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## SHAMANISM AND ORDINARY RELIGION

When I arrived in the Upper Amazon in early 1970, I had just spent several years living in Asian societies. Asia is a place where the shattered shells of castoff religious ontologies litter the dusty landscape like the carapaces of sand-scoured scarabs. I had traveled India in search of the miraculous. I had visited its temples and ashrams, its jungles and mountain retreats. But Yoga, a lifetime calling, the obsession of a disciplined and ascetic few, was not sufficient to carry me to the inner landscapes that I sought.

I learned in India that religion, in all times and places where the luminous flame of the spirit has guttered low, is no more than a hustle. Religion in India stares from world-weary eyes familiar with four millennia of priestcraft. Modern Hindu India to me was both an antithesis and a fitting prelude to the nearly archaic shamanism that I found in the lower Rio Putumayo of Colombia when I arrived there to begin studying the shamanic use of hallucinogenic plants.

Shamanism is the practice of the Upper Paleolithic tradition of healing, divination, and theatrical performance based on natural magic developed ten to fifty thousand years ago. Mircea Eliade, author of *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* and the foremost authority on shamanism in the context of comparative religion, has shown that in all times and places shamanism maintains a surprising internal coherency of practice and belief. Whether the shaman is an Arctic-dwelling Inuit or a Witoto of the Upper Amazon, certain techniques and expectations remain

the same. Most important of these invariants is ecstasy, a point my brother and I make in our book *The Invisible Landscape*:

The ecstatic part of the shaman's initiation is harder to analyze, for it is dependent on a certain receptivity to states of trance and ecstasy on the part of the novice; he may be moody, somewhat frail and sickly, predisposed to solitude, and may perhaps have fits of epilepsy or catatonia, or some other psychological aberrance (though not always as some writers on the subject have asserted).<sup>1</sup> In any case, his psychological predisposition to ecstasy forms only the starting point for his initiation: the novice, after a history of psychosomatic illness or psychological aberration that may be more or less intense, will at last begin to undergo initiatory sickness and trances; he will lie as though dead or in deep trance for days on end. During this time, he is approached in dreams by his helping spirits, and may receive instruction from them. Invariably during this prolonged trance the novice will undergo an episode of mystical death and resurrection; he may see himself reduced to a skeleton and then clothed with new flesh; or he may see himself boiled in a caldron, devoured by the spirits, and then made whole again; or he may imagine himself being operated on by the spirits, his organs removed and replaced with "magical stones" and then sewn up again.

Eliade showed that, while the particular motifs may vary between cultures and even individuals, shamanism's general structure is clear: the neophyte shaman undergoes a symbolic death and resurrection, which is understood as a radical transformation into a superhuman condition. Henceforth, the shaman has access to the superhuman plane, is a master of ecstasy, can travel in the spirit realm at will, and most important, can cure and divine. As we noted in *The Invisible Landscape*:

In short, the shaman is transformed from a profane into a sacred state of being. Not only has he effected his own cure through this mystical transmutation, he is now invested with the power of the sacred, and hence can cure others as well. It is of the first order of importance to remember this, that the shaman is more than merely a sick man, or a madman; he is a sick man who has healed himself, who is cured, and who must shamanize in order to remain cured.<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that Eliade used the word "profane" deliberately with the intent of creating a clear split between the notion of the profane world of ordinary experience and the sacred world which is "Wholly Other."<sup>2</sup>

## **THE TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY**

Not all shamans use intoxication with plants to obtain ecstasy, but all shamanic practice aims to give rise to ecstasy. Drumming, manipulation of breath, ordeals, fasting, theatrical illusions, sexual abstinence—all are time-honored methods for entering into the trance necessary for shamanic work. Yet none of these methods is as effective, as ancient, and as overwhelming as the use of plants containing chemical compounds that produce visions. This practice of using visionary plant intoxicants may seem alien or surprising to some Westerners. Our society regards psychoactive drugs as either frivolous or dangerous, at best reserved for the treatment of the seriously mentally ill where no other effective method is available. We retain the notion of the healer in the figure of the medical professional who, through the possession of special knowledge, can cure. But the specialized knowledge of the modern physician is clinical knowledge, removed from the unfolding drama of each unique and particular person.

