

The Shamanic Journey: Experiences, Origins, and Analogues

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Shamanism, or at least its contemporary Western versions, has recently become surprisingly popular. This does not mean that shamanism is well defined or understood. Indeed, there is enormous confusion as to exactly what it is and how shamans can be distinguished from other tribal practitioners, such as medicine men, witch doctors, sorcerers, and magicians.

In fact, however, there are several key features that seem to distinguish this tradition. The first is that shamans can voluntarily enter altered states of consciousness, states that are distinguishable from those of both psychopathology and other religious traditions (Noll 1983; Walsh In press). The second is that, in these states, shamans experience themselves leaving their bodies and journeying to other realms in a manner analogous to contemporary reports of some out-of-body experiences or lucid dreams (Monroe 1971; Irwin 1985; LaBerge 1985). They use these journeys in order to acquire knowledge or power and to help people in their community.

Shamans also experience themselves interacting with and controlling "spirits." Although many of their fellow tribespeople might claim to see or even be possessed by spirits, only the shamans claim to have some control over them and to be able to command, commune, and intercede with them for the benefit of the tribe. The use of the term *spirits* here is not meant to necessarily imply that there exist separate entities that control or communicate with people. Rather, the term is being used simply to describe the shamans' interpretation of their experience.

In summary, shamanism might be defined as a family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves, or their spirit(s), traveling to other realms at will and interacting with other entities in order to serve their community (Walsh 1989a, 1990). The phrase *family of traditions* acknowledges that there is some variability among shamanic practitioners. However, the definition clearly distinguishes this tradition from other traditions and practices as well as from various psychopathologies with which it has been confused. For example, medicine men may heal and priests may conduct ceremonies, but they rarely enter altered states. Mediums usually enter altered states but do not journey; some Taoists, Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists sometimes journey but this is not a major focus of their practice; and while those who suffer mental illness may enter altered states and meet "spirits," they do so involuntarily as helpless victims rather than as voluntary creators of their experience.

ARE SHAMANS TRUE MYSTICS?

Whether or not shamans can be considered true mystics depends on both the definition and data one uses. If the criterion for a mystic is simply one who obtains direct intuitive transcendental knowledge, then the answer is clearly yes. During their journeys through the cosmos, shamans acquire a range of intuitive transcendental information of value to both them and their tribespeople.

However, a narrower definition of mysticism confines it to experiences of union with the divine, the so-called *unio mystica*. Did shamans experience this mystical union? I have found no references to it in the literature and neither apparently have others. One authority categorically states that "we never find the mystical union with the divinity so typical for the ecstatic experience in the 'higher' forms of religious mysticism" (Hultkrantz 1973, 28).

There are three lines of evidence that suggest that this conclusion might be incorrect. These are the fact that shamanism is an oral tradition, that powerful psychedelics may be used, and that some Westerners report unitive experiences.

That shamanism is an oral tradition means that such experiences may have occurred, at least occasionally, but have been lost to subsequent generations and, of course, to anthropologists. Without writing, there may be no way to adequately preserve a record of the highest, and

rarest, flowerings of a tradition.

Although not an essential part of shamanism, the use of psychedelics is common in some areas (Harner 1973). Peyote and ayahuasca, for example, are powerful substances and capable of inducing experiences that at least some authorities regard as genuine mystical ones (Smith 1964; Walsh 1989b).

Finally, Westerners being trained in shamanic practices may report unitive experiences, and I have personally heard two such accounts. These episodes seemed to be experiences of union with the universe, however, rather than with a deity. This points to the fact that there are actually different types of mystical union (Wilber 1982), and the experience of union with the universe is an example of so-called nature mysticism rather than theistic mysticism (union with God). But mysticism it is, and, in light of this and the other lines of evidence considered above, it seems that some shamans may be genuine mystics. Though unitive experiences are not the aim of shamanic journeys, which focus on soul travel, they may indeed occur. At the very least, it seems that some shamans were the forerunners of more recent mystics, that they possessed a technology of transcendence capable of inducing significant altered states of consciousness, and that they used these states to engage in soul flight to acquire power and information for themselves and for their tribes.

THE SHAMAN AS A SPECIALIST IN SOUL FLIGHT

At the heart of shamanism lies the shamanic journey or soul flight. It is this that helps define shamans and sets them apart from other ecstasies, healers, and mystics; it is this that makes them "cosmic travelers." "Any ecstatic cannot be considered a shaman," said Eliade, because "the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld" (Eliade 1964, 5). Others may enter altered states, minister or heal, but it is the shamans alone who primarily engage in soul flight.

