

SHAMANISM IN HUMAN LIFE: EVIDENCE FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

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Abstract

This article comprehensively analyzes the phenomenon of shamanism, one of the oldest belief systems in human history, examining its genesis of origin and its socio-cultural role in human life. It sheds light on the essence of shamanic beliefs, their correlation with animistic and totemistic concepts, as well as their societal management and medico-psychological functions. The primary focus of the paper is directed toward the material traces of shamanic culture—such as rock art (petroglyphs), amulets discovered in burials, ritual artifacts, and specialized attire—and how they are reflected in archaeological and ethnographic sources. In particular, the indelible marks left by shamanism in the history of Central Asian and Turkic peoples, along with its syncretic (hybrid) connection with subsequent religions, are systematically analyzed.

Keywords

shamanism, animism, Turkic peoples, Central Asian beliefs, archaeological sources, petroglyphs, rock art, ritual clothing, ethnographic studies, syncretism, primitive religions, shamanic drum, totemism, monuments of material culture.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada insoniyat tarixidagi eng qadimgi e'tiqod tizimlaridan biri bo'lgan shomonlik (shamanizm) hodisasi, uning paydo bo'lish genezisi va ijtimoiy-madaniy hayotda tutgan o'rni atroflicha tahlil etilgan. Shomonlik e'tiqodining mohiyati, uning animistik va totemistik tasavvurlar bilan bog'liqligi hamda jamiyatni boshqarish va tibbiy-psixologik funksiyalari ochib berilgan. Maqolaning asosiy urg'usi shomonlik madaniyatining moddiy izlari — qoyatosh rasmlari (petrogliflar), qabrlardan topilgan tumorlar, marosim buyumlari va maxsus kiyimboshlarning arxeologik hamda etnografik manbalarda aks etishi masalalariga qaratilgan. Ayniqsa, O'rta Osiyo va turkiy xalqlar tarixida shomonlik e'tiqodining qoldirgan izlari va uning keyingi davr dinlari bilan sinkretik (gibrid) bog'liqligi tahlil qilingan.

Kalit so'zlar

shomonlik, shamanizm, animizm, turkiy xalqlar, O'rta Osiyo e'tiqodlari, arxeologik manbalar, petrogliflar, qoyatosh rasmlari, marosim kiyimlari, etnografik tadqiqotlar, sinkretizm, ibtidoiy dinlar, shomon dovuli, totemizm, moddiy madaniyat yodgorliklari.

Аннотация

В данной статье всесторонне анализируется феномен шаманизма как одной из древнейших систем верований в истории человечества, рассматривается генезис его возникновения и социокультурная роль в жизни людей. Раскрывается суть шаманских верований, их связь с анимистическими и тотемистическими представлениями, а также функции управления обществом и медико-психологические аспекты. Основной акцент в статье сделан на материальных следах шаманской культуры — наскальных рисунках (петроглифах), амулетах из погребений, ритуальных предметах и специальной одежде, а также на их отражении в археологических и этнографических источниках. В частности, подробно анализируются следы шаманизма в истории Центральной Азии и тюркских народов, его синкретическая (гибридная) связь с религиями последующих эпох.

Ключевые слова

шаманизм, анимизм, тюркские народы, верования Центральной Азии, археологические источники, петроглифы, наскальные рисунки, ритуальная одежда, этнографические исследования, синкретизм, первобытные религии, шаманский бубен, тотемизм, памятники материальной культуры.

The earliest information about shamanism has been recorded in material sources and occupies a special place in human life. This belief was not practiced by ordinary people; rather, it was associated with individuals possessing exceptional abilities, who, in shamanic terminology, were known as diviners, healers, spirit mediums, exorcists, and ritual practitioners. This occupation was generally considered a hereditary profession passed down from generation to generation. Individuals who practiced shamanism enjoyed a special status and were accorded great respect among the people.

Among the earliest forms of religion, shamanism occupies a special place. Unlike primitive clan-based religions, shamanism emerged during the period when tribal unions were beginning to consolidate, and it was closely connected with the clan-tribal forms of social consciousness.