Shamanism is different. Usually, if drugs are used, the shaman, not the patient, will take the drug. The motivation is also entirely different. The plants used by the shaman are not intended to stimulate the immune system or the body's other natural defenses against disease. Rather, the shamanic plants allow the healer to journey into an invisible realm in which the causality of the ordinary world is replaced with the rationale of natural magic. In this realm, language, ideas, and meaning have greater power than cause and effect. Sympathies, resonances, intentions, and personal will are linguistically magnified through poetic rhetoric. The imagination is invoked and sometimes its forms are beheld visibly. Within the magical mind-set of the shaman, the ordinary connections of the world and what we call natural laws are deemphasized or ignored.

## A WORLD MADE OF LANGUAGE

The evidence gathered from millennia of shamanic experience argues that the world is actually made of language in some fashion. Although at odds with the expectations of modern science, this radical proposition is in agreement with much of current linguistic thinking.

"The twentieth-century linguistic revolution," says Boston University anthropologist Misia Landau, "is the recognition that language is not merely a device for communicating ideas about the world, but rather a tool for bringing the world into existence in the first place. Reality is not simply 'experienced' or 'reflected' in language, but instead is actually produced by language. "

From the point of view of the psychedelic shaman, the world appears to be more in the nature of an utterance or a tale than in any way related to the leptons and baryons or charge and spin that our high priests, the physicists, speak of. For the shaman, the cosmos is a tale that becomes true as it is told, and as it tells itself. This perspective implies that human imagination can seize the tiller of being in the world. Freedom, personal responsibility, and a humbling awareness of the true size and intelligence of the world combine in this point of view to make it a fitting basis for living an authentic neo-Archaic life. A reverence for and an immersion in the powers of language and communication are the basis of the shamanic path.

This is why the shaman is the remote ancestor of the poet and artist. Our need to feel part of the world seems to demand that we express ourselves through creative activity. The ultimate wellsprings of this creativity are hidden in the mystery of language. Shamanic ecstasy is an act of surrender that authenticates both the individual self and that which is surrendered to, the mystery of being. Because our maps of reality are determined by our present circumstances, we tend to lose awareness of the larger patterns of time and space. Only by gaining access to the Transcendent Other can those patterns of time and space and our role in them be glimpsed. Shamanism strives for this higher point of view, which is achieved through a feat of linguistic prowess. A shaman is one who has attained a vision of the beginnings and the endings of all things and who can communicate that vision. To the rational thinker, this is inconceivable, yet the techniques of shamanism are directed toward this end and this is the source of their power. Preeminent among the shaman's techniques is the use of the plant hallucinogens, repositories of living vegetable gnosis that lie, now nearly forgotten, in our ancient past.

By entering the domain of plant intelligence, the shaman becomes, in a way, privileged to a higher dimensional perspective on experience. Common sense assumes that, though languages are always evolving, the raw stuff of what language expresses is relatively constant and common to all humans. Yet we also know that the Hopi language has no past or future tenses or concepts. How, then, can the Hopi world be like ours? And the Inuit have no first-person pronoun. How, then, can their world be like ours?

The grammars of languages-their internal rules-have been carefully studied. Yet too little attention has been devoted to examining how language creates and defines the limits of reality. Perhaps language is more properly understood when thought of as magic, for it is the implicit position of magic that the world is made of language. If language is accepted as the primary datum of knowing, then we in the West have been sadly misled. Only shamanic approaches will be able to give us answers to the questions we find most interesting: who are we, where did we come from, and toward what fate do we move? These questions have never been more important than today, when evidence of the failure of science to nurture the soul of humanity is everywhere around us. Ours is not merely temporary ennui of the spirit; if we are not careful, ours is a terminal condition of the collective body and spirit. The rational, mechanistic, antispiritual bias of our own culture has made it impossible for us to appreciate the mind-set of the shaman. We are culturally and linguistically blind to the world of forces and interconnections clearly visible to those who have retained the Archaic relationship to nature.

Of course, when I arrived in the Amazon twenty years ago, I knew nothing of the above. Like most Westerners, I believed that magic was a phenomenon of the naive and the primitive, that science could provide an explanation for the workings of the world. In that position of intellectual naivete, I encountered psilocybin mushrooms for the first time, at San Augustine in the Alto Magdalena of southern Colombia. Later and not far away, in Florencia, I also

encountered and used visionary brews made from Banisteriopsis vines, the yage or ayahuasca of 1960s underground legend.