During this cosmic traveling, the shaman's soul seems to leave the body and to roam at will throughout the expanses of the upper, middle, and lower worlds. The shaman is a cosmic traveler because, according to Eliade,

he commands the techniques of ecstasy—that is, because his soul can safely abandon his body and roam at vast distances, can penetrate the underworld and rise to the sky. Through his own ecstatic experience he knows

the roads of the extraterrestrial regions. He can go below and above because he has already been there. The danger of losing his way in these forbidden regions is still great; but sanctified by his initiation and furnished with his guardian spirit, a shaman is the only human being able to challenge the danger and venture into a mystical geography. (Eliade 1964, 182)

The shaman's experiences while journeying may be dramatic and dangerous, ecstatic or horrendous, demonic or divine. He (or she) may traverse numerous worlds and discover numberless spirits. His emotions may range from terror to bliss, yet often there is "an ineffable joy in what he sees, an awe of the beautiful and mysterious worlds that open before him. His experiences are like dreams, but waking ones that feel real and in which he can control his actions and direct his adventures" (Harner 1982, 27).

Shamans journey in order to learn, to heal, and to help. They may seek knowledge and power either for themselves or for their people. They may seek information for healing, for hunting, or to appease and petition the gods. They may also retrieve the souls of the sick or guide the souls of the dead to their resting place. Hence, shamans are frequently referred to as *psychopomps*, guides of souls.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SHAMANIC JOURNEY

The shamanic journey involves three phases: a prior period of preparation and purification, induction of an altered state of consciousness, and the actual journey.

The initial phase is one of preparation and purification. It may involve a period of isolation, fasting, and celibacy, perhaps alone in the wilderness or in a solitary hut. The journey is usually begun at night when the reduced illumination makes the perception of visions easier. The shaman begins the appropriate rituals and then uses techniques such as singing, dancing, drumming, or drugs to induce an altered state (Walsh 1989b, 1990).

For a journey to the lower world, the shaman usually visualizes an entrance into the earth. Common entrances include caves, a hollow tree stump, or a water hole. The shaman sees himself entering this hole and diving deep into the earth until he eventually emerges into another world. Michael Harner describes the experience as follows:

Entrances into the Lower world commonly lead down into a tunnel or tube that conveys the shaman to an exit, which opens out upon bright and marvelous landscapes. From there

the shaman travels wherever he desires for minutes or even hours, finally returning back up through the tube . . . to emerge at the surface, where he entered. (Harner 1982, 32)

Once in the lower world, the shaman begins the next phase of his mission. This may involve anything from obtaining medical information to recovering lost souls to placating angry spirits. A classic example of this kind of placation is the Eskimo shaman's journey to the depths of the sea to placate the spirit Takanakapsaluk. According to Eskimo legend, it is this stern goddess of fate who controls the sea animals on which the Eskimos depend for food. When the goddess becomes angry—most often because of breaches of taboo—she withholds these animals. Then the Eskimos hunt in vain, and hunger haunts the tribe.

At this time, their fate rests on the shaman. It is he alone who can journey to the bottom of the sea, the dwelling place of Takanakapsaluk, brave the barriers and beasts with which she protects herself, and beg her forgiveness (Rasmussen 1929, 123–27). Thus, while the ordinary human being lives as a more or less helpless pawn of the spirits, it is the shaman, and only the shaman, who can journey to the world of spirits and there placate and control them.

The journeys to the middle or upper worlds have the same general features as those to the lower world. There are, however, some differences in purpose and in the types of entities likely to be encountered. The lower world is often a place of tests and challenges. It is also a place, however, where power animals are acquired and where the shaman is guided and empowered to victory. The upper world is a place where teachers and guides may be found, and journeys here may be particularly ecstatic (Arrien 1989).

The middle world is this world, and, in their visions, shamans journey over it at will, unimpeded by barriers or distance, seeing far and wide, and returning with information about hunting, weather, or warfare. Middle-world journeys are particularly common in the near Arctic areas of North America and Siberia. Here food supplies are precarious, and animal herds migrate and must be located (Harner 1988).

The journey to the upper world usually begins from a raised area such as a mountain, treetop, or cliff from which the shaman envisions herself ascending into the sky. At some stage of the journey, there may be an experience of a kind of membrane that temporarily impedes the ascent. When this is pierced, the

shaman finds herself in the upper world, a world notably different from the middle world, and perhaps populated with strange animals, plants, and people. Like the lower one, the upper world may have several levels, and the shaman can usually move between them at will, perhaps assisted by a helping spirit.

