Why Prophets Are (Not) Shamans?

Martti Nissinen

This essay belongs to a series of articles exploring the theoretical boundaries of the definition of prophecy, otherwise consisting of essays entitled “The Ritual Aspect of Prophecy” and “Why Prophecy Is (Not) Magic.” In the essay at hand, I will ask how, or whether, prophets can in any sense be compared with shamans who, like prophets, may appear as diviners and magicians and whose activity often takes a ritual form. The whole cluster of articles investigates into the interface of divination, magic, and ritual with the objective of bringing conceptual clarity to the study of different practices of allegedly divine-human communication.

As a theoretical exercise, the comparison of prophecy and shamanism—or shamanhood, which may be a more appropriate term—is not without problems,


3 Juha Pentikäinen, Shamanism and Culture (2nd, rev. ed.; Helsinki: Etnika, 1998), p. 11: “In my opinion, ‘shamanhood’ (Russian: samanstvo) is a concept needed to emphasize the special, specific, and permanent state of being of a ‘saman’ that never ceases to permeate the whole existence of the shaman throughout his life”; cf. Mihály
especially if the comparison is done between shamans of our contemporary world and prophets in ancient cultures. Our knowledge of shamanhood is based on anthropological fieldwork observing and interviewing living communities, while ancient prophecy, whether biblical, ancient Near Eastern, or Greek, is documented only in written sources. The ancient sources do not yield a full and authentic picture of the prophetic phenomenon, but provide us with indirect and insufficient information, which may yield a distorted and misleading view of the ancient phenomenon. On the other hand, even the phenomenon of shamanhood comes to the modern researcher only through a process of transmission involving a chain of informants from the pre-literate stage of a tradition to the written record.

Why should the comparison between prophecy and shamanism make any sense at all? This is because a fair amount of similar features that I would like to call family resemblances. Such features may or may not be historically connected but, placed side by side, can raise questions that would not arise when looking only at one of the points of comparison, whether the question is about similarity or difference. Such questions can emerge even across a wide chronological and geographical gap; in

Hoppál, *Shamanhood: Traditions and Transformation* (Budapest: Research Center for the Humanities Institute of Ethnology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2015), p. ix: “I deliberately use the word shamanhood (in Hungarian sámánság) instead of the customary expression shamanism, as I would like to indicate that our goal is not to make a general model, but I consider, rather, the outline of local characteristics and the local variants of the shamanic culture to be the object of our study” (emphases original).

4 See Pentikäinen, *Shamanism and Culture*, pp. 15–16.
the words of Lester Grabbe: “By comparing the scientific description of a living figure with the literary description in the text, we might learn something new.” What new, then, could be learned by comparing ancient prophecy with shamanhood of the modern days? First, it helps placing the prophetic phenomenon on the global anthropological map. Both prophets and shamans have always been there because they have been believed to be able to communicate with the superhuman world. The way prophetic activity is described in ancient sources shares many features with what we can read about shamans in modern anthropological scholarship. Second, the comparison is necessary for the conceptual clarity. We will see both similarities and differences immediately emerging when it comes to the function, purpose, and agency of shamanhood vis-à-vis prophecy, and the methodical manipulation of the differences will help us to make some useful distinctions instead of lumping prophets and shamans together in a way that prevents us from seeing the forest from the trees.

---


6 The idea of “methodical manipulation of difference playing across the ‘gap’ in the service of some useful end” is adapted from Jonathan Z. Smith, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 35.

Anna-Leena Siikala, Mihály Hoppál, and Thomas DuBois have written about them. Ancient prophecy is something I believe to know more about, but this inevitably affects my agenda: I am learning about shamans primarily in order to understand ancient prophecy. My approach is conceptual and theoretical in the first place. I will try to figure out how the main constituents of shamanhood relate to the fragmentary image of prophecy available to us in ancient Near Eastern and Greek sources, and how all this may be located in the conceptual map of divination, magic, and ritual.

