

What is Shamanism?



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Introduction

When we think of shamanism, we think of native “primitive” peoples such as Aboriginals, Inuit, and the tribes of Africa and South America because most of the documented evidence of shamanism comes from anthropological studies (Walsh, 2007). Shamanism is still an active part of the daily life of these peoples and is becoming more popularised in the western world, even becoming portrayed in top selling books and films. James Cameron’s movie, Avatar, which is the highest grossing movie ever made, portrays a shamanic culture, the Nav’i, who lead a deeply spiritual life and talk directly to trees and other animals (Hollywood Reporter, Jan 25th 2010).

One of the most interesting features of shamanism is that it spans across continents and is deeply embedded into the culture of many different traditions. Interestingly, most of the practices and beliefs are very similar despite the distance (Eliade, 1964). “When anthropologists began studying shamanism, they discovered that shamans in cultures separated by thousands of miles and without knowledge of each other developed healing and ceremonial approaches that were almost identical” (Roberts, 2008, p7). Where healing practices often vary from village to village, the authenticity and intention behind the work never varies. Shamanism is beginning to come back to the West, more and more people are finding and incorporating it into their lives. “Workshops often overflow with participants. Because shamanism works and shamanic approaches enhance a person’s ability to seek and find their own answers to life problems, the practice has endured.” (Roberts, 2008, p7).

In this paper I will describe what a shaman is, look at some shamanic beliefs and describe two of the core shamanic practices - the Shamanic Journey and Soul Retrieval.

The Essences of Shamanic Practice

“ ‘Civilised’ society works ‘by the book’ – if it is in the book it is true, if it is not in the book, it is not true; the book in this case is the bible – any bible from any religion” (Buxton, 2009). Although it has been documented as religion, instead of being taught from a book,

shamanism comes from experience – there are no rules and regulations. Shamans speak directly to the rivers, the mountains and they hear the voice of the “Great Spirit” in the wind. They see the life force energy in every natural thing – rock, stick, and plant (Villoldo, 2000). Shamans talk to our ancestors, to animal spirits, to Mother Earth, Father Sky and Grandmother Moon. “Shamans are intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. Shamans can treat illness and are capable of entering supernatural realms to obtain answers to the problems of their community” (Eliade, 1964, p3- 7). The shaman helps their clients transcend the normal, ordinary definition of reality and gives people an awareness that they are not emotionally or spiritually alone in their struggles in life.

Shamans believe that each person’s body is a sacred place where a soul resides. They believe that the soul is made of a beautiful energy composed of golden light with pulses of green, magenta, orange, blue... making up a translucent, multicoloured orb which surrounds the body and is linked to the light of creation. “This (the soul) is the fuel which makes the fundamental difference between a lifeless body and one that is alive. When this luminous energy field is depleted by illness, stress or environmental pollutants we suffer disease. By replenishing this life force we extend our healthy, active years.” (Villoldo, 2000, p 43).

It’s not just the shamans who believe in “soul energy”. According to Indian mystics, prana, the energy of life, moves through all living forms, Yoga is the practice of manipulating this energy through breathing and physical exercise (Brennan, 1987). The Chinese believe in the existence of a vital energy called Chi, Tai Chi and Chi Gong are ancient traditional practices which manipulate this vital life energy (Brennan, 1987). Reiki is the Japanese healing art which works with the life force energy, in its practice, the practitioner becomes a channel to allow the universal energy to pass through the practitioner and into the client (Roberts, 2008). Christian religious paintings portray Jesus and other spiritual figures surrounded by fields of light, in fact, John White, in his book Future Science, lists 97 different cultures that refer to the phenomena of life force energy with 97 different names (Brennan, 1987).

Shamans and Healing

The shaman believes that when we are born, our life force energy, or soul-energy, is healthy and vibrates strongly. As we go through life and experience beautiful or traumatic things, the texture and quality of our soul energy transforms (Brennan 1987, Villoldo, 2000, Roberts, 2008). The energy can pick up a heaviness when we are sad, become light when we are happy, we can lose parts of our soul energy if something shocks or upsets us, and we can become energetically connected to other people's soul energy (Brennan 1987, Villoldo, 2000). Emotions and repetitive thoughts change the shape and colour of our soul energy - in the case of depression, for example, soul energy becomes so heavy that people cannot get out of bed, or see a way out of their condition. By the time we are adults, our soul energy has a very different shape and texture to the way it was when we were born (Brennan, 1987, Villoldo, 2000, Roberts, 2008).

