he discusses with reference to various kinds of shamanic actions and discourses.

#### *Hallowell's Animism*

The new approach to animism is appropriately associated with the increasingly influential research and writings of Irving Hallowell among the Ojibwa of Beren's

River in south central Canada between the two world wars (Hallowell 1960). The key question here is not “is it alive?” but “how should we relate?”. The problem is not beliefs about something that might distinguish life and death, but learning appropriate ways of behaving. Among the Ojibwa, Hallowell learnt, animism is implicit in grammar and becomes explicit in casual and deliberate discourse and performance.

In the Ojibwa language a grammatical distinction is made between animate and inanimate genders. A suffix, *-g*, is added to nouns that refer to animate persons rather than inanimate objects. Verbs indicating the actions of animate persons differ from those referring to acts done to inanimate objects. For example, the plural form of the word *asin* (stone) is *asiniig*, identifying stones as grammatically animate (Nichols and Nyholm 1995: 14). Ojibwa speakers use the same personal pronoun (*wiin*) for masculine and feminine persons, grammatically making nothing of the difference between masculine and feminine. But they use animate gender terms for a wider range of beings than the English language officially recognises. In practice some English speakers do talk about their ships, cars or computers as if they were animate beings rather than inanimate objects, giving them names, blessing or cursing them, and applying the personal pronouns “he” or “she” rather than the impersonal “it”. How far can this “as if” discourse be taken? In the French language, tables are marked as grammatically feminine, *la table* rather than *le table*. Do French speakers treat grammatically female tables as female persons? Perhaps they do so in poetry and children’s stories, but what about in everyday reality? Just so, the question arises, do the Ojibwa treat grammatically animate stones as animate persons? Do they speak with stones or act in other ways that reveal intentions to build or maintain relationships?

Irving Hallowell asked an unnamed old Ojibwa man, “Are *all* the stones we see about us here alive?” (1960: 24, original emphasis). Grammatically all stones everywhere are animate, but did this man actually think that particular rocks around him were alive? Did he treat them in some way that showed them to be alive? The man answered, “No! but *some* are”. He had witnessed a particular stone following the leader of a shamanic ceremony around a tent as he sang. Another powerful leader is said to have had a large stone that would open when he tapped it three times, allowing him to remove a small bag of herbs when he needed it in ceremonies. Hallowell was told that when a white trader was digging his potato patch he found a stone that looked like it may be important. He called for the leader of another ceremony who knelt down to talk to the stone, asking if it had come from someone’s ceremonial tent. The stone is said to have denied this. Movement, gift-giving and conversation are three indicators of the animate nature of relational beings, or persons.

Hallowell makes it clear that the key point in each account is not that stones do things of their own volition (however remarkable this claim might seem) but that they engage in relationships. For the Ojibwa the interesting question is not “how do we know stones are alive?” but “what is the appropriate way for people, of any kind, to relate?”. This is as true for humans as it is for stones, trees, animals, birds, fish, and all other beings that might be recognised as persons. Persons are known to be persons when they relate to other persons in particular ways. They might act more or less intimately, willingly, reciprocally or respectfully. Since enmity is also a relationship, they might act aggressively — which is important when we seek to understand the need for shamans and the dangerous ambiguity of possession. The category of “person” is only applicable *when* beings are relating with others. Perhaps “person” is not a nominal category but a performance, and one that is both corporeal and corporate. This is quite different to the understanding of most European derived cultures in which personhood is an interior quality, a fact about an individual (human)

who is self-conscious. Hallowell recognised this by insisting that we are not talking here about different “belief systems”, epistemologies, but about different ontologies, different ways of being in the world. Indeed, we could say that the old Ojibwa man lived in a different world from Hallowell’s until the latter learnt to see the world as his teacher showed it to be. Once he saw it, Hallowell had to find new ways to use the English language to write about what he had learnt. To talk of animism may have suggested a discussion of life (animation) versus death. To talk of persons may have implied notions about human interiority (belief, rationality or subjectivity). He has, in fact, been misread in both these ways. However, the “animate persons” Hallowell introduced were relational beings, actors in a participatory world. His question is phrased in a way that indicates he had already appreciated some, at least, of what it meant to live in the unnamed old man’s world: he did not ask “are all rocks (universally) alive?” but inquired about nearby rocks. Hallowell was already recognising the importance of relationship and participation.

