

Shamanism – Part 5

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Dangers and Degradations

Shamanism is one of the most dangerous and potentially consequential of modern New Age practices. Anyone who reads the standard works on shamanism, such as those of perhaps the world's leading authority on the subject, Mircea Eliade,¹ or those of I. M. Lewis² and Joan Halifax,³ or the books of popularizers like “white” shamans, Michael Harner,⁴ Lynn Andrews,⁵ and Carlos Castaneda⁶ will soon discover the potentially savage hazards of such a path. Even many anthropologists who have investigated shamanism “scientifically” have paid a costly price in the process.⁷ Botanists, herbalists, and medical doctors likewise.

Horrors surrounding shaman initiations are common:

Tales of frightening initiations are not unusual... with visions of physical dismemberment and reconstruction being quite common....

The Salish shamanic initiation includes first a period of torture and deprivation: being clubbed, bitten, thrown about, immobilized, blindfolded, teased, starved. When the initiate “gets his [shamanic] song straight,” or the slate that is the mind is wiped clean, the guardian spirit or power animal appears [to possess the shaman].⁸

[Rinalik's] own initiation had been severe; she was hung up to some tent poles planted in the snow and left there for five days. It was midwinter, with intense cold and frequent blizzards, but she did not feel the cold, for the spirits protected her. When the five days were at an end, she was taken down and carried into the house, and Igjugarjuk was invited to shoot her, in order that she might attain to intimacy with the supernatural by visions of death.... Igjugarjuk asserted that he had shot her through the heart.... [Another student of Igjugarjuk, Aggjartoq] actually stood on the bottom of the lake with his head under water. He was left in this position for five days and when at last they hauled him up again, his clothes showed no sign of having been in the water at all and he himself had become a great wizard, having overcome death.⁹

Shamans also usually undergo terrifying symbolic experiences of death, while experiencing mystical initiation during spirit-flights.

The often terrifying descent by the shaman initiate into the underworld of

suffering and death may be represented [to him] by figurative dismemberment, disposal of all bodily fluids, scraping of the flesh from the bones, and removal of the eyes. Once the novice has been reduced to a skeleton and the bones cleansed and purified, the flesh may be distributed among the spirits of the various diseases that afflict those in the human community.¹⁰

Through such means the shaman is said to not only relinquish his fear of death but to gain the secrets to healing his fellow tribe members.

Other shamans have real-world experiences of being horribly maimed in various accidents as part of their initiation. Others are poisoned with snake venom or other substances. Some experience diseases such as smallpox, and a few report miraculous phenomena such as a ball of fire that comes down from heaven and strikes them senseless.¹¹ “Kundalini” arousal is also not infrequent. Some American shamans specialize in helping initiates deal with what is apparently shamanically induced kundalini difficulties, including psychoses.¹²

Because so many people are turning to shamanism, we think that stressing the dangers of this practice will help them reconsider their commitment and hinder the merely curious from future involvement. Suffice it to say that shamanism often involves the shaman in tremendous personal suffering and pain (magically, he often “dies” in the most horrible of torments), and that it often involves the shaman in demon possession, insanity, sexual perversion, and so on.¹³ Why anyone would consider shamanism or shamanistic initiation as *healthful*, spiritual or otherwise, is difficult to imagine.

Amorality

Obviously shamanism lacks moral standards. It is characteristically amoral, using the spirits for either good or evil purposes. As shamanistic counselor Natasha Frazier, director of Transformative Arts Institute points out,

There are four ways to use shamanic power—for healing, for manipulation, for acquisition and for malevolent action.... Manipulatory shamanism is [sic] to do with manipulating the environment for personal gain and without regard for the consequences. Malevolent shamanism is tied up with intentionally causing injury, illness or death and can be applied to people, places and the environment.¹⁴

In other words, the shaman is one who acquires knowledge of both good and evil spirits, often attempting either to use both or to bring both into “harmony”.¹⁵ The powerful Native American shaman, “Thunder Cloud,” for example, was known as both “a great healer and adept poisoner”.¹⁶ Like witches, some shamans, of course, claim to concentrate on “good” forces, while others deliberately use evil powers. Yet it is the amoral perspective in general that is part of what makes shamanism per se evil, regardless of any practitioner’s claim to use shamanism benevolently. In the end, the “good” and evil spirits and forces cannot logically be separated, and therefore *all* shamans must utilize a source of power that is as comfortable being used for evil purposes as allegedly for good ones.

In shaman training, “the forces of both light and dark [are] summoned”,¹⁷ and the very process of accepting shamanic power also involves “accepting the

ancient darkness”.¹⁸ As one initiate recalled:

Although I sat in the cave of light, my experience that night was very dark. At times I felt myself to be a channel through which all the destructive and entropic forces of the universe were flowing. [My shaman later] explained that the darker forces... in that evening’s work were seeking to restore balance in the circle, making themselves apparent to those able to perceive them.... While most of the group focused on the light... experiencing radiant visions of power animals or guides, three of us struggled with darkness. In this way the balance of the circle was maintained.¹⁹

Of course, any tradition, spirit, or power that is equally at home employing evil can never logically be considered good. To accept or employ evil as a necessity to supposedly “balance” the occult circle or spiritual world is not wise.

