Border Crossing
January 2026
Volume: 16, No: 1, pp. 1 - 16
ISSN: 2046-4436 (Print) | ISSN: 2046-4444 (Online)
bordercrossing.uk

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 15 December 2025 Accepted: 8 January 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/bc.v16i1.2944

Shaman in the Nomadic Cosmos: Ritual Expertise Between Tradition and Modernity

Çakır Ceyhan SUVARİ[1]

Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of shamanism in the Central Asian context, arguing that it cannot be reduced to a static relic of the past but should instead be understood as a dynamic and multi-layered system of meaning-making. First, the cosmological and ritual foundations of shamanism—anchored in tripartite universe models and axis mundi schemata—are shown to provide both symbolic and psychosocial frameworks for healing and communal cohesion. Second, shamanic social roles are examined across historical and economic domains, demonstrating how mediators of crisis, narrators of normative order, and agents of fertility and hunting integrate ritual performance with social and ecological life, including gendered dimensions of practice. Third, the interaction between shamanism and Islam is explored as a process of transformation rather than disappearance, highlighting continuities in ritual practice and contemporary revivals shaped by post-Soviet identity politics, heritage regimes, and global neo-shamanic movements. By situating shamanism at the intersections of identity, power, health, ecology, and religion, this study proposes shamanism as a productive analytical lens for understanding the entanglement of local tradition and global circulation.

Keywords: *Shamanism, Central Asia, Ritual Practice, Cosmology, Islamization, Cultural Revival, Neo-Shamanism.*

Introduction

Shamanism is widely regarded as one of the earliest known systems of belief and ritual in human history and has long attracted the attention of anthropology, the history of religions, and sociology. Archaeological evidence, ethnographic observations, and mythological narratives indicate that shamanism has played a central role particularly among hunter-gatherer and nomadic pastoral communities (Eliade, 1964; Golden, 1992; Sinor, 1990). This belief system should not be understood merely as a collection of religious or magical practices; rather, it constitutes a comprehensive framework encompassing cosmology, worldview, and the regulation of social life. Shamanism operates as a holistic system aimed at maintaining balance between humans and nature, the community and the cosmos, and the material world and the spiritual or supernatural realm (Hoppál, 2007, pp. 15–18).

Within this framework, the shaman is positioned as a healer, sage, diviner, guide, and a founder and guardian of social order (Lewis, 2003, pp. 1–6). Among nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungusic-Manchu communities of the Central Asian steppe, shamanism has endured as a form of cultural memory transmitted across generations, continually transforming while adapting to new religious and historical contexts (Siikala, 1992, pp. 21–29). Because the lifeways of hunter-gatherer and nomadic societies necessitate close

[1] Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ceyhan Ceyhan Suvari, Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Letters, Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Türkiye.E-mail: ceyhansuvari@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0002-9905-0213.

and sustained interaction with the natural environment, ritual practices aimed at interpreting and influencing natural phenomena have inevitably occupied a central place within their belief systems. The shaman's drum, ritual costumes, trance performances, and communication with spirits are all directed toward safeguarding the community's spiritual well-being and ensuring cosmic harmony (Siikala, 1992, pp. 95–109). Particularly in times of crisis—such as drought, epidemic disease, or warfare—the shaman functions as a mediator who alleviates collective anxiety and seeks assistance from supernatural forces.

Central Asian shamanic cosmology is commonly structured around a tripartite conception of the universe, consisting of the Upper World (sky), the Middle World (earth), and the Lower World (underworld). In a state of trance, the shaman undertakes a symbolic journey across these cosmic layers (Eliade, 1964, pp. 259–270). This journey is frequently represented through an *axis mundi*[2], typically embodied in the form of a sacred tree, mountain, and/or ritual structure, which serves as a vertical conduit linking different realms of existence. Accompanied by the rhythmic beating of the drum and ritual dance, the shaman's soul ascends to the sky or descends into the underworld, where the source of illness is identified, lost souls are retrieved, or harmful and malevolent entities are expelled (Tedlock, 2005, pp. 41–52).

Anthropological scholarship has long emphasized both the individual and collective functions of shamanism. For instance, Levi-Strauss (1963, pp. 186–214) argues that ritual practices transform unconscious tensions by reorganizing subjective experience within a symbolic framework, while Durkheim (1995, pp. 422–430) maintains that ritual reinforces social norms and strengthens collective consciousness. Beyond these classical interpretations, shamanism has also acquired renewed significance in contemporary processes of ethnic identity formation. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the revival of shamanism across Siberia, Mongolia, and Tuva has served to sacralize ethnic identities and to mobilize nationalist sentiments (Humphrey, 1994, 1996; Znamenski, 2007; Balzer, 2011).

At the same time, shamanism's emphasis on the symbolic mediation between humans and nature has resonated strongly with individuals and groups who espouse contemporary ecological sensibilities, thereby contributing to a growing interest in shamanic worldviews and practices (Hoppal, 2007, pp. 49–58; Harvey, 2006, pp. 1–18). Similarly, urban, literate individuals who experience disenchantment with modern life and seek alternatives to institutionalized religions have increasingly gravitated toward a proliferating array of shamanic and neo-shamanic movements in search of new forms of meaning.

The Concept of the Shaman as an Expression of Generalizing Tendencies

Although various interpretations exist regarding the etymology of the term *shaman*, the most widely accepted view traces it to the Tungusic-Manchu roots *šaman*/*saman*, commonly glossed as "one who knows," "one who sees," or "a person capable of communicating with spirits" (Eliade, 1964, pp. 3–7; Hoppal, 2007, pp. 23–26). From the seventeenth century onward, the

[2] The concept of *axis mundi* is used to describe sacred centers—often referred to as the "world axis" or the "cosmic pillar"—that symbolically mediate the connection between the sky, the earth, and the underworld across different cultural contexts. This concept denotes not only a cosmological order but also a liminal passage through which the boundary between the sacred and the profane (everyday life) can be traversed. According to the anthropologist Mircea Eliade, the *axis mundi* manifests itself in diverse forms in different societies. Sacred mountains, cosmic trees, pillars, temples, or even sacred urban centers may all function as symbolic representations of the *axis mundi* (Eliade, 1959, p. 21; Eliade, 1964, p. 36).

term entered European languages through Russian scholarly mediation and gradually evolved into a generalized label designating ritual specialists who perform certain types of practices among Siberian and Central Asian societies (Eliade, 1964, pp. 3–7; Hoppal, 2007, pp. 23–26). Over time, however, the concept of the "shaman" has expanded well beyond its original ethnographic contexts and is now commonly employed to describe practitioners of spirit-centered or magic-oriented belief systems across diverse regions of the world.