Having learnt from his Ojibwa hosts, Hallowell coined the phrase “other-than-human persons” to refer to the animate beings with whom humans share the world. He was not privileging humanity or saying that what makes something a person is their likeness to humans. He is clear that “person” is not defined by human characteristics or behaviours. The term is a much larger umbrella than “human”. All beings communicate intentionally and act towards others relationally: this makes them “persons”. It is useful *for us* (humans) to speak about “human-” and “other-than-human” persons only because (a) we are humans talking to humans (if we were bears we might speak of “other-than-bear persons”), and (b) because English-speakers are preconditioned to hear the word “person” as a reference to other humans. The word “persons” should be enough, and would be if English-speakers had not learnt to privilege and separate humanity from other beings. This separation is also demarcated by the variously maintained boundaries between the “natural” and “social” sciences as much as by the peculiar way in which humans are separated from “the environment” in contrast with the integrated placing of animals *in* their environment — and other constructions of culture/nature dualism.

Animists live in a different world: a community of persons all of whom are capable of relationship, communication, agency and desire. There is no mute or inert “nature” but only the many competing conversations of a multi-species cultural community. Some of these conversations cross species-boundaries. Another of Hallowell’s informants told him that he had been visiting with an elderly couple during a thunder storm. He said, “There was one clap of thunder after another. Suddenly the old man turned to his wife and asked, ‘Did you hear what was said?’ ‘No,’ she replied, ‘I didn’t catch it.’” Hallowell comments that

The casualness of the remark and even the trivial character of the anecdote demonstrate the psychological depth of the “social relations” with other-than-human beings that becomes explicit in the behavior of the Ojibwa as a consequence of the cognitive “set” induced by their culture (Hallowell 1960: 34).

After a lifetime living as animists this couple assumed that thunder is an act of communication. Acceptance of not having “caught” what was said indicates another assumption: that not all communication is about us (humans in general or the hearers specifically). The elderly couple could carry on talking with their visitor while the thunder engaged in a separate conversation nearby.

By referring to relational beings, “persons” invites us to consider what “good persons” might be. In Ojibwa culture (and many other indigenous cultures) goodness too is relational: people are encouraged to be good towards one another, and they are recognised as being good when they reciprocate respect rather than enmity. Eating

other “persons” may place a strain on relationality but perhaps only if permission is not sought and placation offered (Tawhai 1988: 101). Predation may be conceived of as an ordinary act within the negotiated relational community of living beings, but it too may be pursued within the dynamic tension between respect and aggression. Totemism and shamanism may usefully point to ways of dealing with these negotiations and tensions. If the former entails cooperation, the latter is sometimes said to involve aggressive possession.

### *Totemism*

In one of her excellent discussions of Aboriginal Australian relationships with their lands and other-than-human neighbours, Debbie Rose writes that not only humans, but also “other animals like kangaroos have their own rituals and law, and ... they too take care of relationships of well-being” among all the inhabitants of an area or “country”. All related beings share rights and responsibilities, and are expected to be committed to and concerned for each other’s “flourishing in the world” (1998: 7 and 11). Rose uses the term “totemism” to refer to these relationships and commitments that cross species boundaries, involving high degrees of mutual care. In her *Reports from a Wild Country* (2004) she further establishes the responsibility of local, multi-species communities for the well being of all co-inhabitants, an obligation that is commonly identified as “the Law” among Aboriginal people but also (re-)translated as “Dreaming”. Tim Ingold’s (2000) term “dwelling” might be a more resonant equivalent. In this context “wild” is not synonymous with “nature” (either positively or negatively valued) but refers to places that have not been cared for appropriately: it is a result of the hyperseparation of humans from both place and from the community of other-than-human persons. By drawing attention to the presence and absence of humans and ways of being in place this counter use of “wild” contests the construction of “wildernesses” and “nature (p)reserves” which result from the removal of human dwellers. It reveals links between genocide and ecocide just as it invites the linkage of eco-responsibility and co-inhabitation.