To be able to agree on what we are actually comparing, it is necessary to define briefly what I mean by prophecy and shamanhood. Prophecy, according to the most widely accepted view, is non-inductive/non-technical/inspired transmission of

---


divine knowledge. This definition is neither time- nor place-specific and can be used of activity thus defined in any available source material. A shaman, according to Åke Hultkranz, is “a particular ecstatic diviner, healer, and mediator between humans and the spirit world.” Accordingly, the central idea of shamanism is “to establish means of contact with the supernatural world by the ecstatic experience of a professional and inspired intermediary, the shaman.”

The concept of shamanism has sometimes been used very widely across cultures as a label of a kind of an ideal type or pattern of an ecstatic religious entrepreneur; accordingly, even figures like Jesus and Paul have been introduced as shamans. The difficulty with a very broad definition of shamanism is that the

---


14 Ibid., p. 4.

phenomenon thus labelled is prone to lose its contours if not its meaning, especially if one tries to compare it with another related phenomenon. Håkan Rydving, therefore, suggests the abandoning of the terms “shaman” and “shamanism,” unless they are used as self-designation. For the sake of comparability and differentiation, I prefer not to abandon this terminology altogether, but adhere to the more restricted use of the concept in the studies concerning shamans proper in the arctic cultural sphere in Siberia, North America and (South-)East Asia.

Inquiry into the History of the Scholarly Use of the Term in English-Speaking North America,” *Anthropology of Consciousness* 17 (2008), pp. 4–32. He suggests a rather broad definition of shamanism as “a phenomenon consisting of an individual who has voluntary access to, and control of, more aspects of their consciousness than other individuals, however the components of that consciousness are emically understood, and that this voluntary access is recognized by other members of the ‘shaman’s’ culture as an essential component of that culture” (ibid., p. 21).


In the study of biblical and ancient Near Eastern prophecy, shamans have not been mentioned all too often, and it has been the shared conviction of most scholars that shamans, at least according to a strict definition, cannot be found in the biblical tradition or in other Near Eastern sources. However, scholars such as Robert Carroll,18 Robert Wilson,19 Thomas Overholt,20 Herbert Huffmon,21 and Lester Grabbe22 have found prophecy and shamanhood to share enough parallel features to make an anthropological comparison meaningful. I follow a similar line of thought, which today probably is much less radical than it was two or three decades ago, trying to find the location of prophecy and shamanhood within the theoretical framework


concerning divination and magic. The framework (Fig. 1) is a simplified adaptation of Jesper Sørensen’s “ritual event frame” as a part of his cognitive theory of magic.\textsuperscript{23}

![Diagram](image-url)

Fig. 1: The divinatory act belongs mainly to the conditional space because its function is diagnosis based on divine knowledge; the magical act attempts to bring about an effect and, therefore, belongs more strongly to the effect space.

In my modification of Sørensen’s model, ‘divination’ stands for acts of acquisition and transmission of allegedly superhuman knowledge by different means. The function of divination is diagnosis, the purpose of which is to lead to an action; therefore, divination belongs to the \textit{conditional space} of the event frame. ‘Magic,’ again, is used of different means of attaining a certain goal and bringing about a

change as the result of alleged divine-human collaboration, which places magic predominantly in the *effect space.*

Within this framework, I will explore the conceptual interface of prophecy and shamanhood without any assumptions of historical connection or interdependence of the phenomena thus designated. I would like to approach the interface of prophecy and shamanhood from the point of view of four central points of comparison: (1) intermediation, divination, and magic; (2) performance and cosmology; (3) gender; and (4) social status.

