

Music and Altered States of Consciousness in Shamanism and Spirit Possession: An Overview of the Literature

Jack Hunter

(Dept. Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Bristol)

Introduction

A connection between ritual music and communication with the spirit world through altered states of consciousness has long been recognised in the anthropological literature. This chapter will explore these apparent connections through presenting a sample of the ethnographic and theoretical literature as it pertains to the role of music in the induction of altered states of consciousness, frequently referred to as trance states. In particular this chapter will focus on the practices broadly known as shamanism and spirit possession, and the role that music plays within them.

What is Trance?

The term 'trance' is often bandied around quite freely without much worry as to what precisely it refers. Before embarking on our discussion of the role played by music in the induction of trance states, therefore, it will be necessary to define a little more precisely what trance states actually are. Etymologically the term's roots go back to the Latin word *transire* meaning to 'cross over,' and the Old French word *transe*, meaning 'to die' or 'pass on.' So the word 'trance' has usually been associated with liminal states of consciousness, and particularly with the threshold between life and death. From this perspective, then, to be in a trance state is to be somehow between the worlds of the living and the dead. Trance is an altered state of consciousness (ASC). Broadly speaking altered states of consciousness can be defined as phases of consciousness that differ from our everyday waking state of consciousness - our baseline state (Tart 1972). There are many different states of consciousness, including waking consciousness, sleep, meditative states, psychedelic states, and hypnosis, amongst others, each with distinctive neurophysiological correlates.

In popular parlance there are many different states of consciousness, as well as certain unusual sensory experiences, that are categorised as trance states. Judith Becker's (1994), definition of trance is intentionally broad, so as to include a wide variety of different experiences and bodily states. Trance, she writes, is:

...a state of mind characterized by intense focus, the loss of the strong sense of self and access to types of knowledge and experience that are inaccessible in non-trance states (Becker 1994:41)

Becker's definition encompasses a wide variety of state of consciousness including meditative states, possession trance, shamanic trance, communal trance, aesthetic trance and other moments of transcendence. Similarly, Brian Inglis, in his book *Trance: A Natural History of Altered States of Mind* (1989), also lays out a broad spectrum of experiences and states of consciousness encompassed by the term:

At one extreme it is applied to what can loosely be described as possession, in which the individual's normal self seems to be displaced, leaving him rapt, or paralysed, or hysterical, or psychotic,

or taken over by another personality. At the other extreme is sleep. Between the two are conditions in which consciousness is maintained, but the subliminal mind makes itself felt, as in light hypnosis or the kind of reverie in which fancy, or fantasy, breaks loose... (Inglis 1989:267)

Inglis' spectrum of trance states runs from the extremity of dissociative states of consciousness, whereby the individual feels that their consciousness is displaced from the body to reveries and flights of fancy. The term 'trance,' therefore, is often applied to conditions in which consciousness is seemingly restricted, as in dissociation, as well as conditions in which consciousness appears to be expanded, as in reveries and flights of fancy.

In his article 'Trance States: A Theoretical Model and Cross-Cultural Analysis,' Michael Winkelman (1986) presents a psychophysiological model of trance states, arguing that although there are differences in terms of trance experiences and methods for inducing trance states, there are key psychophysiological similarities between specific states, in particular a 'parasympathetic dominance in which the frontal cortex is dominated by slow wave patterns originating in the limbic system and related projections into the frontal parts of the brain' (1986:174). Winkelman asserts, therefore, that there is a 'common set of psychophysiological changes underlying a variety of trance induction techniques' (175). So while there may be a variety of trance experiences, the physiological activity in the brain appears to be similar in nature (for a comprehensive overview of neurophysiological research into trance states see Krippner & Friedman 2010).

As it stands, then, trance is still a fairly general term applied to a wide spectrum of unusual experiences. The following sections will deal with social phenomena that employ specific states of consciousness usually classified as trance states: shamanism and spirit possession. These two, again broadly defined, social phenomena appear to represent both sides of the spectrum of trance states suggested by Inglis. Shamanism, at the one extreme, whereby the shaman retains awareness in interacting with the spirit world while on soul excursions, and spirit possession at the other extreme, whereby conscious awareness is lost and the sense of self temporarily displaced.

Ethnographic Examples

Shamanism and the Spirit World

The writings of the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) are frequently taken as the starting point in explorations of shamanism, and this brief discussion will do just the same. Eliade's primary interest was in the forms of shamanism practiced in Siberian and Central Asian cultures, exemplified by the Tungus (from whom we get the word Shaman, from the Tungusic word *Šaman*), which he held to be the 'purest,' most 'archaic,' forms of shamanic practice. Indeed, quite controversially, Eliade held the ecstatic techniques of the Siberian shamans to be superior to those of other regions, often regarding the use of psychoactive substances, for example, as a 'crude,' 'mechanical' and 'corrupt' method of inducing the shamanic experience (1989:223). Regardless of his apparent ethnocentric bias against psychoactive plant use, however, Eliade's comments on other techniques for altering consciousness, and in particular what he called 'magico-religious music,' are worth considering. In his classic text *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1989 [1964]), Eliade goes to great lengths in describing the central importance of the shaman's drum in many, predominantly Siberian, shamanic traditions. The drum, he writes, 'has a role of the first importance in shamanic ceremonies' (1989:168). He goes on to describe several of the main uses of drumming in shamanic cultures:

