

# Shamans Old and New



**M**ost of us, and I hope all of us, are aware of the seriousness of our human condition with regard to our disharmonious relationship to one another and to the environment. The signs are foreboding. We can no longer afford to remain behind our blindfolds with the hope that if we don't look at it the signs will go away. It *appears* that we are losing while on this journey. However, **if we believe that there is still hope**, we can listen to the voices of our tribal ancestors, who are lovingly urging and guiding us towards a harmonious coexistence with everything around us.

Tribal culture precedes civilization. The beginning of civilization is a stage of human cultural development when writing and keeping written records were attained, and it is also characterized by urbanization, larger populations, city-states, advanced technology, agriculture and complex social organizations. Living in 'pre-civilized' conditions, pure tribal cultures existed outside the civilized world even up to the 1970s. Today there is a resurgence of interest in the ancient ways of the shamans who explore mystical states to find solutions to problems. An increasing number of Westerners are learning to use many shamanic methods tested for thousands of years to access alternate dimensions of reality in order to make contact with sources of wisdom and power.

The word 'shaman' is an arbitrarily chosen word adopted from the language of the Tungus people of Siberia. The word describes a person who interacts directly with the spirit world for assistance to relieve the spiritual side of illness, to divine for information, to help escort the soul of the dead, or

to perform a variety of rituals and ceremonies for their community. Cross-culturally, shamans have taken on many roles such as healers, herbalists, priests, psychotherapists, mystics, storytellers, and even magicians, but most importantly they maintain their community's health and well-being. The practice of the shaman as a healer is no longer exclusive to tribal societies. During the advancement of civilizations some shamanic elements have been absorbed by religious practices, and vice versa. It is also true that there are many alternative healing practices where shamanic elements are present but it is not necessarily shamanism. Today, religion and medical science are separate and independent branches of the shaman's original role.

Shamans are individuals who have the ability to alter their ordinary state of consciousness and to travel to other realms with the assistance of their spirit helpers, to bring back power to heal, wisdom to advise, or knowledge to guide. Shamans are travellers between realities and many worlds.

Modern practitioners of shamanism still use the same methods as our ancestor shamans did for finding and returning lost soul fragments, bringing back lost power, advice, guidance or knowledge. They may extract intrusions that cause localized illness, remove possessions that inflict emotional disturbance, or guide one, through rituals and ceremonies to assist the healing process. There is an increasing expression of interest in this ancient mode by the scientific community, so numerous experiments are being conducted to prove or disprove its validity. It is interesting to note that the results have been positive and it appears that shamanic methods are slowly reclaiming their rightful place in alternative approaches to health and healing.

Shamanism was born in ancient tribal societies. Many cultures, even today, still continue their ancient ways, while others lost due to the pressure of global political and religious expansion. We are grateful to those indigenous elders who kept the knowledge safely in silence until the

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right time arrived for its resurgence. Micheal Harner is instrumental in the revival of shamanism in the West, a Professor of Anthropology, who during his study of an indigenous tribe in the Upper Amazon experienced shamanic initiation. After studying many cultures he found an astonishing similarity in shamanic practices throughout the world. Eventually he established an institute dedicated to the study and teaching of core shamanism that embraces methods and practices common to all cultures. His teachings are non-culture specific. He claims, and has proven, that individuals can learn shamanic methods to use for themselves, or for assisting friends and relatives. Some people become gifted healers to assist others.

There are a good number of shamanic practitioners world-wide, including shamans belonging to indigenous societies. However, just being trained in shamanic methods is not an initiation to become one. Even today, a successful shaman is still chosen. A spirit appears usually unexpectedly, and offers healing power for the initiate. There are many cross-cultural examples that simply wishing, or studying for many years, will not guarantee that the shamanic gift is obtained. There are, however, many successful and dedicated shamanic practitioners today whose initiation into the profession is the same as it was thousands of years ago, and still are known only by their successes. They get clients by word-of-mouth, often have to be searched for far and wide, and they don't ring the bell when the hour is up. There is great hope that more and more people will recognize the validity of this ancient healing practice and offer the respect it so profoundly deserves.

In closing I would like to cite Michael Harner from his book, *The Way of the Shaman*, 1980, p.139:

“In shamanism there is ultimately no distinction between helping others and helping yourself. By helping others shamanically, one becomes more powerful, self-fulfilled, and joyous. Shamanism goes far beyond a primary self-concerned transcendence of ordinary reality. It is transcendence for a broader purpose, the helping of humankind. The enlightenment of shamanism is the ability to light up what others perceive as darkness, and thereby to *see* and to journey on behalf of a humanity that is perilously close to losing its spiritual connectedness with all its relatives, the plants and animals of this good Earth.”

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