

The Language of Shamans and the Metaphysics of Language: Emerging Paradigms in Shamanic Studies

MARILYN WALKER

SACKVILLE, N.B., CANADA

The language shamans use in ritual, including the language of songs and chants, has been studied by western science primarily as text, in which sound has been spatialized into writing. And language has been viewed primarily as a function of physical changes in the evolution of human consciousness. Emerging paradigms suggest we look at shamanic language as communication on the physical, symbolic and subtle planes for new perspectives on the origin of language and its role in shamanism. Drawing on cymatics, metaphysics and new work in imagining rather than theorizing language, this paper addresses the spiritual function of language, a topic that has received little attention in the ethnographic and historic literature in either socio-linguistics or shamanic studies.

INTRODUCTION

"Shamanism" and "language" have generally been dealt with in the ethnographic literature under separate subfields of anthropology—shamanism under the subfield of religion in sociocultural anthropology; language under the subfield of linguistics. Shamanism has been analyzed primarily as a magico-religious phenomenon. Language has been viewed primarily as a function of physical changes in the evolution of human consciousness.¹ Moreover, the language shamans use in ritual, including

¹ Exceptions include the work of Helimskij, who points out, in his study of shamanic verse: "There is hardly any doubt that the influence of poetry—and, therefore, according to the above hypothesis, of the language of spirits—should not be disregarded

the language of songs and chants, has been studied primarily as text, in which sound has been spatialized into writing.

In the social and pure sciences today, the search for new research paradigms to encompass our expanding views about the nature of knowledge, and further, about the nature of reality itself, is leading to interdisciplinary approaches in both linguistics and shamanic studies. Recent and upcoming conferences² on shamanism, and a recent linguistics conference³, draw together scientists and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines. Boundaries between disciplines are blurring. The lines separating the subfields of anthropology, and the "hard" sciences from the social sciences theoretically and methodologically, are being redrawn.

Recent work in the metaphysics of language, and also in shamanic studies, suggests we must address not just *what* we come to know, but *how* we come to know. Both fields become inquiries into epistemology, the search for meaning and the nature of knowledge. In this paper, I view shamanic language as communication on the physical, symbolic and subtle planes, providing new perspectives on the origin of language and its role in shamanism. I also address the spiritual function of language in shamanism, a topic that has received little attention in the ethnographic and historic literature.

BACKGROUND

Much of my own fieldwork as a cultural anthropologist has been in the Arctic and Subarctic regions with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Alaska, and more recently in Russia; and with ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia. All are shamanic cultures in the anthropological sense though not all people in these culture areas use the terms "shaman" or "shamanic".

While there are many commonalities amongst shamanic cultures, shamanism is a complex and diverse phenomenon. Is it even appropriate

when viewing the linguistic evolution of Balto-Finic" (Helimskij 1993: 213).

² For example, *The International Congress on Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*, Moscow, June 7-12, 1999.

³ *Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association*, Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, 1999.

to use the singular "shamanism", for example, or is "shamanisms" more cognizant of the temporal and geographic diversity? In the research I draw from for this paper, I use the singular to address underlying commonalities in practice and ethos in several cultures/culture areas, all of which have common origins in Siberia. These are the Inuit/Eskimo of the circumpolar regions, the Tlingit of Southeast Alaska, the Hmong of Southeast Asia, First Nations of Canada, and Indigenous Peoples of Siberia. Although each area is different culturally and linguistically, shamanic language in each context has similar communicative functions on the physical, symbolic and subtle planes.

In some areas—Siberia, for example—shamans say their tradition remains unbroken. In others, the practice subsided, sometimes disappearing altogether, or went underground. Practitioners have been persecuted, even put to death. Universally, shamanism has been devalued, suppressed, even outlawed, by dominant religions and cultures. The marginalization of shamanism and of the peoples who practice it also applies to the languages of Indigenous Peoples. Many aboriginal languages are no longer spoken and many are at risk. It is important to recognize this important link between shamanism and language by acknowledging that at times, the shaman has acted as, "the guardian of linguistic traditions... Especially among the people of the ex-Soviet Union, the shaman texts are always heard, even today, in languages which the authorities had almost succeeded in making these minorities forget" (Hoppál 1999: 58).

Despite long-term policies of assimilation in all the areas I discuss, shamanism has persisted in some form. As a flexible and adaptive tradition, shamanism has syncretized elements of the dominant religion/ideology of an area and time period—Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity in Russia; Christianity in Canada and Alaska; and Buddhism and Christianity in Southeast Asia—which has contributed to the continuity as well as the diversity of shamanic traditions. And in many areas, shamanic traditions are undergoing a renaissance.

Along with an increasing interest in academia and in the communities, there is developing an international discourse on shamanism as a contested field of study, with debate amongst scholars and the lay public as to what it is and what it is not. New Age philosophy uses the term to describe an individual's journey of personal development or self-

awareness but this is not its traditional meaning in shamanic cultures. In traditional cultures, shamans work in the other world on behalf of their community's well-being in this world. "Well-being" is used in the holistic sense of integration and balance of mind/body/spirit/emotion. "Community" also has a broad sense in Indigenous cultures, encompassing the individual, the family, the plants, animals and other entities of the place in which people live, as well as the ancestors and spirits of the subtle world.

