

FROM

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Mircea Eliade, one of the first anthropologists to explore Shamanism and write about it in the early sixties, writes in his book: "*Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*":

"Shamanism in the strict sense is pre-eminently a religious phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia, The word comes to us, through the Russian, from the Tungusic 'saman'It has been sought to explain the Tungusic term by the Pali 'samana' which is part of the problem of Indian influences on Siberian religions."

In the book '*Shamanic voices*' by Joan Halifax we can read the first hand stories as told by shamans and medicine men of today from all corners of the globe including: Australia, South America and Mesoamerica, North America , Siberia, Greenland and Africa. Shamanism in all cases is performed by a chosen few either because they come from a hereditary line of shamans, or because they were chosen by other experienced shamans to become shamans. Shamanism proper does not seem to accept volunteers.

Joan Halifax quotes from the Ikinilik:

"I am not a shaman, as I have neither had dreams nor been ill"

In all cases without exception something out of the ordinary must happen for someone to become a shaman. After that person has gone through the ordeals of his initiation his job is always that of a healer, a seer and connoisseur of the language of the spirits of the area, and a spiritual advisor to the people, like a psychopomp.

(An interesting question is this: How can a shaman really operate outside his own habitat? How does a shaman from Africa use the power of his helpers and spirits in Africa to heal others if he himself resides in America or the UK? To overcome this distance barrier some say that the shaman needs to use 'talismans', or 'power objects', that are imbued with the power of these native forces.)

Shamans also have to adhere to strict diets which are dictated by the specific spirits of the area where the shaman lives. So in India for instance shamans will never eat meat, but in Siberia they must.

To do his job the shaman learns, or has innate knowledge, of how to cultivate the trance state which enables him to draw power from the other world and to bring it to the people who need it. His spirits, guardian animals and helpers advise him as to what tools he needs to make and the content of the rituals he performs and so he busies himself making strange power objects, potions etc

The following quote from the Huichol is revealing as to the world that the shaman accesses in order to draw his power:

“There is a doorway within our minds that usually remains hidden and secret until the time of death. The Huichol word for it is ‘nierika’. Nierika is a cosmic portway or interface between so-called ordinary and nonordinary realities. It is a passageway and at the same time a barrier between worlds. Nierika a decorated ceremonial disc, is also said to mean mirror as well as face of the deity.” ...

Joan Halifax writes that “Nierika is the threshold through which one passes on the voyage to the world of death and visions.”

The initiations that the ‘would be shamans’ have to go through vary from place to place but are always harsh. Sometimes someone is empowered after a period of illness when they are said to die and then be reborn or granted life, so that they can then go on to heal, or they might become empowered after an accident, such as being struck by lightning, or being bitten by a poisonous snake etc. Many would be shamans die during their initiation ordeals because these require almost superhuman strength for one to survive.

From the Escimo/caribou:

Igjugarjuk was compelled by the mysterious divine force Sila to become an ‘angakoq’ (shaman). As a young man he was besieged by dreams that he did not understand.....

The old man Perqanak was chosen as his instructor. In the depth of winter, Igjugarjuk was put on a sledge just large enough for him to sit on and taken far from his home. When he reached the appointed spot, he

remained on the sledge while Perqanaq built a snow hut so small that the neophyte could barely sit cross-legged in it. Not permitted to set foot on the snow he was lifted from the sledge, carried into the hut, and placed on a small piece of skin. He was not allowed any food or drink and was exhorted to think of only the Great Spirit and of the helping spirit that should presently appear..... Igjugarjuk declared that the strain of those thirty days was so severe that he "sometimes died a little".

He recounts:

"When I was to be a shaman, I chose suffering through the two things that are most dangerous to humans, suffering through hunger and suffering through cold. First I hungered five days and was then allowed to drink a mouthful of warm water; the old ones say that only if the water is warm will Pinga and Hila notice the novice and help him. Thereafter I went hungry another fifteen days, and again was given a mouthful of warm water. After that I hungered for ten days, and then could begin to eat, though only the sort of food there is never any taboo, preferably fleshly meat and never intestines, head, heart, or other entrails, nor meat that had been touched by wolf or wolverline when it lay in cache. I was to keep to this diet for five moons, and then in the next five moons might eat everything; but after that I was again forced to eat the diet that is prescribed for all those who must do penance in order to become clean." ...

Even in cases where a European has approached shamans asking for initiation he has to undergo physical hardship such as fasting, walking for days on end, and also ingest 'power plants' which bring on near death experiences.

The anthropologist Michael Harner, (who founded the 'centre for shamanic studies' and even a degree course on shamanism!), was initiated by the Jivaro Indians of Ecuador. Part of his initiation included ingesting the sacred drink 'ayahuasca', the "soul vine" also called "the little death". Michael Harner, after his fieldwork, sought to bring together all the various shamanistic techniques mentioned by Mircea Eliade and to train anyone who wants to be a shaman in any place in the world. Indeed his well written and user friendly book "The way of the shaman' has been a best seller since the 1980's and gives a taste of shamanism.

A very different type of shamanism was shown by Carlos Castaneda. He advocates that the ultimate way to wellbeing and healing is by attaining "*freedom of perception*" : a state where one can 'see' energy as it flows through the universe.

Although he himself endured many hardships through his initiations to become a 'seer' the modern form of 'Tensegrity' which he founded can be followed easily by anyone but it does not claim to produce *shamans*. It is something altogether different. A way to true wellbeing, power and knowledge.

... And so is '*Heesht*' <http://www.sareoso.org.uk/Liburutegia/ontzia/Heesht.doc>

from the 'Sareoso tradition. <http://www.sareoso.org/>

This article sounds like a meditation or a mystical path where one aligns oneself with the rhythms of nature. This I believe is a worthwhile exercise but not 'shamanism' - in the traditional sense-.

What is interesting, from what has been described so far, is that in shamanism the initiation process or incident of a near death experience is so powerful and shocking that one can only undergo it only once or twice in one's lifetime, yet its effects last for a lifetime (as long as one doesn't abuse the power given through alcohol or other indulgences)

In meditation and mystical paths on the other hand progress and power come gently. It is more a case of continuous practice to have access to the unknown.

Experience has shown that both ways have validity.

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