Sexual Immorality

As an illustration of sexual perversion, many shamans become androgynous, homosexual, or lesbian at the insistence of their spirit guides. In an age of world-wide AIDS, can anybody consider this sound advice? As in forms of monistic Hinduism, the rationale is allegedly to unify the “illusion” of opposites (good with evil, male with female, dark with light). But the result is perversion or even suicide. As the following illustration reveals, the source behind such degradation is the spirit world:

The dissolution of contraries—life and death, light and dark, male and female—and reconstitution of the fractured forms is one of the most consistent impulses in the initiation and transformation process as experienced by the shaman.... During mysteries of initiation such as those of shamanic election, androgyny can appear at two very significant moments in this sacred continuum: at its inception and at its termination.... Among Siberian peoples, androgynous shamans appear to be unusually prevalent. ... The spirit ally, or *ke’let*, demands that the young man become a “soft man being.” Many instances of suicide among adolescent shamans occurred as a result of their refusal to meet this requirement. Nonetheless, most neophytes complied in spite of their profound social and psychological ambivalence. The transformation process is heralded by the spirits guiding the young man to braid his hair like a woman’s. Next, the spirits, through dreams, prescribe women’s clothing for the young man.... The third stage of this initiation entails a more total feminization of the male shaman. The youth who is undergoing the process relinquishes his former male behaviors and activities and adopts the female role.... His spirits are guiding and teaching him the woman’s way. His mode of speech changes as well as his behavior, and on certain occasions, so does his body.... Even his physical character changes.... Generally speaking, he becomes a woman with the appearance of a man.... The “soft man” comes to experience himself sexually as a female. With the help of his spirit allies, he is able to attract the attention of eligible men, one of whom he chooses to be his husband. The two marry and live as a man and wife, often until death, performing their appropriate social and sexual roles.²⁰

In similar fashion, female shamans may become lesbians.²¹ We also find the horrible experiences of the demonic incubi and succubae or sex with male and

female demons.²²

Sexual perversions occur because the shaman is controlled by *evil* spirits from beginning to end.

The initial experience of possession, particularly, is often a disturbing, even traumatic experience.... Where the successor shows reluctance in assuming his onerous duties, the spirits remind him forcefully of his obligations by badgering him with trials and tribulations until he acknowledges defeat and accepts their insistent prodding.²³

Indeed, I. M. Lewis's description of a particular amoral class of spirits that shamans may associate with is actually descriptive of shamanic spirit guides in general.

It is I believe of the greatest interest and importance that these spirits are typically considered to be amoral; they have no direct moral significance. Full of spite and malice though they are, they are believed to strike entirely capriciously and without any grounds which can be referred to the moral character or conduct of their victim.²⁴

Once inside their host, the spirits have the capacity to produce either a "divine" ecstasy or horrible, demonic torment. Perhaps only the occasional spiritual ecstasy of the shaman can explain the willingness of some to enter such a horrible profession.²⁵ Here, the spirits will entice their hosts with intense mystical joy, which may make their infliction of torture more acceptable. Nevertheless, the spirits are capricious:

...These maligned pathogenic spirits are regarded as being extremely captious and capricious. They strike without rhyme or reason; or at least without any substantial cause which can be referred to social conduct. They are not concerned with man's behavior to man. They have no interest in defending the moral code of society.... [T]hey are always on the look-out for a convenient excuse to harass their victims, and they are inordinately sensitive to human encroachment. To step on one inadvertently, or otherwise unwittingly annoy it, is sufficient to so inflame the spirit's wrath that it attacks at once, possessing its trespasser, and making him ill or causing him misfortune.

... They show a special predilection for the weak and downtrodden,... indeed for all those whose circumstances are already so reduced as to make this additional burden seem a final, crushing, injustice.²⁶

Notes

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972); Mircea Eliade, *From Medicine Men to Muhammad* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

² I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1975).

³ Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979).

⁴ Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 1986).

⁵ Lynn Andrews books include: *Jaguar Woman* and *Medicine Woman* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986); *Star Woman* (New York: Warner, 1986).

- ⁶ Carlos Castaneda's books include: *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge; A Separate Reality; Journey to Ixtlan; Tales of Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster/Touchstone).
- ⁷ e.g., Larry G. Peters, "An Experiential Study of Nepalese Shamanism," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 13, no. 1, 1981, pp. 1-16.
- ⁸ Jeanne Archterberg, *Imagery in Healing: Shamanism and Modern Medicine* (Boston, MA: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1985), p. 22.
- ⁹ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, pp. 9-10.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹² Natasha Frazier, "A Model of Contemporary Shamanism," *Shaman's Drum*, Fall 1985, pp. 40-41, Natasha Frazier, "Shamanic Survival Skills," *Shaman's Drum*, Summer, 1985, p. 37.
- ¹³ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, pp. 7-27.
- ¹⁴ Frazier, "Shamanic Survival Skills," p. 37.
- ¹⁵ Albert Villoldo, "A Journey of Initiation of Don Edwardo Calderon," *Shaman's Drum*, Fall 1985, p. 20.
- ¹⁶ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, p. 175.
- ¹⁷ Villoldo, p. 22.
- ¹⁸ Debra Carroll, "Dancing on the Sword's Edge," *Shaman's Drum*, Fall 1985, p. 27.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.
- ²⁰ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, pp. 23-24.
- ²¹ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, p. 25.
- ²² Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 80; cf. Kurt Koch, *Christian Counselling and Occultism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publishers, pp. 162-164.
- ²³ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, p. 66.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ²⁵ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*, pp. 31-32; Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 108-109, 221.
- ²⁶ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, pp. 71-72.