At an international conference on shamanism held in Moscow in 1999, anthropologist Joan Townsend proposed a working definition of the term "shaman" which she based on a single *raison d'être* to which all defining characteristics should be related: shamanism interacts with the spirit world for the benefit of those in the material world:

My working definition of a traditional shaman is a person who has direct communication with spirits, is in control of spirits and altered states of consciousness, undertakes soul (magical) flights to the spirit world, and has a this-material-world focus rather than a goal of personal enlightenment. (Townsend 1999: 32)

Research in shamanic studies is undergoing a paradigm shift in *what* is studied as well as *how* it is studied. Townsend's definition, because it does not question the actuality of the shaman's experience, represents this shift from a biomedical, rational approach to an intuitive, experiential way of knowing that I term "intuitive science". Anthropologist Jeremy Narby, in *The Cosmic Serpent* refers to this coming together of ways of knowing that have been separated in Western science. He writes, "All things considered, wisdom requires not only investigation of many things, but contemplation of the mystery."

The "direct communication" with the spirits referred to in Townsend's definition is effected through a variety of means, including language. But what is language? And can we talk about a shamanic language given the cultural and linguistic diversity of shamanic cultures? Van Deusen's comment that, "The spiritual function of music in Tuvan and Khakass shamanism has been little studied by outsiders" (1997: 24) also applies to the spiritual function of language which has received little attention in the ethnographic and historic literature.

EMERGING PARADIGMS IN SHAMANIC STUDIES

Shamanic studies continue to be directed by western scientific models. Materialist, symbolic and evolutionary models are embedded in the ethnography of shamanism which has been secularized, objectified (that is, turned into an object of study rather than a subject of study), and decontextualized (or studied apart from its cultural context).

Much of our knowledge about shamanism is material culture-derived. Museum collections are comprised mainly of objects. Curating emphasizes the physical description of shamanic artifacts—costume, paraphernalia, and musical instruments especially drums. Our analysis of such materials, however, has often been from a secular viewpoint without a broad understanding of the ritual context in which such objects were used, or the nature of the knowledge they embed. Considerable work has been carried out on the symbolism of shamanic elements, especially of the drum (as summarized in Eliade, and referred to by Li 1992, for example) but some of this work may need to be revisited. About drum motifs, Hutton writes:

A lot of these are completely baffling to modern scholars and perhaps always were intended to be unreadable by those not trained in that shamanic tradition. Some certainly represent the geography of the spirit world and the shaman's journey through it, yet the exact meaning of the painted shapes and signs is still often elusive. (Hutton 1993: 21)

Certainly, the inherent power that shamans recognize in drums and other items, including words, is rarely written about.

Film footage and tape recordings are scarcer. While these give a greater sense of shamanic ritual as "event" and of the *praxis* of objects in use, we must consider the context in which such recordings were made and acknowledge their limitations; for example, were they "performance", that is, enacted for the camera as were Edward Curtis' photographs of Native Americans and Flaherty's classic film of Inuit, *Nanook of the North*? For some parts of shamanic ritual, filming may

not be permitted⁴ so documentation is partial. Segments of events may not be readable as representative of the whole.

Folklorists over the years have written down the texts of many shamanic chants and songs. These have been analyzed in terms of content but the sensory power of the words that comes from the contextual action of speech or song is not recorded. In the transition from an oral culture to western culture, "...sound has been spatialized into writing, a visually-based textual analysis which can remove us from the sensory world of taste, smell, hearing and touch. If such textual analyses are left to stand alone for the event, they limit our understanding of cultural sentiment" (Laderman and Roseman 1996: 10). Textual representation of the shamanic experience also secularizes it as we rely on our analytical skills and our rational mind for comprehension.

The ethnographic literature on the Arctic and Subarctic regions provides a rich resource from which we continue to draw for information on "classic" shamanism. The cultural orientations of the researchers that are embedded in these interpretations of shamanism continue to influence how we observe, document, analyze and interpret shamanic phenomena today. The resources from which we draw for scholarly interpretations of shamanism are rich in some cultural contexts, especially Siberia, but limited by the ideology of contemporary ethnography.

For example, in an article initially published in the 1950s, Anisimov writes that the "intuition of primitive man inevitably had to reach beyond the limit of his experiences [in order] to substitute imagined reasons for real ones. Under the impact of the feeling of impotence in regard to nature, the imagination of primitive man inevitably inclined towards illusory generalizations, endowing an object with supernatural powers" (Anisimov 1963: 158). Taking an evolutionary perspective, he describes shamanism as a "primitive view" of the world, at a "simple level of development and consciousness". He discusses the "imaginary world of spirits" (ibid: 158) and "the interrelations of the primitive's

⁴ During a *kamlunie* by the Siberian shaman, Bair Rinchinov, the audience was asked not to film when the spirit entered his body. I attended this *kamlunie* at the *International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*, Moscow, June 7-12, 1999. Rinchinov is a hereditary shaman from the Buryat-Aginsk region.

rational and illusory views of nature" (ibid: 160). Shamans themselves, on the other hand, describe their experiences not as hallucinatory or imaginary but as real⁵.

The western scientific tradition has directed *what* we have documented about shamanism as well as *how* we have documented it. Mircea Eliade's classic work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, is broad-based geographically and historically and remains authoritative but Eliade did not interview a single shaman; nor was it written from his direct experience of the activities described. There has always been controversy in ethnography about how to "get at" the insider's view without compromising the objectivity or critical, "outside" view that traditional western science argues is at the core of "good science". Methodologically, anthropology has relied on participant observation and fieldwork to "enter" another culture but even these techniques (which are being adopted by other disciplines) may not provide the perspective required in this emerging field of study. In his pioneering work in shamanic studies, Michael Harner suggests radical participation⁶ as an experiential way of knowing. And shamans themselves are now acting as their own researchers.

