

The Wings of Faith: How Bird Reverence Sustains Shamanism Across Cultures

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Abstract

Shamanism is an ancient spiritual tradition rooted in the belief that certain individuals can communicate with the spirit world through altered states of consciousness. Shamanism emphasizes harmony with nature, and birds often serve as symbolic guides between earthly and spiritual realms. This paper explores Shamanism's defining traits, such as adaptivity and inclusivity, that contribute to its widespread practice. The paper argues that its avian reverence may be one key reason for its global persistence. Through the lens of avian reverence, we can see how Shamanism's tolerance for geographic diversity, flexibility for cultural adaptation, and the psychological relief it provides to Shamans allow it to be accepted and practiced worldwide. Moreover, this study examines how bird symbolism reflects humanity's enduring desire for transcendence and balance between material and spiritual worlds. By linking ecological consciousness, mythic imagination, and ritual practice, Shamanism demonstrates a holistic worldview that continues to inspire contemporary spiritual and cultural expression.

Keywords

Faith and Transcendence; Moral Agency; Language and Narrative; Emotional; Transformation; Philosophy of Religion; Spiritual Psychology.

1. Introduction

Shamanism, a mysterious religion deeply rooted in nature reverence, is practiced around the world, yet it is not considered one of the most widely practiced religions. Upon studying Shamanism, one notices that it spread without missionary work or colonization - unlike major religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam (see Fig. 1). The large numbers of adherents to Christianity (32% of the world population), Buddhism (500 million), and Islam (23% of the world population)[1] (Pew Research Center) are largely due to preaching, missionary work, and colonization (Brown and Tran).[2] Furthermore, these major religions are more or less geographically concentrated (Pew Research Center). Shamanism, by contrast, without much intentional preaching, is practiced across Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe, lacking a centralized religious core like the three major religions ("What Is Shamanism?"). This paper explores Shamanism's defining traits, such as adaptivity and inclusivity, that contribute to its widespread practice. The paper argues that its avian reverence may be one key reason for its global persistence. Through the lens of avian reverence, we can see how Shamanism's tolerance for geographic diversity, flexibility for cultural adaptation, and the psychological relief it provides to Shamans allow it to be accepted and practiced worldwide.

2. Defining Shamanism: The Role of Avian Cosmology

Shamanism is defined as an ancient, ubiquitous spiritual practice wherein the practitioner, or shaman, employs "archaic techniques of ecstasy" to reach an Altered State of Consciousness (in other words, mediation between the human and spirit realms)[3] , often through avian

cosmology. By “borrowing” a bird's vision, Shamans believe they can transcend ordinary perception, as birds are universally revered as liminal archetypes and thus guides for ecstatic experience. Therefore, birds' symbolic ability to traverse celestial and terrestrial boundaries underlies their importance and reverence in Shamanic practice.

Across diverse cultures—from Siberia to the Amazon—birds symbolize freedom from corporeal limitation and the possibility of flight between visible and invisible dimensions. The shaman's trance, therefore, is not merely imitation but identification with avian movement and awareness. Through rhythmic drumming, chanting, and visualization, the practitioner embodies the bird's capacity to soar, observing the world from an elevated spiritual perspective. Such avian cosmology reflects humanity's deep psychological yearning for transcendence and renewal. The bird becomes both vehicle and metaphor, expressing the union of instinct and insight, nature and spirit[4], body and soul that defines the Shamanic worldview.

