Shamanism in Ancient Japan

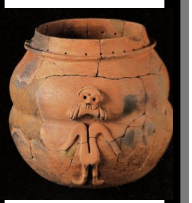
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Overview

Shamanism, defined as "a form of belief which endow[s] particular individuals with the gift of **magical powers** and of **dealing with evil spirits**," has existed in Japan prior to the advent of Buddhism, according to an article titled "Social Context of the fujo: Shamanism in Japan through a Female Perspective." [1] Shamans are responsible for perpetuating the barrier between the **physical and spiritual worlds** as a means of communicating with the gods. It is a heavily spiritual, personal experience, usually associated with primitive, developing societies. Despite this connotation, shamanistic practices are composed of complex , multi-dimensional rituals.

Societal Influence

Shamans, **mediators between *kami* (or spirits/gods) and the mortal world**, attempted to channel or control the aura of the supernatural. In "Social Context of the fujo: Shamanism in Japan through a Female Perspective," the author explains that *kami* typically appear in one's dreams in the form of animals or are symbolized by objects, such talismans. [2] The ability of shamans to ward off evil spirits was highly favorable, particularly in the Shinto belief system. Shamans provided **protection to their community** and considered essential to the function of society. In his book *Religion in Japanese History*, Joseph Kitagawa explains that Japanese myths exaggerate the number of *kami*. [3] Again, this exaggeration reaffirms the overwhelming influence of shamanism in Shinto society, which dictated all facets of life. Kitagawa explains, "In such a world, people did not consider themselves in any way separated from cosmic existence and the rhythm of nature." [4] Early Japanese shamanism is predicated in its belief in the **interconnectedness of the cosmos**. This sense of embeddedness with the universe acts as the basis of shamanistic rituals. The symbolism within these rituals typically involves components of nature. In the perspective of early Japanese society, humans, plants, animals, and even the ground itself are all intertwined in the web of the cosmos. This perspective can be directly examined in the context of Shinto shamanism. In a larger sense, these attributes of ancient Japanese shamanism can be examined in an assortment of other ancient civilizations.



Jōmon pottery indicating role of shaman in earliest Japanese settlements



Dogū statuette believed to embody spirits in shamanistic rituals

Qualifications of Shamans

Since an encounter with the gods relies exclusively on subjective experience, it becomes difficult to **legitimize a self-proclaimed shaman**. In response, the Shinto society needed to develop certain qualifications for validating a shaman. According to "Social Context of the fugo: Shamanism in Japan through a Female Perspective," the following qualifications are used to facilitate these difficulties in distinguishing a true shaman: [5]

1) "...hereditary transmission of the shamanic profession" [6]
2) "spontaneous vocation (call or election)" [7]

In addition to these 2 factors, potential shamans partake in **specialized training** where he/she learns ritual techniques, the functions of each spirit, and methods for **interpreting dreams**. Another overarching qualification is alignment with society's perception of a shaman. Overall, if society is preconditioned to a particular image of shamans, a new, self-proclaimed shaman must adhere to this perception to be accepted.

Why do Shamans Emerge?

According to "Shamanism in Japan" published by Nanzan University of Japan, the following factors contribute to the emergence of self-proclaimed shamans: [8]

-Personal anxiety
-Universal societal distress
-Overwhelming societal acceptance

The most powerful factor leading to the emergence of a shaman is the level of **societal distress**. If a community experiences famine, strife, or repeated, unexpected deaths, a shaman is more likely to emerge. In the eyes of a community member, the *kami* are more inclined to communicate with the mortal world in times of need. As a result, once an individual claims to have received word from the gods, the community is far more accepting in times of overwhelming distress.

Further Resources:

"Shamanism in Japan" by William P. Fairchild via JSTOR (Online Article)
"Occult Japan: The Way of the Gods" by Percival Lowell (Book)

[1] Lakić Parać, Iva. "Social Context of the Fujo: Shamanism in Japan through a Female Perspective." *Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 146.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Joseph M. Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History* (Columbia University Press, 1966), 12.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ichirō Hori, "Shamanism in Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies of Nanzan University*, 1975.

Sources:

Lakić Parać, Iva. "Social Context of the Fujo: Shamanism in Japan through a Female Perspective." *Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 154-170.

Hori, Ichirō. "Shamanism in Japan." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies of Nanzan University*. December 1975.

Joseph M. Kitagawa. *Religion in Japanese History.* Columbia University Press, 1966.