The area of shamanism that is well-studied in anthropology is its "this-material-world focus" identified by Joan Townsend above. Current studies in shamanism in other parts of the world such as Laderman and Roseman's work in Southeast Asia provide materialist and secular interpretations of spirit work. Their volume addresses the metaphorical nature of elements of shamanic séance; the mediation, in healing cere-

⁵ For example, "I also saw a vision of a huge garden... I was seeing all of this in clear daylight. It wasn't a hallucination, nor was it coming from my imagination—these were visions": Peruvian shaman, Don Agustin Rivas Vasquez, in "Plant Diets in the Training of a Peruvian Healer" by Don Agustin Rivas Vasquez, as told to Jaya Bear. *Shaman's Drum*, No. 54, 2000: 40-47.

⁶ Radical participation goes beyond participant observation. The ethnographer enters as fully as possible into the world of the shaman, seeking first-hand knowledge. Shamanism is a path of knowledge, not a faith. To acquire this knowledge, it is necessary to step through the shaman's doorway. Researchers can test for themselves the reality of spirits (Michael Harner, from presentation given at *International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*, Moscow, June 7-12, 1999).

monies, of power relations between social groups; the shaman's séance as venue to express in socially acceptable ways strong emotions that are not acceptable in everyday existence; and the individual—community dynamic that is reinforced through enactment of shamanic ritual.

Shamanic rituals, however, are multi-level events in which all these and other aspects take place simultaneously. Language in shamanic ritual, likewise, communicates on more than one plane—physical, symbolic and subtle—and may mediate several levels of communication—between this world and the other, between the shaman and audience, between shaman and spirit, between the inner and the outer worlds of the shaman, and between the physical and the subtle realms. (Shamans also describe interactions within the spirit world.)

A paradigm shift is emerging in the academic study of shamanism which contradicts the premises on which western science is based—rationality, and reality as observable phenomena. We are undergoing a shift from analysis to experience, from materialist models of culture to existential models. These emerging models acknowledge the subtle realms as identifiable, accessible and describable. Some researchers point to even broader implications, to a shift in consciousness in the sciences and in western thought. Jeremy Narby's *The Cosmic Serpent*, for example, marshals the evidence of molecular biology to argue for an epistemic correspondence between the knowledge of Amazonian shamans and modern biologists. Cymatics, metaphysics and new work in imagining rather than theorizing language, offer new insights into the spiritual function of shamanic language and the epistemology of Indigenous Knowledge.

STUDYING LANGUAGE

Can we even talk about “shamanic language”? Probably not if we divide the study of language, as linguistics generally does, into four parts: semantics, syntactics, pragmatics and phonetics, each of which highlights a different aspect of the way language works (Martin and Yakayama 1997: 149). What if we use the term discourse, meaning “language in use” (ibid: 160) instead? “Discourse” focuses attention on the action of language and on interaction between speaker and listener but all these categories orient us to the physicality of language. Perhaps

semiotics⁷ or semiosis⁸ offers possibilities for understanding language in the shamanic experience. Within the framework of an "ethnography of communication" [the idea] that "text and context are mutually constitutive in performance highlights the active, emergent quality of these events" (Laderman 1996: 3). These perspectives focus attention on the generative nature of language rather than simply on its expressive or symbolic nature.

A broad view of communication suggests language may be viewed on several levels—physical, symbolic and subtle⁹. Much has been written about language as physical, and about shamanic features including words as symbolic¹⁰. Little attention has been paid to shamanic language as subtle; however, the study of language, like the study of shamanism, continues to evolve. Developments in interspecies communication are leading us to consider language in a broader sense. Anthropology once defined humans through our use of language. Now, we are becoming comfortable with the idea that animals use language. Shamans and scientists refer to the songs of plants. Shamans also describe phenomena—wind, echoes and elements of landscape such as mountains or rivers—as entities with whom they communicate. Recent research suggests shamans may have special abilities that enable their communication on these levels. These possibilities suggest a metaphysics of language.

In ethnographic research, decontextualization to fixed text from the ephemeral event in which shamanic language takes place predisposes us to analysis rather than experience of shamanic language, and to a logical rather than intuitive comprehension. In contrast, "literature", as a creative field, offers possibilities for understanding shamanic language

⁷ "The analysis of the nature and relationships of signs in language" (Martin and Nakayama 1997: 345).

⁸ "The process of producing meaning" (Martin and Nakayama 1997: 345) with the goal of establishing entire systems of semiosis and the ways those systems create meaning (ibid: 163).

⁹ "Subtle" is used to describe the reality that is mundane or "not material" (for example, Faidysh 1999: 137).

¹⁰ For example, "Words and sounds had a definite symbolism" (Kenin-Lopsan 1997: 132).

that linguistics may not. The volume, *Imagining Language*, as “a linguistics of the singular and the heterological¹¹”, assembles “the multiple ways in which language has been used or conceptualized in relation to reality”. The selections include “bizarre” language practices and “deviant” literary texts. In making their selections, the editors put the emphasis “on the creative ability to imagine rather than to theorize language” (Rasula and McCaffery 1998: xii). The selections, taken from writings of the last three millennia, document many devices, imaginings, and techniques that shamans also describe in their work. Shamanic language becomes more than symbolic or expressive; it becomes generative of meaning. Kenin-Lopsan refers to the creative power of shamanic language when he says about Tuva: “It might be said that shamans created worlds through words” (1997: 11).

About shamanism, Townsend argues that we must “open up our study to approaches other than psychoanalytic, neuro-physiological, biochemical, and reductionist materialist. By definition, “those perspectives require that non-material, spiritual kinds of phenomena cannot exist” (Townsend 1999: 37). She urges that research into shamanism “should not be limited to the scientific materialist/positivist epistemology” (ibid: 35). Likewise, with language, Jolas calls for “a new art of the word...that has nothing to do with the pedantry of modern philology, or the sterile dogmas of ‘estheticism.’ It is related to the existential, to anthropology, to depth-psychology, to metaphysics” (Rasula and McCaffery 1998: 34). Jolas refers to something of this in the “liturgical, hymnic attitude to the word” of the anonymous poets who created their hymns in “mystic Latin.” And he writes that we are beginning to sense the metaphysics of language again:

It is the unconscious vision which created language, and we stand before the task of re-discovering the knowledge of the daemonic-magical things that lie hidden in words and have been lost to modern man.