Geographic Distribution of Religious Groups

Percentage of each group's total population that lives in particular regions

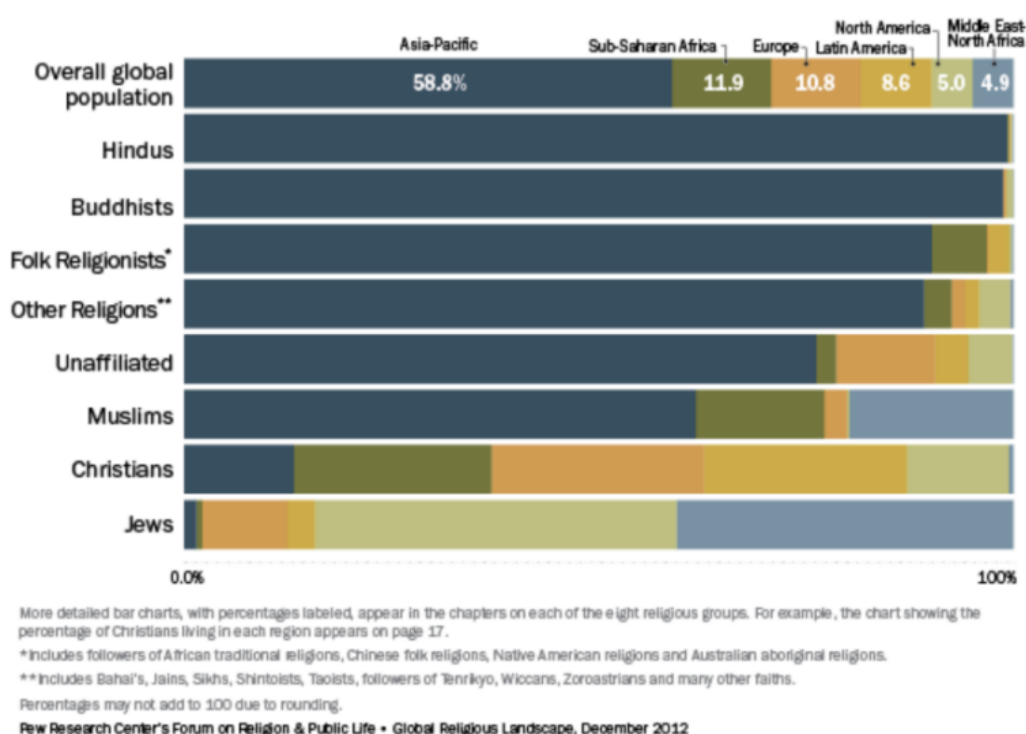


Fig.1. Geographic Distribution of Religious Groups

3. Geographic Adaptability: Local Avian Reverence as a Reflection of Environment

Shamanism's global diffusion stems partly from its tolerance for geographic diversity, reflected in the worship of different birds. The beliefs and reverence surrounding birds vary by location. For example, on Long Island along the Atlantic Coast, Shamans worship the red-tailed hawk as the most sacred bird, unlike other parts of the U.S., where the golden eagle holds that role. This belief is tied to a distinct geographical phenomenon of the Eastern seaboard, where the “sun is most red when it is rising over the ocean, and this can only be seen on the eastern shore” (Pritchard 21). Shamans there associate the red sunrise with the hawk's red feathers, praying to the bird for guidance: “Where is my life going?” and watching its flight direction for answers (Pritchard 21). In this instance, the geographical factor - the red sunrise - is not merely a backdrop but a defining influence shaping what is deemed sacred and resulting in the respect for hawks. Conversely, Shamans in Western America revere the owl or “night eagle,” as the West

is believed to be the direction in which the dead travel to the spirit world - the realm where the sun, moon, and stars “go to die”(Pritchard 19). These birds are thus regarded as guardians of the portals of the underworld. Such regional variation in avian reverence highlights Shamanism's adaptability across geographies, which presents a stark contrast to the dogmatic uniformity of the three major religions. Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam remain largely confined to particular regions - Christianity in the West and its former colonies, Buddhism in East Asia, and Islam in Muslim countries (Pew Research Center)[5]. Shamanism's acceptance of local beliefs and integration of diverse geographical worldviews has allowed it to flourish almost everywhere. Its dynamic theological system, which values experiential relevance over doctrinal rigidity, has enabled it to thrive across vastly different environments.