In contrast to this broad generalization, even within Central Asian societies themselves, individuals who perform shamanic practices have historically been identified by a variety of indigenous terms. These include baksı, kam, otacı, and böge, each embedded in specific linguistic, cultural, and ritual contexts. The widespread adoption of the term *shaman* thus represents not merely a process of linguistic transmission, but also reflects a broader Western epistemological tendency to centralize and homogenize non-Western religious figures under a single conceptual rubric. In this sense, the elevation of the shaman as a universal category parallels earlier classificatory practices through which non-Western societies were subsumed under pejorative labels such as "barbaric," "savage," or "primitive," revealing a similar impulse toward reduction and totalization.

Nevertheless, the theoretical frameworks employed to explain shamanism within the history of anthropology have diversified in accordance with disciplinary orientations and shifting methodological preferences across different periods. Edward B. Tylor, for instance, conceptualized the intellectual foundations of shamanism through his theory of animism, framing it as an early system of belief centered on spirits. According to Tylor, animism constitutes a cognitive schema through which natural phenomena are interpreted as the intentional actions of spiritual agents, and within this schema the shaman emerges as a specialist who mediates between spirits or the supernatural realm and the human or natural world (Tylor, 2010, pp. 8–12, 118). While this approach offers an account of the epistemic foundations of the shaman's authority and efficacy, it has also been criticized for situating the plurality of local ontologies within a linear, unilinear evolutionary trajectory.

James G. Frazer likewise advanced an evolutionary classification of human thought by schematizing its development through the triadic sequence of "magic–religion–science," and he analyzed shamanic practices primarily through the categories of imitative (sympathetic) magic and contagious magic (Frazer, 1993, pp. 10–22). Ritual representations of natural cycles intended to ensure fertility, for example, or the symbolic transfer of illness onto an object can be understood within Frazer's analytical framework as instances of imitative and contagious magic.

In Emile Durkheim's functionalist interpretation, shamanism is positioned as a social institution through the analytical lenses of the sacred–profane distinction and the concept of collective consciousness. From this perspective, ritual does not function solely as a means of individual healing, but also as a mechanism through which social solidarity is periodically reproduced. The shaman, in turn, operates as a mediating figure who dramatizes and enacts this solidarity in ritual form (Durkheim, 1995, pp. 39–44, 422–430).

By contrast, Mircea Eliade—whose work constitutes one of the most influential bodies of scholarship on shamanism—approaches the subject from a phenomenological perspective centered on what he terms "techniques of ecstasy." Eliade (1964, pp. 259–270) argues that the tripartite structure of the cosmos (sky, earth, and underworld), the *axis mundi*, and spirit

journeys together form the universal core of shamanism. However, much like the approaches of Frazer and Durkheim, Eliade's framework has been criticized for subsuming local variants into a shared structural essence, thereby rendering historical, political, and culturally specific differences—and the interpretations grounded in them—largely invisible.

In the approach of the French structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, shamanic healing is analyzed primarily as a narrative form. According to Levi-Strauss, the shaman mobilizes the morphological resources of mythic language to transform the patient's chaotic experience into a coherent and meaningful discourse; through this process, the symbolic order is reconstituted, and the body is guided toward healing by conforming to that order (Levi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 186–214). This perspective, however, while rendering the discursive dimension of ritual visible, tends to marginalize its performative and sensory aspects—such as sound, rhythm, and smell—that are central to the embodied experience of ritual practice.

In contrast, Victor Turner's performance-oriented approach to ritual, developed through his influential studies of rites of passage, interprets shamanic action through the concepts of *liminality* and *communitas*. Turner emphasizes the therapeutic and integrative functions of ritual in moments of crisis, highlighting how shamanic performances generate transitional spaces in which social bonds are reconfigured and collective cohesion is restored (Turner, 1969, pp. 94–106).

From the 1970s onward, two major approaches emerged within anthropology. The first is ecological anthropology and the cultural ecology perspective. Julian Steward argued that cultural practices are selectively shaped in response to environmental constraints and opportunities. From this viewpoint, shamanism functions as an adaptive strategy within nomadic economies, responding to climatic conditions, animal herds, and seasonal cycles (Steward, 1955, p. 36).

The second orientation consists of phenomenological and psychological approaches. Carl Gustav Jung's theory of archetypes offers a parallel reading of the tripartite cosmology in terms of consciousness, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. According to Jung, the shaman's journey constitutes a symbolic dramaturgy corresponding to the individual's process of individuation—that is, the integration of disparate elements of the psyche into a coherent whole (Jung, 1964, pp. 67–92).

Processes of generalization surrounding the concepts of the shaman and shamanism have also been shaped by the discourse and practices commonly referred to as "neo-shamanism." In contemporary scholarship, neo-shamanism is generally defined as a set of hybrid formations in which selected traditional techniques are combined with elements drawn from modern psychology, ecological thought, and self-development discourses, and subsequently circulated within the global cultural industry (Wallis, 2003; Harner, 1980). While this movement has rendered an expanded and diversified shamanic repertoire more accessible to broader audiences, it has simultaneously generated critical debates concerning authenticity, cultural appropriation, and the commodification of indigenous spiritual practices.

In the contexts of Turkey and Central Asia, by contrast, the historian–philologist tradition associated with the intellectual lineage of Fuad Köprülü has tended to examine the continuities and transformations between shamanic elements and Sufi practices through an intersection of textual analysis and field-based inquiry (Köprülü, 2004, p. 52; Ocak, 1983, p. 88). This

approach foregrounds historical depth and local specificity, emphasizing processes of adaptation and reinterpretation rather than homogenizing classifications.