In the magical texts of the past there are to be found extraordinary sound-formations that refer to the sacred element of language. These forms of ancient wisdom were transmitted liturgically, they represented

¹¹ Hetero, meaning “different” or “another”.

enigmatic sigils, they had exorcistic potency... the mythological mind approached the hidden or supernatural powers. (Rasula and McCaffery 1998: 44)

"THE SOUNDS COMING DOWN FROM HEAVEN I AM..."

Where does language come from?¹² In physical anthropology, language is attributed to physical evolutionary changes. Other perspectives suggest its origins are outside of the physical realm and outside of the physical body or mind of its speaker.¹³

In this Caribou Inuit shaman's song¹⁴, inspiration is metaphysical, originating "from above." In many traditions, breath is life. This song is called forth through a deep breath which links the shaman's inner life with the outer world and a "power above":

I hear of distant villages
And their miserable catch
And draw a deep breath...
As I call forth the song
— From above —
Aya — haye
Ayia.

¹² Narby asks a similar question about DNA and the origins of knowledge: "The origin of knowledge is a subject that anthropologists neglect—which is one of the reasons that prompted me to write this book. However, anthropologists are not alone; scientists in general seem to have a similar difficulty. On closer examination, the reason for this becomes obvious: many of science's central ideas seem to come from beyond the limits of rationalism. René Descartes dreams of an angel who explains the basic principles of materialist rationalism to him; Albert Einstein dreams in a tram, approaching another, and conceives the theory of relativity..." (1999: 158)

¹³ A.E. writes, "...among the many thoughts I had at the time came the thought that speech may originally have been intuitive..." A.E. is George Russell (1867–1935), a close friend of the Irish nationalist, poet and mystic W.B. Yeats. Yeats' own interest in Celtic shamanism is reflected in his poem "The song of the Wandering Aengus", written in the 1890's. Yeats' Aengus may have been a shaman on a soul journey whose experience took place outside of the mind in non-ordinary reality.

¹⁴ Transcribed in Rasmussen 1930.

In his discussion of Arctic shamanism, Merkur describes the connection between the physical breath and the breath soul:

...because physical breath is a function of the breath-soul, breath has a metaphysical dimension. "The souls can speak".¹⁵

Breath, then, is the language of the soul. What does this make of language? Is it an outer manifestation of an inner world? Is it a gift from the gods? It is a means of communication across sound worlds—human and spirit, and across dimensions—the physical and the metaphysical.

Shamans, as well as storytellers, poets, and artists, describe their work as emanating not from themselves, but as being carried out through them. Their words, they say, come from "the spirits", "the spirit world", or "the other world." They pass these words and knowledge on, acting as a conduit from one realm to another—physical/metaphysical, inner/outer. Language may "appear" in this world through *séance* during which shamans may suddenly be able to converse in a language they have not spoken or understood before. Tuvans describe how, in dreams, shamans may hear words in other languages they do not normally understand (Van Deusen 1997: 100). In eastern Canada, Mi'kmaq elder and Medicine Woman, Jeorgina Larocque speaks about the old language of the grandmothers and grandfathers by which she is given information in healing ceremonies; this is a language most people have forgotten, she says¹⁶. A Hmong woman shaman spoke about an old language a few of them still know, a language given by the spirits as a means of communication between worlds¹⁷. Songwit Chuamsakul¹⁸, answered my question about how this language is learned by pointing out, "It is

¹⁵ Merkur (1992: 92) drawing from various ethnographic sources.

¹⁶ Personal communication, October 26, 1999.

¹⁷ Personal communication, December 1999.

¹⁸ Hmong researcher/academic.

not learned. It is a gift, given by the spirits," making reference to this language as a non-rational, non-thought-based process.

Kyrgyz recorded the first line of a Tuvan shaman's auto-eulogy: "The sound coming down from the heavens I am..." (Kyrgyz 1993: 47). Here, the shaman is a medium for, or a transmitter of, sound. Further, he (or she) *is* the sound, not in a metaphorical or symbolic sense, but in an actual sense. Similarly, landscape and phenomena *are* speech which is also a connection to the divine in this world view.

"A.E." (see footnote 13 above) noted in the ancient literature, the "belief in a complete circle of correspondences between every root sound in the human voice and elements, forms, and colours... Every flower was a thought. The trees were speech. The grass was speech. The winds were speech. The waters were speech" (Rasula and McCaffery 1998: 147). "The roots of human speech are the sound correspondences of powers which in their combination and interaction make up the universe. The mind of man is made in the image of Deity, and the elements of speech are related to the powers in his mind and through it to the being of the Oversoul" (ibid: 148).

The science of cymatics, or the study of wave phenomena, provides a western scientific corroboration of shamanic language as other worldly in origin, of the shaman *as* the sound, and of sound as landscape—physical and subtle, as A.E. describes above. Cymatics was pioneered by the Swiss physician, natural scientist and artist, Dr. Hans Jenny (1904-1972). In his work on wave phenomena, Jenny experimented with animating inert substances through audible sound/vibration. Doctors have applied this work in healing; for example, the British Dr. Guy Manners uses audible sound to balance acute and chronic conditions in body tissue.

