

# Shamanism – Part 1

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## Introduction and Influence

The term “shaman” is apparently a derivative of the vedic<sup>1</sup> *sram*, meaning “to heat oneself or practice austerities.”

Shamanism is, in some form, indigenous to nearly all cultures. However, in technologically advanced Western nations, the influence of Christian belief, science, and rationalism has suppressed or muted its development, at least until recently. Today, shamanism is making a significant resurgence.

*Reader’s Digest* says of shamanistic healing methods that “these alternate systems merit our attention,” and yet it realizes that the purpose of the shaman is to “mediate between the ordinary world and the world of the spirits.”<sup>2</sup> A number of periodicals (e.g., *Shaman’s Drum*) and organizations (e.g., “Shaman Pharmaceuticals” in California) now promote shamanism in sundry ways. For example, *Shaman’s Drum* combines accounts of contemporary experiential and experimental shamanism and related practices (e.g., voodoo) as well as historic anthropological reports, and is a clearinghouse of sorts for dozens of shamanistically oriented enterprises.

Several organizations seek to integrate shamanism with contemporary American life. These include Shamanic Journey Counseling in Oakland, California; the Center for Shamanistic Studies in Norwalk, Connecticut; the Church of Loving Hands in Eureka, California; Four Winds Circle in Mill Valley, California; Hawaiian Shaman Training in Santa Monica, California; and Transformative Arts Institute in Albany, California.

In addition, literally thousands of “vision quests”—shamanic wilderness retreats conducted by Native Americans—have introduced shamanistic concepts and practices to untold numbers of teens and adults. “The most famous method of acquiring a guardian spirit is the vision quest or vigil conducted in a solitary wilderness location, as among the Plains tribes of North America.”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the country, the renewed interest in Native American cultural and religious life is introducing aspects of shamanism to thousands of adults, and even to children. (Over 500 federally recognized Native American communities now exist.) One example is the “As the Indians Lived” day camps that are held in

various places to teach children ages 6-15 the traditions and culture of Native Americans. Such camps are usually taught by Indians or sometimes even by shamans themselves. One camp in Chattanooga, Tennessee, was led by “Flaming Warrior” (Michael Ziegler) of the Lakota Sioux Nation.

Despite its primitive, animistic nature, the direct and indirect influence of shamanism is significant in many areas of modern American culture.<sup>4</sup> Veteran spiritual counterfeits researcher Brooks Alexander comments, “A variety of shamanistic forms and images pervades contemporary art, literature and music at all levels,”—especially rock music.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Robert S. Ellwood of the University of Southern California is a well-known authority on the resurgence of new religions and cults in America. He points out there are “striking parallels” between modern cults and shamanism and suggests that the modern revival of scores of new cults “could almost be called a modern resurgence of shamanism.”<sup>6</sup> Many of the founders of these new religions experienced a type of shaman initiation in their quest for the occult empowerment, which granted them the spiritual authority and charisma necessary to institute and lead the new religion. Our detailed research into some two dozen Eastern gurus repeatedly uncovered shamanistic motifs.<sup>7</sup>

Shamanistic techniques are also being incorporated into segments of modern psychotherapy.<sup>8</sup> Some people have suggested that shamanism has “a crucial role to play in preventive psychiatry.”<sup>9</sup> Even the National Institute of Mental Health and other U.S. government agencies occasionally award grants “to finance the training” of shamans.<sup>10</sup> In *Inner Work*, Jungian analyst Robert Johnson, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo, suggests the importance of shamanism for psychological self-insight:

We have begun to rediscover [shamanistic] ritual as a natural human tool for connecting to our inner selves, focusing and refining our religious insights, and constellating psychological energy.... Jung anticipated this new awareness decades ago when he demonstrated that ritual and ceremony are important avenues to the unconscious.... Without thinking about it in psychological terms, ancient and primitive cultures have always understood instinctively that ritual had a true function in their psychic lives. They understood ritual as a set of formal acts that brought them into immediate contact with the gods.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, shamanism is also influencing some segments of the church.<sup>12</sup> Many Native American shamans were formerly active in Protestant or Catholic churches. After conversion to their birth religion, they now seek to “enlighten” the churches. Other shamans have visions of “Jesus” and believe that their ministry is to be directed toward Christians. Still others combine elements of Christianity with shamanism.<sup>13</sup> To varying degrees, some ministers, theologians, and psychologists of a Christian persuasion variously endorse shamanism. In *The Christian and the Supernatural*, Morton Kelsey, a Jungian analyst and Episcopal priest associated with the charismatic movement, argues that Jesus and His true dis-

ciples were either shamans or exercised the power of shamans.<sup>14</sup> Jungian therapist and Christian author John A. Sanford also argues that shamanistic motifs were common among the Old Testament prophets and that Jesus was a shaman. Sanford believes shamanism is a legitimate form of spiritual healing.<sup>15</sup>

Doran C. McCarty is Professor of Ministry at Golden Gate Baptist Theologian Seminary in Mill Valley, California. In his convocation address to the seminarians titled "The Making of the New Shaman," he spoke of the need for Christian ministers to adopt aspects of a more refined shamanism, and that this shamanism should become "a model for Christian ministry." Indeed, "The New Testament picture of Jesus was that of a shaman," and, "Seminaries now face the task of creating 'the new shaman,' who is to become 'the minister of Jesus Christ'!"<sup>16</sup>

(to be continued)

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> **Veda**— "Any of the oldest and most authoritative Hindu sacred texts, composed in Sanskrit and gathered into four collections." *American Heritage Dictionary*

<sup>2</sup> Alma Guinness, ed., Reader's Digest Association, *Family Guide to Natural Medicine: How to Stay Healthy the Natural Way* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1993), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 1986), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Dave Hunt, *The Sorcerer's New Apprentice* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Brooks Alexander, "A Generation of Wizards: Shamanism and Contemporary Culture," *SCP Journal*, Winter 1984, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> John Weldon, "Eastern Gurus in a Western Milieu: A Critique from the Perspective of Biblical Revelation," Ph.D. dissertation, Pacific College of Graduate Studies, Melbourne, Australia, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Raymond J. Corsini, ed., *Handbook of Innovative Therapies* (New York: John Wiley, 1981); Alberto Villoldo and Stanley Krippner, *Healing States: A Journey into the World of Spiritual Healing and Shamanism* (New York: Fireside/Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1987), p. 200; I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1975), pp. 197-199; Larry G. Peters, "An Experiential Study of Napalese Shamanism," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1981, pp. 1-26.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> e.g., Villoldo and Krippner, *Healing States*, p. 200.

<sup>11</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 101,103.

<sup>12</sup> Hunt, *The Sorcerer's New Apprentice*.

<sup>13</sup> *Shaman's Drum*, Spring 1986, p. 47; Fall 1985, pp. 21, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Morton T. Kelsey, *The Christian and the Supernatural* (Minneapolis, MN: Ausburg Publishing House, 1976), pp. 16-17, 69, 92-95.

<sup>15</sup> Rudolf Steiner, "How We Can Help Our Dead," *The Christian Community Journal*, vol. 7, 1953, p. 48; Rudolf Steiner, lecture, "The Dead Are with Us," London, 1945, pp. 75, 80-81.

<sup>16</sup> Doran C. McCarty, "The Making of the New Shaman," photocopy of lecture transcript given Feb. 6, 1986, pp. 5-6, 25-28.