The ascent may also occur in other ways. In some variations, the shaman may experience herself as transformed into a bird soaring to the upper world. At other times, the experience of ascent may involve climbing the world axis, the central axis that runs between upper, middle, and lower worlds. Sometimes the axis may take the form of a tree, the world tree. The shaman climbs this tree or may ascend a mountain, rainbow, or ladder. But whatever the specifics, the common theme is an ascent from this world into a world or worlds above, where spirits abide. There the shaman can intervene with them on behalf of her earth-bound tribespeople.

SPONTANEOUS JOURNEYS

Shamans learn, sometimes over many years, to induce and direct the journeys that are their hallmark. Yet people around the world who have never even heard of shamanism may be surprised to find themselves having journey-like experiences. These may erupt spontaneously and entirely unsought as out-of-body experiences (OOBEs), lucid dreams, or near-death experiences. Such experiences presumably have occurred throughout human history. As such, they may have provided inspiration for consciously induced journeys, first in shamanism, then in other religious traditions, and most recently in psychotherapy.

Spontaneous out-of-body experiences have been reported throughout history and have traditionally been referred to as "astral traveling." Perhaps the best-known travels are those of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg was an eighteenth-century Swedish intellectual who poured forth such a wealth of scientific writings and inventions that he was regarded as one of the great geniuses of his time. Yet, around his fifty-fifth year, he underwent a religious crisis and began to describe spontaneous personal journeys to heaven and hell and meetings with their inhabitants. He published numerous metaphysical works based on these experiences and presented a picture of the cosmos similar to that created thousands of years earlier in the Jain religion (Zimmer 1969). So impactful were his

writings that even today, some two centuries later, the Swedenborgian movement is still alive in several parts of the world.

Perhaps the best-known contemporary examples of spontaneous out-of-body experiences are those of Robert Monroe (1971). Monroe was a conventional businessman who feared he was going crazy and sought medical treatment when he found himself having out-of-body experiences. He had never heard of such a thing and did not even believe it possible. Yet, as the initial shock and fear diminished, he found himself able to control, explore, and enjoy the experiences. He chronicled the explorations in his widely sold book, *Journeys Out of the Body*.

A person having such out-of-body experiences may report experiences of travels similar to those of shamans. He or she may seem to travel at will around the world or to other worlds, meet various spirits, and feel like the recipient of all manner of valuable information. The fact that such experiences can occur spontaneously at first and later be brought under voluntary control suggests that this may be one way in which shamanic journeying was learned and relearned throughout human history.

A shamanic journey-like phenomenon can also occur during near-death experiences. It has long been known that those who have a brush with death may describe unusual and profound experiences. There has been a remarkable surge of interest in these near-death experiences, or NDEs as they are now called, ever since the publication of Raymond Moody's book *Life After Life* (Moody 1975), which has sold a mind-boggling total of ten million copies.

Near-death experiences occur most often in people who come close to death but are resuscitated at the last moment—for example, after a cardiac arrest. Though there is some variability from one person to another, the experience usually progresses through a series of recognizable stages. The first stage is marked by a sense of profound peace and well-being. Next comes the shock of finding one's "self" outside the body, able to hear and see everything going on in the environment, including one's own body lying comatose and unconscious. There are several reports of revived patients dumfounding their doctors with detailed descriptions of the resuscitation procedure that occurred while they were comatose or "dead" (Moody 1988).

In the next stage, there is a sense of moving through a vast dark tunnel. At the end of the tunnel is a spiritual figure or light of incom-

prehensible brilliance with which the dying person merges in ecstatic love. The experience ends with a sense that death would be premature and that the person must return to the world (Moody 1988).

Near-death experiencers, or NDEers, commonly report that the experience was the most profound, important, and life-changing moment of their lives. Almost 90 percent say they would be willing to repeat it (Ring 1980). Moreover, the experience can produce dramatic and long-lasting personality changes. These include a reduced fear of death and an increased belief in an afterlife. There is also a greater sense of the preciousness of relationships, love, and life, more interest in learning and self-knowledge, and a significant shift from materialistic goals and worldly possessions toward helping and caring for others. These dramatic changes are as much, or more, as would be expected from years of psychotherapy. Because of improved resuscitation techniques, the number of people having such experiences has increased dramatically in recent years. This combination of dramatic psychological and spiritual change among increasing numbers of people suggests that near-death experiences might eventually exert a significant impact on human culture and consciousness (Ring 1984, 1986).