As its connection with the tribal system became stronger, shamanism gained a central position as the dominant religion during the period when the tribal system

was fully established. With the gradual disintegration of the tribal structure, the weakening of inter-tribal relations, and the transition of society toward new territorial and interregional social relations, shamanism underwent internal transformations.

This stage contributed to shamanism becoming a universal form of social consciousness, since all peoples passed through stages of clan, clan-tribal, and tribal society. For this reason, shamanism and its elements can be observed in the spiritual life and everyday traditions of all peoples of the world (1).

Shamanism (the word “shaman” is associated with the Tungus-Manchu root “sa”, meaning “to know,” and “saman”, meaning “a knowing person”) is a belief system that emerged as a result of animism, totemism, and fetishism. Through it, people were believed to establish an imagined connection with their totems and the spirits of their ancestors. The main feature of shamanism is the belief that specially chosen and trained individuals are capable of communicating with spirits and possessing divine power. Shamans enter trance states in order to interact with spirits. In this state, the helping spirit is believed either to unite with the shaman as a single entity or to manifest through the shaman (2). Sources mention that, in the pre-Islamic period, pastoral Turkic tribes practiced various forms of shamanistic beliefs, including the veneration of ancestral spirits and Kök Tengri (the Sky God), as well as totemistic views. Their religious rituals were closely associated with the worship of animals, mountains, and water sources such as rivers and lakes (3).

Ancient Turkic peoples believed in the existence of demons, jinn, fairies, and spirits, and held that communication with these beings was possible through shamans. Shamans performed sacrifices dedicated to protective spirits, recited incantations to ward off evil forces, and undertook ritual purification practices known as “chilla” in order to cleanse themselves spiritually.

Shamanism has been preserved and continuously developed over many centuries. Even today, elements of shamanistic belief can still be found among various peoples, where practitioners are referred to as “bakhshi” and “parikhon”.

In antiquity, shamanism was widespread in Central Asia and played an important role in the history of Turkic peoples (4). Ancestors of the Turkic peoples firmly believed in the existence of auxiliary spirits, such as fairies (paris), chiltons, and momos, as well as demons and jinn. People also held the belief that spirits served shamans and carried out their various commands.

It was likewise widely believed that shamans possessed the ability to communicate between humans and spirits, acting as intermediaries with supernatural powers.

According to ethnographic data, shamanism was one of the primary belief systems of tribes engaged mainly in hunting and pastoralism. Later, with the development of agriculture, reverence for the earth and the plant world, along with their life-renewing, transformative, and other essential properties for human survival, led to their veneration, which in turn contributed to the further development of such beliefs (5).

Among the sources that embody the ancient religious beliefs of the Uzbek people, the work of Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, "Monuments of the Past Generations" (Al-Āthār al-Bāqiya 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliya), holds significant importance. This historical-ethnographic work reflects various forms of religious beliefs, rituals, and their regional characteristics that existed among the Khorezmians and Sogdians in Central Asia prior to the arrival of Islam, including ideas related to shamanism.

In particular, the work provides interesting information about fairies (paris), their forms, and their functions as one of the key elements of these belief systems. Biruni's observations regarding shamans are also noteworthy. According to him, "before the emergence of Budasaf, there were shamans who lived in the eastern part of the world and worshipped idols" (6).

In the late 6th century and early 8th century, with the arrival of Turkic tribes in the regions of Central Asia, features characterizing shamanism and the spiritual life of Turkic communities can be observed in burial and commemorative rituals, stone carvings, and balbal stone monuments.

In the traditional Turkic worldview, the sacred land was perceived as the center of ancestral territory and served as a symbol of the structure of the universe. It was marked by stone sculptures, tribal tamgas, and ritual altars. The Turks worshipped the Sky (Tengri).

The cultural heritage of the Turks has been recorded throughout the territory of Kazakhstan. These monuments are mainly stone sculptures located in open landscapes. Such sites are found across a vast area stretching from Saryarka, the upper reaches of the Torgay River, and the Ulytau Mountains, to Altai and Tarbagatai, as well as in Semirechye, where Turkic ritual complexes such as those in Merke and Jaysan have been studied (7).

