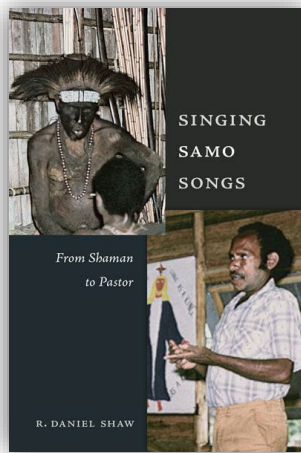


BOOK REVIEW

Singing Samo Songs: From Shaman to Pastor

By R. Daniel Shaw

Reviewed by Jill Hurley



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Singing Samo Songs is rife with thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) of the Samo culture. What stands out to me is the ontological shifts from shaman to pastor and congregation to collective shamans—the nuances of which will have a profound impact not only on how Christians perceive shamans in their native contexts, but more importantly on how the Western Church perceives, understands and negotiates thin places in spiritual landscapes. This will be evidenced by how the Western Church reacts to a simple footnote, in which Shaw writes,

If Shamans, in association with the ancestors, express their compassion for human interests and mediate ancestral concern from the spiritual realm, how might the Samo relate to God who created the shamans and the ancestors they channel? . . . For them, it was a short conceptual shift of allegiance from the ancestors to Jesus while continuing to appreciate the watchful eye of their ancestors, even as the book of Hebrews affirms (Daimoi 2004) . . .

The Samo understanding of Jesus as the ultimate shaman is a case in point (Shaw 2010c).”

I can envision the apoplectic fits from Evangelical parishioners as the hypothetical 2023 version of the “Names of Jesus Daily Calendar” comes out and they flip to some arbitrary day and read the title for that day’s devotion, “Jesus, The Ultimate Shaman.” Humor may provide a relief valve to the tension that this footnote brings, but as scholars we must remain vigilant as we analyze the implications made by such statements. This book review does not provide adequate space to delve into these issues fully, thus this article must stand as a signpost for fellow travelers guiding their conversations along their way.

In recent years, theologians and anthropologists have been attempting to make peace with the phenomenon known as an ontological turn. Scholars have discussed merits or the lack thereof when using terminology like syncretism, hybridity, polyontologism (Shaw, Nguyen, Hutnyk, Klimova, McIntosh, and Burrows). Once again I am reminded that there is something problematic when we define religions by bounded-set systems. In a 2018 article entitled, *Understanding Christian Conversion as a Post-Relational Ontological Re(turn) to Relations*, I wrote, “In Christianity, we like to think of people as saved or not saved, believers or unbelievers, members or nonmembers of the church. In reality, people live a dynamic experience wherein each moment, emotion and circumstance through years of living can culminate in a gradual transformation into something brand new. Individuals may not be entirely aware that the challenges and frustrations that happened in one circumstance could be what motivated them to seek out a new circumstance” (Hurley 2018, 2). The reality is that this is true not just of Christianity but of every religion or belief structure. In many ways, we could interpret the story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament, as a reflection on humanity’s attempts to

build religions (religious structures) to interact with God. Instead of embracing the mystery, we attempt to control it and end up in chaos and confusion. As such, conversations about syncretism, hybridity and poly-ontology are many times simply adventures in missing the point.

In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai gave us a new framework to understand globalization by creating a world map that illustrates the flow of culture across boundary lines, much like jet streams. As a graduate student, I contemplated Appadurai's -scapes and I realized that religion is just as fluid as any of the other motifs he described. I wrote, "I am left feeling curious if there is an important -scape that is missing from this text. I wonder if it is possible to describe a sixth -scape as *theoscapes*." Our nation-state boundaries are helpless against the jet stream flows of politics, finances, technology, family values and certainly religion. Thus the effects of globalization will have an impact on each person's religious beliefs because we are a communal people. It is categorically impossible for an idea to remain constant. Even with no outside influence, time in and of itself will cause an evolution in thoughts. The journey of humanity as we attempt to understand and know God cannot be understood any longer by a myopic lens. McIntosh (2019, 112-20) attempts to describe the onion layers by writing,

The concept of syncretism appeals to contemporary scholarly enthusiasm about cultural "creolization," "hybridity," and "boundary crossing," and, to be sure, such pursuits have been vital to dismantling older social-scientific assumptions of cultural boundedness, fixity, and homogeneity and to redefining—even celebrating—the flux and bricolage that make up cultural life. Indeed, a common rejoinder to earlier conceptions of "syncretism" is that religious practices—like cultural practices in general—are always already porous, and hence every religion is fundamentally syncretistic.

