

Shamanism – Part 2

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Introduction and Influence (con't)

Although many people are unaware of the fact, many practices of the New Age Movement and of New Age medicine are shamanistic in nature. Shamanism, both traditional and modern, involves such practices as:

- meditation and visualization
- deliberately cultivating altered states of consciousness, trance, and out-of-body experiences
- contact with the spirit world
- spirit-possession
- psychic-spiritistic healing
- dream work
- crystal work
- certain aspects of psychotherapy
- occult ritual
- sensory stimulation or deprivation
- body work methods
- hypnosis¹

In addition, shamanism has influenced, or is part of a significant number of, religious traditions which are, to degrees, experiencing revival in America. This includes various forms of witchcraft, voodoo, Tibetan Buddhism, and Hindu Tantrism.² Although shamanism, Eastern religion, and witchcraft are distinct categories, there is nevertheless a strong correlation between them—a fact admitted to by anthropologists, shamans, witches, and gurus. Consider that ancient pagan nature worship and witchcraft practices “were essentially shamanistic.”³ “Anthropologists with cross-cultural information on shamanistic health practices have concluded the wise women (witches) were acting within the long-standing pagan tradition of European tribes whose practices were essentially shamanistic.”⁴ And, “The ancient shamanic traditions of the West African peoples are the source of many of the practices and beliefs of Lucumi, Santaria,

Condumbe, Umbanada, Haitian Voodoo, and other New World spiritist traditions.”⁵ The relationship between witchcraft on the one hand and yoga and other Eastern practices on the other is noted by Mircea Eliade in his “Observations on European Witchcraft”:

As a matter of fact, all the features associated with European witches are—with the exception of Satan and the Sabbath—claimed also by Indo-Tibetan yogis and magicians. They too are supposed to fly through the air, render themselves invisible, kill at a distance, master demons and ghosts, and so on. Moreover, some of these eccentric Indian sectarians boast that they break all the religious taboos and social rules: that they practice human sacrifice, cannibalism, and all manner of orgies, including incestuous intercourse, and that they eat excrement, nauseating animals, and devour human corpses. In other words, they proudly claim all the crimes and horrible ceremonies cited *ad nauseam* in the western European witch trials.⁶

If much witchcraft practice is “essentially” shamanistic, then it should not surprise us that the practice of many Eastern yogis and gurus—who claim “all the features associated with European witches”—would bear marked resemblance to shamanistic practices as well. There is a closer relationship between Eastern gurus, psychic surgeons, black magicians, witches, and shamans than many people realize. For example, the spirit possession, temporary insanity, kundalini arousal, bizarre animal sounds and grunts, and occult transfer of energy found among magicians, voodooists and Hindu and Buddhist gurus are all found among the shamans as well. In the latter instance, “[the shaman] Matsuwa... touched his prayer feathers to objects that had become infused with life energy force (*kupuri*) and transferred the precious substance to those who were in need of it, a transmission similar to the communication of shakti between Hindu guru and disciple.”⁷ Harner points out that in dancing or “exercising” their guardian spirits (to supposedly keep them happy) shamans are transformed into the animal, making its own movements and noises:

Shamans, in dancing their guardian animal spirits, commonly not only make the movements of the power animals but also the sounds. In Siberia, native North and South America and elsewhere, shamans make bird calls and the cries, growls, and other sounds of their animal powers when experiencing their transformations.⁸

Shamanism is not only pervasive in pagan religion, it is increasingly found even in scientific circles. Today there are literally hundreds and possibly thousands of what can be termed “shaman scientists”—men and women in a variety of scientific disciplines who are employing shamanism or shamanistic methods as forms of personal transformation or enlightenment and incorporating shamanistic techniques into their professions. The eminent scientist John Lilly, famous for his research with dolphins, is one of many illustrations.⁹ A number of universities have practicing shamans as professors, such as Robert Lake with Humboldt State University, Dr. Albert Villoldo of San Francisco State University, and Dr.

Michael Harner at New York's New School for Social Research. Increasingly today, anthropologists and anthropology professors are turning to shamanism, and in the process converting some of their students to it.¹⁰ Anthropologist Dr. William S. Lyon, a shaman apprentice who works closely with the well-known shaman Wallace Black Elk, has "a particular interest in the incorporation of Native American values into contemporary educational systems."¹¹

In addition, converts to shamanism usually become ardent promoters of spiritism in the national culture. Examples include Laeh Garfield, coauthor of *Companions in Spirit: A Guide to Working with Your Spirit Helpers*, and psychologist Albert Villoldo, coauthor of *Realms of Healing and Healing States*, a text about shaman healing. Well-known shamans like Carlos Castaneda, Rolling Thunder, Sun Bear, and shamaness-vooodooist (Yoruba Lucumi) Luisah Teish, author of the spirit-written *Jambalaya: A Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*,¹² are often speakers or lecturers at universities and colleges around the country.¹³

In the field of modern literature (and cinema¹⁴), we also discover the impact of shamanism. Hyemeyohsts Storm's popular *Seven Arrows* has allegedly "done more than most to introduce shamanic techniques in a way that is entertaining, responsible, clear and usable in contemporary life."¹⁵

The many books of influential American shamans such as Carlos Castaneda and Lynn Andrews have remained on national bestseller lists for many months at a time.¹⁶ Castaneda's own journey into shamanism began when he was an anthropology student. His subsequent tutelage by a Mexican sorcerer named Don Juan is a story known to millions. Proof of his popularity can be seen in the fact that his books have been read by well over ten million people. Among his books are *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*; *Journey to Ixtlan*; *Tales of Power*; *A Separate Reality*; *The Eagle's Gift*; *The Fire Within*; *The Second Ring of Power*; *A Way of Dreaming*.

