

Animism and Shamanism



Animism is the belief that all things have a spirit or soul, including animals, plants, rivers, mountains, stars, the moon, and the sun. Each being is considered a spirit that can offer help or harm to humans. As such, spirits must either be worshiped or appeased. Animists offer sacrifices, prayers, dances, or other forms of devotions to these spirits in hopes of blessing upon areas of life (crops, health, fertility, etc.) or for protection from harm.

Animism is the perception that consciousness or spirit is a quality of the entire world, rather than the exclusive possession of humankind. Everything has the potential ability to communicate with other beings (whether verbally, through gestures, intuitively, or otherwise) and to bring about change.

Varieties of animism can be found in the worldviews of countless indigenous peoples from every geographical area and period of time, from Paleolithic Africa to modern North America. Even the European peoples are no exception, an excellent example being the Vikings.

(<https://norse-mythology.org/concepts/animism/>)

Today, Animism continues in most tribal religious movements, in Shinto, in eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and in Pagan/Neopagan movements. In addition to believing inanimate objects have spirits, many believe in revering the spirits of ancestors who have an influence on those who are living. This is a noted practice in Shinto and forms of Native American spirituality, among others.

It is important to note that not all religious scholars define Animism the same way. Some view Animism as a belief or practice while some classify Animism as its own religion. Since many religions practice Animism, it is generally better to consider it a belief. In addition, most Animist cultures have an overall "religion" rather than understanding itself an Animistic Religion.

(<https://www.compellingtruth.org/animism.html>)



Shamanism is an ancient healing tradition and moreover, a way of life. It is a way to connect with nature and all of creation. The word *shaman* originates from the Tungus tribe in Siberia. Anthropologists coined this term and have used it to refer to the spiritual and ceremonial leaders among indigenous cultures worldwide.

The word *shamanism* can be used to describe the ancient spiritual practices of these indigenous cultures. Clearly, the countless similarities between various ancient traditions played a role in the continual generalization of the word.

(<https://www.shamanism.com/what-is-shamanism>)

A shaman is someone who is regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of benevolent and malevolent spirits, who typically enters into a trance state during a ritual, and practices divination and healing.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shamanism>)

One could view shamanism as the universal spiritual wisdom inherent to all indigenous tribes. As all ancient spiritual practices are rooted in nature, shamanism is the method by which we as human beings can strengthen that natural connection.

Shamanism stems from nature itself. Shamanic practices tap into the power Mother Earth has to offer and the ancient indigenous teachings are derived from the simple truths of nature. Shamanism is not only concerned with the health of the individual, but also with the health of the entire community. This includes all people, plants, animals, and all of life.

Daily spiritual practice allows for the continued and exponential growth of both body and soul. The goal is to create internal and external harmony with all creation.

Learning to approach and connect with sacred places is an intrinsic part of shamanism. By honoring natural wonders such as rivers, lakes, mountains, and caves, we reawaken and invigorate the energy of the land. Ceremonies to honor the spirits of nature help promote harmony and balance. The path of shamanism never ends. It is believed that so long as these ceremonies continue, the world will go on.

(<https://www.shamanism.com/what-is-shamanism>)

Video: The Spirit of Shamanism.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVcNQWb0bCs>

Some of the people who practice these belief systems:

The San people of South Africa in the Paleolithic era left paintings showing their outer life (hunters) and inner life of their shamans. Part of the San are the !Kung (also spelled !Xun), are people who live around the Kalahari Desert regions of Africa in present day Namibia.

The !Kung people of southern Africa are both animistic and animistic, which means they believe in both personifications and impersonal forces. They believe in a god named Prishiboro who had a wife that was an elephant. Prishiboro's older brother tricked him into killing his wife and, later, into eating her flesh. Her herd tried to kill Prishiboro in revenge, but his brother defeated them.



!Kung people also have many taboos concerning the dead, as they believe that the ghosts (*!gangwasi*) of the deceased would cause them injury or death. It is against the rules to even say the name of someone dead, once an annual ceremony to release the spirits of the dead has been performed.

The !Kung practice shamanism to communicate with the spirit world, and to cure what they call Star Sickness. The communication with the spirit world is done by a natural healer entering a trance state and running through a fire, thereby chasing away bad spirits. Star Sickness is cured by laying hands on the diseased. A healer in training is given a root to help induce trance. "I drank it a number of times and threw up again and again. Finally I started to tremble. People rubbed my body as I sat there feeling the effect getting stronger and stronger. . . . Trance-medicine really hurts! As you begin to trance, the *n/um* [power to heal] slowly heats inside you and pulls at you. It rises until it grabs your insides and takes your thoughts away."

The !Kung have a special system for child birth. They consider the earth the first mother of all people in the tribe. !Kung women give birth with the earth as primary midwife (a form of unassisted childbirth) walking away from the village camp as far as a mile during labor and bearing the child alone, delivering it into a small leaf-lined hole dug into the warm sand.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C7%83Kung_people)

Aboriginals of Australia

It is believed that some of their ceremonies lasted for several weeks, often held inside caves in the wilderness.



The Mayan people of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico had “state shamans” who were able to mediate between human mankind and the supernatural.
(Strayer, *Ways of the World* p. 274).



In addition, the religious movement of **Chavin** developed around 900 B.C.E. in the Andes Mountains of Peru. Chavin artwork suggests influences from the surrounding deserts and rain forests. Chavin shamans made use of snakes and a local cactus for its hallucinogenic properties in their ceremonies to contact their supernatural world. By 200 B.C.E. the Chavin movement had faded and was replaced by regional civilizations. One of these was the **Moche**. They were governed by warrior-priests, some of whom live on top of huge pyramids, the largest found being made from 143 million sun-dried bricks. They also used hallucinogenic drugs to help them link between their human lives and that of their gods. Many time human sacrifices were used in these ceremonies. (Strayer, *Ways of the World*, p. 278-279).



Impression of a Moche pyramid

The Silk Road helped spread Shamanism. **The original Turks, those who spoke Turkic languages**, were pastoral nomads who settled in present day Mongolia. Once they converted to Sufi Islam, they developed a blend of the two religious traditions; mystical Sufi Islam and shamanism. This is another example of cultural interactions along the Silk Road.

(Strayer, *Ways of the World* p. 361)



When the **Mongols** created their vast Eurasian empire in the thirteenth century they did not create any new languages or regions. Instead, they kept their belief system of shamanism to themselves. Mongol leaders used shamans to predict the future, offer sacrifices, and communicate with the spirit world, especially Tengri, the supreme sky god of the Mongols.

(Strayer, *Ways of the World* p.521-522)

(A Mongol altar to Tengri in the steppes)

