



Shamanism

Introduction

Originating in the Tungus tribes of Siberia; the word shaman comes from the Russian *saman* meaning “one who sees in the dark”. Dating back at least thirty to forty thousand years, shamanism was the first spiritual practice of human kind.

Shamanism comes to us from our ancestors. It was both their ‘world view’ and their ‘what to do about it’ - their cosmology (the understanding of existence and the nature of reality), their spiritual practice and their healing modality. Shamanism is cross-cultural and similar in each tradition’s culture. The shamanic framework precedes all modern understanding and is what links us all. There are variations in the different cultures practices, and these are due to the differences in their experiences and connections with the specific nature around them, however the basics are the same.

In his book “Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy”, historian Mircea Eliade describes shamanism as a “technique” and “method of practice”; differentiating it from a religion or a system of faith. He defines shamanism as the basis of all spiritual traditions, its most distinctive feature being the shaman’s ability to journey to the other worlds in an altered state of consciousness.

There is much anthropological evidence to indicate that the first shamans were women. This is explored in depth in the wonderful book by Barbara Tedlock, “The Woman in the Shaman’s Body”. In *Shakti Woman*, Vicki Noble also has this to share about the research of Geoffrey Ashe, a noted British scholar of shamanism “*Ashe is very clear about one thing that especially interests me: He says that ancient shamanism was not an individual phenomenon but something that was practiced by the female group. And the power of the female group is biologically rooted in menstruation and the blood mysteries of birth*” (pg 13)

In her article, *Birthing as Shamanic Experience*, Leslene della-Madre explores this further, “*A shaman is one who flies between the worlds, and who has a foot in both worlds – that of the seen and unseen. When a woman bleeds, she enters the world of the unseen, the world of dreams, intuition and spirits.....With the female group bleeding together, the collective vision is deep and profound, with far reaching effects on the community. In matrifocal societies, it was probably true that tribal life was guided by the visions of women who bled together. Women accessing healing and wisdom in the unseen realms through their blood, in rhythm with the moon, together, was a primal shamanic art. And giving birth was also a primal shamanic art*”.

The Shaman of Old

The ancient shaman was in service to her community and was often ‘chosen’ by a significant life event that heralded her ability to travel between the worlds. This was commonly the recovery from a serious illness in which she would have otherwise been expected to die.



The shaman was the community healer, seer and gatekeeper between the worlds, the spiritual ceremonialist and often the midwife. She worked with herbs, dreams, symbols, ceremony, ritual, oracles and journeying in trance states to other realms for the purpose of healing and mediation for others. Nature was her guide; she understood the interconnectedness of all things.

“Shamanic practice seeks healing and wisdom from realms that overlap ours.” Gail Wood “The Shamanic Witch” p 3

The Shaman of New

In modern times, shamanism is practiced as a way into soul work, for soul crafting, and for accessing the wisdom of the soul. The soul, the individual soul, the group soul, is our essence and is accessible to all. Shamanism gives us ‘ways in’ to a deeper understanding of what is and ways to understand what we find there to bring back.

“(So) the work for contemporary shaman women is to learn to move, to act, and to do what our inner voices tell us we need to do, even if it seems socially inappropriate.” Vicki Noble “Shakti Woman” p 8

Basic concepts that underpin the modern practice of shamanism:

Everything is interconnected.

There is an essence that permeates everything.

Everything is in a constant state of change.

Changes occur in cycles and patterns; they are not random or accidental. (If you can’t see the pattern or how the change is connected to everything else, change your perspective.)

There is the seen realm and the unseen realm. The physical world and the spiritual world. These are two aspects of the one reality. There are separate laws that govern each. Violation of spiritual laws affects the physical world and violation of laws of the physical world affect the spiritual world. A balanced life is one that honours the laws of both of these dimensions.

Will and choice – volition is the doorway to the journey and change.

Guides and teachers appear.

No test will be given to the traveler who does not already have the strength to meet it. (“The Sacred Tree”)

Modern science also gives us proof of the shamanic framework.

From Gregg Braden’s “The Spontaneous Healing of Belief”:

“The universe, our world and our bodies are made of a shared field of energy that was scientifically proven in the 20th century and is now identified by names that include ‘the field’, the quantum hologram, the mind of God, nature’s mind and the Divine Matrix.”

“In the Divine Matrix, ‘things’ that have been connected physically and then separated act as if they are still linked, through a phenomenon known as entanglement.”

“The human DNA directly influences what happens in the Divine Matrix in a way that appears to defy the laws of time and space.”