In summary, *shamanism* should be understood not as the designation of a single, unified religion, but rather as an umbrella concept encompassing a set of ritual specializations and cosmological designs that perform comparable functions across diverse historical contexts. Within this analytical landscape, the Tylor–Frazer lineage foregrounds cognitive and symbolic logics; the Durkheim–Turner tradition emphasizes social order and cohesion; the Eliade–Jung framework focuses on experience and cosmology; and the Levi-Strauss perspective centers on narrative form and structural organization.

Core Beliefs and Cosmology of Shamanism

In Central Asian shamanism, the universe is most commonly conceived as a tripartite structure consisting of the Upper World (Sky), the Middle World (Earth), and the Lower World (Underworld). This triadic order is not merely a mythic representation; it simultaneously structures the spatial choreography of ritual, the normative map of social order, and the symbolic logic of healing (Eliade, 1964, pp. 259–270; Durkheim, 1995, pp. 422–430; Roux, 2017). The Upper World is inhabited by Tengri (the Sky God), benevolent spirits, and ancestral spirits; the Middle World is occupied by humans, animals, and other natural beings; and the Lower World is associated with chaotic and malevolent forces, as well as the spirits of the dead (İnan, 1986, pp. 43–51; Ögel, 2006, pp. 120–149).

The shamanic journey unfolds across these cosmological layers. Its axis is represented by cosmic figures commonly conceptualized as the *axis mundi*. In ritual performance, the shaman frequently constructs a bodily "ladder" through the rhythmic beating of the drum, monotonous chants, and cyclical movement. The drum functions not merely as a musical instrument but as a vehicle—often metaphorically associated with a horse or wings—that conveys the shaman into the spirit world. Its components are symbolically charged: the drumhead is linked to a hunted animal, while the frame is associated with the cosmic tree, or *axis mundi* (Eliade, 1964, pp. 266–270). This kinesthetic and auditory dramaturgy transforms, in Levi-Strauss's terms, the patient's fragmented symptoms into a coherent narrative structure (Levi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 186–214).

The Middle World constitutes the everyday texture of ritual practice. Fire, kindled within this realm, is valued not only as a means of heating or cooking but also as a purifying force and as a mediating element that forges a connection between the microcosm (the household) and the macrocosm (the universe). The smoke rising from the fire is commonly understood as a channel of communication with spirits. Among Altai communities, for instance, the pouring of sacrificial fat onto the fire or the ritual "fumigation" with milk functions to ward off malevolent entities and to invoke fertility and abundance (Anisimov, 1958, pp. 812–818).

Water, like fire, serves both as an agent of purification and as a medium of transition. Ritual acts such as pouring water over the body of the sick or performing ceremonial bathing in a river are interpreted as processes through which negative afflictions are dissolved and released. Earth and wind, in turn, represent the poles of stability and transformation within the cosmic cycle, and festivals structured around the seasonal calendar are generated through rhythmic movements between these poles (Siikala, 1992, pp. 101–109, 135–148).

Communication with the Upper World becomes most visible in rituals of divination and fertility. Acting on behalf of the community, the shaman petitions for victory, rainfall, or the multiplication of herds, negotiating with celestial authority through symbolic representations of ascent. The effectiveness of this negotiation is reinforced by the dramaturgical intensity of the ritual and by the active participation of the community (Hoppal, 2007, pp. 49–58).

Journeys to the Lower World, by contrast, are undertaken primarily in response to adverse conditions such as illness, infertility, the loss of a soul, or collective calamity. In these contexts, the shaman seeks to retrieve the lost soul by bargaining with, confronting, or expelling aggressive and malevolent supernatural entities. Descent scenes are performed through highly charged gestures—controlled breathing, shouting, trembling, and prostration—while their spectatorial dimension heightens the emotional tension of the assembled community and produces a cathartic effect (Balzer, 1996, pp. 59, 77; Levi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 186–214).

The social corollary of cosmology, as indicated by Durkheim, lies in the mapping of moral order and the demarcation of its boundaries. Within the cosmic schema, the Upper World is formalized as the domain of normative ideals; the Middle World as the sphere of everyday relations; and the Lower World as a space of trial and chaos. Disruptions in the balance between these cosmological layers threaten the well-being of the community, whereas shamanic ritual serves to restore cosmic equilibrium (Durkheim, 1912/1995, pp. 422–430).

From a Jungian perspective, the tripartite cosmos is interpreted as a symbolic correspondence to levels of the psyche. These levels are consciousness as the everyday self, the personal unconscious shaped by trauma and memory, and the collective unconscious structured by archetypes and myths. Within this framework, the shaman's ritual is understood as a dramaturgy of integration and rebalancing, through which psychic and cosmological order are simultaneously reconstituted (Jung, 1964, pp. 67–92).

The ecological logic of this cosmological schema becomes particularly visible in nomadic and semi-nomadic societies. Seasonal migrations, the cyclical movement of herds, and climatic fluctuations structure the ritual calendar as well as practices of sacrifice and thanksgiving (Bazin, 1974). From the perspective of cultural ecology, Julian Steward argues that the ritual repertoire of shamanism consists of adaptive strategies selectively developed to manage environmental uncertainty (Steward, 1955, p. 36). For example, dances and puppet performances performed during spring ceremonies to invoke fertility may be interpreted through Frazer's concept of imitative magic; at the same time, these practices function not merely as magical operations but also as social rhythms that restore collective morale (Frazer, 1993, p. 21; Turner, 1969, pp. 94–101).

Cosmology, moreover, constitutes a gendered order. Umay Ana, for instance, is among the feminine figures associated with fertility and the protection of children. In parallel, the roles assumed by female shamans in rites of passage—birth, marriage, and death—symbolize the articulation of feminine generativity with the cosmic cycle (Ögel, 2006, p. 147; Eliade, 1964, p. 190; Siikala, 1992, p. 145). This symbolic positioning also accounts for the location of female shamans within the ambivalent polarity of the "sacred" and the "dangerous" or "uncanny" (Levi-Strauss, 1963, p. 213; Balzer, 1996, pp. 112–119).