[The drum] is indispensable in conducting the shamanic seance, whether it carries the shaman to the “Center of the World,” or enables him to fly through the air, or summons and “imprisons” the spirits, or, finally...enables the shaman to concentrate and regain contact with the spiritual world through which he is preparing to travel (1989:168)

For Eliade, then, music represents the *sin qua non* shamanic technique of ecstasy, arguing that ‘there is always some instrument that, in one way or another, is able to establish contact with the ‘world of the spirits’ (1989:179).

Writing more recently, psychologist and parapsychologist Stanley Krippner has further expanded on Eliade’s use of the term ‘techniques of ecstasy’ in his discussion of ‘shamanic technologies.’ Krippner defines shamanism as comprising ‘a group of techniques by which practitioners deliberately alter or heighten their conscious awareness to enter the so-called “spirit world,” accessing material that they use to help and to heal members of the social group’ (Krippner 2000:98). Krippner highlights the fact that ‘[r]arely is one procedure used in isolation,’ and emphasises the frequent combining of different techniques. He describes, for example, the traditional healing procedures of the Native American Ojibway, for whom it was customary for the *wabeno* (shamans) to ‘heal by means of drumming, rattling, chanting, dancing erotically (while naked), and handling hot coals’ (2000:102). Music, drumming, chanting and dancing, therefore, might all be employed in combination, or alongside other techniques for the induction of shamanic states of consciousness, including, for example: sensory deprivation, sensory stimulation, dietary restrictions, sleep deprivation, hyperventilation, and consumption of psychoactive substances, amongst others (Kelly & Locke 2009:36).

It is clear, however, that in spite of the many different techniques for the induction of contact with the spirit world, music is the most cross-culturally prevalent. Indeed music often serves to ‘enhance the experience’s profundity’ (Krippner 2000:102), performing an important role in shamanic rituals employing other modes of consciousness alteration. Marlene Dobkin de Rios and Fred Katz (1975), for example, describe how amongst certain Amazonian Peruvian populations, whistling incantations during periods of ritualised psychoactive intoxication ‘served as a vital link in bridging separate realities induced by the ingestion of a plant hallucinogen’ (1975:65). They suggest that the rhythmic structure inherent in many musical forms serves to create a ‘jungle gym’ for consciousness during the altered state ‘providing a series of pathways and banisters through which the drug user negotiates his way’ (1975:68). This structuring of the altered state experience is necessary, so Dobkin de Rios and Katz argue, in order to give the experience meaning and to allow the shaman to achieve culturally important goals, such as communication with spirit ancestors and healing.

Uwe Maas and Süster Strubelt (2003) have suggested that the polyrhythmic music that accompanies the ritualised use of the psychoactive drug *iboga* during initiation rituals in Gabon, Central Africa, actually ‘increases the effect of the drug...so that patients may need smaller amounts...of this potentially harmful drug’ (Maas & Strubelt 2003:1-2). Maas and Strubelt describe the *iboga* initiation ceremony of the Mitsogo as a ‘controlled near-death experience’ (2003:8), the experience of which features many phenomenological commonalities with those documented in the traditional near-death experience literature.

In addition to the role played by music in initiating contact with the spirit world, Michael Winkelman, drawing on experimental studies into music’s physiological effects on the body (including its capacity to counteract stress related biological change, reduce muscle tension, heart rate, blood pressure, and alter mood and attitude, amongst others),

has highlighted the significant therapeutic role of music in many shamanic traditions (2000:196-197). Similarly, neurologist Oliver Sacks (2006) has highlighted the positive influence of both rhythm and melody in the therapeutic treatment of various neurological conditions. He writes: 'patients with parkinsonism, in whom movements tend to be incontinently fast or slow or sometimes frozen, may overcome these disorders of timing when they are exposed to the regular tempo and rhythm of music' (Sacks 2006:2528).

Anette Kjellgren and Anders Eriksson (2010) conducted a study in which twenty-two individuals participated in a twenty minute shamanic-like drumming session. After the drumming, participants were asked to produce written accounts of their experiences during the session. Amongst the reports of the participants were numerous experiences considered to be classically shamanic in nature, including entry into holes and tunnels, moving through different levels, visual imagery, bodily transformations, inner sounds, encounters with animals, plants and insects, visionary landscapes and insights (Kjellgren & Eriksson 2010:5).

It is clear then that music is a multi-purpose shamanic technology: it provides access to spiritual realms, helps to structure altered state experiences for attaining culturally significant goals, and serves the therapeutic needs of the social group, as well as (of course) providing entertainment (which in itself may perform an essential cohesive social function).