Shamans work by interacting with the spirit world to learn what the afflictions are in their client's soul energy (Eliade 1964, Harner 1990, Ingerman 1991, Villoldo 2000 plus many more). By asking their Spirit Guides for assistance and by going on journeys to non-ordinary reality, shamans learn through symbols and messages what has caused their clients' afflictions, and can bring back new healing energies from these non-ordinary realities which allow the client to recover. They work directly with their client's soul energy, transforming it, reshaping it and cleansing it. When the soul energy is bright and clear it flows strongly, giving benefit to our physical body, speeding up physical healing (Brennan, 1987, Harner, 1990, Ingerman, 1991, Villoldo, 2000, Roberts, 2008). Sometimes it is possible to observe the results of a shamanic energy healing immediately - "I saw with my own eyes a large gray blob of plasma emerge from the sick woman's back. Then I knew the African (shamans) were right, there is spirit affliction, it isn't a matter of metaphor and symbol, or even psychology, it is real" (Walsh, 2007, p144).

Ecstatic Techniques

Shamans historically have used hallucinogenic drugs found naturally in plants to reach an altered state of consciousness to access the Spirit world. In Siberia, the most popular substance is the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*, a red mushroom speckled with white dots. In Latin America, shamans use peyote, which is a cactus, and ayahuasca, made from a vine. Both of these concoctions make the body extremely sick as well as opening doors to visions (Walsh, R. 2007). There has been much argument amongst academics about the validity of drug-induced experiences. The general consensus is that if the intention behind the use of the drugs is for a specific healing purpose, then the visions induced are valid for that purpose, rather than simply taking drugs to induce a general mystical experience. (Walsh, 2007 p199).

The shaman, during this time of ecstasy, remains in control of his body and comes back with messages for healing. Taking hallucinogenic drugs is not seen as something done for pleasure. “The ecstatic experience of the shaman is entirely different from the prophetic and mystical ecstasy of the poets and the priests. The shaman does not just feel his connection with the sacred, he is part of it and at one with the entities which occupy these other worlds. It is through this control, not through loss of control that he is able to visit new levels of existence, to communicate with spirits, to access hidden and arcane information and to make subtle changes in the ‘otherworld’ which will have a real, physical effect in the world of ordinary reality” (Heaven, 2001, p135).

Drug use is unacceptable in modern Western society, as the new interest in shamanic practice asserts itself; different ways of accessing these trance-like states have been adopted. Part of this has been attributed to the spirit world rejoicing in a newfound embrace of the shamanic way (Harner, 1990). The ecstatic trance-like state required for shamanic journey can be obtained by listening to a drum or rattle beating at a constant rate, along with using grounding and breathing techniques (Harner, 1990, Ingerman, 1991, Heaven, 2001, Horowitz, 2009, plus many more). This makes shamanism more accessible to more people, both clients and practitioners alike can now benefit from shamanic healing

techniques without the use of drugs.

Initiation

Traditionally, shamans do not choose their path; they are seemingly thrown upon it by powers greater than they. The initiation process into shamanic work is one of trauma and pain, great fighting of personal demons and dragons and spending time in the dark recesses of the soul. Initiation involves a complete breakdown of everything known and a regeneration into something new, a complete transformation. “Being called (to shamanism) – many are not at all pleased by the prospect of their new profession and resist the initial signs with all their might. However resistance is no easy matter and many tribal myths hold that the person who resists the call will sicken, go mad, or die” (Walsh, 2007, p110). Although both men and women are called to this work, I will refer to the shaman as being female.

Because of the shadow work and the nature of going into trance or ecstasy, shamans have been demonised and categorised as psychotic, schizophrenic and neurotic (Walsh, 2007). Eliade was the first to state “it is unacceptable to assimilate shamanism as any kind of mental disease” (1974, pxi-xii). The negative portrayal of the shaman was the expression of a zeitgeist, along with a change in the belief as to what defines a healthy state of consciousness. The most important factor is that the shaman, although initially wounded, through the powers given to her, heals herself. “What is unique about the shaman is not that she complains of persecution by spirits; it is that she eventually learns how to master and use them.” (Walsh, 2007, p98). We have, in a shaman, the archetypal wounded healer.

The Shamanic Journey

Using a trance-like state to travel to the Spirit world is called a Shamanic Journey. The Spirit world is divided into three parts – the Upper World, the Middle World and the Lower World, all shamanic traditions across all continents hold this to be the case (Eliade, 1974). Each world has its own purpose, texture, density, and is accessed through what is called an axis

mundi, or an entry point, which is different depending on each shaman, and may change through time or remain the same (Harner, 1990). “The axis (mundi) passes through an opening, a ‘hole’, it is through this hole that gods descend to earth and the dead to the subterranean regions; its through the same hole that the soul of the shaman in ecstasy can fly up or down in the corner of his celestial and infernal journeys” (Eliade, 1974, p259). The intention for the journey must be set before the shaman goes into trance. The outcome of the journey is open and there should be no attachment to whatever might happen along the way.