The experiences that I had during those travels were personally transforming and, more important, they introduced me to a class of experiences that is vital to the restoration of balance in our social and environmental worlds. I have shared the group mind that is generated in the vision sessions of the ayahuasqueros. I have seen the magical darts of red light that one shaman can send against another. But more revelatory than the paranormal feats of gifted magicians and spiritual healers were the inner riches that I discovered within my own mind at the apex of these experiences. I offer my account as a kind of witness, an Everyman; if these experiences happened to me, then they can be part of the general experience of men and women everywhere.

## **A SHAMANIC MEME**

My shamanic education was not unique. Thousands of people have, by one means or another, come to the conclusion that psychedelic plants, and the shamanic institutions that their use implies, are profound tools for the exploration of the inner depths of the human psyche. Psychedelic shamans now constitute a worldwide and growing subculture of hyperdimensional explorers, many of whom are scientifically sophisticated. A landscape is coming into focus, a region still glimpsed only dimly, but emerging, claiming the attention of rational discourse-and possibly threatening to confound it. We may yet remember how to behave, how to take our correct place in the connecting pattern, the seamless web of all things.

An understanding of how to achieve this balance lingers on in the forgotten and trampled cultures of the rain forests and deserts of the Third World, and in the reserves and reservations into which dominator cultures force their aboriginal people. The shamanic gnosis is possibly dying; certainly it is changing. Yet the plant hallucinogens that are the source of this, the oldest of human religions, remain a clear running spring, as refreshing as they have always been. Shamanism is vital and real because of the individual encounter with the challenge and wonder, the ecstasy and exaltation induced by hallucinogenic plants.

My encounters with shamanism and hallucinogens in the Amazon convinced me of their salvific importance. Once convinced, I was determined to filter out the various forms of linguistic, cultural, pharmacological, and personal noise that obscured the Mystery. I hoped to distill the essence of shamanism, to track the Epiphany to her lair. I wanted to see beyond the veils of her whirling dance. A cosmic peeping Tom, I dreamed of confronting naked beauty.

A cynic in the dominator style might be content to dismiss this as delusions of romantic youth. Ironically, I was at one time that cynic. I felt the folly of the quest. I knew the odds. "The Other? Naked Platonic beauty? You must be kidding!"

And it must be admitted that there were many wild misadventures along the way. "We must become God's fools," an enthusiastic Zen acquaintance once urged, by which he meant, "Hit the road." Seeking and finding had been a method that had worked for me in the past. I knew that shamanic practices based on the use of hallucinogenic plants still survived in the Amazon, and I was determined to confirm my intuition that a great secret lay undiscovered behind this fact.

Reality outran apprehension. The mottled face of the leprous old woman was made more startlingly hideous when the fire she tended suddenly flared as she added more wood. In the semidarkness behind her, I could see the guide who had brought me to this unnamed place on the Rio Cumala. Back in the river town bar this chance encounter with a boatman willing to take me to see the miracleworking ayahuasca witch of local legend had seemed like a great chance for a story. Now, after three days of river travel and a halfday struggling through trails so flooded with mud that they threatened with each step to suck your boots right off you, I was not so sure.

At this point, the original object of my quest the authentic deep forest ayahuasca, reportedly so different from the swill of the char latans of the marketplace-hardly held any interest for me.

"Tome, caballero!" the old woman had cackled as she offered me a full cup of the black, slow-flowing liquid. Its surface had the sheen of motor oil.

She must have grown into this role, I thought as I drank. It was warm and salty, chalky and bittersweet. It tasted like the blood of some old, old thing. I tried not to think about how much at the mercy of these strange people I now was. But in fact my courage was failing. Both Dona Catalina and the guide's mocking eyes had slowly gone cold and mantislike. A wave of insect sound sweeping up the river seemed to splatter the darkness with shards of sharpened light. I felt my lips go numb.

Trying not to appear as loaded as I felt, I crossed to my hammock and lay back. Behind my closed eyelids there was a flowing river of magenta light. It occurred to me in a kind of dreamy mental pirouette that a helicopter must be landing on top of the hut, and this was the last impression I had.

When I regained consciousness I appeared to myself to be surfing on the inner curl of a wave of brightly lit transparent information several hundred feet high. Exhilaration gave way to terror as I realized that my wave was speeding toward a rocky coastline. Everything disappeared in the roaring chaos of informational wave meeting virtual land. More lost time and then an impression of being a shipwrecked sailor washed onto a tropical shore. I feel that I am pressing my face into the hot sand of a tropical beach. I feel lucky to be alive. I am lucky to be alive! Or is it that I am alive to be lucky? I break up laughing.