The word “totem” originated among the Ojibwa and refers to clans that include humans and particular animals and plants. It has been used by academics to theorise about human-animals relations. Claude Lévi-Strauss established the notion that totem-animals are chosen not because they are “good to eat” but because they are “good to think” (1969: 89). Here, once again, a scholar has constructed an epistemology than marginalises a term’s originators. In Ojibwa and Aboriginal Australian totemism, animals are good to relate with. As Chris Knight says, “Totemism is, therefore, embedded in animism as an aspect of sociality” (Knight 1996: 550). It is a more immediate and intimate mode of relating than the all-embracing relationality indicated by “animism”. The title of another of Debbie Rose’s books points to the central importance of totemic relationships in making people what they are: *Dingo Makes Us Human* (1992). The job that clans are supposed to do within the wider, inclusive, cross-species community posited by animism is to animate and locally enact the privileging of respect, cooperation and the bias towards resolving differences amicably rather than destructively. However, Rose is careful to point out that relationships and co-habitation are not always harmonious: they can lead to tension, conflict and competition. There is often a need for mediators or diplomats to intervene between groups and individuals to sort out problems — such people may be labelled “shamans” for comparative and analytical purposes.

### *What “shaman” means*

It is too late to insist (although a few scholars still do) that nobody should be named a shaman beyond the territorial, cultural and linguistic boundaries of the Siberian

Evenk people and related speakers of Tungus languages. A host of neighbouring and distant religious and/or social functionaries are regularly named “shamans” alongside whatever local names might be deemed applicable. Without doubt, indigenous terms point to variations of some type or magnitude. In one place, the label “shaman” might translate a local term pinned to a healer, in another to someone who gains knowledge about prey animals in unusual ways, and elsewhere to ritualists with expertise in communicating with the deceased or the divine. Campbell (1995) argues that among the Wayapí (and perhaps elsewhere) we have been misled into identifying “shamans” where local people speak not in nouns but adjectives and even verbs that point to a range of acts and abilities widely available to everyone in the community — sometimes without any deliberate effort. Nonetheless, although “shaman” does now label a wide range of phenomena, a quick skim through academic publications, let alone popular ones, will show that absolutely anything and everything can be (indeed probably has been) labelled “shamanic” or “shamanism”. This makes it hard to be clear what any author means by “shaman” and related terms. At least part of the confusion is caused by uncertainty about whether we are offered (or seeking) functional, lexical or real definitions (Baird 1971: 1-16). As with “religion”, it is possible that “shaman” no longer refers (if it ever did) to something “real”. Its lexical history demonstrates a confusingly wide range of associations and putative referents. Now only a functional definition — selected precisely to draw attention to particular phenomena within the possible range — is helpful. In this regard, the intention of this chapter is to demonstrate the value of defining shamans as people who play specific but varying roles within (localised) animist communities. Contrasting definitions are not negated, merely deemed less interesting and less helpful in relation to much of what they purport to define.

Where should we begin to form a functional definition? What are the basic and central data to which it must refer? Many attempts to talk about shamans begin with the title’s origins among the Evenk people and their neighbours. At first this seems obviously helpful: it was their word first, they ought to know what it means and what is expected of people to whom it applies. However, two portrayals (one visual, one verbal) of Evenk shamans immediately point to fundamental problems. The first is a wood-cut depiction of a shaman in Nicolas Witsen’s 1692 book *Noord en Oost Tartarye* entitled “Priest of the Devil”. The second is Piers Vitebsky’s ethnography of the Evenk entitled *The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia* (2005).

It is tempting to ignore Witsen’s allegation that shamans have anything to do with the Christian devil but if we do so why should we trust anything about the portrayal at all? If Witsen is responsible for the devilish clawed feet portrayed here, how can we be sure he did not invent the drum or the posture? Ethnographic description from elsewhere might support these details but our understanding is at least contaminated by Witsen’s composite (if it is not a complete fabrication). But this is a small matter in comparison with the greater difficulty caused by Witsen’s identification of this shaman as a “priest”. Are shamans and priests really comparable? Do they serve the same, presumably religious, function? Many more recent scholars of shamanism categorically reject such assertions, even suggesting that no one could possibly confuse the two. Should we be swayed by such certainty? How helpful is it to define one term in relation (whether of comparison or opposition) to another that is, once we begin to think about it, similarly unclear and wide-ranging. What, after all, do Episcopalian priests have in common with Vodou leaders or officiates at ancient biblical or Roman ceremonies? Perhaps the answer here is “sacrifice” (real or metaphorical) but, if so, does the categorical distinction between shaman and priest collapse among shamans who offer gifts, including blood sacrifice, to their

ancestors? If, however, the term “shaman” is indeed a local, indigenous term for “priest” scholars already have a translation equivalent and need not mystify others by importing a foreign term. Similarly, if “shaman” and “priest” are equally translatable as “religious leader” without further clarification or content-specific narrowness, they are equally vacuous.