Considerable work has been done in studying the effects of shamanic music, especially of the shamanic drum. Michael and Sandra Harner, for example, report on the physiological effects of the drum in shamanic journeying:

First the practitioners call for spiritual help and then enter Nonordinary reality. This is done by going into the SSC, most typically with the aid of sonic driving in a range of about four to seven Hertz, a range that approximately corresponds to the range of theta EEG waves [e.g., see Neher (12, 13); Maxfield (14, 15), and S. Harner (16, 17)]. The sonic driving can be supplied by a live

drum beaten by an assistant, by a rattle, or can be supplied in recorded form through headphones worn by the practitioner(s). (Harner and Harner 1999: 26)

I am not aware of comparable work in the study of language; however, cymatics allows us to begin to comprehend, from the western scientific viewpoint, how through language, and in séance, shamans participate in the creation of the cosmos. Shamanic language, as a vehicle for interaction with the subtle world, is a carrier of consciousness, a bridge between the physical and subtle worlds, and a representation of what is called variously "the divine", the "spirit world", the "other world" or "spirit".

ACTIVATING THE INNER SENSES

Shamanic language is part of a constellation of activities/tools/techniques/vehicles via which shamans interact with the spirit world and which includes

smoke and fire
offerings of food and drink
percussion and rhythm instruments, especially the drum
movement – dance, shaking, gesture
costume
voice – speech and song

The burning of resin-rich plants as incense or smudge produces smoke that in the shamanic event is said to permeate the thin membrane between this world and the other. As it disappears into the air, smoke is said to connect this visible world with the invisible world. Smoke is also offered as a gift to the spirits who are said to like the scent, and "feed off" the smell of the burning offering. Smoke from a fire or smudge purifies and cleanses a drum, or a person in preparation for travel to the other realm.

Food and drink are offered to the spirits in shamanic ritual. Hmong shamans place rice and whiskey on their altars. Siberians offer rice¹⁹.

¹⁹ Rice predated the arrival of Buddhism and was the result of trade with China

vodka and fermented mare's milk. At First Nations' feasts in North America, a plate of food may be offered to the spirits. Inuit hunters return a small piece of an animal they have killed to the land as a gift to the animal's spirit.

The horse is a key symbol in Siberian shamanism. In Southeast Asia, it becomes the shaman's bench which is "ridden" by the shaman to the spirit world. The drum, and the rhythm of the drum, like the horse's hoofbeats in Siberia, is a vehicle of transport in Native North America and across the North. The Hmong, as in other areas with Buddhist influence, use a metal gong. Other ritual percussive instruments in the areas I discuss include the bell, rattles and finger cymbals. The jew's harp or jaw's harp²⁰, an instrument of entertainment in Western culture, is used ritually in Siberia and also by the Hmong. In Siberia and Mongolia, it is used for entertainment and also to induce trance and heal the sick, although these latter uses are not as yet well-documented. Rhythm is built up from the instruments, the shaman's voice, the steps and other body movements of the shaman, and from the various elements of his/her dress such as tassels and ties, and metal attachments that move and also make sound.

Language is spoken and sung. It may be improvised in shamanic events or recited. Shamanic songs and other texts are recorded in the literature, but analysis and interpretation has generally been by the ethnographer, with little from the emic or experiential viewpoint. As Western understanding of the myths, legends and histories of shamanic cultures derives primarily from written text, so has language been isolated from other elements of the shamanic event. While words are key, they are carriers of meaning in conjunction with the other elements of shamanic séance.

Smoke, along with movement, sound, and offerings of food and drink, activates the inner senses, as Van Deusen describes:

Tuvan and Khakass shamanism is based on the principle that the spiritual world may be contacted through the inner senses in trance. The finely tuned

(Marilyn McCullough, personal communication, Nov 22, 2000). Siberian shamanism does integrate Buddhist elements.

²⁰ Of which we have evidence from 1545 though it may have been in use 1000 years ago in iron form (Gohrin, no date).

traditional Turkic *kamlanie* is designed to activate these inner senses and the ways of using them. Shamans often cover their physical eyes during *kamlanie* in order to enhance the visual images seen with the inner eye. Inner smell is aroused by the burning of artysh, or juniper, during the ceremony. The shaman's inner kinetic or touch sense is enlivened by dance movements, mostly connected with the playing of the drum. Inner taste is activated through offerings of food and vodka to the spirits. (Van Deusen 1997: 24)

We may also talk about the "inner ear", but this is not simply aural hearing. It is hearing with the body, through the body. Our inner body rhythms of the pulse and the breath are activated through the interaction of the various elements of shamanic ritual, including language. In the shamanic event, a shaman connects with the vibration of the universe, becomes one with "the sound of the heavens."

Thus, in the shamanic/Indigenous world view, this world and the spirit world are parallel worlds. Western science has separated the "sacred" from the "secular"—useful terms in ethnographic description but this separation is not consistent with the shamanic world view in which the sacred and the secular co-exist.

