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The signs of the sacred: Identifying shamans using archaeological evidence

Christine S. VanPool *

Department of Anthropology, 201 Swallow Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211-1440, United States

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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists have determined that shamanism is a robust cross-cultural pattern, but they still have many methodological and theoretical issues to resolve. Central to archaeological religious studies is the need to develop a general and rigorous methodology for identifying the presence and structure of shamanism. This discussion begins by discussing shamans as a polythetic class and proposes that shamans and priests as they are commonly defined do not represent dichotomous religious structures, but rather reflect two ends of a continuum. The paper then presents a methodology for identifying and studying shamanism based on cross-cultural regularities in shamanic tools (sacra) and shamanic experiences. The methodology is then applied to the Casas Grandes region and Pottery Mound, both from the North American Southwest, and indicates that shamanic ritual was likely present during the late prehistoric occupation of the region.

Introduction

Archaeological analyses of past religious systems are becoming increasingly common, and represent a major area of anthropological research (Rakita and Buikstra, 2008, p. 2). This includes a fluorescence of books and articles written on shamanism by professional archaeologists over the past decade (Aldhouse-Green and Aldhouse-Green, 2005; Emerson, 2003; Lewis-Williams, 2002; Lewis-Williams and Pearce, 2005; McCall, 2007; Pearson, 2002; VanPool and VanPool, 2007; Whitley, 2000). These studies are based on a robust empirical pattern initially identified by ethnologists who found that religious practitioners from across the globe initiate trance states, generally called altered states of consciousness (ASC), for the purpose of communing with spirits. Subsequent research by other anthropologists and researchers in related fields have further validated the etic category of shamanism, defined as individual, part-time practitioners who commune with spirits (Jones, 2006).

Interest in shamanism in general has been increasing amongst anthropologists. The journal *Anthropology of Consciousness,* published by the American Anthropological Association, in fact lists shamanism as one of its major areas of interest, and a recent review of shamanic studies finds there is a robust body of scholarly research on the subject (Jones, 2006). Archaeological research, however, is absent from Jones's (2006) review, presumably indicating it has yet to contribute significantly to this research topic.

Given that shamanism has been documented around the world, archaeologist can be certain it was also present in the past. A number of regionally isolated studies indicates this is true, but the lack of systematic archaeological study of the topic is an impediment to the anthropological study of religion. One key to improving the archaeological study of shamanism is the development of a general methodology for identifying the presence of shamanism and discovering its basic structure using material culture. Research into shamanism using archaeological data has focused on a heuristic set of tools that shift from context to context and researcher to researcher. Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with methodological flexibility, a more general methodology based on a synthesis of the relevant characteristics of shamanic practice should allow more useful insights. An explicitly stated methodology should increase the rigour of the arguments by identifying variables and their behavioural correlates that can be examined and evaluated in archaeological contexts. Put another way, a methodology based on middle-range research (sensu Arnold, 2003) connecting archaeological data and shamanism will increase the rigour of archaeological analyses of past religions by clearly explicating the connection between data and the interpretations of shamanic practice. Here I outline such a methodology based on well-established worldwide shamanic patterns. I begin by defining priests and shamans and defending the analytic appropriateness of the concept of shamanism. I then discuss the physiological mechanisms that underlie shamanic experiences and summarise the analytic frameworks used to describe and organise shamanism. Next I discuss the shamanic sacra (the tools and iconographic depictions), and propose that archaeologists can determine the presence and nature of shamanic practice by identifying the occurrences and contexts of these sacra. Finally, I provide case studies

* Fax: +1 573 884 5450.
E-mail address: vanpoolc@missouri.edu

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from the North American Southwest that illustrate the application of the proposed methodology and how it can be used to further addresses anthropological and regional concerns.

Priests *AND* shamans, not priest *OR* shamans

Although many scholars of comparative religion are moving beyond it (Carr and Case, 2005; Miller and Taube, 1993, p. 152; Rakita, 2009; Winkelman, 1992), many studies divide religious practitioners into two groups, shamans and priests. These "types" are often seen as mutually exclusive, alternate states such that a society either has shamans or priests. Priests are full-time religious specialists, typically associated with agricultural societies with social differentiation. They act as representatives working for deities and are relegated to performing standardised liturgies that seek to propitiate the supernatural and mediate contact with the sacred (Rakita, 2009; Miller and Taube, 1993, p. 152; Table 1). Winkelman (1992, pp. 7, 28–36) explicitly argues that priests do not seek altered states of consciousness (ASC), and rarely if ever *directly* interact with supernatural agents. Often their rites are systematically "depersonalise" and are designed to inhibit the expression of self-referential messages. In contrast, shamans do use ASC and directly interact with supernatural entities whilst working for the people they represent either for healing, finding game animals, or procuring rain (Boyd, 1996; Grim, 1983; Vitebsky, 2001). They typically do have "personal," individual specific rituals, and are most common in simple, hunter and gatherer societies.