*Intermediation, Divination, and Magic*

According to the most widely accepted scholarly understanding, a prophet is someone who transmits divine words to human recipients. Prophets are, thus, by definition, intermediaries of superhuman knowledge, in other words, practitioners of divination.²⁴


Among different types of diviners, prophets belong to those whose divinatory skills are not dependent on learning the techniques of interpretation of observable objects but who, instead, transmit the divine word directly, acting as the mouthpiece of the deities. Most of the time, therefore, prophetic activity clearly belongs to the conditioned space of the ritual event frame. The action of the prophets rarely reaches beyond the transmission of the divine word; it is rather the addressee who is supposed to act upon the reception of the divine message. Nevertheless, prophets are sometimes found in roles that bring their activity very close to what is perceivable as magic; some prophets, for example, are described to act as healers. Therefore, prophets may occasionally (but not very often) be called magicians.

Shamans, too, are intermediaries between the human and superhuman realms, and their profession includes divinatory activities. The shamans’ divination may include elements of clairvoyance, and they may even be believed to be able of shaping the future, which is untypical of divination in ancient sources. But shamans are much more than diviners. Healing, in particular, is one of the main activities of the shamans, and in this role, shamans may be classified as magicians rather than diviners. Sometimes divination appears as a part of a healing ceremony. Shamans act both as diagnosticians and providers of therapeutic acts, hence their endeavor covers

---

26 For sources and discussion, see Nissinen, “Why Prophecy Is (Not) Magic?”


28 For the shamanic healing, see, e.g., DuBois, Introduction to Shamanism, pp. 133–150; Hultkrantz, Shamanic Healing and Ritual Drama; Hoppál, Shamans and Traditions, pp. 119–32; idem, Shamanhood, pp. 16–19.
both the diagnostic and the prognostic phase in the ritual event frame. This extends the shamans’ activity from the conditional space to the effect space. The functions of the shamans as luck- and harm-bringers point towards the same conclusion.\(^{29}\) In addition, shamans may also act as sacrificial priests, which makes them full-blown ritual officiants.\(^{30}\) As a whole, the “séance,” as the shamanic performance is called in the scholarly literature, is a ritual by any definition.

We can see that the prophets and shamans have a most significant thing in common, and that is the role of an intermediary between the human and superhuman realms. The variety of the professional roles assumed by the shamans is typically much broader than that of most of the prophets appearing in our sources. Much more than the prophets, the shamans are involved in activities describable as magic rather than divination and covering the entire ritual event frame including the effect space, which in the case of the prophets is usually not part of the performance. Moreover, shamanic séances are rituals in their own right, which cannot often be said of the ancient Near Eastern prophetic performances.

**Performance and Cosmology**

Sometimes, however, the prophetic performance, as far as it can be reconstructed from ancient sources, can indeed be characterized as a ritual in its own right. This is mostly true for the practice in the major Greek oracle sites, Delphi, Didyma, and

---

\(^{29}\) See Bäckman and Hultkranz, *Studies in Lapp Shamanism*, p. 17.

Claros, in which the oracular process follows a ritual agenda. In the Near Eastern sources, including the Hebrew Bible, this is not at all typical. Prophets are very often temple-based and they may sometimes be found performing within a ritual framework, but the way prophetic performances are described does not present them as self-sustaining rituals. What seems to be the normal expectation regarding prophetic performances, however, is a patterned behavior indicating an altered state of consciousness. The information regarding the ecstatic element of prophetic


performances is very fragmentary and insufficient to enable reconstructions of how it was reached and how it affected the prophets’ comportment.

The altered state of consciousness was interpreted as a divine possession in the sense that the deity spoke through the prophet who was not acting her- or himself but impersonated the deity. The cosmological theory behind this belief is not very complicated. It consists essentially of a deity (sometimes more than one) who speaks to the addressee(s) through the prophet’s mouth. This deity may speak as her- or himself, but may also represent the voice of a divine council or speak on behalf of another deity.34 The message may be solicited, which means that the prophet can be consulted by members of the community and the performance can take place on behalf of a client, but it can also be unsolicited. The performances of the prophets are not described in a detailed manner in the sources, since the contents of the divine message seems to have mattered much more than the way it was transmitted.

