

Shamanism and Spirit



PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY EDITH TURNER

THE WORD “SHAMAN” derives from *saman*, taken from the Tungus of Siberia where it means “spirit healer.” Shamanism, or working with spirits, is found today in many parts of the globe among people who live by what Lévy-Bruhl, in 1910, called “the law of mystical participation,” that is, the sense of a spiritual connection that exists between everyone and everything in the universe. Among such people, shamanism is neither a religion nor a science, but an *activity* in a world that is ordinary yet spiritual. It can be viewed as a healing or helping technology—the technology of the sacred, as it has been called—acts and experiences instead of a set of beliefs or customs.

In the shamanic view, spiritual connections between people are already in place and that is just how things are. Such a sense still lingers on among hunter-gatherer peoples in the Arctic, northern Asia, central Australia, around the Pacific, and among Native Americans. Furthermore, shamanism is now recognized to exist widely in Africa. All are cultures in which corporate economies have less power.

To access the power that spirits can give, shamans make a spirit journey. In times past, people drummed or sang, and the music would become so powerful that shamans would lose the ordinary sense of being present in the world. These people would find themselves speeding along in a different world—not a world created by the shaman’s imagination, because the experience came *to* them—they were some place else.

Access to this different world could be gained beneath the ordinary world, beneath the earth, under water or ice, or reached high up on a mountain or in the clouds. The shaman might encounter a spirit animal or an ancestor spirit with knowledge of healing, both figures being helpers. Over the course of such a journey, the helper could empower the shaman to rescue the lost soul of a sufferer, bringing it back to its owner.

The elements of shamanism are curiously similar throughout the world. “Shaman” is a universal title for a per-

son who does such work, though “visionary” or “one who experiences spirit events” would also describe the practitioner, and those terms link shamanism to religion.

Mircea Eliade, who wrote what was, in the 1950s, the definitive treatise on shamanism, believed that what defines a shaman is his ecstatic ascent to the sky or descent to the underworld on mystic flights. Eliade shows there is often an “entrance,” “door,” or “bridge” to these different realms, and he also traces an interesting feature of shamanic initiation.

When a person first receives the call to be a shaman, he or she experiences a vision in which his or her old, non-spiritual body is spiritually dismembered in some way and yet brought together again in a new body with power—a process known as “sparagmos.” This spiritual ordeal curiously echoes the Biblical saying, “you must be born again.” Later, in the 1980s, Michael Harner, one of the present world’s major authorities on shamanism, included a frequently encountered commonality in his definition: the assistance of a spirit helper, either animal or human.

Generally, shamanism provides powers that are greater than the ordinary physical powers we possess in everyday life. The following are the powers of a shaman: the hands-on power to heal by removing harmful spirit stuff from the body or restoring the body’s energy; the power to *see* in a visionary manner into the body of a sick person; and the power to retrieve the lost soul of the sick. Shamanism also provides a kind of knowledge that is hard to describe, that of a connection with animals, even help from an animal spirit; it gives the sense of the presence of one’s ancestors or friendly dead who come to give help.

A shaman while in a dream or on a spirit journey may receive a vision of future events; shamanism may provide knowledge of the whereabouts of lost things or persons, along with the power to find them. Shamanism can oddly alter the weather; give a person physical strength that seems impossible; and curiously, give the power of bilocation, to be in two places at once. It very often gives joy or makes people laugh.

The sea-hunter’s umiak canoe. Ice still surrounds the village.



Dancing the eagle. The January *Kivgiq* ceremonies.

WORKING AMONG THE IÑUPIAT OF NORTHERN ALASKA

My own work on shamanism was among the Iñupiat of northern Alaska. Shamanism with the Iñupiat does not appear on the surface, but during my research of this Inuit culture, I was able to trace many events that were shamanic in character. Such spirit occurrences were a frequent source of strength and healing to the Iñupiat. My main visit took place from August 1987 to August 1988. The shamanic events that occurred were each different, representing different shamanic gifts. I have written about these experiences and events in my book *The Hands Feel It: Healing and Spirit Presence among a Northern Alaska People*.

