

# Shamanism – Part 4

by John Ankerberg, John Weldon

## Characteristics

First of all, what exactly is a shaman? A shaman is a religious leader who usually functions in an animistic culture to contact the spirit world in order to be empowered by it. He is expected to protect the tribe, cure illness, predict the future (divination), and offer practical advice. Initially, certain occult rituals are prescribed for the shaman initiate, which culminate in spirit possession and the resulting empowerment for whatever tasks may be at hand.

Throughout the world, shamanistic practices and experiences are highly uniform. In North and South America, Australia, Africa, and Asia, the shaman functions in a similar fashion, using the same techniques, achieving the same results. Anthropologists have long recognized this “remarkable” worldwide consistency of shamanism.

Michael Harner received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley and has been a visiting professor at Columbia, Berkeley, and Yale. He is described as “an authentic white shaman” and teaches anthropology courses in the graduate faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York. Founder of the Center for Shamanistic Studies and currently chairman of the anthropology section of the prestigious New York Academy of Sciences, Harner observes,

One of the remarkable things about shamanic assumptions and methods is that they are very similar in widely separated and remote parts of the planet.... [O]ne anthropologist notes: “Wherever shamanism is still encountered today, whether in Asia, Australia, Africa, or North and South America, the shaman functions fundamentally in much the same way and with similar techniques....<sup>1</sup>

Following are some common characteristics or features of shamanism.

- The shaman works in darkness.
- The shaman must enter a trance state in order to “control” the spirit world and function effectively. The shaman employs specific methods for entering this trance state, or altered state of consciousness, which is necessary to contact the spirits. Two of the more common methods are ritual dancing with drum music or ingesting hallucinogenic drugs, although visualization, self-hypnosis,

dream work, and other methods will also suffice.<sup>2</sup>

- The shaman employs “spirit flight” or out-of-the-body travels, into the spirit world, the “upper,” “lower,” and other occult realms. He enters these worlds as part of his initiation and regular occult work.
- The shaman is equally proficient in the practice of “good” or evil, e.g., “healing” or cursing work (“white” or black magic<sup>3</sup>).
- The power the shaman claims to use is either that given by the spirits themselves, or a force conceptually differentiated from the spirits but which is indistinguishable from them. And either may be said to be spiritistic manipulations of energy. Notable similarities exist between the power the shaman uses and that of many New Age energy concepts, such as *chi*, *mana*, *kundalini*, *kupurr*<sup>4</sup>, and *prana*.

*Mana* represents a supernatural impersonal power, also present in today’s so-called primitive religions; the *Manitou* of the Algonquins, *wakonda* of the Sioux, *orenda* of the Iroquois—which could be appealed to for good or ill. The shaman or medicine man, by virtue of his special gifts and acquaintance with the supernatural world, was able to harness this force.<sup>5</sup>

- It is essential for the shaman to contact one or more (sometimes dozens or hundreds) spirit guides. These are often viewed as nature spirits of various types, such as the spirits of plants, animals, or inanimate objects. “Spirit helpers” related to plants are often used in “healing” and are distinguished from the more powerful “guardian spirits.” The latter are often a personal “power animal,” from which the shaman derives his psychic abilities, spiritual assistance, and “protection” from evil forces. Basically, the power animal becomes the shaman’s alter ego.<sup>6</sup>
- Shamans acknowledge that spirit possession supplies their magical powers. In other words, apart from the spirits, shamans are impotent. As Harner observes, “Whatever it is called, it is the fundamental source of power for the shaman’s functioning.... Without a guardian spirit, it is impossible to be a shaman, for the shaman must have this strong basic power source....”<sup>7</sup> In his impressive study and standard work on the subject, *Shamanism*, no less an authority than comparative religions expert Mircea Eliade points out, “All categories of shamans have their helping and tutelary spirits....”<sup>8</sup> Anthropologist I. M. Lewis says the shaman is one who “permanently incarnates these spirits” into his own body, and thus “the shaman’s body is a ‘placing’ or receptacle, for the spirits.”<sup>9</sup>
- The shaman experiences temporary or extended periods of mental illness similar to psychosis and schizophrenia; extended periods of acute physical suffering and torture are also common. I. M. Lewis is professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics and author of *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism*. He observes that, in all cases studied, those experiences constituting shaman initiation “are certainly viewed as dangerous, even terrifying, experiences or illnesses. Experience of [mental] disorder in some form is thus an essential feature in the recruitment of shamans.”<sup>10</sup>

How do shamans enter their strange vocation? As Eliade points out (in common with other forms of the occult), the most powerful shamans are produced either by heredity or election. The vocation is passed from generation to generation, creating a shamanic lineage from parents to children or, as we will see, the spirits personally choose the shaman such as during a traditional vision quest.

In Central and Northeast Asia the chief methods of recruiting shamans are: (1) heredity transmission of the shamanic profession and (2) spontaneous vocation ("call" or "election"). There are also cases of individuals who become shamans of their own free will.... But these "self-made" shamans are considered less powerful than those who inherited the profession or who obeyed the 'call' of the gods and spirits.<sup>11</sup>

And this situation appears true for other forms of the occult as well.<sup>12</sup>

If we were to summarize the essentials of shamanism, it would include at least four basic themes: 1) altered states of consciousness or trance, 2) spirit possession, 5) experiences of severe physical and mental illness, 4) spirit travel. Although these are not limited to shamanism and, collectively, are found in much occult practice, without them, no one can become a shaman.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 1986), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy White, "An Interview with Luisah Tesh, Daughter of Oshun," *Shaman's Drum*, Spring 1986, p. 42; Richard Dobson, Natasha Frazier, "Trance, Dreams and Shamanism," *Shaman's Drum*, Spring 1986, pp. 38-39, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 184

<sup>4</sup> Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), p. 21

<sup>5</sup> Walter Bromberg, *From Shaman to Psychotherapist* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery, 1975), p. 3; cf. Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 475.

<sup>6</sup> Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1975), p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>11</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> John Ankerberg, John Weldon, *The Coming Darkness: Confronting Occult Deception* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993), pp. 207-215.