Central Asian shamanic cosmology may be understood simultaneously as a map of the universe, a mirror of society, and an algorithm of social cohesion grounded in the balance between nature and humanity. The ritual journey woven around the *axis mundi* functions to

reestablish equilibrium within the nature–society–body triad when it is disrupted. For this reason, the shamanic cosmos exceeds the status of a mere belief system and should instead be approached as a multilayered practice and a form of collective intelligence.

The Social Role of the Shaman

In Central Asian societies, the shaman is not merely an individual healer but also a guardian of normative order, a manager of crises, a producer of narrative meaning, and, in certain contexts, a political mediator. Within anthropological literature, this multidimensionality is most often conceptualized through the notion of *mediation*. By establishing communication between humans and supernatural beings, the shaman safeguards the fragile equilibrium of collective life (Eliade, 1964, p. 7). This mediatory role materializes across three interrelated domains. These domains include health and healing, economy and ecology, and the political–ethical order.

The shaman's healing practice rests upon a composite repertoire that brings together herbal medicine, trance, spirit invocation and/or expulsion, and sacrificial rites. Tylor's animistic framework helps to clarify the epistemic authority of the shaman within local ontologies that attribute illness to the influence of spirits (Tylor, 2010, p. 118). As noted earlier, Frazer's categories of imitative and contagious magic provide useful analytical tools for elucidating the symbolic logic underlying acts of healing. In shamanic rituals, for example, balance may be restored through the symbolic transfer of illness onto a concrete object or through the ritual imitation of a healthy body (Frazer, 1993, pp. 12–15).

For Levi-Strauss (1963, p. 186), the core of healing lies in the shaman's ability to reorganize the patient's fragmented emotional states into a coherent semantic structure through mythic discourse and performance. In this process, the triad of word, rhythm, and gesture exerts a regulatory effect on the nervous system (Levi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 186–214). The liminal scene conceptualized by Turner, in turn, constitutes a space of simultaneous rebirth for both the patient and the community (Turner, 1969, pp. 94–101).

In nomadic pastoralist and hunter-gatherer societies, the shaman is regarded as indirectly responsible for the success of fertility and hunting rituals. The multiplication of herds, the expulsion of epizootic diseases, and the maintenance of an "ethical" relationship with the spirits of animals are normatively regulated through the shaman's mediatory role (Hamayon, 1993, pp. 17–40; Hoppal, 2007, pp. 60–66; Balzer, 1996, p. 77). Siikala's ethnographic observations demonstrate that ritual practices are closely aligned with seasonal cycles, indicating that the religious calendar is, in effect, a reflection of the economic calendar (Siikala, 1992, pp. 87, 135–148). From the perspective of cultural ecology articulated by Steward, the shaman's role functions as an institutional mechanism for risk reduction in the management of environmental uncertainty and seasonal unpredictability (Steward, 1955, p. 36).

The shaman also dramatizes the moral codes of the community. In situations marked by tension—such as the violation of taboos, blood feuds, prohibited relationships, or the pollution of sacred sites—the shaman once again assumes a mediating role. In such contexts, shamanic ritual serves to transform guilt and pollution, thereby contributing to the reestablishment of social peace (Durkheim, 1995, pp. 422–430). Humphrey's (1994; 1996) observations in the Mongol–Buryat region demonstrate that, in the modern period, shamans have increasingly become public actors who negotiate with local administrations, ethnic

associations, and cultural heritage bureaucracies. This transformation indicates that the shaman is not merely a religious figure but also a cultural–political agent.

This social role of the shaman simultaneously generates both reverence and fear. The shaman's proximity to the supernatural renders them at once a figure of protection and a source of danger or uncanniness, and this dual emotional regime provides insight into the social psychology of shamanic authority (Balzer, 1996, p. 59).

Although the source of a shaman's authority may in some cases be traced through lineage, it is ultimately grounded in transmission through a master–apprentice relationship. Ritual techniques, botanical knowledge, and the mythic repertoire can be transmitted only through prolonged and disciplined training (Siikala, 1992, p. 173). Upon completing this training, the shaman amplifies their performative charisma through elements such as voice, rhythm, dance, costume, and the drum, thereby expanding their bodily and auditory presence and establishing a sensorial bond with the community (Eliade, 1964, pp. 266–270; Hoppal, 2007, pp. 60–66). The motifs inscribed on costumes and talismans function as embodied reflections of the cosmological map, transforming the shaman into what may be described as a walking and dancing cosmos.

Processes of modernization and state formation have profoundly reshaped the social role of the shaman. While Soviet-era policies of secularization forced shamanic practices into concealment and marginality, the post-1991 period witnessed the reemergence of shamans as visible actors within the domains of cultural heritage, tourism, and ethnic identity politics (Balzer, 2011, p. 17; Znamenski, 2007, pp. 239–247). In this context, shamanic authority has become a multifaceted form of mediation, no longer negotiated solely with spirits but also with bureaucratic institutions, media representations, and market forces.

In sum, the social role of the shaman may be characterized as that of a multifaceted mediator. Traditionally, the shaman is responsible for healing both individuals and the community, maintaining the balance between nature and humanity, and resolving social as well as environmental crises. In contemporary contexts, this role also involves engagement with global circuits through tourism and market relations while representing locality and nationhood within the politics of ethnic identity. This multidimensionality situates the shaman in an ambivalent position—both indispensable and potentially dangerous—thereby positioning the shaman as an actor who operates along the boundary zones of social order.

Shamanism and Nomadic Life

The nomadic way of life has profoundly shaped both the institutional structure and the ritual repertoire of Central Asian shamanism. Climatic fluctuations across the steppe landscape, the seasonal mobility of herds, and sustained intimacy with the natural environment have positioned the shaman not only as a spiritual leader but also as a guardian of economic security and social cohesion (Roux, 2017; Golden, 1992; Sinor, 1990; Eliade, 1964, p. 145). The rhythms of nomadic life have been closely interwoven with the ritual calendar of shamanic practice, such that systems of belief and strategies of subsistence have come to mutually constitute one another.