Vitebsky, meanwhile, nourishes the idea that reindeer herders who employ shamans live among animals and spirits. If we assume that “animals” in the subtitle refers in particular to reindeer, an internet search for “reindeer” returns many sites that present uncontroversial images, descriptions and even recipes. Certainly there are sites that offer stories of reindeer that might be alleged to commit the error of anthropomorphising, projecting human-likeness of some kind. Others are plainly mythological or folkloric. Generally, however, “reindeer” are recognizable denizens of a taxonomy of the deer family, the prey of humans and wolves. “Animals” too, though a wider taxon, is readily understandable. “Spirits”, however, are far less easy to pin down. The few websites that offer any kind of illustration of spirits tend to use conventional symbols like candle flames rather than portrait photographs. Dictionaries evidence a widespread vagueness arising from the (reputed) intangibility of the word’s supposed referents. But *if* spirits are, by definition, alien to the material world or embodied life, the means by which they cause effects that require shamanic intervention are hard to understand. Vitebsky’s linking of animals (rather than reindeer specifically) and spirits might suggest that “spirits” is a wider, more generic term. There might be as many kinds of spirit as there are kinds of animals. This is born out to some degree by illustrations in another of Vitebsky’s books: *The Shaman* (1995) which will be commented on below. The question raised by Vitebsky’s “animals and spirits” subtitle is whether we really know what “spirits” means in the same way that we know (or can easily find out) what “reindeer” means. If the term is inherently vague it is arguably more mystifying than conducive to understanding.

Whatever “spirits” means, a common theme of discourse about shamans is that they are caught in a tension between opposing and cooperating with “spirits”. Often these are played out in the domain of health or illness, healing and other therapeutic practices and discourses. Where shamans are healers they may be defined by the enabling relationship they have formed with “spirits” and their opposition to the predatory acts of other “spirits”. Where shamans are allies of hunters they may be defined by the mediation they conduct between potentially generous and potentially aggressive “owners of (prey) animals or other food sources”. The precise form and content of shamanic acts and ideas is the subject of complex ethnographies and, if one is willing to embrace their inclusion, Western spiritual DIY manuals. (*My Shamanism: A Reader*, 2003, and *Shamanism Dictionary*, co-authored with Robert Wallis, 2005, are intended to promote debate about these and other definitional and boundary issues.) The point here is that if only some shamans are therapists and only some shamans inform hunters these cannot inform a global, cross-cultural or critical definition of the term. If, as seems common opinion, some practice to do with something called “spirits” is universal, then these practices and entities appear definitive.

Mircea Eliade’s defining of the word “shaman” — and his shaping of “shamanism” in research and in practice — is (virtually) inescapable. Everything he wrote on the topic is an exposition of the words of his (1964) book title: *Shamanism: the Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. His “ecstasy” follows in the trajectory of earlier scholars in privileging states of consciousness. Marie Antoinette Czaplicka (1914), for example, summarised earlier and contemporary writing about the hysteria and mental illness of shamans, and Shirokogoroff (1935) wrote about the “psychometrical complex of the Tungus”. Narby and Huxley say that “Lévi-Strauss appeared to settle the issue by

twisting it around and saying that shamans were more like psychologists than psychotics" (2001: 75, referring to Lévi-Strauss 1949). Others have agreed, e.g. Morton Klass (1995: 72) asserts that shamans are neither frauds nor mentally ill, but intelligent and thoughtful individuals. Nonetheless, Eliade's insistence that shamans are essentially expert controllers of "ecstatic" states has reinforced the psychological turn in shamanism studies and constructions. He has persuaded many that what shamans do is to perform "techniques" that result in their own ecstasy. This allows them to benefit others — especially therapeutically — but it is the shaman's psychological state that is most important. Such techniques are "archaic" when they derive from ancient, traditional or authorised origins. Eliade does not hide his claim to be able to authoritatively determine whether or not particular people practise "archaic techniques" or not. For example, he condemns contemporary shamans for being "degenerate" when they fail to adhere to his insistence on the centrality of an allegedly ancient tripartite cosmology. But even dabbling with the lower of the three proposed realms is deemed inadequate. Where "possession" is not the condition shamans seek to cure in others, where it is something that overwhelms shamans themselves, it is a failing, part of this degeneracy.