LANGUAGE AS MEDIATION

Describing the relationship between the two realms, and how language reflects this relationship, Silva writes about Huichol cosmology and the changing of names on the peyote journey:

Well, let's see now. I shall speak about how we do things when we go and seek the peyote, how we change the names of everything. How we call the things we see and do by another name for all those days. Until we return. Because all must be done as it must be done. As it was laid down in the beginning. How it was when the *mara'akáme* who is Tatewarí [Huichol name for the deity with whom the shaman has a special affinity, roughly translatable as Our Grandfather Fire] led all those great ones to Wirikuta. When they crossed over there, to the peyote country. Because that is a very sacred thing, it is the most sacred. It is our life, as one says. That is why nowadays one gives things other names. One changes everything. Only when they return home, then they call everything again what it is. (in Rasula and McCaffery 1998: 55)

In the Western tradition, too, language reflects the reversal of worlds and the reversal of consciousness that takes place in moving between worlds. Kerner writes about the hidden language of Frau H. Among its characteristics: "...she did not think this language with her head; and... [it]... came from the depths of the heart... She was able to speak and write this language only in a condition of half-awakenedness, and when she was awake she knew nothing whatever about it". Further he writes, "Frequently in her condition of half-awakenedness she said that the spirits spoke a similar language, in fact she had several times spoken with them against her will as this language threw her into a somnambulist state". Frau H. wrote herself: "Although the spirits read thoughts and have no need for language, yet this language belongs to the soul, the soul carries it into the other world, because the soul rules man and forms his body over there... This language passes over with the soul and forms a soaring body for the spirit." (Kerner in Rasula and McCaffery 1998: 41)

Swedenborg, a theologian, heretic, visionary and scientist (1688–1772) who inspired William Blake and his "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," describes characteristics of the angelic language and how humans, on one plane, communicate with angels and spirits on the other:

When angels and spirits turn their attentions to people they know nothing but what is given in human language. This is because they so thoroughly enter into human speech that they forget their own; but as soon as their attention strays from humans they're fully absorbed into the angelic language, where they no longer understand a word of human tongues. The same thing happened to me when in my companionship with angels, when I conversed with them in their speech and knew nothing of my own; but when I passed from their fellowship I was back in the human language again... (in Rasula and McCaffery 1998: 136)

Shamanic language connects the speaker with the subtle world. As the authors of *Imagining Language* write, "language partakes of the cosmos as much as it is governed by it" (Rasula and McCaffery 1994: 327), pointing out the connective and reflective nature of shamanic knowledge.

CALLING THE SPIRITS: WORDS AS POWER

Western scientific interpretation of myths, legends, and stories told by and about shamans derives primarily from written text, emphasizing analysis (rather than experience) of the content and isolating text from other elements of culture and event. The secularization of language and of the role of the shaman and the story-teller has removed much of the power of spoken language, including eliminating the experiential and the resonant. The power of shamanic language is in the action of the words, as it remains in other traditions:

Language in Kabbalah²¹ may be, for example:

(1) a technique of mystical striving; (2) an instrument of creation that is at the same time a component of the created world; (3) a structural homology between the mundane and the divine, and the locus of an encounter between macrocosm and microcosm; and (4) a talisman, or receptacle, for collecting divine emanations... The emphasis on the written text is predominant in Kabbalah, as it is in Judaism in general; but the Abulafian school of ecstatic Kabbalah engages the acoustic dimension of language in ways that bring it into alliance with recitation techniques and sonorous iconography common to Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist mysticism. (Rasula and McCaffery 1998: 329)

Malinowski has written on the magical power of words. Basso, in his work on Apache place names, demonstrated how the name of a place can function as condensed text, evoking and recreating the experience of place. Hood describes how Mayan elders, in whom authority is vested, use oral narratives that seek to transform rather than reflect life,

²¹ The Kabbalah or Cabala is the Jewish esoteric philosophy. In the name, derived from the Hebrew word *kabel* 'to receive', is the implication that it was received in the form of special revelations. Comprised of two systems, the theoretical and the practical, practical Kabbalah is based on the belief that the mystic doctrines can be translated into action such as the performance of miracles. It is also concerned with the use of divine words and names, among other objects, to achieve particular ends. Angels may be invoked, and spirits and demons silenced through amulets and prayer. Without going into further detail, the connections between language in the kabbalah and in shamanism are explicit.

and thus embed recognition of the power of the spoken word. Mayan shamans start their ceremonies with "Heart of the Sky" and "Heart of the Earth". Through these words, they invoke the Divine, invoke the Heart of the Sky and the Heart of the Earth to work through them. The words themselves are very important—they are key words in Mayan cosmology, words of respect. Each Mayan word is like a prayer, an invocation. Further, in the Mayan language they have a resonance, not just a sacred meaning. What does the resonance effect? In Hood's view, it connects with chakra levels in the body that relate to achieving higher levels of consciousness. Mayan ceremonies incorporate a lot of repetitive invocations. Like a chant, these set up a resonance and a state of receptivity that allow one to enter into an elevated state of consciousness and access the Divine²².

Shamanic activities are based on control of what Mader calls "power elements" in the Ecuadorian Amazon—magical darts, little arrows of light or objects, and spirit helpers. "The knowledge of songs and the possession of magical stones (*nantar*) are further assets of shamanic power", he writes (in Rasula and McCaffery 1998: 370). All these enable a shaman to exercise influence upon other persons' bodies, thoughts and emotions" (ibid: 371). Amongst Inuit, Merkur notes that, "A secret language is employed whenever they converse with spirits. Magic words or spells and magic songs may be used to control both malicious and helping spirits"²³. In all of these contexts, words are power, not in a symbolic but in an actual sense:

The Eskimo poet must—as far as I have been able to understand—in his spells of emotion, draw inspiration from the old spirit songs; which were the first songs mankind ever had; he must cry aloud to the empty air, shout incomprehensible, often meaningless words at the governing powers, yet withal words which are an attempt at a form of expression unlike that of everyday speech. Consequently, no one can become a poet who has not complete faith in the power of words. When I asked Ivaluardjuk about the power of words, he would smile shyly and answer that it was something no one could explain; for

²² Robin Hood, personal communication, November 3, 1999.

²³ Merkur (1992: 5) drawing from various ethnographic sources.

the rest, he would refer me to the old magic songs I had already learned, and which made all difficult things easy. (Rasmussen 1929: 234)

This strategic use of words as power effects shamanic healing.

