

Shamanism

By Tori McElroy

When you hear the word "*shamanism*," what images jiffy-pop into your mind's eye? Most folks picture feather headdresses, buffalo hides, medicine wheels and dream-catchers—all images associated with Native American cultures. But contrary to popular opinion, a "*shaman*" is not an Indian medicine man, and "*shamanism*" is not a Native American religion. In fact, many Native Americans find the terms "*shaman*" and "*shamanism*" offensive. The word "*shaman*" actually originates among the natives of Siberia, where it describes a specialized type of holy person. The shamans of Siberia interact with deities and spirits not only with prayer, ritual and offerings, but also through direct contact with the spirits themselves. With the aid of rhythmic drumming and chanting, the shaman enters a very deep or "ecstatic" trance. (In discussions of shamanism, the word "*ecstasy*" is used in its original sense, from the Greek roots *ex* and *histanai* meaning "*out of place*" or "*out of the physical*"—in other words an out-of-body mystical state) This trance frees the shaman's consciousness from the body, allowing it to "*fly*" into the realms the spirits inhabit, and to experience these "*Other worlds*" with all the senses of the ordinary physical realm. Yet, shamanic journeys are more than mystical encounters with spirits; shamans undertake trance-journeys for practical purposes, in service to their community.

A shaman may journey in the Other worlds to gather information from the spirits, perform healings, guide the spirits of the dead to resting places, gain spiritual favor and power, or any number of other reasons. Like priests in Western society, shamans are not self-appointed, but called to their tasks by the spirits themselves, and then trained and recognized by their Elders and the community.

This specialized, sacred role of the shaman exists in many cultures outside Siberia, and the accounts of ecstatic trance-journeys are remarkably similar around the world. The ecstatic trance seems to open the human mind to archetypal experiences transcending cultural boundaries. The spiritual realms are almost always experienced in three layers: one equivalent to the physical plane of the earth, another to the heavens above, and a third that lies below the earth. Each culture interprets these realms and their inhabitants slightly differently, but the similarities are enough to suggest that the pattern of imagery arises from the process of the trance-journey itself, rather than from cultural expectations. There is even evidence that the ecstatic trance-journey may have been part of the development of all religions, including Christianity. Although the practice of the trance-journey has all but vanished in many cultures, remnants of it exist in myths and traditions.

Since any Western words for the role disappeared along with the practice, "*shaman*" was adopted into English from Russian in approximately 1700. It describes not only the Siberian shamans, but also any community-recognized specialists of the ecstatic trance-journey, whatever their culture or religion may be. The term "*shamanism*" refers to the typical practices and beliefs of these spiritual specialists; it includes the methods of ecstatic trance-journey, and the beliefs and methods that arise from it. "*Shamanism*" also describes religions like those of Siberia, which support and depend upon the shaman as a necessary central figure to their

practices (much as Catholicism supports and depends upon on priests). These types of religions are moderately rare, and most modern uses of the word "*shamanism*" refer to trance-journey practices used within a religion, rather than to a religion itself.

Although Euro-American cultures don't support the classical role of a "*shaman*," there is a modern effort to re-introduce shamanic practices to the West. Known as neo-shamanism, this spiritual movement adapts the methods of the shamanic trance-journey to the needs of modern society. Like traditional shamanism, neo-shamanism is not a religion, but a set of practices and techniques used within existing belief systems. Neo-shamanism focuses on spiritual and psychological healing, and is finding acceptance, within alternative belief systems, but also among some Christian and other mainstream religious groups, as well as in certain branches of psychotherapy.

Unfortunately, the term "*shamanism*" has been misused in popular culture for many years. The entertainment industry has used "*medicine man*" and "*shaman*" interchangeably (and usually inaccurately) to describe holy men and women of Native America. The public began to assume that "*shaman*" was a Native American word, and that "*shamanism*" was a universal Indian Religion—but there is no universal "*Indian Religion*." There are hundreds of Indian Nations in North America, each with its own culture, language, and spiritual belief system. Many of these Nations are very different from one another in their religious traditions, and none of them describe their beliefs as shamanism. Even from a scholarly standpoint, few Native systems can be accurately described as "*shamanism*"—the ecstatic trance-journey is simply not a major part of most North American Indian cultures.

Commercialized pseudo-indian groups that sprang up in the late 1970's reinforce this confusion. Focused mainly on New Age alternative healing methods and environmental awareness, these groups misrepresent themselves as genuine teachers of Indian traditions. Exploiting the stereotype of Native Americans as ecological warriors and spiritual healers, they commonly charge high fees for teachings and ceremonies, a practice particularly offensive to traditional Native Americans. Although the teachings of these movements may be valid in their own right, they are neither traditional nor typical of Indian beliefs, nor are they shamanic, as they rarely if ever stress the ecstatic trance-journey as a central practice. Yet the movement continues to misrepresent itself as both Indian and shamanism.

