

National School of Political and Administrative Studies

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**Cultural-Cognitive Technologies in Tamang Shamanism from the
Himalayas
and Other Ethnic Categories:
The Cultural Foundation of "Wild Religion"**

SUMMARY

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Introduction

Human societies around the world have developed traditions and beliefs about supernatural agencies, referred to as "wild religion" by me and "wild traditions" by Pascal Boyer (Boyer, 2019). These practices arise spontaneously and informally, with common features such as the presence of spirits, belief in mystical attacks, divination and religious specialists such as shamans. Even in the face of mainstream religions, these practices persist.

My research and observations have confirmed the existence of these practices in numerous societies (Krader, 1967; Eliade, 1964; Singh, 2018) and prehistoric periods (Dietrich, 2024). Between 2008-2015, I documented over 50 shamanic rituals in South and Southeast Asia using participatory observation and interview methods. We observed that these practices are often the only forms of religion in many societies and that they occur spontaneously even in the context of dominant religions.

This paper analyzes the foundation of "wild religion" and shamanism in the Tamang community in the Himalayas using a cross-culturally based explanatory model. The objectives are:

1. Documentation of transcultural evidence and its correlation with ethnographic literature.
2. Developing an explanatory model based on the universal features of "shamanism".
3. Analyzing the persistence of these practices and cognitive and evolutionary influences.
4. Model testing by analyzing an initiation ritual in Tamang shamanism.
5. Exploring the impact of rituals on autobiographical and episodic memory and self-representation.

The research emphasizes that 'wild religion' reflects fundamental adaptive cognitive functions and contributes to our understanding of the interplay between cultural evolution and human psychological predispositions.

"Wild religion" and the evolutionary foundations of religious beliefs and behaviors

The study of religion in the social sciences has evolved from two main directions: Durkheim (1912) analyzed the role of rituals in the 'collective consciousness', and Weber (1930, 1959)

investigated the power of divinity in social and political contexts. These insights were mainly applied to major doctrinal religions.

However, these approaches have not considered that most prehistoric and historical humans did not adhere to doctrinal religions (Whitehouse, 2004; Boyer, 2001, 2019; Atran, 2002). "Wild religious traditions" persist within major religions as well (Boyer, 2019). In recent decades, researchers have integrated biology, evolutionary psychology, and behavioral sciences to understand the complexity of cultural phenomena. Bloch (2008) suggests that religion is integral to human social organization based on imagination and imagined social structures.

Studies in the "cognitive science of religion" have demonstrated that religious beliefs and behaviors are grounded in deep-seated evolutionary predispositions (Barrett, 2000; Bloom, 2000; Boyer, 2001; Atran, 2002). These predispositions include:

1. **Mind-body dualism:** the idea that the soul and cognitive capacities can exist separately from the body, globally held.
2. **Promiscuous teleology:** The tendency to view the world as the result of intelligent design, present in creation myths.
3. **Precautionary danger intuition:** Ritual behaviors in response to perceived danger, similar to obsessive-compulsive disorder.
4. **Immanent justice intuition:** the belief that wrongdoing is punished and prosocial behavior is rewarded.

In conclusion, "wild religions" are not products of doctrines or social or political forces, but natural manifestations of the human mind in search of meaning and coherence. Meaning and coherence often means living intensely, feeling alive and having an authentic and unified experience. Ultimately this builds meaning and coherence. 'Wild religion' provides this opportunity, helping to reinforce unified agency in networks of memories, individual and social cognitive networks. My research shows that these forms of religion are central to our understanding of human behavior and how the human mind creates and interprets cultural information, demonstrating both the complexity and diversity of religious beliefs and the uniqueness of human nature similarly expressed in these religious phenomena.

Methodology

Sociocultural anthropology has addressed a variety of religious phenomena, from functionalist perspectives to the study of rituals and 'collective consciousness' (Durkheim,

1912; Weber, 1930). Studies have focused mainly on the major doctrinal religions, but recent research emphasizes the importance of 'wild religions' (Whitehouse, 2004; Boyer, 2001). Maurice Bloch (2008) suggests that religion is central to human social organization, evolving in the Upper Paleolithic period.