Wherever shamanism is found, healing is a shaman's principal function, among his or her numerous roles. For instance, among the Iñupiat, one has to see illness as some



Successful Iñupiat hunters drum and sing in the shelter of their whaling boats

kind of substance—then shamanic healing works. The illness or injury appears to be a spirit thing, offending inside the body of the sufferer, telling lies to the afflicted person and infecting her. These are not germs seen under a microscope, but “spirit germs,” as it were, that one may sense. This healing story from the Iñupiat provides insight into this reality.

HEALING: THE SOUL'S JOURNEY

I listened in wonder to a story given by Clem, a whaling man and a seer. (I have changed people's names to preserve their privacy.) It was the story of a sick man whose spirit was failing. In this story, it was the seals that healed. It may seem strange that healing should come from humble animals, but it was highly meaningful from the Iñupiat point of view.

Clem said, “A man was very sick. When he was about to die, he found himself traveling under the sea ice to the underwater house of the seals. When he came to the door of the seal house, he went in by the double porch, the place where people take off their parkas and hang them on pegs.” Clem then pointed to his own double porch where rows of parkas were hanging.

He continued, “The clothes hanging on the pegs in the seal's double porch were all sealskins. The man went inside. He thought he was going to find seals without their skins, but no, they were *people*. Underneath their skins, the seals were people, sitting around in a circle. One of them had very long ears. This was the seal-person who could hear everything that went on in the village—you've heard of the Long-Eared One.

“The seal people took the man in and he stayed with them for a whole year, learning shamanism. At the end of the year, the seal people showed him the way back under the ice to his house and said goodbye. He came to himself in his bed, quite well, and found he'd only been away from home for one hour.”

This kind of experience has happened to others. The soul sometimes travels when in extreme danger—and in our culture, we have heard of the near-death experience. Also, the story attests to the fact that wisdom or skills may be imparted in one great event.

One begins to understand why the Iñupiat hold seals in reverence. In this ice-bound environment, hunters are continuously among wild animals, and they are dependent on the generosity and self-sacrifice of animals in order to exist. Thus the spirit power of the animals looms large, especially those of seals, whales, and eagles.

It is a curious thing that before I ever came to Alaska, I had a vivid shamanic message in which I saw a television screen showing an animal's internal organs. It was puzzling. Yet months later, ensconced in Clem's house in northern Alaska, I saw that animal in reality. It was a seal, and, in reality,

I was helping to open up its body for our food. I saw then the selfsame sight I had seen on the dream television, the internal organs. That earlier flash had been a predictive sight, fortelling the future.

Seals, even dead and giving of themselves, have spirit power. In order to be at one with their power, the Iñupiat carve many beautiful seals in ivory, just as the Dordogne cave artists in ancient days shaped their spirit animals on the cave walls to activate their spiritual power.

A way to understand shamanism is to sense a kind of medium in which all people live that liberates faculties that are beyond the ordinary, a kind of medium that also makes people permeable to each other. One understands this best through stories of actual experience because, otherwise, the power is hard to put into words. These stories demonstrate both the sense of connectedness the Iñupiat share with spirit animals and the power of experiencing spirits. They are serious stories.

What then is the nature of the consciousness that can develop in shamans when they are healing? When an Iñupiat healer puts her hands on suffering human tissue, this is an act of actual spiritual connection with the other. The sufferer does not feel merely the hand's pressure, nor does relief occur only because the sufferer believes something will happen. What happens is a phenomenon not much examined in research, though those who experience this feeling know it very well when it is in progress. It is a matter of connections.

People know they have connections with one another; they are continually accessing the usual connections simply in order to live. We "read" body language, we can even "read" love, but in healing there is an extra charge, a kind of booster charge, passing along through the healer's hands. I have felt it myself.

That continuous, universal presence of connectedness can carry energy and power from person to person, just as the air carries our voices. Through this connectedness, people receive the shaman's powers. In most religions there is an awareness of a spirit or power entity that intervenes and provides the gift (though rarely is this awareness found in the philosophical or intellectual aspects of world religions). A kind of connective spirit, then, exists that can join people, so that a shaman can connect with others to heal.

Due to this spirit, a shaman may also be able to return after death to help others and send unmistakable messages when vitally needed; and in life, like a saint or the Delphic oracle, may become conscious of purposes that flash throughout the entire, all-connecting web. Awareness and incorporation of these connections are more explicitly found in folk religions, as well as in the experience and practice of hunter-gatherer societies. 🏠

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Edith Turner with her host's baby.

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For Further Reading

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