

Shamanism, The Basics The origins of the word 'shaman'.



The origin of the word shaman has been, and still is, debated by philologists, ethno-linguists and other interested parties throughout the world. There is no indigenous term for 'shamanism' which came into usage as a word used in the West to help identify practices with common qualities. However there is a common consensus that the word 'shaman' is of Tungus origin although its root meaning is still debated. www.indieshaman.co.uk

Some current dictionary and encyclopaedia definitions of the origin of the word shaman are as follows:

- Oxford Dictionaries¹ state that it originated in the late 17th century from the German word *Schamane*, from the Russian *shaman* and from the Tungus *šaman*.
- Random² cite German, Russian and probably Evenki *šamān*, *samān* (people of Russia and China).
- The Collins English Dictionary³ gives "from Russian *shaman*, from Tungusian *saman*, from Pali *samana* Buddhist monk, ultimately from Sanskrit *śrama* religious exercise]".
- Encyclopaedia Britannica⁴ says that the term *shamanism* comes from the Manchu-Tungus word *šaman*. The noun being formed from the verb *ša-* 'to know'; thus, a shaman is literally "one who knows".
- Douglas Harper⁵ says the word originates in the 1690s and means a "priest of the Ural-Altai peoples," probably coming via the German *Schamane*; Russian *shaman*; Tungus *shaman*, which is perhaps itself comes from the Chinese *sha men* ('Buddhist monk'), from Prakrit *samaya-*, from Sanskrit. *Sramana-s* "Buddhist ascetic."

Various ideas have been put forward for the original derivation of the Tungus word *šaman* as can be seen in the dictionary and encyclopaedia definitions above: including from the Sanskrit or Pali word *samana* for a Buddhist Monk. Mariko Namba Walter^{1°} says of this "since Buddhist Monks were often seen to have magical powers, this Indian origin of the word is a possibility" (p. xxi).

Berthold Laufer^{2°} dismisses this possible root for the word stating that "The Tungust notion of a Shaman is very different from a Buddhist Monk" (p. 361). Laufer believes instead that the root word of *šaman* is not *sa* (to know) but *sam*. The Tungusian *sam* is then interpreted as possibly related to the Turkish word *kam*. In this he is following the research of the Hungarian scholar, J Nemeth who worked on the phonetic history of the Turkish and Mongol languages and concluded that the Manchu Tungusian *sam* is the phonetic equivalent of the Turkish *kam*. This research makes a potentially very important point in tracing ancient words through

how they sounded rather than are written. The Turkish word *kam* first appears in the Chinese Annals of the T'ang dynasty where it is said the Kyrgyz called their shamans/sorcerers *kam* (spelled *kan*). The Chinese used the term *wu*, an ancient term for native medicine men.

Anthropologist Alice Beck Kehoe^{3°} disagrees with Laufer stating that the root of the word *saman* is 'sa' meaning to know.

Mircea Eliade^{4°} pulls together all of the above ideas in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* stating that the word *saman* origins in Sanskrit and Pali as *sramana* and from the Chinese *sha-men* and also mentions the connection to the Turko-Mongolian word *kam*.

Here is a summary so far so you can make your own mind up:

Potential root meanings, origins and connections of the word:

- *ša-* 'to know'. Root of the word *šaman*, literally 'one who knows'.
- From the ancient Turkish word *kam* (*kan*) meaning shaman/sorcerer
- From the Sanskrit or Pali word *samana*, or *sramana* meaning Buddhist monk.
- From the Chinese *sha-men*

Interestingly Laufer^{2°} states that scholars did note that the words used for female shaman were broadly similar: *udagaan*, *utygan*, *udgan*, *ubakxan* causing theories that the original Siberian shaman were women, with male shaman occurring after the tribes separated. However Laufer himself disagrees with this theory as it originated in the idea that the male word for shaman differed throughout Siberian languages. Laufer believing that the origin of the word, being *kam*, gives an identical term for male Turkish, Tungusian and Gilyak (Russian) tribes and stating additionally that male and female shaman co-existed throughout China.

In the seventeenth century, when Russians started colonizing Siberia, the Russian priest Avvakum Petrovich became one of the first observers to use the word *shaman* in print, in his autobiography published in 1672. It was also used by Dutch diplomats E. Ysbrant Ides and Adam Brand who accompanied the Russian embassy sent by Peter the Great to China during 1692 – 1695. And later in a 1875 in an article for the Encyclopaedia Britannia by AH Sayce (Mariko Namba Walter quoting Grim 1983, 115)

Additional Notes

Philology is the study of language in written historical sources

Ethnology comes from the Greek *ethnos* meaning "nation, race" and is the branch of anthropology that compares and analyzes origins, social structure, religions and language.

Ethnolinguistics is the study of language as an aspect or part of culture especially the study of the influence of language on culture and of culture on language.

Manchu-Tungus languages, also called Tungusic languages are a group of languages spoken by approximately 70,000 people scattered across a vast region stretching from northern China across Mongolia to the northern boundary of Russia. Relatively little is known about individual tribes of the Manchu-Tungas and a lot of these languages are now extinct.

Pali or Prakrit is an middle Indo-Aryan language of the Indian subcontinent best known as the language of the earliest Buddhist scriptures.

Sanskrit is a historical Indo-Aryan language which is now listed as one of the 22 languages of India. Classical Sanskrit dates to around the fourth century BCE and is the equivalent in Great India of Latin and Greek in Europe having influenced most of the modern languages of the Indian subcontinent especially in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Vedic Sanskrit is prior to Classical Sanskrit and dates from around 1500 BCE which classifies as one of the oldest Indo-Iranian language and one of the earliest of the Indo-European language family, which includes most European languages including English.

The Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) is one of the worlds six independent Turkic states, along with Turkey, Azerbaijan, Termenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Mountainous and landlocked Kyrgyzstan is located in central Asia bordered by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the People's Republic of China. *Kyrgyz* is a Turkic language spoken by about 4 million people in Kyrgyzstan, China, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Russia. Kyrgyzstan became independent following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

Ural-Altai – The Ural-Altai language/s are spoken by over 150 million people from a vast area that reaches from Eastern Europe across Russia and Asia to the Pacific Ocean. Most of the evidence for combining both the Uralic and Altai as one language family is based on language structure such as word order rather than use of the same root words.

Bibliography

¹ oxforddictionaries.com

² dictionary.com

³ *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. Cited in dictionary.com

⁴ britannica.com

⁵ etymonline.com

^{1°}Mariko Namba Walter (2004) *Shamanism: an encyclopaedia of world beliefs, practices, and culture, Volume 2*. ABC-CLIO Ltd

^{2°}Berthold Laufer (1917). "Origin of the Word Shaman" in *American Anthropologist* Vol. 19, No. 3, Jul. - Sep., 1917 pages 361-371

^{3°}Alice Beck Kehoe (2000) *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*. Waveland Pr Inc

^{4°}Merica Eliade (1951 republished 2004) *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton University Press