

**Subject:** Spiritual Human

**Article:** 5

## **Shamans of the World**

Doç. Dr. Haluk Berkmen

Shamanism is the oldest spiritual activity of the world. We can call it a fulltime activity, because shamans had several important duties in ancient times. They were healers, were able to bring messages from the spirits, soul retrievers and soul travelers. They could act as intermediaries between gods and humans and bring information about future events. Shamanism is thus a visionary approach to nature and the cosmos, accepting that humans, animals, plants and natural formations have a soul. The essential message of shamanism is that we should respect the sanctity of nature.

In early times, the physical and the metaphysical realms were intertwined. All natural phenomena, such as thunder and lightning, were the consequence of gods' wrath, which needed to be appeased. After storms or natural disasters shamans would journey spiritually to the realm of the gods and bring sacred information for the benefit of the society. Shamans were also expected to protect the society as well as the humans from the hostile influence of evil spirits. If such an evil attack happened the shaman was expected to cure the patient with the help of spiritual guides, which generally took the form of an ancestor or a helping spirit in the form of an animal.

Spirit guides are guardians or helpers, who are available when the shaman needs to call on their aid. Spirit guides are independent in their particular realm and are not automatically subject to the control of the shaman. Therefore, the shaman approaches them with awe and respect. Many shamans maintain that they can take the form and reflect the energy of their spirit guide. This is why many Asiatic shamans wear symbolic objects belonging to their power animal or helper spirit.

Shamanism is still practiced in many parts of the world. It is still an accepted activity among several African, Asiatic, Australian and American –northern as well as southern- clans and tribes. Below we see two Asiatic shamans in their traditional clothing. The shamanic drum is a special instrument that helps the shaman enter into a trance. During ceremonial rituals the shaman travels into a realm that is much larger and mysterious than the familiar world of daily reality. Dance and chants are part of such shamanic ceremonial rituals, which help the audience to enter in an ecstatic state and experience mystic visionary moments.



The drum has a special role in shamanism. For Asiatic shamans it is the vehicle, or the 'horse' that carries his soul to the other world. That other world can be the upper world of the gods or the lower world of the demons. The monotonous rhythm of the drum helps the shaman 'ride' and travel in those worlds. It has been recently discovered that rhythmic drumming produces a state of hypnotic trance, which induces mystic imagery [1]. Modern man defines such special experiences as 'lucid dreaming'. Shamans report their encounters with spirits not as hallucinations or fanciful imaginations, but as real as the ones we experience in our daily existence. For the shamans there is only one reality: The world of the supernatural. The feathers on their head tell us that they are able to perform spiritual flights to the supernatural realm as birds do in the natural realm.

Singing and incantation is another vital aspect of shamanism. It is through songs and chants that the shaman expresses power and intent. All musical instruments developed by ancient societies were considered to have a magical power helping the soul to communicate with deities and ancestors. Many shamans believe that during a musical ceremony their body and soul is possessed by the spirit of their forefathers who answers questions and informs them about the future events.



**DATURA**



**Psilosibe**



**Peyote**

Shamans accept that sacred plants help to remove the barrier of daily perception. Above we see three such hallucinogenic plants.

In order to enter into an altered state of consciousness the shaman may also use hallucinogenic plants. Such plants are poisonous and illegal in western societies, but are accepted to be sacred by shamans who are willing to undertake a vision quest. The most important of the shamanic mushrooms in Mexico is the **Psilocybe Mexicana**, which grows in wet pasture lands [2]. It produces vivid images, colorful hallucinations and unusual auditory effects. The **Peyote** is a small cactus capable in producing a wide range of effects. Its main alkaloid constituent is **Mescaline**, but it also contains about 30 other psychoactive agents. The Datura, also known under the name of **Jimson Weed** is another plant used on special occasions by Mexican shamans.

Today, Mexican shamans continue to regard these plants as divine and sacred. Each year groups of native Mexicans, led by an experienced shaman, make a pilgrimage to collect these plants. The plants are then shared to those participating in the pilgrimage. They are considered as inducers of a higher level of awareness and their function is to help the shaman, during a healing session, to connect and interact with the spirits. **Carlos Castaneda**, the Anthropologist and author of many books dealing with the Mexican shamanism has influenced many people all over the world. Through his experiences narrated in 12 books on the same subject, people started to consider shamanism as a state of higher awareness. In the next article I will discuss the concepts of the Mexican (Yaqui Indian) shamanism through the books of Carlos Castaneda.

## References

- [1] **Shamanism**, Nevill Drury, Element books, page 52, 1996 UK.
- [2] Reference [1], page 63.