“Human belief (and the feelings and emotions surrounding it) directly changes the DNA that affects what occurs in the Divine Matrix.”

“When we shift our beliefs about our bodies and our world, the Divine Matrix translates that change into the reality in our lives.”

Further things to remember in contemplating the application of shamanism in our modern world:

We are spiritual beings having a human experience.

We are on a life journey, toward wholeness.

Things are not good or bad, they just are.

We are habitual creatures; we thrive on routine and don't like change.

As women we are under the influence of the effects of the misogynistic tendencies of the patriarchal culture which has reigned for the last 5000 years.

Our own births determine how we 'do process' and all acts of creativity.

Our experiences of early childhood teach us how to love.

There's much more going on that we can see.

The present moment is the safest place to be.

We have an inner knowing about what is right for us and an inbuilt self healing mechanism

“The whole process of the female shaman is one of opening and becoming a larger vessel.” Vicki Noble “Shakti Woman p 108

Shamanic Cosmology

The shamanic world view sees the Earth as alive, and all beings, creatures, plants, matter, etc also as alive, with a spirit and part of the whole, the 'divine', the 'all that is'. The interconnectedness of everything is the basis of the 'structure' and shows us both the opportunity and the responsibility. Throughout and within the whole of existence and experience is a pattern and a weaving of the thread of the divine. This holds both mystery and power. The patterns that reveal themselves in our lives and our being-ness can be seen in the patterns of nature, the cycles, the structures of life and are often reflections, mirror images of what is around us.

We are the Weavers, We are the Web

The shamanic framework consists of 3 realms or worlds; the Lower Realm, the Middle Realm and the Upper Realm.

The Lower Realm is the place of animal spirits and helpers, spirit guides and guardians, power animals, the dead. It may also be called the Underworld. Journeying to the Lower Realm is done to find one's power animal, to recover lost power, and to find and retrieve parts and aspects of someone for the purpose of 'soul retrieval'. Soul retrieval is a process that involves initially identifying experiences in one's past (including past lives) when as a result of what happened, usually trauma – either physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual, or some or all of these – one 'leaves behind' or 'loses' part of oneself, part of one's soul. For example, women who have been sexually abused as children may 'lose' their childhood innocence and 'grow up' very fast. Soul



retrieval in that situation would involve finding and remembering her young self that she had abandoned or needed to leave behind and bringing her back into her present self in a loving, compassionate caring way. This may enable a reclaiming and a healing, and in fact a retrieval of part of her soul that was left behind back then.

The Middle Realm is both the reality in which we live and the spiritual parallel to it. We can access other parts and places of our 'ordinary' reality shamanically. We may do this to effect positive change in places that need that; investigate a situation in process – be 'a fly on the wall' so to speak. And we may access the magical spirit realm of the plants, creatures and minerals that also inhabit the Middle Realm as well as our Inner Goddess and Inner Shaman.

The Upper Realm is the place of archetypal knowledge and patterns, spirit guides, teachers, Gods and Goddesses, angels, 'the matrix of possibilities', and un-manifest potential. Journeying to the Upper Realm can be done to meet your teachers and various archetypes, for the purpose of learning, clarification, inspiration and insight. The shaman can make a visit to the Upper Realm to bring harmony and balance back to the Middle Realm.

The three realms are linked together by a vertical axis, the 'axis mundi,' or the 'World Tree' and can be easily accessed using the image of a tree, the Upper Realm as the branches and above, the Middle Realm as the trunk, the Lower Realm as the roots of the tree. We can also see this image in ourselves, with the Upper Realm above us, the Lower Realm below us and our presence in the Middle Realm.

The worlds or realms of the shaman are both actual and metaphoric and are accessible by everyone. The Shamanic Journey is an inner journey.

The Shaman

The shaman is the one who travels to the other realms to instigate healing for others, to get information, to give information and for the purpose of 'soul retrieval'. The shaman is in service. She accesses the other realms via an altered state of consciousness. This can be done in a trance state with the aid of the drum, (also known as the shaman's horse) that she rides, journeying to the other realms in her spirit form. This can also be done through meditation, dancing, singing, ingestion of various hallucinogenic plants and drugs and simple acts of will and intention.

The shaman, however is not the only one able to access the other realms. These are both within and around us all, part of our inner experience, and we access them often already.

The Shamanic Craftswoman

The Shamanic Craftswoman facilitates this inward journey for others and midwifes the transformation possible. To do this, she must be comfortable and experienced with the landscapes and possibilities of the shamanic journey in order to be 'with woman' (the meaning of the word midwife) in her inner and outer worlds.



