



Shamanism: The Neural Ecology of Consciousness and Healing

Michael Winkelman

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Cross-cultural and neuropsychological perspectives on shamanism reveal that it produces an adaptive integrative mode of consciousness. Shamanic altered states of consciousness (ASC) are related to brain organization and processes, showing shamanism's concern with socioemotional and self functions of the paleomammalian brain and cognitive capacities based in presentational symbolism, metaphor, analogy, and mimesis. Integration of cross-cultural and neurological perspectives illustrates homologies which reveal the psychobiological basis of shamanism and soul journeys, guardian spirits, death and rebirth, and other universal forms of shamanic cognition. Shamanic contributions to sociocultural and cognitive evolution are examined. The integrative mode of consciousness produced by shamanic ASC is related to general brain functions. Specific psychophysiological functions of ASC and their variations cross-culturally are illustrated. Shamanic soul journey, possession, and meditative forms of consciousness are examined from phenomenological, neurological, and epistemological perspectives which reveal them to be innate forms of cognition and practices for manipulating perception, attention, cognition, emotion, self, and identity. Shamanistic healing involves physically and culturally mediated forms of adaptation to stress which are reinforced by procedures eliciting opioid release. Therapeutic effectiveness of shamanistic practices are illustrated by clinical research. Shamanistic healing includes procedures for altering physiological, psychological, and emotional responses. Contemporary spontaneous religious experiences and illness characterized as "spiritual emergencies" have shamanic roots and illustrate the continued relevance of shamanic paradigms.

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