

Introduction

Our attention was first drawn to the contemporary scientific study of shamanism on two counts. Firstly, there were its “mutations”; although shamanism as a socio-religious phenomenon is believed to be quite ancient, it has nevertheless undergone a substantial amount of development in contemporary urban areas. Secondly, there were the new, evolving methods used to elucidate shamanism’s diverse aspects.

We would like to note in particular a new and little studied area of research: the so-called “recrudescences,” which have largely escaped scientific scrutiny. In some cases they have fallen under the category of *pseudo-shamanism* or *neo-shamanism*. These recrudescences, associated with “trendy” modes of thought, have taken shape in the “undergrounds” of California, London, Berlin, Paris, and elsewhere.

The appearance of neo-shamanism has reignited a long-standing debate between proponents of two approaches to the study of shamanism: The first employs the language of psychology and starts with the personality of the shaman and his or her “problems,” even “psychotic characteristics.” This approach has given rise to the question of “altered states of consciousness.” The other approach, which employs the language of the history of religion and anthropology, is an inheritance from the missionaries and chroniclers who first observed shamanism.

Since the publication, in 1982, of an article by Philippe Mitrani – an article that demonstrated both the productiveness and limits of the psychological approach to shamanism – it had been assumed that the debate over the shaman’s personality (and, with it, over the role of “altered states of consciousness”) had been put to rest. However, the complexity of contemporary phenomena, as illustrated by the first international conference on shamanism (Seoul, 1991), which itself was a result of decisions made during the International Congress of Anthropology and Ethnology in Zagreb in 1988, has served to spur the various disciplines in a direction

that will lead, in the long run, to an interdisciplinary approach to this field of study.

The articles that follow are offered by researchers who have specialized in the study of shamanism for a number of years. Some of these researchers have been actively involved in this area – whether it be in the laboratory, the classroom or the field – for more than twenty years. Our decision to call upon author-investigators from various nations is a norm that *Diogenes*, since its inception, has followed as part of its international orientation. It is also an indispensable approach for a comparative perspective on the world of contemporary shamanism: Russian, American, Canadian, and Korean investigators are brought together here with franco-phone specialists.

This special issue embodies certain problematical aspects of an entire field of study. It strives to present a reevaluation of facts and theoretical approaches as well as an evaluation of current developments based upon observations of the avatars of shamanism in contemporary society.

The “avatar” – like the *métis* of the ancient Greeks – plays jokes and sets traps; he hides when one expects to find him, only to reappear suddenly in an unexpected location. Sometimes shamanism grafts itself onto the great religions, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, or upon ancient religions that are remaking themselves in new forms; sometimes it appears in “primitive,” prophetic modes that carry and diffuse its message. The reader will encounter these diverse phenomena in the course of this volume. In a journal of various voices, discord can be as important a contribution as the quality of investigation and innovation of each article.

It was in this spirit, and following these guidelines, that the first draft of this proposed issue was presented to the editor-in-chief of *Diogenes*, Jean d’Ormesson, and to his co-editor, Paola Costa: we wish to thank them both for having shown us the confidence necessary to allow us to bring together our authors and develop our themes. Our contacts with foreign collaborators are due to the determination and perspicacity of Roberte Hamayon alone. It was she who conceived and organized their contributions and we are also grateful to her for having written the afterword. I wish personally to thank her and each of the collaborators of this number for their help.

MICHEL MATARASSO