Eliade's position was greatly developed by Michael Harner (1990). Harner adapted shamanic initiation and Eliadean ecstasy into states achievable in a suburban living room or a New Age workshop. Consciousness could be altered by individual imagination aided by taped drum rhythms and other modernised and interiorised archaic techniques. "Neo-shamans" cannot be criticised for converting frightening otherworlds into life-enhancing inner-worlds and conflating shamanism with quasi-Jungian therapy when Eliade, Harner and other academics required such a move (Jakobsen 1999). The task of distinguishing a "shaman" from other therapists and seekers of personal growth is, however, made more difficult. The lack of fit between Eliade's model (or tight-jacket) and ethnographies of shamans and those they live among has only widened in parallel with the criticisms levelled at Eliade for purveying a single cosmology regardless of the data he claimed to be discussing. Nonetheless, the various Western forms of shamanism continue to constellate around "spirits" if we allow that term to embrace "inner", psychological or archetypal realities, and "possession", whether this is something to be cured or, in metaphorical terms at least, a state of consciousness to be evoked. But since both terms mystify rather than aid understanding they cannot easily form helpful, scholarly definitions of what shamans are or what they do. We need to examine "spirits" and "possession" further.

### *Spirits*

In Piers Vitebsky's *The Shaman* there are illustrations of what "spirits" look like. Most impressively, spread across pages 20-21 there is "A Shaman's-Eye Photograph of Non-ordinary Reality". Or, rather, there might be — Vitebsky ends the caption with a question mark. The difficulty is compounded when Vitebsky discusses the photo. First he quotes the Tamu shamans' exclamation on being shown the photo that "This is exactly what the god, the witches and the ancestors look like!" In the next paragraph he says that "The shaman explained that the yellow line running right across the picture is what the ancestor spirits who come to protect the shamans look like as they arrive". Another coloured line becomes "the souls of witches" not just "the witches" (1995: 20). The fact that these shifts in description are made by a careful presenter of rich ethnographic description and an enviable critical analyst indicates that even the best interpretations can lead to uncertainty. The term "spirit" here and everywhere is at best a religious term and at worst a word imported by observers who, whatever they intend, thereby make understanding less rather than more likely. If people are willing to claim that ancestors, stones or lightning communicate in various ways, or that witches and deities exist, or that trees can have good or bad

intentions, the addition of the word “spirit” is either empty of meaning or too full of meanings. If empty, the term can immediately be dropped and we can worry about what people mean when claiming that the dead or rocks participate in ceremonies. If full, the term is either part of a local taxonomy that requires translation (just as Evenk terms have been translated into “animals” and “reindeer” in Vitebsky’s book title) or a remnant from the taxonomy of Western religious vocabulary. Since “spirit” in Western discourses either refers to mysteries that transcend or romanticise ordinary reality or contributes to polemics about false (foolish or culpable) metaphysics it is, again, not conducive to understanding or debate. The regular use of “spirits” in association with the word “possession” invites another approach to the range of questions we are asking about what shamans do and what shamanism is.

### *Possession*

Just for now, let us assume that, on occasions at least, shamans see ancestors and witches (whatever these terms mean) and that animists communicate with animate stones. Let us try to cast out whatever associations the word “spirit” might have if we were to add it to these or other terms. That done, we can ask what “possession” might mean in the context of what shamans do and what happens to them and those among whom they live and serve. Some interpreters may conclude that “possession” is best translated into others that speak more plainly of psychological conditions or states of consciousness. They may be correct. People may mistake unusual or powerful “inner states” for experiences of other beings. Experiences are always interpreted and never so immediate that we can know or speak about them unmediated by expectations, worldviews and contexts. Similarly, people absorb the expectations of their group or society and tend to perform in locally typical ways. Indeed, if they wish to be understood it makes sense for them to share wider ideas, even about what is “eccentric”. We do not need to agree with informants about their interpretations. However, if our first aim is to understand what shamans say they do and experience it does make sense for us to begin with their discourse, their knowledge as expressed in locally relevant ways. It might also be true that the legacy of Martin Luther and René Descartes too easily persuades us to fit what people say and do into boxes that privilege individuality and interiority (belief, mind, consciousness) (see, e.g., Taylor 1998: 2; Koerner 2005: 421, 433). Such boxes may be both inappropriate and uncritical. What is proposed here is that the wider associations of the term “possession” with ownership and relationships (including complementary and conflicting ones) may enrich scholarly discussions of shamanic and other phenomena.