The Shamanic Craftswoman understands and respects the inner shamanic journey and the process of a woman's life journey through her rites of passage. She guides the woman through her experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, mothering and menopause; helping her see the relevance of what happens and the lessons and gifts of the issues and situations that arise for her.

The Shamanic Craftswoman is best equipped to help the woman in this way if she has in turn brought this same level of consciousness to her own experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, mothering and menopause. Working from the premise of "Healer Heal Thyself", she must be present to her own journey, attending to her own practice of self awareness and be connected with the energy of the Earth and the wisdom of the cycles.

The Shamanic Craftswoman acts as a conduit, facilitating both her own and her 'client's' higher wisdom to come through. This process necessitates a self knowing and takes one to and through her own life journey thus far; the soul crafting experiences of her birth, early childhood and own rites of passage. It enables her to truly know her 'agenda'; which will show up as wounds that can be seen as healing and growth opportunities that her life journey is all about. Once a level of self knowing is attained one can more clearly discern fear from intuition, and more likely understand and accept what her inner voices are telling her. The shamanic cosmology enables this process through a mythic perspective that speaks to our soul. Shamanic practices transport us to the inner shamanic realms where we are able to find our story and piece ourselves back together.

Shamanic Practice

"Female shamanic practices are those methods and techniques that awaken our natural instincts and impulses and then ground us in our bodies so that we can act from within." Vicki Noble "Shakti Woman" p 65

Journeying
Creating and Conducting Ceremony
Holding Space
Intuitive Listening and Inquiry
Connecting with Guides, Teachers and Power Animals
Working with the Cycles
Soul Retrieval

Guide to Shamanic Journeying

Journeying to the beat of the drum is a simple and easy way to access the other realms. This can be done by listening to someone drumming either live or via a recording or by drumming for yourself (this takes some practice). The rhythm needs to be fast, about 180 beats per minute, and regular.

Scientific studies have shown that as we listen to a monotonous drum beat our brain waves slow down, and move from the normal state of consciousness (Beta state) into a deep meditative state (Alpha state) or even a deeper hypnotic state (Theta State). In these trance states we are free to enter



into the parallel universe of non-ordinary reality enabling us to have visions and access to the archetypal field of information.

You can choose to journey with a specific intention such as to meet your power animal, or simply to meet what is “there” for you at any given time. Journeying for others can be done in a variety of ways, the simplest method being to meet with your own guides and teachers and journey with what arises from your specific enquiry on their behalf.

Sometimes during a journey you may encounter a Being or Presence that you feel unsure of. If this happens, ask this entity “Are you for my highest good?” If they are not, they will disappear. If they are, they will stay and you can ask them a question, like “What are you here to show / tell me?”

If you know your power animal; it is customary to travel with her to the other realms each time you journey. She may guide you, assist you and be able to access further information during your encounters in the realm you visit. You may also shapeshift into your power animal for or during a journey.

To start your journey, create a vision in your mind of a favourite place in nature. Depending on which realm you intend to travel to (Lower, Middle or Upper), will decide which way you go from here.

To journey to the Lower Realm, the initial process is to ‘descend’ - down a hole in the earth, a tunnel or via a tree root.

To journey to the Upper Realm, you ‘ascend’, perhaps up a tall tree. Once you have reached the top there is generally a passage through clouds or a fog before arriving into the Upper Realm.

To journey to the Middle Realm, you may go inside your body or via a place in nature wherever the journey takes you.

Regardless of which realm you initially head off to and the original reason for which you have chosen to journey, you will always have the journey you need to have. In the shamanic world, the possibilities are endless and varied. There are no set rules or definites. Perhaps instead of visiting the Lower Realm, on the way there you suddenly find yourself in the Upper Realm. Or maybe you have set off to ask a question of your Power Animal and your Spirit Guide / Teacher arrives to share some wisdom instead. Flow with what happens and trust that whatever unfolds will be perfect; there will always be information there for you.

To return from your journey, it is important to retrace your steps back to your body into this world, so remember to go back up the tunnel or down the tree the same way you came.

Once back into your present moment awareness, it’s a good idea to immediately write your experience in your journal. Drawing or painting a picture can be very useful too. Grounding the experience in this way helps you remember and interpret later what happened in your journey.



Example Journey to Lower Realm

Drum Journey to consult / connect with your Power animal

Your power animal may come to you in a variety of ways. It is generally accepted that if 'it' shows itself three times within your journey to meet 'it' then that is the sign she has arrived. However it is always more important to listen to your inner knowing than rely on a count of viewings.