In nomadic societies, nature is perceived not merely as a source of economic production but as a sacred totality. The tripartite cosmology—Upper World, Middle World, and Lower World—provides a universal model through which this mobility and relationality are rendered

intelligible (Hoppál, 2007, p. 53). Pastures, mountains, and rivers are not understood solely as geographical features but are also revered as sacred spaces inhabited by spiritual beings. For this reason, the shaman assumes the role of mediator who negotiates with nature spirits in order to protect herds, prevent epidemics, and secure fertility and abundance (Siikala, 1992, p. 87). In this sense, shamanism may be interpreted as a constellation of practices that sacralize the nomadic mode of life through its continuous engagement with the natural world.

As noted earlier, seasonal migrations—one of the defining characteristics of nomadic life—also delineate the framework of shamanic ritual cycles. Transitions between winter quarters (*kışlak*) and summer pastures (*yaylak*), for instance, simultaneously mark sacred periods within the ritual year. In spring and summer ceremonies, symbolic actions aligned with natural cycles come to the fore, emphasizing renewal, fertility, and continuity (Bazin, 1974; Steward, 1955, p. 36).

In nomadic economies, pastoralism constitutes the primary means of subsistence, and the health of herds directly determines the survival of the community. In states of trance, the shaman communicates with animal spirits to seek protection for the herds (Hamayon, 1993, pp. 17–40). Among hunting-based communities, the shaman similarly engages with the spirits of game animals to ensure a successful hunt. Sacrificial rituals performed to appease the spirit of the hunted animal establish the ethical dimension of hunting practices (Balzer, 1996, p. 77). An unsuccessful hunt is thus perceived not only as an economic loss but also as a spiritual failure, a condition that may negatively affect the shaman's performative charisma and ritual authority (Hamayon, 1993, pp. 17–40; Balzer, 1996).

The fragmented and inherently fragile structure of nomadic communities has generated a persistent need to reinforce internal solidarity. For this reason, one of the shaman's central roles is to establish and maintain social cohesion—a task accomplished primarily through ritual. Turner's (1969, p. 101) theory of ritual and social drama provides a useful framework for understanding this function. In moments of crisis, shamanic rituals may be interpreted as liminal processes that neutralize the risk of social fragmentation. In this sense, the shaman also emerges as a symbolic architect of nomadic identity.

Shamanism is closely intertwined with the nomadic mode of life. Continuous engagement with the natural environment, the inscription of seasonal migrations into ritual cycles, and practices associated with pastoralism and hunting have positioned the shaman at the center not only of religious life but also of economic, social, and political processes. Shamanism should therefore be understood as an integrated system of practices through which nomadic communities interpret and organize their ecological, economic, and social existence. One of the defining characteristics of shamanic rituals, moreover, is their function as mechanisms of ecological adaptation.

Female Shamans

The presence of female shamans is of critical importance for understanding the gendered dimensions of shamanism in Central Asian and Siberian societies. As emphasized by numerous scholars, female shamans have played particularly central roles in rituals related to fertility, abundance, and family life (Eliade, 1964, p. 190; Balzer, 1996, p. 112). Their existence demonstrates that shamanism is not an exclusively male-centered tradition; rather, it reveals that women, too, have attained powerful symbolic status by assuming mediatory roles between nature and society.

One of the most prominent functions of female shamans is associated with fertility. In rituals performed for women unable to conceive, female shamans were believed to communicate with fertility spirits. These rituals were not merely forms of individual healing but symbolic actions aimed at securing the future of the community itself (İnan, 1986, p. 85). The presence of mythological figures such as Umay Ana further reinforces the association of female shamans with fertility and abundance (Ögel, 2006, p. 147).

Female shamans also assumed significant roles in marriage and funerary rites. In marriage ceremonies, they performed rituals intended to ensure harmony and continuity in the couple's life, while in death rituals they mediated the safe passage of the soul to the other world (Siikala, 1992, p. 145). Humphrey (1996) notes that, in funerary contexts, female shamans were believed to prevent the soul from straying into "wrong worlds" through the performance of specialized laments and trance practices. In this way, the female shaman emerges as an indispensable guide across the threshold between life and death.

Female shamans are represented not only in social practice but also prominently within mythological narratives. In Yakut mythology, the fertility goddess known as *Aysıt* is regarded as a protective figure for female shamans (Balzer, 1996, p. 112). Similarly, the figure of *Umay Ana* in Turkic mythology emerges as a powerful archetype that reinforces the social status of female shamans (Ögel, 2006, p. 147). These mythological figures indicate that female shamans are not associated solely with individual ritual roles but are also symbolically integrated into the cosmic order itself.

As noted earlier, shamans—and female shamans in particular—are perceived as simultaneously sacred and uncanny. While they are revered as sources of life and fertility, they also inspire fear due to their close relationship with the supernatural. The social image of female shamans closely corresponds to the management and mediation of binary oppositions such as life and death, fertility and barrenness, protection and threat, as conceptualized within Levi-Strauss's theory of structural oppositions (Levi-Strauss, 1963, p. 213).

Contemporary feminist anthropology seeks to render visible the historically overlooked roles of female shamans. Balzer (1996, p. 119) argues that Soviet-era research frequently marginalized female shamans, despite ethnographic evidence demonstrating their decisive significance in ritual practice. In this regard, Balzer highlights that although female shamans were historically relegated to the background of scholarly narratives, they nevertheless occupied a powerful and enduring place within cultural memory.

Female shamans have assumed central roles in fertility, abundance, family-related rites of passage, and funerary rituals. Their position is characterized by a dual structure that simultaneously commands reverence and evokes fear. Within anthropological scholarship, the renewed visibility of female shamans is therefore of critical importance for understanding the gendered dimensions of shamanism.