This research aligns with the evolutionary cultural perspective and the 'cognitive science of religion' to explore 'wild religions' as the foundation of global religious phenomena.

Cross-Cultural Research

Between 2008 and 2015, I studied over 50 shamanic rituals in South and Southeast Asia using participatory observation and interview methods. I continued my research between 2016 and 2022, focusing on Tamang shamanism in Nepal and other locations.

Research Objectives

1. **Universal Evidence:** collecting evidence from over 30 societies to demonstrate the universality of shamanism.
2. **Identifying Cultural Traits:** Identifying a common set of magico-religious practices and beliefs.
3. **Explanatory Model:** Developing a model based on cognitive science to explain the persistence of "wild religions".
4. **Model Testing:** Application of the model in analyzing initiation rites in Tamang shamanism.
5. **Analyzing Cognitive Mechanisms:** Investigating the role of rituals in memory and evolutionary adaptation.

Research Questions

1. What is the basis of "wild religion" and how can it be explained naturalistically?
2. Why do shamans appear in diverse societies and what role do they play?
3. Why do shamanism and similar practices recur in diverse cultures?
4. How do initiation rites contribute to self agency and mental health?

Data Collection

We used four main methods:

1. **Participatory Observation**
2. **Introspective Ethnography**
3. **Person-Centered Ethnography**
4. **Ethnographic Interviews**

Data Collected:

- **Healing ceremonies:** 30 in Nepal, including Kafle and Phondi villages.
- **Burial rites:** 10, including Phowang.
- **Ceremonies at Shiva Mandir:** 150+ ceremonies in Kathmandu.
- **Participants:** 70 in initiation rituals.

Stages and Locations:

- **Nepal (2008-2013, 2015-2022):** In-depth study of Tamang and other groups.
- **India (2010-2019):** Research in Ladakh, Rajasthan, Goa.
- **Indonesia (2011-2012):** Study of rituals in Sumatra, Borneo.
- **Philippines (2019-2020):** Shamanism research in Palawan.

We applied self-assessment and feedback strategies to reduce subjectivity, using both direct observation and consultation with religious and cultural texts.

Conclusions and Research Perspectives

This paper analyzes shamanism from a cognitive-evolutionary perspective and makes a significant contribution to the study of religious phenomena. Research indicates that "wild religions" and shamanism are universal cultural patterns influenced by evolved cognitive mechanisms integrating religion, medicine and morality.

The main conclusions are:

1. **Universality of Rituals:** Shamanic rituals, observed in over 30 groups, are universal practices based on common cognitive mechanisms. These include possession trance and the regrouping of human agency.

2. **Role of Shamanism:** Shamanism responds to the human need to explain reality and deal with uncertainty, and is an evolved cultural product adapted to intuitions about supernatural agents and the 'soul'.
3. **Cognitive and Moral Models:** 'Savage religions' and shamanism are based on universal cognitive mechanisms, influencing the development of doctrinal religion and concepts of morality and sanctioning.
4. **Cognitive Transformation:** shamanic rituals contribute to the reconfiguration of the self through neuroplastic processes and social interactions, modeling the "synaptic self".
5. **The "Cultural Attraction Cluster" Model:** The concept of the self as a "cultural attraction cluster" emphasizes the integration of biology, culture and society and is central to understanding human agency and mental health.

These results suggest that 'wild religion' has deep evolutionary roots and that the 'cultural attraction cluster' model is crucial for the study of cultural evolution and human identity.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research makes essential contributions to the cognitive science of religions, providing a solid basis for the development of new theories. The study emphasizes that "wild religions" and shamanism are universal phenomena influenced by evolved cognitive mechanisms and underlines the importance of the "cultural attraction cluster" model in analyzing human agency. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the diversity and complexity of shamanism as a global cultural phenomenon and provide a useful theoretical model for similar research in other cultural contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

To deepen knowledge, future research could explore in depth the cultural-cognitive technologies in modern societies, providing comparative perspectives on how these practices are influenced by the specific cultural context. In addition, it would be valuable to examine the impact that modernization has on 'savage' religious practices and their social and political forms, in order to understand how they adapt or transform in the face of contemporary social and technological change.