Descriptive data from many putatively shamanic contexts demonstrates the wide distribution of ideas of intimate relationships between shamans and otherworld beings. (The term “otherworld” is admittedly another difficult or mystifying one. It is used here to suggest something like an aspect, perhaps plural aspects, of the world that is not encountered easily everyday by everybody. It may be conceived to be above or beneath the land or sea surface, or in a nearby but strange dimension, but is not as “transcendent” as the heavens of monotheistic cosmologies. Its geography and inhabitants may be what the word “spirit” claims to refer to, but these are not necessarily any less physical than this-worldly beings — just of a different order.) Sexual, seductive and marital language is used in many places to refer to the formation and maintenance of relationships between shamans and otherworld partners. These are sometimes paralleled or in conflict with similar relationships with human partners. Such discourses suggest, at least, a degree of complementarity but with an edge that at least hints at potentially ambiguous or fraught power imbalances. The seducer and seduced are not always either equals or entirely willing. More aggressive relational terms are also frequent and form the bulk of discourse about

shamanic initiations. It is here that shamans are most likely to experience something closest to the phenomena elsewhere labelled “possession”: being overpowered and overwhelmed by an other. If the initiation is successful (i.e. if the initiate narrates this as an initiation) it is likely to lead to the formation of a working relationship in which the shaman is helped in future tasks. This typically involves claims that the shaman has gained control or mastery of the being who assaulted them, and is able to maintain control over them to the benefit of others. In particular, people in the shaman’s human community who are assaulted by such beings might be aided by the shaman and the mastered being. This is the foundation of the claim that shamanism and possession are distinct phenomena. However, since members of “possession cults” *voluntarily* undergo “possession” by powerful others, and since their narration of such experiences so closely parallels that of shamanic relationships, it is hard to resist the notion that these are similar phenomena. It is sometimes claimed that people who are “possessed” are controlled by others rather than gaining control over them — but descriptions of possession and of shamanic séances often include considerable ambiguity about who is in control. Performances contain phases and elements that illustrate a host of locally expected acts and motifs. Deities, ancestors, disease-beings, owners-of-animals could, in theory, act in a wide range of ways but tend to be recognisable within more-or-less stereotypical acts. This is, of course, to be expected in a context where something is being communicated.

Whatever we are to make of performative dramas among the possessed and among shamans, it is certainly helpful to note Caroline Humphrey’s (1994) reminder that the important matter for shamans and their communities is rarely the individual’s inner state of mind (which is considered inaccessible to others), but the fact that particular actions identifiable as “possession” or “trance” indicate that the shaman is communicating with helpers or journeying to gain knowledge and abilities beyond those of other people. Similarly, Ioan Lewis’ demonstration of the close similarities between practices and discourses identified as shamanism in one place and possession elsewhere undermine any categorical differentiation. Lewis (2003) supports a definition of shamans as people who welcome “possession” as an aspect of (sexual and/or marital) relationship with otherworld persons, and who are distinguished from the victims of unwanted possession — who may be the subject of exorcism by shamans (or other religious specialists where there is no acceptable form of possession).