For each person the landscape of each world (upper, lower, middle) is different, but the texture or quality of experience is the same (Harner, 1990, Ingerman, 1991). The more often these places are visited the more detail appears, for example, dwellings or elements of nature (rocks, waterfalls, etc) that were not there before, may appear depending on the journey’s intention (Harner, 1990, Ingerman, 1991). Traditional axis mundi’s include trees with large holes in them, caves or a hole in the ground, even a waterfall. As Western society embraces shamanism, this list includes elevators, computers, even stepping through a television or a cinema screen. The main characteristic required for an axis mundi is that it must exist in this world (Buxton, 2009). Eliade (1974) published images of Mandela’s showing portals into the spirit world used by different tribes. “The tree, stretching above and below, is perhaps the most familiar symbol in the shamanic cosmos, and it is the prime avenue on which many journeys and crucial transactions are made by the shaman healer” (TePaske, 1997, p26).

Most shaman, once they get to the lower world, will encounter a spirit guide with whom they form a relationship (Harner, 1990). Different guides appear for different people, or perhaps they are the same guide in different guises (Harner, 1990). Information can be obtained from the guide to help heal the client.

The shamanic journey is not a dream, it is not made up, it is something that really happens in a non-ordinary reality. This is one of the most difficult pieces to learn in the work, and modern shamans living in westernised society find to do this work clearly they must abandon their ego, have it step out of the way, so that they do not “make up” their journeys

but are instead conscious and open to anything that may happen, again having no attachment to the outcome. (Heart, 1996; Villoldo, 2000, Harner, 1990, Ingerman, 1991 plus many more). It would be easy to travel to the lower world, ask what the client needs and be told exactly what we want to hear by our own inner voices, but that's no good to anyone. The shaman must be grounded and centred in order to journey without his/her own inner voices getting in the way (Ingerman, 1991).

Journeying with Clients

There are many possible ways to use the Shamanic Journey in a practice with clients. The most established techniques using non-hallucinogenic methods for Western society were developed by Michael Harner and Sandra Ingerman through the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. These are the ones I will describe here.

After an interview with the client, the intention for the shaman's journey is agreed with the client. The shaman and the client lie down on the floor; the use of pillows for comfort and blankets to lie on is permitted. Sometimes there is a third party involved, a drummer, who will drum softly and constantly, or in place of this a drumming tape can be used. The clients' "job" is to relax, the shaman's is to travel to non-ordinary reality and bring back whatever knowledge, healing energy or imagery that is gifted to them (Ingerman, 1991).

The shaman's journey is mythic, symbolic. It can be terrifying, involving complete dismemberment, where the body is attacked by ravens, eyes pecked out, stomachs slashed open, limbs torn off. It can also be beautiful, ancestors can come and talk, animals help and flowers provide healing. There is regeneration and healing involved, new eyes being gifted which can see new things, new stronger arms which can contain more, stronger stomachs, a rebirth of a new being. (Ingerman, 1991; Heaven, 2001; Harner, 1990 and many more)

After the journey is complete, the shaman holds in their hand (or in a crystal) a new energy direct from this landscape to be integrated into to their client's soul energy. This energy can take the form of a power animal or a spirit guide, the identity of which is shared with the

client afterwards. The energy is blown directly into the client's body, first into their heart, and second into the crown of their head (Ingerman, 1991; Villoldo, 2000, and many others). There is also a message, a symbol, an image that comes with this new energy to explain or to place the new energy into context. After the energy is given, both parties gently sit up and when able, resume the interview process where the shaman recounts the journey to the client without embellishment or interpretation.

In the process of what is called "Shamanic Counselling", the shaman teaches the client how to journey so they can do it themselves. Discussion occurs afterwards of how to work with what came up - by accepting it for what it is, an image, a symbol, an emotion. It's completely different to dreamwork as created by Freud, in that the images are not interpreted nor seen to be parts of the self, but taken at face value. Clients are encouraged to write down their journeys because if something is immediately clear, it may become clear over time (Harner, 1990, Ingerman, 1991, Buxton, 2009)

Results of the Journey

New information is always valuable to clients when they are in emotional turmoil, and this is mainly what results from a shaman going on a journey (Ingerman, 1991, Harner 1990). Epiphanies happen quickly through symbolic image work and trauma is easier to let go of, as the client trusts and feels held by spirit guides and the process of the work (Ingerman, 1991). Unlike counselling, the client can bring their spirit guide or power animal home with them. They are invited to communicate with their power animal directly in their own time, and encouraged to involve their power animal in a ritual or ceremony to further cement the relationship. Clients find the new gifted energy from the spirit world holds them between sessions and is an invaluable support to them as they integrate it into their soul energy and become transformed (Gagan, 1988, Ingerman, 1991, Estes, 1992, Shaffer, 1997).