At this point the old woman begins to sing. Hers is no ordinary song, but an icaro, a magical curing song that in our intoxicated and ecstatic state seems more like a tropical reef fish or an animated silk scarf of many colors than a vocal performance. The song is a visible manifestation of power, enfolding us and making us secure.

## **SHAMANISM AND THE LOST ARCHAIC WORLD**

Shamanism was beautifully defined by Mircea Eliade as "the archaic techniques of ecstasy." Eliade's use of the term "archaic" is important here because it alerts us to the role that shamanism must play in any authentic revival of vital Archaic forms of being, living, and understanding. The shaman gains entrance into a world that is hidden from those who dwell in ordinary reality. In this other dimension lurk powers both helpful and malevolent. Its rules are not the rules of our world; they are more like the rules that operate in myth and dream.

Shamanic healers insist on the existence of an intelligent Other somewhere in a dimension nearby. The existence of an ecology of souls or a disincarnate intelligence is not something that science can be expected to grapple with and emerge with its own premises intact. Particularly if this Other has long been a part of the terrestrial ecology, present but unseen, a global secret sharer.

The writings of Carlos Castaneda and his imitators have resulted in a fad of "shamanic awareness" which, although muddled, has turned the shaman from a peripheral figure in the literature of cultural anthropology into the media role model for full membership in neo-Archaic society. In spite of the grip that shamanism has on the popular imagination, the paranormal phenomena that it assumes to be actual and true have never been taken seriously by modern science, even if scientists, in a rare case of deference, have called on psychologists and anthropologists to analyze shamanism. This blindness to the paranormal world has created an intellectual blind spot in our normal world view. We are completely unaware of the magical world of the shaman. It is quite simply stranger than we can suppose.

Consider a shaman who uses plants to converse with an invisible world inhabited by nonhuman intelligences. This would seem to rate a headline in the supermarket tabloids. Yet anthropologists report such things all the time and no one raises an eyebrow. That is because we tend to assume that the shaman interprets his experience of intoxication as communication with spirits or ancestors. The implication is that you or I would interpret this same experience differently and that therefore it is no big deal that some poor, uneducated campesino thought he was talking with an angel.

Xenophobic as this attitude is, it suggests a good operating procedure since what it is saying is, "Show me the techniques of your ecstasy and I will judge their effectiveness for myself." I did this. This is my credential for the

theories and opinions I hold. I was initially appalled at what I found: the world of shamanism, of allies, shape shifting, and magical attack are far more real than the constructs of science can ever be, because these spirit ancestors and their other world can be seen and felt, they can be known, in the nonordinary reality. Something profound, unexpected, nearly unimaginable awaits us if we will turn our investigative attentions toward the phenomenon of shamanic plant hallucinogens. The people outside of Western history, those still in the dream time of preliteracy, have kept the flame of a tremendous mystery burning. It will be humbling to admit this and to learn from them, but that too is a part of the Archaic Revival.

This is not to imply that we must stand slack-jawed before the accomplishments of the "primitive" in yet another version of the Noble Savage Cha-Cha. Everyone who has worked in the field is aware of the frequent clash between our expectations of how "true rain forest people" should behave and the realities of tribal daily life. No one yet understands the mysterious intelligence within plants or the implications of the idea that nature communicates in a basic chemical language that is unconscious but profound. We do not yet understand how hallucinogens transform the message in the unconscious into revelations beheld by the conscious mind. As archaic people honed their intuitions and their senses by using whatever plants were at hand to increase their adaptive advantage, they had little time for philosophy. To this day the implications of the existence of this mind within nature discovered by shamanic peoples have yet to fully dawn.

Meanwhile, quietly and outside of history, shamanism has pursued its dialogue with an invisible world. Shamanism's legacy can act as a steadying force to redirect our awareness toward the collective fate of the biosphere. The shamanic faith is that humanity is not without allies. There are forces friendly to our struggle to birth ourselves as an intelligent species. But they are quiet and shy; they are to be sought, not in the arrival of alien star fleets in the skies of earth, but nearby, in wilderness solitude, in the ambience of waterfalls, and yes, in the grasslands and pastures now too rarely beneath our feet.