Tanaka, in her work on Ainu shamans in Japan, provides insight into the connective or bridging role of words, as well as their activating, dynamic nature. She describes how “prayers are not only verbal expressions but are living actions; they are incantations. Prayers²⁴ affirm a bond between you and the addressee, be it a deceased relative, a spirit being” (Tanaka 1999: 302). Kira Van Deusen, who is herself a musician and story-teller, discusses this transportive role of sound in Tuva:

Shamanic drumming and chanting play central roles in helping the shaman and other participants in *kamlanie* to open their spiritual ears and eyes and to journey into the inner world. Music transports the shaman on the journey into the spirit world, and musical sounds also call the helping spirits, who especially enjoy hearing their names called...

Süzükei told me that Tuvan shamans use sound as a bridge or tunnel connecting the inner and outer worlds: “There is a bridge in these sound waves so you can go from one world to another. In the sound world, a tunnel opens through which we can pass—or the shaman’s spirits come to us. When you stop playing the drum or khomus, the bridge disappears.” (Van Deusen 1997: 24)

The transportive and transforming power of words is effected through the speaker, the shaman who receives the gift of language from the spirit world. In this work, word, action [speaking the word] and intent [respect] are inseparable. Meaning is conveyed through the word itself,

²⁴ Harner and Harner (1999: 20–21) discuss the limited role of prayer: “Ordinary people and priests in a great range of cultures commonly appeal to these spirits by means of prayer. Although supplication through prayer can often facilitate spiritual help from the other reality, and is indeed part of shamanic practice, prayer is not usually recognized in shamanism as being as effective as journeying into non-ordinary reality to work in cooperation with the compassionate spirits firsthand, or as effective as bringing the spirit to the Middle World to embody it there”. Further, “Through this intimate alliance, shamanic practitioners in indigenous cultures are typically expected by their peoples to produce healing results beyond those considered possible by prayer alone”.

through the act of speaking the word and the act of carrying out shamanic work, and through the intent of the healer/shaman. Likewise, meaning is contained in the *praxis* of words and music, in the voicing itself which produces resonance. "Without the musical instrument of the drum, without the music composed by the shaman himself, and without his performance of it, [these] archaic determinants lose their emotional force" (Kenin-Lopsan 1997: 140).

Referring to speech as act, Hoppál describes how Kenin-Lopsan collected Tuvan shamans' folklore and writes about one of the two genres Kenin-Lopsan recorded:

The first is the *algysh*, a song, or prayer, invocation, blessing, request, appeal to the spirits – I use all these European concepts only tentatively since none of them corresponds precisely to the type of text sung and recited by the Tuva shamans. It is, however, certain that the *algysh* is a kind of sacral communication, a "speech act" and specifically an illocutionary performative act. The characteristic of such an act is that it is not a declaration or communication of something but an action performed through speech. Research has not paid adequate attention to this modality aspect of the shamanic song (prayer, blessing, spell) although attempts have recently been made in this direction. (Preface by Hoppál in Kenin-Lopsan 1997a: xiv-xv)

Van Deusen compares the art of storyteller to that of shaman (both having the ability to heal through the spoken word), and addresses the inherent power of words and the care that must be taken to acknowledge this power:

While there is no ownership or restriction on the retelling of Udegei magic tales by outsiders, as there is among many North American peoples, it is considered spiritually dangerous to speak of spirits or the inner lives of shamans directly. So perhaps the stories are a way to speak of that reality in an oblique way, much as sacred animals like the tiger and bear are called by nick-names. Especially if the teller were a shaman, subtle ways of "speaking around" the subject would protect the speaker. (Van Deusen 1999: 99)

Words convey meaning and have power in and of themselves. The act of speech is also about power and about the activation of power during the shamanic event. Through the act of speech, resonance connects the participants and the shaman with one another, with the place that

surrounds them, and with the subtle world of the ancestors and the spirits. Resonance connects language, action and intent, and mediates between the physical world in which the act takes place and the subtle world to which the shaman travels. In her study of Malay shamanic performances, Laderman describes how the shaman's rationality and emotions are awakened or mobilized through the chanting of invocations and singing of songs. The words are not sacred, she points out, but they do carry power, "a power that proceeds from his breath, the outward manifestation of his bomoh's Wind, without which no amount of study could prepare him for his profession" (Laderman 1996: 120). The Malay shaman must open the shaman's gates and move his "Winds" through the quality of the poetic language of his song. His words strengthen and guard his "gates" (ibid: 121).

Words, in the traditions I have discussed here, strengthen and protect the shaman. They send greetings and reverence to the other world. They invite the powers of sacred ritual objects and of the shaman's helping spirits, guardians and ancestors. And they open the way for the shaman's powers or gifts to be used for healing or reclamation.

SHAMANIC LANGUAGE

If we can talk about "shamanic language", what can be said about it?

1. Shamanic language is part of a constellation of techniques/bridges/means of communication with the spirit or subtle world. Western science conceptualizes language primarily as a physical act. Shamanic language operates metaphysically also.

2. The language of shamans is multisensory; it is intuitive and experiential as well as intellectual and ideological.

3. Shamanic language is active and emergent. It *does something* and thus it does more than reflect or symbolize experience; it generates and transforms experience.

4. Western epistemology conceptualizes the past, present and future as linear²⁵. The language of shamans transcends time as linear, connecting "this world", physical time with a realm that exists "outside of time".

5. Shamanic language is incantatory. It is experiential and emic, deriving from the experience of the moment and from the experience of the speaker although it may be both repeated by rote and/or improvised.

7. Shamanic language is sonorous (resonant, full, deep or rich in sound). Meaning is generated from the speaking of the words. Words in the shamanic experience do not simply represent power, they are power. Shamanic language is not simply a representation of phenomena, it is phenomenon.