Ironically, it is this porous nature that could be the very key to summing these religious structures that humans have built, because we realize that porosity is not only a horizontal phenomenon between peoples and cultures but it is also a vertical phenomenon between us and the Divine. The abstract for *Porosity*

Is the Heart of Religion, a new article published by Tanya Luhrmann et al. (2022, 247-53), says,

When scholars and scientists set out to understand religious commitment, the sensation that gods and spirits are real may be at least as important a target of inquiry as the belief that they are real. The sensory and quasisensory [sic] events that people take to be the presence of spirit—the voice of an invisible being, a feeling that a person who is dead is nonetheless in the room—are found both in the foundational stories of faith and surprisingly often in the lives of the faithful. These events become evidence that gods and spirits are there. We argue that at the heart of such spiritual experiences is the concept of a porous boundary between mind and world, and that people in all human societies have conflicting intuitions about this boundary. We have found that spiritual experiences are facilitated when people engage their more porous modes of understanding and that such experiences are easier for individuals who cultivate an immersive orientation toward experience (*absorption*) and engage in practices that enhance inner experience (e.g., prayer, meditation). To understand religion, one needs to explore not just how people come to believe in gods and spirits, but how they come to understand and relate to the mind.

This porosity pinpoints precisely the thing that humans desire the most, a transcendental encounter with God. It is the spark of inspiration, a moment of comfort, an out of body experience where people come face to face with the mystery, and so much more. This porosity invades conversations, mundane moments, everyday circumstances and transforms people into evangelists, and the theological landscape of peoples lives change in an instant. Porosity is why America is experiencing a psychedelic renaissance and why the American church is dying. People are craving an encounter with the divine. People are starving for transcendental, mystical experiences that reveal their place in the mystery. Porosity is why Tibetan Buddhists spin a prayer wheel, why Hindu's place mangos on the altar of the local shrine, why Muslims travel to Mecca, and why Christians sing "How Great Thou Art" at the top of their lungs as they watch the sunrise in the mountains. Worship is the only tenable

response to encountering the mystery.¹ The noetic response is universal.

In *Singing Samo Songs*, Shaw shatters the neat and tidy paradigm of Western Christianity by conflating the roles of pastor and shaman. While this revelation fits so perfectly inside the Samo culture, the implications for worldwide Christianity are tremendous. The identification of Jesus as the Ultimate Shaman goes well past describing Jesus as our advocate or savior. If the basic understanding of Christianity is that Christ invites us to be like him, then we become peacemakers to emulate Jehovah Shalom (The Lord our Peace) and we become people filled and motivated with compassion as we emulate Jehovah Nissi (The Lord our Banner—and “his banner over us is love”) and stretch our banner of love over the hurting and the dying. What then is our response to this new identity of Jesus as the Ultimate Shaman and what is our path of emulation?

Jesus invites us to become like him, to become shamans—people who are not afraid of the liminal space and are willing to create a porous, or thin place, theology, to be guides to those around us who find themselves lost and in need of an encounter.

We are witnessing a porous moment where Samo Christianity finds itself mystically penetrating the hearts of Western Christians and in the next twenty years, we will see an evolved, more mature, and healthy, albeit a syncretistic-hybrid-polyontological, version of Western Christianity that fully embraces engagement with these liminal and porous places, and Christians themselves will finally be able to say with all intellectual humility, let me point you to the mystery.

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Jill Hurley has an MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology from Eastern University and dual bachelor degrees in Religion and Anthropology from Eastern New Mexico University. Her research has covered the ontological turn in Christian converts in Nepal and the inter-generational trauma of the nation of China from a psychohistorical perspective. She is currently working on a project that explores the theological and ethical implications of Christians using psychedelic plant medicine in a medical context, such as using psilocybin to treat PTSD due to religious or other forms of trauma.

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¹ A quote from a conversation with Benjamin McCauley, director of Denovo Psychedelic Therapy Clinic in Lubbock, TX on December 28, 2022.