The shamanic performance is decidedly a ritual event, and like the prophetic performance, essentially about achieving the altered state of consciousness which enabled the communication with the superhuman agents. The rite technique of the Siberian shamans is well known and documented by, e.g., Anna-Leena Siikala,35 and anthropological field-work has enabled a thorough knowledge of the cosmological


35 Siikala, The Rite Technique of the Siberian Shaman.
ideas behind the performance. This idea is based on a multilayered cosmological structure typically consisting of the heaven, the human sphere, and the world of the dead. The shamanic séance is essentially a performance during which the shaman achieves an altered state of consciousness, his or her soul leaves the body and travels to the realm of spirits. Having achieved the altered state of consciousness, the shaman is believed to be able to travel between the visible and invisible realms.

The shamanic séances, especially the healing rituals, are typically performed for the sake of a client who needs help from superhuman powers, whereby the shaman’s therapeutic acts happen in the triangle of the patient, the shaman, and the community. The inspiration is granted by the tutelary spirits who, according to the emic theory, enable the change of the shaman’s consciousness. This results in a new role in which the shaman is able to communicate and collaborate with the helping

36 See Pentikäinen, Samaanit, pp. 45–50 on the Siberian Yakut cosmology and DuBois, Introduction to Shamanism, pp. 42–46 on Southeast Asian Hmong cosmology. The shamanic cosmology can often be presented as a vertically arrayed tripartite figure, but it may also have horizontal dimensions; cf. DuBois, Introduction to Shamanism, pp. 51–55. What is essential is the separation of the visible and invisible realms, between which the shamanic journey takes place; see Siikala, Mythic Images and Shamanism, pp. 295–301.


spirits. In concrete terms, the shaman’s altered state of consciousness may be triggered by music or psychotropic substances."

We can see that communicating with the superhuman realms in an altered state of consciousness is a common denominator of prophecy and shamanhood. Ecstatic behavior is interpreted as a sign of divine collaboration which makes both the prophet and the shaman capable of fulfilling their divinatory and, in especially the case of the shaman, magical function. It indicates a role-taking that is acknowledged by the community and qualifies the prophet’s or the shaman’s position. Even prophetic performances are sometimes but not typically induced by music or liquids."

The theological or cosmological explanation of the ecstasy is different, since in the sources of ancient prophecy the role of spirits is marginal," and the prophets normally

39 For music and psychotropics, see DuBois, Introduction to Shamanism, pp. 153–75.


41 When theorizing about the source of the Delphic Pythia’s divine inspiration, Plutarch mentions a δαίμων, a disembodied intermediary, as one possibility without, however, presenting this as the superior theory (Plutarch, Mor. 5.414f–415c). In Assyrian prophecy, according to Simo Parpola (Assyrian Prophecies [SAA 9; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997], pp. xxvi–xxxi), the goddess Ištar functions
communicate with one major deity. Moreover, the prophets do not travel to the heavenly realm but, rather, the divine word comes down to the humans through the mouth of the prophet who is not acting as her- or himself during the performance.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{Gender}

Both prophecy and shamanhood are professional roles that can be assumed by men, women, and third gender persons alike. Ancient sources of prophecy demonstrate that in Greece and Assyria in particular, prophetic divination was practiced by women.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{42} According to Seth Sanders, “the diviner is not described as a messenger or traveler to other realms but a reporter of cosmic law, a scientist who generates the information and makes the state secrets present to the state council” (\textit{From Adapa to Enoch: Social Culture and Religious Vision in Judea and Babylon} [TSAJ 169; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017], p. 92). This is true even for prophetic diviners who, however, can hardly be called scientists.