In 1969, a fragment of a stone slab depicting the face of a person wearing a three-horned headdress was discovered near the village of Maytobe, on the southern shore of Biylikol Lake in the Jambyl Region of Kazakhstan. Stone statues featuring three-horned crowns have also been found at different times in neighboring territories of Kyrgyzstan, including the Lake District, as well as in the Issyk-Kul Basin.

In some of these depictions, the figures are shown wearing an sleeveless mantle or cape as part of their upper garments. Similar mantle-cape, identified as elements of female outer clothing, were also documented by S. M. Akhinzhanov in the artistic monuments of Sogdiana and Tokharistan (8).

In Tajikistan, numerous petroglyphs from different historical periods have been studied. The majority of them in terms of content and motifs are associated with shamanism. Some of the depictions illustrate specific ritual actions performed by shamans, hunting scenes, as well as key сюжет lines and main characters of shamanic mythology.

However, the exact purpose and meaning of these drawings have not yet been fully interpreted. In our view, these mythological symbols and ritual scenes may suggest that the origins of shamanism in Central Asia could be traced back to the Stone Age.

In recent years, approximately 600 stone statues associated with early medieval Turkic burials have been recorded in the territory of Kyrgyzstan. These monuments have been discovered mainly in burial sites located in the Tian Shan Mountains, the Issyk-Kul Region, the Chuy and Talas valleys, as well as in the foothill areas of eastern Fergana.

Most of the graves have a circular form. Their construction involved the use of river stones and stone fragments, and the burial structures were covered with stone mounds. The entrance sections of the graves are relatively larger, and in these areas horses were buried.

It should be noted that horses are found in burials regardless of the sex of the deceased. To date, around 40 graves containing horse burials have been excavated. During the cleaning of these burial sites, fragments of domestic animal bones, as well as traces of ash and charcoal, have also been discovered (9).

This phenomenon may be associated with religious rituals performed both during the construction of burial structures and subsequently within cemetery areas.

In Tajikistan, numerous petroglyphs from various historical periods have been studied. The content and motifs of many of them are closely linked to shamanism, and some depictions illustrate specific moments of shamanic ritual actions, hunting scenes, as well as key сюжет lines and principal characters of shamanic traditions. However, the purpose and meaning of these drawings have not yet been fully interpreted (10). In our view, these mythological symbols and depictions of ritual scenes may also suggest the hypothesis that the origins of shamanism in Central Asia could be traced back to the Stone Age.

In addition, the adherence of many Turkic groups – particularly the Karluks-to shamanism during the 8th–10th centuries has been acknowledged by a number of researchers. As noted by K. Shoniyozov, the Karluks practiced shamanistic beliefs, and their principal deity was Kōk Tengri (the Sky God). In his work “The Karluk State and the Karluks,” K. Shoniyozov states that the nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic-speaking population had long been influenced by deeply rooted beliefs in Kōk Tengri (the Sky God) and shamanism, which had been ingrained in their worldview since ancient times. Among nomadic peoples, belief in the Sky God (Tengri) and shamanism was particularly strong. These religious beliefs persisted as residual elements within tribal communities even after their conversion to Islam(11).

In the peoples of Central Asia, as in other cultures, remnants of shamanism can be observed in various forms. For example, the healing ritual known as “Chilla Yosin” involves reciting the Qur’anic surah “Yasin” forty times, followed by striking the patient with willow branches. In this practice, the willow branches are required to number forty.

Another form of shamanistic ritual is “kinna,” a specific method of expelling illness from the patient’s body (12).

Thus, shamanism is one of the earliest forms of religious belief systems, which primarily developed among peoples at the middle stage of clan-tribal social development. Accordingly, shamanistic beliefs and traditions emerged at a time when concepts of the supernatural had already become relatively well formed in human consciousness. In conclusion, from antiquity onward, elements of shamanism can be observed in the study of medieval urban cultural monuments.

Conclusion: Shamanism is one of the most ancient belief systems, and archaeological research suggests that it may have emerged during the Upper Paleolithic period. A number of archaeological findings, including the famous “sorcerer” depiction discovered in the “Three Brothers” cave, as well as other similar Paleolithic monuments, indicate that clear attributes of shamanism had already begun to take shape in the Upper Paleolithic era.

Thus, certain aspects of this phenomenon appear to be closely linked with the formation of the modern human anatomical (physical) type(13).

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