4. Cultural Integration: Avian Symbolism in Ritual and Authority

Moreover, cultural adaptivity has been another crucial factor in Shamanism's worldwide diffusion. Shamans in different cultures shape their rituals around their unique avian reverence. For example, the Wakashan Confederacy in Miami, a small community practicing Shamanism, maintains a strong war culture. Before going to war, warriors hold a preparatory feast with up to fifty men, each paying homage to his own “oot-sik-a-li-kan,” a carved wooden or stone replica of his protector bird (Pritchard 122). They believe this totemic object protects them in battle. The ritual reveals their purpose for practicing Shamanism - to draw power and blessings from birds. They also “give the same cry as their birds in running after them” during battle, believing that mimicry grants them the birds' strength (Pritchard 123). Such imitation underscores the Wakashan people's deep reverence for birds[6]. The incorporation of this avian symbolism into warfare illustrates how Shamanism adapts to local cultural needs, aligning spiritual practice with tangible personal and communal goals.

A very different form of cultural adaptation appears in Tibet, China, where bird symbolism became closely tied to political and religious authority. Originating in the ancient Zhang-Zhung region through the indigenous Bön religion, Tibetan traditions used bird imagery to signify power. The bya-ru (bird horn) - a hat ornament worn by Zhang-Zhung kings - symbolized their authority and legitimacy (Yan and Zhang). Its texture and color even differentiated social ranks (Yan and Zhang). This merging of bird reverence and political symbolism exemplifies Shamanism's elasticity and capacity to absorb local customs. Shamanism's ability to localize into small communities, such as the roughly 2,000-person Wakashan Confederacy, makes it accessible and personally meaningful. Each community, regardless of size, develops its own rituals and expressions, enabling individuals to integrate Shamanism into daily life. This inclusivity contrasts with major religions, which, though they exhibit minor cultural variations, remain constrained by doctrinal frameworks. Shamanism's flexibility to adapt even within small populations fosters its acceptance and expansion across diverse cultures[7].

5. Psychological Dimension: Soul Flight and Emotional Transcendence

Finally, the psychological relief Shamans experience through the practice of “soul flight” is another major reason for Shamanism's persistence. “Soul flight,” also known as shamanic journeying or magical flight, is a universal practice among Shamans[8]. In Shamanic cosmology, the world comprises three realms: the upper world (anabasis), the middle world (our physical world), and the lower world (katabasis). By revering and emulating birds' ability to traverse these realms, Shamans achieve “soul flight” through ecstatic trance states, either ascending or descending to gain knowledge for healing, protection, or exploration. For instance, during my personal encounter in Inner Mongolia this summer, a Shaman explained that in her culture, they believe the shaman's soul is carried by bird spirits, allowing transformation into birds for journeying. Her costume, adorned with feathers, and a carved owl on her desk symbolize her

spiritual guides. The knowledge and emotional release gained through “soul flight” provide profound psychological comfort not only to the Shamans but also to their communities. This sense of connection, transcendence, and joy contributes significantly to the religion's enduring appeal and global spread.

Faith also reshapes the inner landscape of emotion by offering a rhythm of release and renewal. Within the silence of belief, grief learns to breathe, and anxiety finds a vocabulary of surrender. The act of faith does not erase fear; it teaches the heart to coexist with uncertainty until it becomes serenity. In this process, the believer's psyche experiences a subtle reorientation: the center of meaning shifts from control to communion, from resistance to trust. Such emotional transcendence reflects not an escape from reality, but a deeper harmony with it—an awakening of the self to its own capacity for peace[9].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the endurance and global presence of Shamanism cannot be explained by expansionist strategies, centralized institutions, or proselytization, but rather by its profound flexibility and spiritual inclusivity. Rooted in avian reverence, Shamanism embodies a worldview that transcends territorial, cultural, and psychological boundaries. Birds, as symbols of mediation between heaven and earth, enable practitioners to adapt their faith to local geographies, merge it with diverse cultural practices, and find personal healing through ecstatic experience. This dynamic interplay between the physical environment, cultural interpretation, and individual spirituality distinguishes Shamanism from the doctrinal rigidity of institutional religions.

Through its openness to environmental symbolism and its respect for human experience across contexts, Shamanism demonstrates that a religion need not expand through conquest or conversion to attain universality. Instead, its power lies in its capacity to transform and be transformed, and to speak the language of every landscape, culture, and psyche it touches. In this sense, Shamanism represents not merely an ancient spiritual tradition, but a living testament to humanity's enduring, universal desire to find transcendence through nature, imagination, and the boundless flight of the soul.

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