Spirit Possession

Music also plays a central role in many spirit possession traditions. Spirit possession differs from shamanism in a number of key respects, most importantly: during spirit possession performances the possessed/medium claims to surrender control of their body to an external spirit or deity (Gauld 1982:29-31), while the shaman always remains in control (Peters & Price-Williams 1980:398; Eliade 1989:6); following the spirit possession performance the possessed/medium is unable to recall the events that took place during their trance, while for the shaman recollection of the events that take place during his/her excursion to the spirit-world is an essential component of their socio-cultural role. Despite these apparent differences, however, it is clear that shamanism and spirit possession practices often overlap with one another in a number of ways, with the use of musical trance induction techniques being just one of them.

In many Afro-Brazilian traditions, including Candomble, Umbanda and Batuque, rhythm in particular plays a very important role. During Candomble trance performances spirit mediums must dance according to very specific rhythms, employing very specific bodily postures, in order for the individual *Orixá* to express itself (Turner & Turner 1985:129-130). Each *Orixá* in the Yoruba pantheon has its own characteristic rhythm and dance movements by which it is recognised. Oshala, the *Orixá* of creation, for example, dances slowly and ponderously to a steady drum rhythm, while Oya, *Orixá* of the wind, whirls gracefully to a quick polyrhythmic beat. During Candomble possession rituals, if the possessed person does not dance the correct dance to the correct rhythms the possession is not deemed to be authentic.

Erlmann (1982) describes the use of music in the *boori* spirit possession cult of the West African Hausa. Music plays a particularly important role in *boori* possession ceremonies. Musicians perform specific songs, known as *taakee*, for each of the four hundred plus spirits usually incorporated by cult members, who become 'mares' (*goo'dilyaa*) upon which the spirits ride. The music is performed on gourd rattles, calabashes and single-stringed lutes called *googee* (1982:49-50).

My own field-research with a Spiritualist home-circle in the UK (Hunter 2012), also found music to have a central role in contemporary trance and physical mediumship seances. In this context, however, the music is generally popular music from the past

twenty years. The music used to help the medium return from his/her trance state at the end of the seance, for example, is a short instrumental piece by the American rock band REM. It would seem, therefore, that any kind of music can be used for the induction and modulation of altered states of consciousness, which would support the notion that trance is not necessarily an automatic response to particular musical forms, but rather is a learned response (Rouget 1985).

Music, the Brain and Altered States of Consciousness

There is a great deal of debate about the actual effect of music on the psycho-physiological functioning of the brain, especially as it relates to the induction of altered states of consciousness and anomalous experiences, as frequently reported by those who practice forms of spirit possession and shamanism. The debate can broadly be split into two camps, those who argue that music has a direct physiological effect on the brain, essentially *causing* or *inducing* the trance state, and those who suggest that trance is a learned response to particular culturally significant musical forms (Jankowsky 2007:187-188).

The theory of 'auditory driving' was first put forward in the 1960s by psychologist Andrew Neher to describe the observation that EEG readings from subjects exposed to repetitive rhythms appear to show a synchronisation of brain wave frequencies to the frequency of the drum beat (Neher 1961). Neher further expanded on this research by investigating the use of percussion in shamanic cultures (Neher 1962). Winkelman (2000) suggests that auditory driving is a universal feature of shamanic healing practices, particularly as a result of drumming, singing and chanting, arguing that the work of Neher suggests that 'the cortex is easily set into oscillation at the alpha frequency or slower and that singing, chanting and percussion procedures produce or enhance this state of dominance of slow-wave frequencies' (Winkelman 2000:149). The phenomenon of auditory driving would appear to suggest that specific percussive frequencies can produce specific alterations of consciousness.

Drawing on fieldwork in Venda spirit possession rituals in the 1950s, Blacking (1985) argues that there is no 'direct causal relationship between the sounds of music and human responses to them.' He offers instead that 'if organized sounds are to affect people's feelings and actions, people must not only be predisposed to listen to them, they must also have acquired certain habits of assimilating sensory experience' (1985:64). In other words, Blacking suggests that spirit possession is a learned response to what he terms 'musical symbols,' rather than a direct response to the musical sounds themselves. It is not the music that creates the trance, but rather the music serves to give structure to the trance experience. Arguing along similar lines, Fachner (2007) suggests that: '*Music creates conditions* that favour the onset of trance, that regulate form and development and make them more predictable and easier to control' (2007:176), but does not create the trance state itself.

Concluding Remarks

While it is clear that music, and indeed sound more generally, plays an important role in the trance induction techniques of many different cultural and sub-cultural groups, the question of whether music has the capacity to *create* alterations of consciousness, or whether it simply aids in the *control* and *modulation* of altered states is still up for debate. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, however, music's role in spirit possession and shamanic rituals is undeniable, indeed ethnomusicologist Ruth Herbert (2013) has argued that 'dissociation from self, surroundings or activity in conjunction with music is a common occurrence in everyday life,' thus suggesting that music's capacity to induce and/or

modulate ASCs is a universal, cross-cultural, human phenomenon that is not restricted to specific ritual settings.

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