The Process of Becoming a Shaman

The process of becoming a shaman is not regarded as a random selection in many societies, but rather as a transformation defined by specific symbolic conditions and ritual stages. This process typically begins with a "calling," during which the candidate undergoes extraordinary experiences, followed by a period of training under the guidance of an experienced shaman, and culminates in an initiation ritual through which the individual is formally recognized as a

shaman by the community (Golden, 1992; Sinor, 1990; Roux, 2017; Bazin, 1974; Eliade, 1964, p. 34).

The most salient phenomenon indicating that an individual has been selected as a shaman is what is commonly referred to as "shamanic illness." Symptoms resembling epilepsy or schizophrenia, as well as intense hallucinatory experiences, are interpreted as signs that the spirits have chosen the individual (Walsh, 1990). Humphrey's fieldwork (1994; 1996) demonstrates that such experiences are socially interpreted as spirit possession. These crisis episodes also symbolize the individual's rupture from ordinary social roles, marking the initial stage of separation in the process of becoming a shaman.

Following the experience of the calling, the candidate undergoes a prolonged period of training under the guidance of a master shaman. This training encompasses not only ritual techniques but also mythological narratives, ecological knowledge, and methods of herbal healing (Siikala, 1992, p. 173). The process often extends over several years, during which the candidate learns to play the drum, enter trance states, transmit mythological stories, and perform acts of healing. Through this training, the shamanic apprentice acquires not only individual competence but also the responsibility of becoming a bearer of collective memory.

The culmination of the process of becoming a shaman is the initiation ritual performed before the community. In these rituals, the candidate undergoes a symbolic death followed by rebirth. Eliade (1964, p. 42) characterizes this experience as one of the most universal themes of shamanism. During the initiation rite, it is believed that the shamanic candidate is dismembered by spirits and subsequently reassembled. This process, which may be interpreted through Turner's (1969, p. 106) concept of *liminality*, symbolizes the individual's shedding of a former identity and the acquisition of a new social status.

Among Yakut (Sakha) communities, a severe illness or an intense trance experience is interpreted as evidence that the individual has been chosen by the spirits (İnan, 1986, p. 94). Among the Buryats, encounters with "underworld spirits" during initiation rituals serve to formalize and legitimize the candidate's new status as a shaman (Balzer, 1996, p. 135). In Turkic shamanism, by contrast, a period during which the candidate is perceived as "mad" is understood as a sign that they are being tested by the spirits rather than as an indication of pathology (İnan, 1986, p. 94).

The process of becoming a shaman constitutes a multilayered transformation shaped by a calling, crisis experiences, a master–apprentice relationship, and initiation rituals. Through this process, the individual acquires a new status at both the social and cosmological levels. Anthropological literature abounds with cases suggesting that becoming a shaman is not the result of an individual choice but rather a compelled outcome of the phenomena commonly described as "shamanic illness," as outlined above.

The Interaction between Central Asian Shamanism and Islam

Islamization in Central Asia should not be understood merely as the adoption of a "new religion," but rather as a long-term process of cultural negotiation, ritual transfer, and adaptation. Within this process, indigenous shamanic repertoires interacted with Islamic traditions—particularly Sufi interpretations—sometimes exhibiting continuity, at other times undergoing transformation or actively reshaping Islamic practice itself. Fuad Köprülü's

classical thesis emphasizes the capacity of Yesevism and Bektashism to articulate with Central Asian popular beliefs, arguing that these Sufi orders functioned as carriers of folk religion by refunctionalizing pre-Islamic elements within an Islamic idiom (Köprülü, 2004, p. 52). This perspective proceeds by identifying correspondences between shamanic practices—such as trance, breath control (*nefes*), amulets, and votive sacrifice—and their counterparts within Sufi ritual life (Ocak, 1983, p. 88; Melikoff, 1998, p. 34).

The similarity between shamanic trance and Sufi states of *wajd* or *samāʿ* is most often explained through the bodily and auditory dramaturgy of the experience. The rhythmic structure of the shamanic drum and that of *dhikr* are commonly understood as shared instruments that synchronize collective affect, discharge social tensions, and generate "sacred time." From this perspective, Sufism's emphasis on ecstasy and spiritual rapture exhibits a functional parallel with the performative logic of the shamanic repertoire (Eliade, 1964, p. 190; Dressler, 2013, p. 66). This parallelism, however, should not be mistaken for identity. While Sufism is grounded in a theological–ethical framework and has historically drawn nourishment from multiple religious traditions, shamanic practices are more deeply rooted in local cosmologies and relationships with ancestral spirits. Consequently, the relationship between shamanism and Sufism does not extend beyond a process of mutual element transfer and reinterpretation.

At the level of popular religion, Islamization often manifested itself primarily through ritual continuities. Practices such as shrine visitation, votive offerings and sacrifice, beliefs in the evil eye, and the use of amulets enabled the reinterpretation of indigenous notions of protective spirits and ancestors within an Islamic hierarchy through the mediating figures of saints (*evliya*) and holy men (*eren*) (İnan, 1986, p. 104; Dressler, 2013, p. 66). While this continuity served to preserve local memory on the one hand, it also rendered the language and practices of the new religion more intelligible and accessible on the other. DeWeese's study of the Golden Horde region demonstrates that Islamization proceeded not as an abrupt rupture but through a multilayered logic of transformation and accumulation (DeWeese, 1994, pp. 129–134).

From a sociological perspective, it may be argued that the flexibility of Sufi orders played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of this process of interaction. The collective *dhikr* practices of Yesevism in Central Asia and the *cem* ritual of Alevism in Anatolia provided frameworks capable of organizing social solidarity and managing liminality—such as birth, marriage, and death—through musical–rhythmic structures and sacrificial or communal meal rituals (*kurban/sofra*) (Köprülü, 2004, p. 52; Ocak, 1983, p. 88). These rituals generated what Turner conceptualizes as dramatic channels that reintegrate liminal states into social cohesion. In this respect, their function exhibits a structural parallel to the role played by shamanic systems in the management of crisis situations (Turner, 1969, pp. 94–101).