8. Shamanic language is about the process of knowledge as well as about its content. Language is a dynamic link with the subtle world that shamans activate through seance.

Shamanic language merges the intuitive and rational into intuitive science. Western science is beginning to acknowledge the subtle realms or planes of consciousness as existing and describable. It is interesting that in writing down shamanic texts, recorders have often selected a poetry format²⁶. Poetry represents in the literate mind, the intuitive and creative; whereas prose generally represents the world of ideas—the rational and ideological.

REFERENCES

- Anisimov, A.F. 1963. "Cosmological Concepts of the Peoples of the North." In Henry N. Michael (ed.) *Studies in Siberian Shamanism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 157-229.

²⁵ Anthropologist Michael Harner describes it this way: A core feature of shamanism is that the Universe is divisible into three worlds: the Upper, Middle and Lower. The Middle World, in which we live, has both its OR [ordinary reality] and NOR [non-ordinary reality] (or non-spiritual and spiritual) aspects, and belongs only to this immediate moment in time. The Upper and Lower Worlds, in contrast, are purely spiritual and are found only in nonordinary reality, where they exist "outside of time".

²⁶ For example, Kenin-Lopsan 1997a, who relayed this information about materials he collected to Hoppál in conversation: "The shamanic myths are our philosophy. The shamanic hymns (*algyshtar*) are our poetry" (Kenin-Lopsan 1997a: xv).

- Basso, Keith. 1996. *Wisdom Sits In Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1964. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Translated from the French by Willard R. Trask. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Faidysh, E.A. 1999. "The Informational Mechanisms of the Forming of the Shamanic States of Consciousness." *Proceedings of the International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*. Moscow, June 7-12. 137-142.
- Gohrin, Bill. no date. "History of the Jew's Harp." Unpublished Notes handed out at the World Rhythm Festival. Seattle. 1999.
- Harner, Michael. 1999. "Altered States of Consciousness and Shamanism." *Proceedings of the International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*. Moscow, June 7-12. 69-77.
- Harner, Michael and Sandra Harner. 1999. "Core Practices in the Shamanic Treatment of Illness." *Proceedings of the International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*. Moscow, June 7-12. 14-38.
- Helimskij, Eugene. 1993. "Does the Language of Spirits Influence the Development of Human Language?" In Mihály Hoppál and Keith D. Howard (eds.) *Shamans and Cultures*. Istor Books 5. Budapest/Los Angeles: Akadémiai Kiadó/International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research.
- Hoppál, Mihály. 1999. "Shamanism at the Turn of the Century." *Proceedings of the International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*. Moscow, June 7-12. 1-59.
- Hutton, Ronald. 1993. *The Shamans of Siberia*. Somerset, U.K.: The Isle of Avalon Press.
- Kenin-Lopsan, Mongush B. 1997. "Tuvan Shamanic Folklore." In Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (ed.) *Shamanic Worlds*. New York: Armonk. 110-151.
- . 1997a. *Shamanic Songs and Myths of Tuva*. Selected and edited with preface by Mihály Hoppál. Budapest/Los Angeles: Akadémiai Kiadó/International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research.
- Kyrgyz, Zoya. 1993. *On The Music of Shamanism in the Tuvian Culture*. English version by Rollanda Kongar. Published by the International Scientific Centre of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Tuva. Kyzyl: Printing House Novosti Tuvi.
- Laderman, Carol. 1996. "The Poetics of Healing in Malay Shamanistic Performances." In Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman (eds.) *The Performance of Healing*. New York: Routledge, 115-141.
- Laderman, Carol and Marina Roseman (eds.) 1996. *The Performance of Healing*. New York: Routledge.
- Li, Lisha. 1992. "The Symbolization Process of the Shamanic Drums Used By The Manchus and Other Peoples in North Asia." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 24: 52-80.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1965. *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*. 2 vols. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Martin, Judith N. and Thomas K. Nakayama. 1997. *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*. California: Mayfield Publishing.

- Merkur, Daniel. 1992. *Becoming Half Hidden: Shamanism and Initiation Among the Inuit*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Narby, Jeremy. 1999. *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam.
- Rasmussen, Knud. 1929. *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos. Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-1924*. (7) 1. Copenhagen, Denmark.
- . 1930. *Observations on the Intellectual Culture of the Caribou Eskimos. Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24*. (7) 2. Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Rasula, Jed and Steve McCaffery (eds.) 1998. *Imagining Language: An Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Stoller, Paul. 1996. "Sounds and Things: Pulsations of Power in Songhay". In Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman (eds.), *The Performance of Healing*. New York: Routledge, 165-184.
- Tanaka, Sherry. 1999. "Bringing Home a Dragon: A Spiritual Cartography from Northern Tsugaru." *Proceedings of the International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*. Moscow, June 7-12, 296-304.
- Townsend, Joan. 1999. "Theoretical Issues in the Study of Shamanism." *Proceedings of the International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*. Moscow, June 7-12, 32-39.
- Van Deusen, Kira. 1997. "Shamanism and Music in Tuva and Khakassia." *Shaman's Drum* 47, 22-29.
- . 1999. "Storytelling as a Shamanic Art: The Udegej People of the Amur Region." *Proceedings of the International Congress Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*. Moscow, June 7-12, 96-104.

DR. MARILYN WALKER is an anthropologist and associate professor at Mount Allison University, Canada. Her work with Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities has taken her to Southeast Asia, the Arctic and Subarctic regions of North America, and Russia. Current areas of interest in minority-state relations and Indigenous epistemology explore trans-cultural comparisons in shamanism, music and traditional medicine.