One of the key traits, therefore, for differentiating shamans and priests is the use of altered states of consciousness and the emphasis on becoming a "non-human" spirit agent (Jokic, 2008; Wilbert, 1972). ASC takes many forms from day-dreams to hallucinations (Lewis-Williams, 2002; McCall, 2007, p. 226). The differences between dream states and "reality" are actually socially constructed (Al-Issa, 1995). The clarity of these differences have caused shamans and priest to become religious "archetypes" that are thought to be associated with different subsistence strategies and levels of social complexity (Winkelman, 1992). Many other traits (e.g., apprenticeship, altars) have also been associated with these archetypes (Figs. 1 and 2), although these has been critiqued (Kehoe, 2000; Whitley, 2001). As intuitive as it may seem, however, shamans and priests are not appropriate archetypes and do not reflect dichotomous or essentialist "types" in the sense that they are immutable states wholly distinct from one another. Instead they are analytically useful groupings that reflect the co-occurrence of religious traits that tend to correspond with one another as the level of cultural complexity shifts (Fig. 1). Not surprisingly at each end of the continua, the groupings of shamans and priests appear distinct, but there is too much variation and mixed associations of traits to allow researchers to use one or

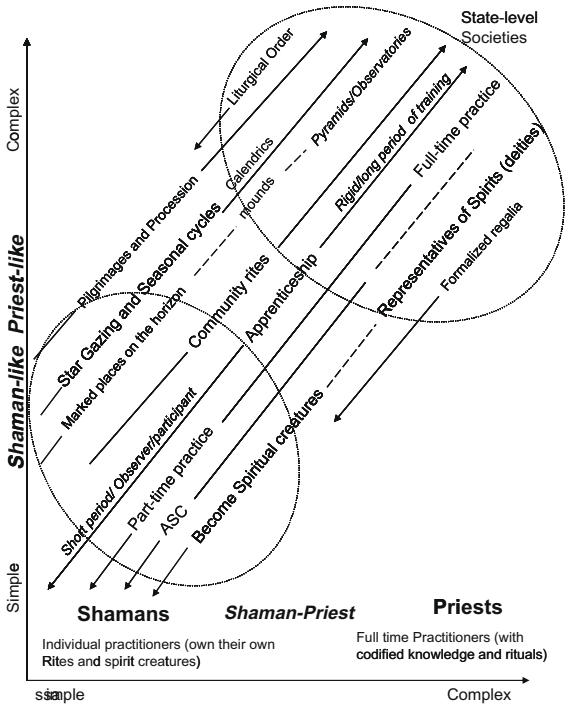

Fig. 1. Illustration of variables that shift with increasing complexity to create the polythetic classes of shamans and priests. Ovals encompass the commonly accepted traits of shamans in the lower left-handed side, and priests in the upper portion of the graph.

the other of these terms in every situation (at least if one wants them to be meaningful). Researchers of course often recognise this (albeit they have not quite conceptualised it like Fig. 1), which is why some use terms like shaman-like or shaman–priests (Carr and Case, 2005; VanPool, 2003a). It is entirely possible that aspects of shamanic practices continue long after the focus of a religious system has shifted to full-time practitioners (priests) (Miller and Taube, 1993, p. 152). Maya scholars for example have identified the continuation of shamanic practices in Mesoamerica despite the rise of social complexity, state sponsored rituals and the development of priesthoods (Freidel et al., 1993; Furst, 1968; Miller and Taube, 1993, p. 152). Winkelman (1992, p. 55) further observes that the presence of priests does not indicate the complete absence of shamanism; shaman-healers were frequently found in societies that have other types of religious practitioners for example (Winkelman, 1992, p. 55). This topic leads to a second, related issue—the appropriateness of shamanism as an analytical concept.

Table 1
Sacra for shamans and priests at the tails of the continua (Figs. 1 and 2). These are based on cross-cultural comparison presented by Rakita (2009), Whitley (2001), Winkelman (1992), and Wilbert (1987).

Shamans	Priests
Iconography including: entopics (e.g., grids, nets, dots, spirals), anthropomorphic figures, tutelary creatures, liminal creatures	The divine "written word". Limited specialists to write and read "the word". Standardised texts
Psychoactive plants	
Tutelary creatures in iconography and as fetishes	Statuary and carvings of the deities
Liminal creatures	
Individually owned and/or created tools such as pipes, noisemakers (especially drums), crystals, fetishes, and sucking tubes. These may be buried with their owner or transferred to an apprentice shaman, if the spirit requests it	Standardised ritual paraphernalia that should be found within a broad region (e.g., chalices, statuary). Musicians associated with the priesthood
Private or personal ritual space and also places with controlled access to liminal spaces (e.g., caves or mountaintop shrines)	Large-scale public ceremonial spaces
Sacra stored in private spaces or left in caves or shrines. Therefore there should not be a systematic pattern to the sacra, although they may be clustered in certain locations	Storage area(s) for sacra when not in use, potentially creating repeated standardised caches of sacra within the ceremonial complex