At the cosmological level, the articulation of the shamanic emphasis on ancestral spirits with shrine visitation and pilgrimage practices is particularly noteworthy. While offerings dedicated to ancestors were largely replaced by sacrificial acts and votive offerings performed with intentions of justice or healing, the perception of spatial sacredness continued through attachment to local hills, trees, and water sources. In many cases, however, these sites came to be marked and redefined through the names of saints. In this way, the landscape of sacred space was re-mapped through Islamic terminology, while the geographical veins of indigenous memory were largely preserved (İnan, 1986, p. 104; Dressler, 2013, p. 66).

Viewed through Geertz's (1973, p. 112) interpretive anthropological approach, this syncretic process reveals the mutual production that emerges between an incoming religion and local worlds of meaning. In the Central Asian case, shamanic symbols acquired secondary—and legitimized—meanings within Islam's theological universe, while Islam itself became localized by internalizing indigenous regimes of emotion and spatial memory. The result was an interpretive formation in which the "old" and the "new" were syncretized within the fabric of everyday social practice.

At the same time, this interaction has not been free of tension. Jurisprudence-centered schools and Salafi interpretations have frequently stigmatized certain practices as *bidʿa* (illicit innovation), superstition, and/or heresy. Despite such condemnations, ritual continuity in lived religious practice has proven remarkably resilient, largely because these practices function not merely as "beliefs" but also as mechanisms for social solidarity, healing, and the production of spatial belonging (Dressler, 2013, p. 66; DeWeese, 1994, pp. 129–134). Indeed, the hybrid forms observed in popular religiosity across Anatolia and Central Asia operate as cultural channels through which local autonomy is maintained in the face of modern nation-building projects and centralized religious policies.

Shamanism in the Contemporary World

In the contemporary period, shamanism has reemerged along three principal axes: (i) cultural revival in post-Soviet Central Asia and Siberia; (ii) regimes of "intangible cultural heritage" and the cultural economy; and (iii) neo-shamanistic movements in the West. While these axes are mutually reinforcing, they operate according to distinct logics of transformation.

In the post-1991 period, shamanic organizations began to emerge in regions such as Tuva, Altai, Khakassia, and Yakutia. Within this process, shamanic rituals were increasingly subjected to institutionalization and standardization, while shamans themselves were brought into the public sphere under the status of "cultural experts" (Znamenski, 2007, pp. 239–247). Balzer's observations indicate that shamans are no longer positioned solely as religious actors but have come to function as identity entrepreneurs, local representatives, and, in some cases, political figures (Balzer, 2011, p. 17). Humphrey's ethnography of the Buryat region further documents how, amid the social and political uncertainties of the post-Soviet era, shamanic ritual reemerged as a mechanism for reconstructing social order and a sense of belonging (Humphrey, 1996).

From the 1990s onward, policies related to "Intangible Cultural Heritage" have encouraged the cataloguing of shamanic practices as forms of heritage to be preserved. Events such as the *Yhyakh* (Summer Festival) in Yakutia, for example, have become central both to local identity politics and to the tourism economy (Pegg, 2001, p. 142). While heritagization records and stages rituals, it simultaneously standardizes them and integrates them into market logics. In this process, the shaman is transformed not only into a ritual leader but also into a performer of cultural spectacle (Znamenski, 2007, p. 245; Balzer, 2011, p. 17). For local communities, this dynamic generates both opportunities—such as recognition and economic income—and risks, including excessive folklorization and ongoing debates over authenticity.

Neo-shamanic movements emerged in the West from the 1960s onward through the blending of shamanic techniques with alternative spiritual interpretations, discourses of personal transformation, alternative healing, and ecological sensitivity. In his formulation of "core shamanism," Michael Harner (1980) presented selected techniques drawn from diverse

Indigenous traditions as a universal "core" protocol. While this approach gained widespread popularity, it also became the subject of intense debate due to its detachment from specific cultural contexts (Harner, 1980, p. 21; Atkinson, 1992, p. 311). Wallis's critical analysis draws attention to issues of representation, authenticity, and cultural appropriation within neo-shamanism (Wallis, 2003). Nevertheless, ecology-centered sensibilities and the ideal of "living in harmony with nature" continue to carry shamanic imagery into the language of global environmental ethics (Pentikäinen, 1998, p. 94).

In the post-Soviet context, shamans have increasingly become mediators who negotiate with a range of institutions, including municipalities, cultural departments, and museums. While responding to demands for healing on the one hand, they simultaneously engage in practices of representational politics on the other. Humphrey (1994) argues that this new relationship between ritual and local governance positions shamans "at the threshold of the public sphere," thereby extending the meaning of ritual beyond the domain of healing alone. Balzer further notes that female shamans have gained particular visibility within this revival, as their roles in fertility-related and family-centered rites of passage have been revalorized in contemporary settings (Balzer, 2011, p. 17).

In sum, shamanism today should not be understood as a singular phenomenon but rather as an intersection of multiple logics and roles operating across different domains. This plurality has rendered shamanism, on the one hand, a resilient local tradition, while on the other transforming it into a flexible, exportable global repertoire and, at times, a commodified cultural form. Ethnographic research demonstrates that shamanism continues to function as a powerful mode of healing, solidarity, and meaning-making, even as it is simultaneously shaped by political and economic actors (Humphrey, 1994, 1996; Balzer, 2011, p. 17; Znamenski, 2007, pp. 239–247; Pegg, 2001, p. 142).

Conclusion

Shamanism should not be understood merely as a remnant carried over from the past; rather, it constitutes a flexible system of meaning-making that simultaneously shapes—and is shaped by—environmental, social, and political domains. Focusing on the Central Asian context, this study has examined three principal dimensions of shamanism.

First, the cosmological–ritual order was examined, highlighting how the tripartite structure of the universe and the *axis mundi* schema provide both a symbolic and a technical framework for the shaman's trance journey (Eliade, 1964, pp. 259–270). The purifying function of fire, the cleansing role of water, and the cathartic effects of dramatic performance demonstrate that shamanic rituals offer psychosocial mechanisms of healing that extend beyond the domain of magic alone (Anisimov, 1958, pp. 812–818; Lévi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 186–214).