Soul Retrieval

It's common for victims of a trauma such as rape to have had an out-of-body experience, where they fly out of their bodies and watch it happening from above. This is a survival mechanism. As trauma is subjective we can also lose pieces of our "selves" for seemingly much less dramatic things, such as being screamed at, falling off a bike, witnessing violence, or even during a happy moment when things are overwhelming (Ingerman, 1991). In order to survive the event without a total breakdown, part of us may need to leave.

"Contemporary psychology, like shamanism, recognises that parts of the self can become separated, leaving the individual estranged from his or her essential self. Many current therapies understand that if trauma is too severe, parts of the vital feeling self will split off to lessen the impact of the trauma" (Ingerman, S. 1991, p19). This is also known as disassociation or splitting, and is well documented in psychiatry as it can lead to psychopathological disorders (Collins, 2004).

Shamans believe that the parts of us that leave are composed of pieces of our vital life force energy. These lost pieces of soul energy, or soul parts, may come back into the body naturally and gradually over time, however, it doesn't always happen, almost as if part of the soul energy does not trust or feel safe in the body and would rather stay away. Shamans believe that these soul parts can be retrieved from wherever they reside, and be integrated back into the body, no matter how long ago the trauma may have been (Ingerman, 1991).

According to Shamanic Mythology, over a lifetime, many pieces of soul energy can disappear from our energy bodies. What is left behind, may leave us feeling incomplete and not quite connected to the world, not quite in our body (Ingerman 1991, Villoldo, 2000, plus many others). Interestingly, not feeling purposeful in life, not feeling a connection to the world, is a common reason for people to go to a psychotherapist. People can be in psychotherapy for years trying to reclaim parts of themselves that left during a trauma (Ingerman 1991 and many others). "In modern times, psychology has provided our primary model for addressing the painful sense of incompleteness and disconnection that many of

us experience. We may spend years in therapy or self-help groups trying to uncover traumas and to become whole. Experience has shown me that psychotherapy works only on the parts of us that are home” (Ingerman, S. 1991, p12)

By using the shamanic journey with the intention of locating the split-off parts of their client’s soul energy, shamans can reclaim their clients lost soul parts in a few sessions. The client’s job is then to integrate the newfound energy back into their soul energy field using similar methods as already described for gifted energy (Harner 1990, Ingerman, 1991, Villoldo 2000 plus many others).

A Soul Retrieval Journey may be trickier than a standard journey because shamans have to seek, find and sometimes trap the missing soul part and bring it back. Negotiation may be required as the soul part originally did not feel safe returning to the body, so the shaman may need to convince this energy that it is now safe to return (Ingerman, 1991). The client has to take responsibility for the new soul part by tending to it, nurturing it and healing it as it integrates back into the whole. Documented results from one single session are so powerful that people have had instant healings, diseased bodies have become healthy again and people who don’t feel connected to life begin to live again (Ingerman, 1991).

“...from a psychotherapist turned shaman “It has surprised me how many of my clients have declared their understanding of soul loss immediately, that they understand that they have lost some of their soul and that they need to get it back in order to be complete.After a soul retrieval, one woman realises she has chosen the wrong career as a nurse and would rather work in the business world... another woman remembers being sexually abused, a fourth becomes able to see how her mother psychically terrorised her and starts to work with that issue.” (Ingerman, S. 1991, pp132-133)

Soul retrieval is a core practice of shamanism, different techniques may exist around the world but the intention and the outcome is the same (Eliade, 1964, Villoldo, 2000). Shamans also believe that as well as losing soul parts due to trauma, people have the power to steal soul parts from others either on purpose or unknowingly, through the soul energy connections formed in relationship. There, another journey may be necessary to that person

to retrieve the part, or negotiation in ordinary reality is required for the part to be returned safely and consciously by the “soul thief” (Ingerman, 1991).

Psychology and Shamanism - Oil and Water?

There is much material here which may be hard for the classically trained psychotherapist to take in without having first-hand experience. Psychotherapists come from a science background, they use facts and figures, they require proof, they have established empirical systems which are the building blocks of accepted practice. Shamanism, on the other hand is spiritual, based on a system of faith, and the only way to truly prove it works is through experience.

Psychologists are wary of journeying and soul retrieval as accurate methods which bring real results. “From the point of view of psychology, shamanism works with some surprising metaphysical assumptions. The soul or quantum of psychic energy that has been lost is a distinct, recognizable entity that can be found and recovered by a second individual..... At first sight, this shamanic perspective seems to go far beyond the psychological. Its success, furthermore, seems to demonstrate its accuracy. No wonder shamanism and psychology tend to be suspicious of one another.” (Haule, 1997)

I believe however, that shamanism and psychotherapy have links, and they can be woven together to make a very powerful healing practice. Contact me to find out how!

If you have downloaded this paper from my website and are considering having a shamanic healing, feel free to contact me on abby@abby-wynne.com with any questions you may still have, or to make an appointment.

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