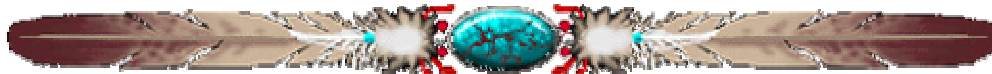
As a result, many Native Americans see the use of the word "*shamanism*" as the height of an offensive stereotype and commercial exploitation of their people's beliefs. Many neo-shamanists and scholars are sensitive to this issue, and strive to educate the public about exploitation of indigenous cultures, as well as correcting common misconceptions about the words "*shaman*" and "*shamanism*."

A "*shaman*" is a specialist and master of the ecstatic trance-journey, not a synonym for tribal healer, holy person or medicine man. "*Shamanism*" is the practice of ecstatic trance-journey, and the typical beliefs and techniques that arise from and support it.

Shamanism is not a catchall term for indigenous religion, earth-based religions, spiritual healing, or beliefs in totems, animal guardians or nature spirits. Both well-meaning and fraudulent teachers, books, periodicals and web pages promote these misconceptions about shamanism. They need to be corrected both for the preservation of traditional Native American cultures, and for the advancement of spiritual learning in the West.

Tori McElroy, October 23, 2000

For More [Information On Cultural Integrity](#)



What are the basic commonalities shared by the many different Shamanic practices throughout the world? What do they each have in common? Are there commonalities? Read and decide for yourself if this is the path for you. I have listed sources at the end of this article. Also, many thanks to Elder Medicine Fire, a real Shaman, my brother and a dear friend always.

1. **"Going Around In Circles."** All Shaman whether male, female, or androgynous understand this concept. Time is never linear but exists simultaneously on many different planes at one time. The Shaman understands the concept of many different cycles depending on where they are located. In the far reaches of the North two seasons exist which are Winter and Summer. At the Equator they are the season of wet and dry. Somewhere in between are areas that enjoy the four seasons of Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. In some parts of the world the Agricultural Seasons rule when to plant and harvest. These seasons continue the same for years, centuries, and eons. There is an understanding of the movement of the Earth and the Moon in relationship to the Sun and the other planets and stars. These are all cycles going around in a circle. Shaman understand the concept of The Circle of Life. We are born, we live, and someday each of us will die. It is as natural as the Seasons turning and understanding each is in the domain of the Shaman to give advise, help, heal and teach as needed for the common good of the community. This often means placing the community first and yours on hold.

2. **"Survival."** This is extremely important. Not all Shaman will marry and reproduce offspring. If they do, it is important that they train their children how to take care of the 7th generation yet to be born. Even if they never marry or have children it is important that they teach so that the wisdom is not lost but continues to survive in the next generation and their children's children and so forth. One thing for sure, many students will show up wanting to learn if you are a Shaman. They will seek you and it's up to you to choose the right one to teach. The student only hopes and wants to prove themselves worthy. Many a student does not have what it takes. Being insecure, childish, not honest, unethical, immoral, participating in illegal activities or being irresponsible will not endear you to a great teacher let alone a mediocre teacher. Shaman have

much responsibility for the common good and survival of the community taking their work very seriously. It is not unusual that they found their way quite by accident not wanting to accept the job as Shaman but got it anyway. It is a gift. The same goes for teaching. Often they did not want to teach but the class keeps getting larger anyway! This means they can be choosy teachers and the good Shaman usually takes on only one, two or three serious students at a time maybe in their entire lifetime.

3. **"Responsibility."** Not all understand the responsibility of recognizing that everything on this Blue Marbled Planet is connected and alive. This beautiful oxygenated living planet will always survive but will we? We are visitors here and the Earth is our Mother. We need to be more responsible for what is going on here. Our responsibility means making a difference so that the 7th generation yet to come will inherit a better place. It starts now and it starts today. Be responsible and waste nothing. Recycle, reuse, and make everything count. Make do with what you have. Don't be a part of the, *"I see, I want group."* Don't buy into who ever has the most toys wins. 4. **"Gifting."** Know that you are blessed if you truly have a job that you like and get paid for doing it. Meanwhile, if you don't have a job you like, work productively so you can get the job eventually that will pay you for what you like doing best. Be responsible for yourself and be self-sufficient. If you made too much share it with another while allowing them the dignity to repay you. This is known as a *"gift for a gift."* Teaching others is difficult, so remember not to waste time, your resources, or your efforts on those who refuse to learn from their mistakes. Teach the art of gifting to your community and your students. There are ignorant people who do not know any better. *"I have enough to share and know that you too will share with me someday when I need it."* This is a concept modern people don't always understand. It was an old custom of a *"gift for a gift."* It is what kept the economy going and is still practiced today but we call it spending money for an exchange of goods instead of *"exchange of gifts."*