This was also true for Mari, where even persons with an unconventional gender role carrying the title *assinnu* acted as prophets. Even the Hebrew Bible knows a handful of female prophets. The gender-inclusive nature of prophetic divination is exceptional in comparison with other divinatory methods but finds an interesting counterpart in shamanhood. The majority of shamans among some Siberian clans in the lower course of the Amur river, for instance, are women, and female shamans are


45 I.e., Miriam (Exod 15:20), Deborah (Judg 4:4), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14–20), Noadiah (Neh 6:14), the woman who gives births to Isaiah’s child (Isa 8:3), and the women who “prophesy” in Ezek 13:17–23.
known even from other places.° Shamanic gender-blending goes even further than is the case with the prophets, since some shamans are themselves believed to be able to change gender." Transgressing gender boundaries may take place only during the ritual, but some shamans are compelled by their tutelary spirits to permanently assume a reversed gender condition. This kind of transgressing gender boundaries is known from prophetic sources only in the case of the assinnu whose gender position is caused by the goddess Ištar, herself able to change her own as well as the people’s gender.°

In the case of the shamans, gender is not the only personal quality that can be transformed, since they can sometimes even take the role of the animal, depending on the helping spirits who often are animal-shaped.°° The shamanic spirit-journey, thus may involve more thorough transformations than any prophetic performance known to us from the ancient sources.

Social Status

---

46 See Pentikäinen, Samaanit, pp. 38–41; DuBois, Introduction to Shamanism, pp. 79–81.


49 See, e.g., Siikala, Mythic Images and Shamanism, pp. 226–228.
The social status of prophets and shamans is, of course, very much dependent on local circumstances and varies both in ancient sources and in the anthropological record of contemporary shamans. Prophets have a different status in the sources according to their affiliation to temples and the favor they enjoy in the royal court. Some kings favored prophecy more than others, and some prophets were regarded more trustworthy than others. Much depended on the status of the temple with which the prophets were affiliated. In general, prophets do not occupy very high positions in any of the societies that have left behind written sources. The prophets were probably not perceived of as having personal authority, since the impact they had on the society was not interpreted as their own doing but god’s work. This does not mean, however, that the prophets had no independent agency. Their role as proclaimers of the divine word may have been interpreted in terms of instrumental agency, but since it enabled them even to reproach and criticize the king and authorities, their personal influence could have been more significant than that of a mere mouthpiece of the gods.

50 For the social and ideological status of prophets, see, e.g., Parpola, Assyrian Prophecies, pp. xxxvi–xliv; Dominique Charpin, Gods, Kings, and Merchants in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia (PIPOAC 2; Leuven: Peeters, 2015), pp. 11–58; Bowden, Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle; Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, pp. 257–296.
Prophets were probably illiterate; there is no conclusive evidence that ancient prophets (including the biblical ones) would ever have written anything. However, there is some evidence of their personal involvement in the scribal continuation of the prophetic process of communication. Without having active agency in scribal culture, prophets and scribes could sometimes work in tandem.  

The social roles of the shamans appear to be generally more central in the communities in which they feature. Like ancient prophets, shamans are typically illiterate, but this does not push them into a marginal position since literacy does not play a role in the traditions of their communities in which the highly developed ritual system is much more important.  

Shamans are often looked up by the members of their communities as spiritual leaders and sources of superhuman knowledge and aid. They also serve as transmitters of traditions and carriers of the communal identity,

---


influencing their communities’ decision-making and policies. Shanmanhood can be passed down within specific family lines and involves initiation and training. Nevertheless, the establishment of a shamanic persona involves a specific calling. As much as this is perceived of as belonging to the agency of the spirits, the community assumes a pivotal role in accepting someone as a shaman. According to Thomas DuBois, “it is evident that gaining and maintaining the community’s support must lie at the heart of a shaman’s professional activities. Without a community’s acceptance, a shaman can seldom build up a professional career.” This is certainly true for prophecy as well. In spite of the common ideal of the prophet as a free and independent spirit, prophecy would not function without an institutional echo; as Robert Wilson argues, they “are integral parts of their societies and cannot exist without social guidance and support.”