Castaneda is not alone. A minority of anthropologists and other scientific professionals, who initially sought only to study shamanic culture academically, have been converted to shamanism. For example, Mike Plotkin was a botanist who went to study plants in the Amazon. In *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice*, he tells how he became enthralled with shamanism as a result of the shaman's "expertise" with the medicinal properties of certain plants and, as a result, "logically" converted to shamanism.

Lynn Andrews is one of the feminine counterparts to Carlos Castaneda. She has chronicled her own modern shamanistic journeys with Native Americans. Like anthropologist Castaneda, it began innocently enough: She was a simple art dealer looking for a sacred Indian marriage basket. However, that innocent search led her deeper and deeper into shamanism until today she is a leading U.S. recruiter, along with Michael Harner (*The Way of the Shaman*), Taisha Abelar (*The Sorcerer's Crossing*), Castaneda, and others.

Andrews is recasting the sorcery of Native American shamanism specifically

for modern American consumption, especially feminism, and characteristically doing it under “orders” from her spirit guides. In correlating a radical feminist spirituality, already saturated with witchcraft and neo-paganism, to shamanistic motifs and power, her place as a leader within the American feminist tradition seems assured. She states that her books “stress the ancient [occult] powers of woman.”¹⁷ Several of her books have also achieved sustained recognition on *The New York Times* bestseller list (*Jaguar Woman*, *Medicine Woman*, *Star Woman*, *Flight of the Seventh Moon*).

And the connection to radical feminism and shamanism is noted by many others as well. Shamaness Vicki Noble is described as “a healer working with snake power for the healing and empowerment of women” (shades of the Garden incident?). She states, “The current interest in and attraction to shamanism runs parallel to the emergence of a feminist spirituality.”¹⁸

Then there are other indicators of the influence of shamanism. A number of journals, such as *Shaman’s Drum: The Journal of Experiential Shamanism*, have sprung up and are gaining a respectable following. This is somewhat surprising because articles in these journals often reveal the truly dangerous nature of shamanistic practices.¹⁹ Also, many states around the country offer “workshops” on shamanism for a variety of purposes, especially to teach people how to contact their spirit helpers.²⁰

Notes

¹ Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 1986); Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979); I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1975); Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

² *Shaman’s Drum*, Fall, 1985, pp. 11, 15, 29, 40-41; Spring 1986, p. 42; Winter 1985, p. 22; Brooks Alexander, “Shamanism in Two Cultures: Tantric Yoga in India and Tibet,” *SCP Journal*, Winter 1984.

³ cf. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, p. 221.

⁴ Jeanne Achterberg, *Imagery in Healing: Shamanism and Modern Medicine* (Boston, MA: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1985), p. 61.

⁵ *Shaman’s Drum* brochure advertising a two-day workshop on “Afro-American and West African Shamanism and Spiritualism,” at the University of California, Berkeley, University YWCA, Berkeley, CA, September 6-7, n.d.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 71.

⁷ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, p. 21; cf. Timothy White, “An Interview with Luisah Tesh, Daughter of Oshun,” *Shaman’s Drum*, Spring 1986, p. 42.

⁸ Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, p. 80.

⁹ John Lilly, *The Scientist: A Novel Autobiography* (NY: J. B. Lippencott, 1978); cf. 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), pp. 198-201; Larry G. Peters, “An Experiential Study of Nepalese Shamanism,” *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1981, pp. 1-26.

¹⁰ *Shaman’s Drum*, Spring 1986, p. 7, and Fall 1985, p. 23.

¹¹ *Shaman’s Drum* brochure advertising a workshop with Wallace Black Elk and William S. Lyon at Rainbow Ranch, CA, August 1-3, n.d.

- ¹² White, "An Interview with Luisah Tesh." p. 43.
- ¹³ Alan Morvay, "An Interview with Sun Bear," *Shaman's Drum*, Winter, 1985, p. 20; Jim Swan, "Rolling Thunder at Work," *Shaman's Drum*, Winter, 1985, p. 40.
- ¹⁴ *Shaman's Drum*, Winter 1985, pp. 40, 49; Fall 1985, pp. 30-31, 43.
- ¹⁵ Hal Zina Bennett, *Inner Guides, Visions, Dreams and Dr. Einstein* (Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1986), p. 162.
- ¹⁶ Carlos Castaneda's books include: *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge; Journey to Ixtlan; Tales of Power; A Separate Reality* (New York: Simon and Schuster/Touchstone); Lynn Andrews, *Jaguar Woman and the Wisdom of the Butterfly Tree* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986); Lynn Andrews, *Star Woman* (New York: Warner, 1986).
- ¹⁷ Andrews, *Jaguar Woman*, p. IX.
- ¹⁸ Vicki Noble, "Female Blood Roots of Shamanism," *Shaman's Drum*, Spring 1986, p. 20.
- ¹⁹ E.g. articles in *Shaman's Drum*: Matthew Bronson, "Brazilian Spiritistic Healers" (Winter 1986, pp. 23-28); Knud Rasmussen, "The Shaman's Magical Drum," (Summer 1985, pp. 18-24); Frena Bloomfield, "Asking for Rice: The Way of the Chinese Healer" (Summer 1985, pp. 33-37); Naomi Steinfield, "Surviving the Chaos of Something Extraordinary" (Spring 1986, pp. 22-27).
- ²⁰ Every issue of *Shaman's Drum* lists a "Resources Directory," with numerous workshops, retreats, shaman centers, shaman counseling, etc.; Brooks Alexander, "A Generation of Wizards: Shamanism and Contemporary Culture," *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Special Collections Journal*, Berkeley, CA: Winter 1984, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 27.