### *Shamans, spirits, possession and animism*

If we refuse to psychologise shamans, and resist accepting that pre-existing Western (Protestant Christian and Enlightenment inflected) notions readily explain shamanic discourse and practice, we may need to drop the word “spirit” even as we worry about what “possession” entails. The (new) animism does not simplistically replace the word “spirit” with the word “person” but challenges a stress on interiority, spirituality or transcendence, and mystification. It points to relationality as a key to what happens in shamanic acts and communities. It makes it possible to understand shamans not as virtuosi dealing with their own psychoses and helping others with psychosomatic problems, but as necessary negotiators of communal well-being among people who understand themselves to be participatory members of wider than human communities. The radical personalist ontology of animism does not romanticise relationship but pays attention to ambiguities and even raises difficulties distinctive from those known elsewhere. The problem of the need to eat those who are themselves “persons” leads directly to conflicts about ownership of and access to what we might call “resources”. Many animist communities require shamans because of issues of possession: who possesses the animals that hunters and cooks require? Who possesses the right to give and take life? Who possesses control over animals,

health, wealth and well-being? If it is not individuals, are there powerful persons of some other-than-human but also other-than-animal kind whose aid and permission might be sought or whose anger might be placated? In communities with relatively diffuse authority patterns, who possesses the authority to define appropriate behaviour? When people are ill who is in control and who can help? When people bring home food, who possesses it? Such questions about varied and mundane kinds of possession are raised to intimate that possession as a (putative) state of (awareness/performance of) being controlled and/or in control of other beings is entangled with other senses of the word. Possession here becomes a way of talking about varied kinds of ownership implicated in particular kinds of relationship and particular kinds of performance.

In the version of shamanism popularised in a trajectory following Eliade and Harner the abbreviation “ASC” has become popular, highlighting the centrality of “Altered States of Consciousness”. This sums up a range of the problems of an interiorising interpretation that devotes most attention to individuals and their consciousness. It is proposed here to re-use the abbreviation ASC to refer to “Adjusted Styles of Communication”. Shamans are persons (human or otherwise perhaps) who learn to communicate across species boundaries within a richly animate world full of persons who deserve respect but might be eaten and might aggress, and who might control and be controlled.

### *Conclusion*

Earlier it was insisted that, despite the confusing cacophony of claimants to the title, it is too late to restrict the term “shaman” within a Siberian religious or cultural box. Although there are local specificities that are identified by the Evenk as the activities of shamans rather than elders or hunters, there are commonalities as well as differences between Evenk shamans and other religious or cultural actors elsewhere. Engaging with similarities and differences in order to form working definitions rather than absolute ones is something scholars of religion are used to, precisely because “religion” is amenable to so many definitions (Smith 1998: 281; Chidester 2005: vii; Tweed 2006: 60). It has been suggested, in opposition to Nicolas Witsen’s polemical image, that shamans are not priests, and, in concert with Vitebsky’s suggestive subtitle, that they do have something to do with “spirits” among people who live closely with animals (hunting and/or herding in particular). Now that the term “shaman” is so widely used with reference not only to reindeer herders and those who deal with “spirits”, but also to agriculturalists and consumerists who utilise consciousness-altering techniques, the Evenk (and knowledge of the Evenk) cannot now say what “shaman” means in all the books and websites where it now appears.

“Shaman”, “spirit” and “possession” are Humpty Dumpty words: words that are made to work hard, sometimes in eccentric ways, and sometimes “paid extra” for their work (as Humpty Dumpty claims to do in a bizarre conversation with Lewis Carroll’s, 1872, Alice “through the looking glass”). It is argued here that the word “spirit” is made to work too hard but is never paid extra: it is most often obscure or redundant. It should now be retired altogether. The word “possession” works hard and is beginning to be paid its due, as evidenced in this book and in wider reconsideration and research. It promises to reward this careful attention with even greater insights into the richness of the human relationships, performances and experiences that it labels. “Shaman” has certainly worked too hard and is only sometimes paid extra. This chapter has aimed to say something about animist shamans working among and for other animists because relationality needs mediations of various kinds. It has sought to introduce some of the benefits of speaking about shamanic relationships, including those that entail “possession”. In this context, animist shamans might be defined as

people who, for specific, locally meaningful purposes, welcome “possession” by otherworld persons while also “possessing” those persons as significant helpers and co-workers. “Possession” here may be defined as a particular kind of relationship that arises from and affects the behaviour of both the shaman and the otherworld person. Whether these functional definitions describe reality (i.e. whether there really are otherworld persons) is not the point. The task is to see the world of those among whom we research and allow ourselves to be challenged to understand and communicate about them more richly than we would under the possessive constraints of our cultural context. To that end, the words “person” and “relationship” are offered as ways of understanding matters of importance in the scholarly debate about shamans and possession.

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