The difference between the social standing of contemporary shamanhood and that of ancient prophecy lies rather in societal structures. The activity of the prophets whose activity is described in ancient sources takes place mostly in a political setting,


56 For the shamanic calling, election, and apprenticeship, see David Gordon Wilson, Redefining Shamanisms: Spiritualist Mediums and Other Traditional Shamans as Apprenticeship Outcomes (Bloomsbury Advances in Religious Studies; London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 196–214; DuBois, Introduction to Shamanism, pp. 56–81.

57 DuBois, Introduction to Shamanism, p. 94.

58 R. R. Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel, p. 5.
because the information, especially from the Near East, represents the point of view of rulers and the elite. From this perspective, the prophets as persons do not appear in authority positions with regard to their audiences in this source material, even though the divine messages pronounced by them may be taken seriously. The shamans, on the other hand, belong to traditional small-scale societies, in which their chances of assuming leadership positions are much higher, especially when their position is supported by a long intergenerational tradition.

**Conclusion**

Everything that is written about shamanhood is dependent on transmission of a non- and pre-literate tradition involving a chain of informants from the eye-witness through several intermediaries to the last informant on whose report the written document is based. This is well comparable with the process of communication preceding the written documents of prophecy: everything we know about it is dependent on a similar chain of transmission. It is important to note the distance between the scholar and the source in both cases. However long the temporal distance between the documentation of ancient divination and contemporary shamanhood is, it is nevertheless a distance that enables only an indirect access to the source. The written record is always secondary to the performance, whether shamanic or prophetic.

---

59 Pentikäinen, *Shamanism and Culture*, p. 16: “Each link of the chain is, of course, important but the last informant plays a decisive role, since it is his duty to write down the oral message or to dictate it to some other (preferably trained) person.”

Neither the sources from the ancient world nor the modern anthropological record enable a full access to prophecy or shamanhood, but they nevertheless make it possible to create a scholarly construction of the phenomena thus designated. In the scholarly language, both ‘prophecy’ and ‘shamanism/shamanhood’ are constructions based on reality but created by scholars for analytical purposes. Therefore, the comparison between these two entities depends on how they are organized in the scholarly conceptual system. Victor Turner argued half a century ago that “mediums, shamans, and prophets clearly constitute subtypes of a single type of religious functionary.” Typology, of course, is another scholarly construction designed for the purpose of interrogating sources, whether ancient or modern. I would rather opt for a different typological construction, organizing diviners, shamans, and prophets as different types of functionaries that, nevertheless, share significant functions related to divine-human communication.

---

Contemporary shamans and ancient prophets do share the main divinatory function of mediating between human and superhuman realms and transmitting divine knowledge to people who need it in order to cope with risk and uncertainty. Even some magical functions, such as healing, are common between shamans and prophets, even though the prophets do not often involve in such activity in our sources. In addition, the shamanic and prophetic performances may function similarly, especially when it comes to the altered state of consciousness as the prerequisite of acquiring divine knowledge. The shamanic séances can, however, be described in a much more detailed way than the performances of ancient prophets, the specifics of which are largely unknown.

A common feature between shamans and prophets is gender-inclusiveness and a certain openness even to a transgendered role, which in the case of the shamans appears stronger. From the perspective of social status, shamans in general seem to enjoy a higher esteem than the prophets in their own communities. However, the community structures reflected by the source materials are very different, and it is to be expected that the social position of a prophet in the Assyrian empire or at a temple of Apollo in a Greek city is difficult to compare with a shaman’s status in a traditional arctic community. What matters in both cases is the superhuman authority ascribed to the activity of the prophets and the shamans, as long as it is acknowledged and accepted by the community. The appreciation of the shamanic and prophetic activity depends essentially on a shared idea of divine-human communication and the accredited role of the intermediary.

All this does not turn prophets into shamans or vice versa, and it is necessary to uphold the conceptual difference between these divinatory functions. Nevertheless,
these functions share enough family resemblances to make prophecy and shamanhood appear like trees belonging to the same divinatory orchard.