To begin, cleanse yourself of any negative energy. This can be done by smudging or through willful intention by speaking the words "I cleanse myself of all negative energies".

Lie down and cover yourself for warmth.

Be careful to not touch anyone else - you may go on the same journey if you do!

Relax; melt your body onto the surface you are lying on.

State your intention 3 times, "I am going to the Lower Realm to meet with my power animal"

Listen to, focus on the drum beat.

If you start thinking anything such as "gee that's loud" or "that's so fast" etc then simply bring your attention back to the drum beat, just like bringing your awareness back to your breath during meditation when you start thinking. It's your undistracted single pointed focus that is needed to create the Alpha brain waves required.

Go to a place in nature that you love.

Enter the Earth going downward; down a tree root, a tunnel etc.

Pay attention and notice what occurs.

Commune with your animal in whichever way you feel called. Be open to what she has to show or tell you.

If you are there to connect with your Power Animal for the first time, you may ask her to return home with you.

"As you wake back to this world, hold an image of the animal in your cupped hands, and with an indrawn breath, place the animal into your aura, at your heart." Gail Wood, The Shamanic Witch

When it is time to return from the journey, you will hear a call back through the change in the drumming rhythm. This should have been explained to you prior to starting.



As you return home, it is important to retrace your steps back to your body in this world, so go back up the tunnel or tree root via which you came.

Once back into your present moment awareness, wiggle your fingers and toes and take some deep breaths. Write down what you can remember in your journal.

Remember you can return to your journal writing again at any stage. Often you can recall more details later after you have written down the initial entry.

If you feel a bit shaky or faint, drink some water, splash some on your face and eat something. If you are still not feeling fully present and in your body then lie down on your belly on the earth and if necessary have someone shake a rattle all around you.

You can also journey to the Lower Realm to meet with the Dark Goddess, perhaps to consult with Her about certain aspects of your shadow or what resides in your inner depths yet to be seen and claimed.

The Lower Realm is also known as “the place of tests and challenges” (“The Shamanic Drum” by Michael Drake p26) and a journey there may unfold to include these kinds of opportunities. The Lower Realm “is a place for exploration of physical ailments, bodily issues, intuition, and psychic development.” (“The Shamanic Witch” by Gail Wood p 68) and so can also be journeyed to for information like this for yourself or others.

Journeying to other Realms and for other Purposes

The reasons to journey are many and varied. With intention you can travel to the specific Realms for specific purposes. Again, remember you will have the journey you ‘need’ to have. However your intention, spoken either out loud or to yourself three times at the beginning of your journey, will greatly influence the outcome.

In the Upper Realm you can journey to connect with your Guides and Teachers. When you pass through the fog or cloud barrier you will enter ‘another world’ where once you have established a connection with your Guides and Teachers you can meet and consult with them. Your Guides and Teachers may take a variety of forms, ranging from “deities, saints, angels, heroes, or admired people who have passed away.” (Gail Wood p 79). Sometimes they are visible, sometimes not. The wisdom of the Upper Realm is archetypal and spiritual in nature and concerning our “intellect, mind, feelings and emotions.” (Gail Wood p 78). Often a visit to the Upper Realm, consulting with your Teachers, can bring balance and harmony to your world.

Journeying to the Middle Realm, via a familiar place in nature, you can meet and connect with your Inner Shaman. He/ She can then accompany you on your further journeys as a spirit ally, and will be available to you at any time you need to access their wisdom or support.



You can journey into your own body, your womb, for example, to travel to the Middle Realm to meet your Inner Goddess - your inner Divine Feminine energy. She (that aspect of you) can be consulted on all matters and subjects concerning you at any time you need her.

During pregnancy, a Mother can journey to her womb to meet with her baby inside. This is a potent process and the connection formed often brings great healing.

Valuable tools and information for the labour and birth can be accessed by the mother as well as the baby's name and advice on who should be present at the birth.

When a woman feels connected to her baby, the birth process takes on a new level of meaning and a simplicity is offered to the mother's role as she "accompanies" her baby from her womb, through her vagina and into this world.

Journeying to her womb can become, for the mother, a regular practice during her pregnancy. This offers great preparation for labour and birth as both are best approached from a similar altered state of consciousness to that which is experienced during journeying. Within that altered state of consciousness, which is the blueprint for the birth process, there is less pain in labour, an inner knowing of how to best flow with what's happening, and a more relaxed mother.

Women planning pregnancy can journey to their womb to meet their 'soulbaby'. This can be deeply healing.