5. **"Education."** Never stop learning and develop what you were born with: instincts, talents, skills, aptitudes, and your unique abilities. All of this was inherited from your ancestors. Teach and share your knowledge with others. Support and be able to educate your family. A Shaman never ever stops learning. Gather all the knowledge, store it, and use it for the good of the community.

6. **"Honor Your Ancestors."** You are here because of your ancestors. You would not exist had not they existed first. We also honor the youngest to oldest living member in our own family with equal respect as well. All have a purpose and each should have a say. To honor your ancestors is to honor yourself through them. They are here when we need help and oversee what we accomplish and do for the good of the community. Listen and the ancestors will speak.

7. **"Respect."** Have respect for all your brothers and sisters. We are all related and members of the same species known as *"all-kind."* Everything is living, alive, connected and related. The earth is our mother, the sky is related, and the moon is a relation as so is the sun. Every tree holds the memories of our past and oxygen to breath. Every crystal has stories that teach us. The fish, the mammals, the amphibians, the birds, all have something we can learn from in order to live better lives and teach others.

8. **"Boundaries."** Get rid of negativity in your life and set up boundaries for yourself. Be positive, seek the positive things in life that make you smile and be happy. Unhappy negative people do not live as long. Falsehoods, bad or unpleasant information is negative and the body needs goodness, wholesomeness, love, and positive experiences to survive and live a long healthy life. Strive to live a healthy life! Make good life choices and a good life partner. Always seek the light and enlightenment. Respect yourself, as you are an important individual deserving the very best life has to offer to be happy.

9. **"Spirit."** From Spirit you came and to Spirit you shall return. Life is eternal and is referred to as **THE CIRCLE OF LIFE**. We are born, we live and we die. Every Shaman must learn to face his/her own death. They must understand the cycle of life by coming to terms and facing death so they can guide others to the other side when it is their time to pass over. They must learn the art of compassion and allowing dignity of the dying. The young Shaman must learn by experiencing the joys and sorrows of life. The realm of death is to the more experienced Shaman. Shamans must let their spirit grow as well through experiencing all. None of this is learned over night or in just one lesson but through many lessons throughout one's entire lifetime. The Shaman must remember everything learned through experience and tap into those memories when needed.

10. **"Connected."** The Shaman must be connected to all there is and trust themselves while being there to experience all the senses which are to hear, to see, to smell, to feel and to taste. Above all they must also trust the ultimate intuition of the knowing and the communication with the other side. They must also master the sending and receiving which involves all of the above.


11. **"Memory."** Young Shaman are often like sponges and can retain great amounts of memory. The older Shaman learned at an early age to retain the memory and use it as needed along with being connected, which is using all of the senses and intuition. Suddenly there are no books, no records, or computers. What is the Shaman to do? The Shaman is the keeper of all the traditions, the history, the knowledge of our ancestors, and literally a walking library of knowledge for learning, healing, and helping. Be kind to your Elders. They have spent a lifetime of remembering and cataloging what is important, not what is trivial. Our continued survival depends on remembering.

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?




1. Go to your sacred place where you feel connection to deity.


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.....  2. Ask your Higher Power what your purpose, your duty, your job, your goal in life should be.


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.....  3. Often this is part of a Vision Quest. There are many kinds of Vision Quests. Some are a rite of passage taken for a few days, a week, or even a month. Men and women both may do this and it is always done alone with a teacher checking up on the individual participating to make sure they are all right. Usually, a Vision Quest is taken for a reason to accomplish something or learn something. Some Shaman use Sweat lodges, listen to drumming, bells jingling, rattling, singing, chanting, meditation, etc. to get into an altered state to communicate with Spirit. Some go to high places, a special well, a special rock formation or a place of high energy or a personal known sacred place.

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.....  4. The ancestors or deity will fill your mind with information you need to know.

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.....  5. Stand tall with your arms raised to the sky and ask out loud what you need to know. Be still, listen to the wind, honor all the elements, all living things, your ancestors, your deity, and then your purpose, your goal, and your duty will begin to grow from that point on.

H.J. Carol Thompson, AKA Stormy (Stormsdottir)



Animal Totems

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