

Section 1 – The Foragers

Shamanism and Revelation

Shamans are believed to be able to travel into the world of the spirits. There they receive knowledge and enlightenment as well as visions of the future, and, sometimes, the power to influence it. They are still found across the modern world. The earliest archaeological evidence we have of them is from the Upper Palaeolithic and it suggests that the first shamans were women;¹ yet their presence within our culture may be much older.

A shaman is not part of a formal religious hierarchy. She learns a mythology and a set of rituals and then combines and enhances this learned knowledge with personal voyages into the spirit world, where ‘real’ knowledge is revealed to her. Shamans may learn from a more experienced mentor, who will guide the novice in her first journeys in the spirit world.² Typically, shamans will use mental focussing techniques such as meditation, repetitive movement like dancing, drumming, or chanting a repeated phrase. Often they use hallucinogenic drugs, for example, peyote, marijuana or even alcohol. Most of all, however, the shaman will use ritual, a series of acts that will lead her to the doorway into the spirit world – and also protect her and allow her to return.

Shamans are intermediaries between the supernatural world and the human, and can use the powers of this interaction in a variety of ways. These include the ability to predict weather, to see where prey animals will be, to heal the sick, to cure infertility and, most importantly, to communicate with beings in the spirit world. Shamanism has existed across human culture and while each form differs from the others, they all focus on revelation that can only be obtained in a mind-altered state, by personally entering the supernatural realm.

What shamanism gives to successor religions is the belief that through certain practices, truth might be revealed. Using ritual, fasting, narcotic drugs, meditation, by passing through a portal or entering a sacred place, or by some other means, the shaman arrives at a mental state that is not normal, typically some sort of trance, during which her critical faculties are suspended and her innate desire to see pattern and agency is most profound. In this state, she experiences

¹ Barbara Tedlock has suggested that the earliest known shamans, found in what is now the Czech Republic, were women. (Tedlock, Barbara. *The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine*. Bantam. 2005.)

² Anthropologist Carlos Castaneda describes his own relationship to a shaman in the book *Don Juan*. (Castaneda, C. *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. Penguin. 1990.)

something which she believes has been revealed to her by the supernatural world. She then has to interpret this; its meaning may not be clear, and her skill and experience come into play in the reading of the signs that she has seen. In this sense, shamanistic practice is like reading auguries, tea-leaves, patterns in the clouds, Ouija boards or many other practices to explain the world, communicate with the dead or the gods, visit the spirit world or foretell the future.³

Revelation is the idea that we can know something because it has been shown to us, without any other explanation, usually by an agency that cannot be explained in material terms. People who accept such answers and guidance believe that revealed truth is not only true but the most profound truth; that it provides the best possible answers to important questions. This is the foundation of faith, which is belief in something that has not been or cannot be proved. In turn, this leads to harsh criticism and even punishment of anyone who does question the answers provided by revelation.

It follows that she to whom the knowledge is revealed, who furthermore interprets that message and relays it to others, becomes powerful, not only in a spiritual sense but also in a temporal one.

Imagine an ancient shaman, deep within the cave that for her is the womb of the Goddess, flickering firelight illuminating the intense darkness. She may be painting or carrying out some ritual, perhaps having consumed some herb or drug such as cannabis, nutmeg, psilocybin or fly agaric mushrooms, or having fasted, or chanted or danced until she passed out of her body. In this journey she may or may not be alone. In Mexico, where there is still a strong tradition of female shamans, women group together either to travel into the spirit world or to support the one who does. For these women, the ritual is a uniquely bonding part of their lives, reinforcing their group identity, as well as a venture into the supernatural. Palaeolithic shamans would have been no different.

If the first shamans were women and the state of motherhood venerated, and the social group of women was the hub of the culture, then it is likely that women, not men, were the governing voice within the society. Indeed the early groups were almost certainly focussed on the core of fertile breeding mothers and their children, and in turn were quite possibly governed by those women.

³ The techniques of fasting, incense, chanting, dancing, meditation, trance and so on, used by people seeking religious enlightenment are similar to those used by shamans because they were inherited by more recent, organised religions from the older culture.