



Published in final edited form as:

*Behav Brain Sci.* 2018 January ; 41: e88. doi:10.1017/S0140525X17002199.

## The social functions of shamanism

Rachel E. Watson-Jones,

Cristine H. Legare

Department of Psychology, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX

### Abstract

Cultural evolutionary accounts of shamanism must explain the cross-cultural recurrence and variation in associated practices. We suggest that Singh's account of shamanism would be strengthened by considering the social functions of shamanism in groups. Shamanism increases social group cohesion, making it distinct from other magico-religious practices.

---

The term *shamanism* can be applied broadly to a wide set of magico-religious practices that occur across cultures. Historical, social, economic, and ecological factors contribute to how shamanistic practices are organized within cultural groups. Singh's account of the cultural evolution of shamanism provides a framework for explaining cross-cultural variation and recurrence of related practices. As the author notes, however, the current "theory is agnostic as to whether shamans provide benefits to clients or groups" (sect. 3.4, para. 3). We argue that understanding social functions is central to a cultural evolutionary account of shamanism. We discuss how the social nature of shamanism differentiates it from practices related to other magico-religious practices such as witchcraft. We also explain that the rituals associated with shamanism provide a means of social cohesion that does not always necessarily involve signaling cooperative intent (Watson-Jones & Legare 2016).

Shamanism and traditional healing are distinct from practices related to witchcraft. Winkelman's (1986b) analysis of Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (Murdock & White 1969) data provided evidence that magico-religious practices are related to political and economic complexity. This analysis revealed that there are four major practitioner types related to socioeconomic conditions:

1. The Healer Complex that includes shamans, shaman/healers, and healers – the major distinction among these being that the shamans and shaman/healers engage in trance states, whereas the healers do not. Shamans were most associated with hunter/gatherer societies, shaman/healers with all societies that had agriculture, and healers with almost all societies that were politically integrated.
2. Mediums who were characterized as engaging in possession-like trance states and were found in agricultural and pastoralist societies
3. Priests who were often leaders in societies with political integration and a hierarchical social structure that relied heavily on agriculture

4. Malevolent practitioners who engaged in harmful activities against others in societies with political integration. Across many cultures, witchcraft practitioners are considered malevolent actors. For example, in South Africa, witchcraft is a common attribution for the ultimate cause of AIDS transmission (Legare & Gelman 2008). Witchcraft practitioners are accused of using their supernatural knowledge for individual gain and are not regarded as working in the interests of all members of the community. In many cases, once communities with shamans are integrated into more complex socioeconomic systems, practitioners associated with the predominant religion call out or label shamans as witches to delegitimize their role within the community (Winkelman 1986b).

Shamanism is communal. Many anthropologists have argued that shamanism has social functions; it increases social cohesion and cooperation. Shamans act as a conduit to the supernatural realm, where they act on group members' behalf and enable rituals (often dramatic) that bind group members together for a common goal. This is not to say that shamans act selflessly. As the author notes, shamans often are prestigious members of their communities. An account of the cross-cultural recurrence and variation of magico-religious practices must take into account the perceived, or actual, motivations of the practitioners. The shaman reduces uncertainty surrounding important fitness-related events, such as illness, childbirth, hunting, and protection from enemies. Healers are almost exclusively responsible for dealing with illness-related issues, and witches are perceived as focused on causing harm to others, most often surreptitiously. It would be interesting to consider whether shamanism is ever practiced in secret – if shamanistic practices are done in isolation from other community members, are they ever done without request or knowledge of the community?

The importance of shamanism and similar practices for group functioning is not necessarily related to signaling cooperative intent, and the author provides a cogent argument against costly signaling accounts of shamanism. Cooperative intent doesn't get off the ground without a preexisting, regularly maintained core of social cohesion. The rituals associated with shamanism provide a means of reaffirming social solidarity through shared experience and providing an indication of commitment to group norms.

Does shamanism professionalize because of its contribution to group functioning? Singh argues that shamanism professionalizes “because individuals typically must invest in transformative practices to be considered capable of influencing uncertain outcomes” (sect. 5.1, para. 4). In this way, the professionalization differs from that of practices related to technical knowledge. Both expertise and group consensus increase perceptions of ritual efficacy (Souza & Legare 2011). We argue that the professionalization of shamanism also is related to the function it serves for groups. As the earliest ritual practitioners, shamans provided a means of group cohesion that was, and is, essential for small-scale societies.

The defining characteristics of shamanism come partly from its relationship to social group dynamics and the benefits its practices provide for social cohesion. Singh's framework of the cultural evolution of shamanism neglects an essential explanatory feature of shamanism: the social benefits it provides to human groups.

## References

- Legare CH & Gelman S (2008) Bewitchment, biology, or both: The co-existence of natural and supernatural explanatory frameworks across development. *Cognitive Science* 32:607–42. doi:10.1080/03640210802066766. [PubMed: 21635349]
- Souza AL & Legare CH (2011) The role of testimony in the evaluation of religious expertise. *Religion, Brain, and Behavior* 1:146–53.
- Watson-Jones RE & Legare CH (2016) The social functions of group rituals. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25:42–46.
- Winkelman MJ (1986b) Magico-religious practitioner types and socioeconomic conditions. *Behavior Science Research* 20:17–46. doi:10.1177/106939718602000102.