Second, the social roles and functions of the shaman were examined. It was emphasized that, through their identities as mediator, healer, and narrator, shamans contribute to the maintenance of normative order. While the approaches of Tylor (2010, p. 118) and Frazer (1993, pp. 12–22) conceptualize the symbolic logic underlying ritual actions, Turner's (1969, pp. 94–106) theory of liminality explains the capacity of rituals to reintegrate communities during moments of crisis. Moreover, within hunter-gatherer and nomadic pastoral economies, the shaman functions as a "guarantor" of material production through fertility and hunting rituals (Hoppál, 2007, pp. 60–66; Balzer, 1996, p. 77). The central position of female shamans

in fertility-related and rites-of-passage rituals further demonstrates that shamanism constitutes a gendered domain of sacred authority (Eliade, 1964, p. 190; Ögel, 2006, p. 147).

The third dimension concerns historical encounter and transformation. The interaction between Islamization and shamanism has been shown to produce not a process of disappearance but one of transformation through continuity. In Sufi traditions such as Yesevism, Alevism, and Bektashism, practices of *wajd*, *dhikr*, and *samāʿ*/*semāh* exhibit functional parallels with shamanic trance, while shrine visitation and votive or sacrificial practices function as channels of ritual continuity (Köprülü, 2004, p. 52; Ocak, 1983, p. 88; İnan, 1986, p. 104; Dressler, 2013, p. 66). In the modern period, post-Soviet revival has positioned shamanism at the center of ethnic identity formation and cultural heritage politics, while simultaneously opening a new field in global circulation under the rubric of neo-shamanism—where it intersects with discourses of individual transformation and ecological consciousness (Balzer, 2011, p. 17; Znamenski, 2007, p. 245; Harner, 1980, p. 21; Atkinson, 1992, p. 311).

In conclusion, shamanism offers a rich repertoire of practices that are simultaneously rooted in local contexts and adaptable to diverse discursive frameworks. With its dynamic structure extending from Central Asia to the global arena, shamanism may be regarded as a powerful analytical lens through which the intersections of identity, power, health, ecology, tourism, and religion can be examined in an integrated manner.

References

Anisimov, A. F. (1958). Shamanism in Siberia: Soviet research (1920–1956). *American Anthropologist, 60*(4), 805–820.

Atkinson, J. (1992). Shamanisms today. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 21*, 307–330.

Balzer, M. M. (1996). *Shamanism: Soviet studies of traditional religion in Siberia and Central Asia*. Routledge.

Balzer, M. M. (2011). *Shamanic worlds: Rituals and lore of Siberia and Central Asia*. M. E. Sharpe.

Bazin, L. (1974). Les systèmes chronologiques turcs anciens. *Journal Asiatique, 262*, 1–25.

DeWeese, D. (1994). *Islamization and native religion in the Golden Horde*. Penn State University Press.

Dressler, M. (2013). *Writing religion: The making of Turkish Alevi Islam*. Oxford University Press.

Durkheim, E. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life* (K. E. Fields, Trans.). Free Press.

Eliade, M. (1959). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Harcourt, Brace & World.

Eliade, M. (1964). *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*. Princeton University Press.

Frazer, J. G. (1993). *The golden bough: A study in magic and religion*. Wordsworth Editions.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.

Golden, P. B. (1992). *An introduction to the history of the Turkic peoples*. Harrassowitz.

Hamayon, R. N. (1993). Are "trance," "ecstasy," and similar concepts appropriate in the study of shamanism? *Shaman, 1*(2), 17–40.

Harner, M. (1980). *The way of the shaman*. Harper & Row.

Harvey, G. (2006). *Animism: Respecting the living world*. Columbia University Press.

Hoppál, M. (2007). *Shamanism: An introduction*. International Society for Shamanistic Research.

Humphrey, C. (1994). Shamanic practices and the state in North Asia: Views from the centre and periphery. In N. Thomas & C. Humphrey (Eds.), *Shamanism, history, and the state*. University of Michigan Press.

Humphrey, C., & Onon, U. (1996). *Shamans and elders: Experience, knowledge, and power among the Daur Mongols*. Clarendon Press.

İnan, A. (1986). *Eski Türk dini tarihi*. Türk Tarih Kurumu.

Jung, C. G. (1964). *Man and his symbols*. Aldus Books.

Köprülü, M. F. (2004). *Türk edebiyatında ilk mutasavvıflar*. Dergâh Yayınları.
Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural anthropology*. Basic Books.
Lewis, I. M. (2003). *Ecstatic religion: A study of shamanism and spirit possession* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
Melikoff, I. (1998). *Uyur idik uyardılar: Alevilik-Bektaşilik araştırmaları*. Cem Yayınları.
Ocak, A. Y. (1983). *Bektaşî menakıbnamelerinde İslam öncesi inanç motifleri*. Türk Tarih Kurumu.
Ögel, B. (2006). *Türk mitolojisi: Kaynakları ve açıklamalarıyla destanlar* (Vols. 1–2). Türk Tarih Kurumu.
Pegg, C. (2001). *Mongolian music, dance, and oral narrative*. University of Washington Press.
Pentikäinen, J. (1998). *Shamanism and culture*. Finnish Literature Society (SKS).
Roux, J.-P. (2017). *Türklerin ve Moğolların eski dini* (Turkish trans.). Kabalcı Yayınları.
Siikala, A.-L. (1992). *Interpreting oral narrative: The case of shamanism*. FF Communications.
Sinor, D. (Ed.). (1990). *The Cambridge history of early Inner Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
Steward, J. H. (1955). *Theory of culture change: The methodology of multilinear evolution*. University of Illinois Press.
Tedlock, B. (2005). *The woman in the shaman's body: Reclaiming the feminine in religion and medicine*. Bantam.
Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine.
Tylor, E. B. (2010). *Primitive culture*. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1871)
Wallis, R. J. (2003). *Shamans/neo-shamans: Ecstasy, alternative archaeologies and contemporary pagans*. Routledge.
Walsh, R. N. (1990). *The spirit of shamanism*. Tarcher.
Znamenski, A. A. (2007). *The beauty of the primitive: Shamanism and the Western imagination*. Oxford University Press.