There are obvious similarities—detachment from the body, journey to other realms, meeting spirits—between near-death experiences and shamanic journeys. Indeed, one writer has gone to the extreme of suggesting that "the shaman, then, is a master of death; he actually dies and is actually reborn. . . . The shaman is the classic investigator of the realm of death; he explores the routes of travel to and in the Beyond and thereby produces a map of the postmortem terrain" (Kalweit 1988, 15, 11).

At the present time, it seems far safer to say that although there are obvious similarities between shamanic journeys and near-death experiences, there are also significant differences. For example, unlike the shaman, a person near death appears to have very little if any control over the experience. As yet no single explanation—either biological, psychological, or spiritual—has proved adequate to account for the near-death phenomenon.

However, inasmuch as these experiences may have occurred throughout history and had profound transformative and healing effects, they may well have served as an inspiration for shamans. Indeed, one of the traditional calls to shamanism was unexpected re-

covery from a nearly fatal illness. If some shamans-to-be had near-death experiences, they may well have sought ways to recreate and control similar experiences for both their benefit and their tribes'.

A third type of cosmic traveling is one we have all experienced. This is the traveling that occurs in dreams. Within minutes of closing our eyes, we may journey to unknown worlds, meet strange inhabitants, and regard them as completely real. These dream journeys may be rich sources of insight. In many religions and psychologies, dreams are regarded not only, to quote Freud, as "the royal road to the unconscious" but also as the royal road to wisdom and awakening. Small wonder that some native cultures and shamans regard dream experiences and journeys as no less real or valuable than waking ones.

A particularly dramatic variation is "lucid dreaming," a state in which the dreamer knows that she is dreaming. The lucid dreamer is able to direct her dreams much as the shaman does his journeys. The dreamer can visualize traveling through this world or other worlds, meeting other beings, exploring, questioning, and learning. The technique has been developed further in Tibetan dream yoga. Here the yogi uses lucid dreams to study the nature of the mind or, like the shaman, to journey to other realms. In this case, she journeys to various heaven realms to seek teachings from the Buddhas (Evans-Wentz 1958).

Whatever one may think of such yogic claims, contemporary research makes clear that lucid dreaming is a real phenomenon. Most people have probably experienced at least one lucid dream, and training programs for cultivating them are now available. Thanks to these programs, what was once a secret technique available only in the monasteries of Tibet can now be learned in the comfort of one's own bed (LaBerge 1985).

It seems then that lucid dreaming, out-of-body, and near-death experiences have probably occurred spontaneously throughout human history. They may therefore have provided a basis for the widespread belief in a soul and soul travel and may also have provided the prototype for shamanic journeys. Because these experiences may be profoundly meaningful, healing, and helpful, they would doubtless have been valued and sought after. Consequently, the techniques and circumstances that favored them would have been carefully noted, cultivated, and transmitted across generations. When these and other

skills were collected into a coherent body of techniques and wedded to an explanatory mythology, the core elements of shamanism would be in place, and the shamanic tradition would be born or reborn.

This process may provide an answer to the long-debated question of how the world-wide occurrence of shamanism is to be explained. Two competing suggestions have been addressed. The first is that shamanism arose spontaneously in different locations; the second is that it spread around the world by migration. If journey-like experiences occurred spontaneously throughout human history, they may have repetitively reinspired and reinforced similar practices and beliefs in widely separated cultures and centuries. This would favor the idea that shamanism was discovered or rediscovered in many parts of the world. It would also account for why the tradition shows such similarities across cultures and why it was able to survive for so long.

COSMIC TRAVELING IN OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

While shamans are the cosmic travelers par excellence, they are not the only people who journey. Nowhere is cosmic traveling so central as in shamanism, yet both ancient religions and modern psychologies make use of analogous experiences.

Among religions, practitioners of Taoism, Islam, yoga, and Tibetan Buddhism may journey to other realms. Among Taoists, "visualizations were believed to help the adept ascend to paradise. In the course of the visualization he crossed the gates of the three celestial passes to enter the Yu-ching Heaven, where he undertook an excursion of 'paradise'" (Baldrian 1987, 301). Some Indian Muslims practice "allowing the soul to explore the spirit world," helped on its way with hashish, which they call the "heavenly guide or poor man's heaven" (Siegel and Hirschman 1984). In contrast to shamanism, however, these traditions use journeying only occasionally, and it is by no means a central practice.

JOURNEYS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Given the potential healing power of journeys, it is not surprising that psychotherapists have sought ways to induce similar experiences. The result is a wide range of imagery techniques that have been called by many names. Carl Jung, one of the first Westerners to use them, called them active imagination. Others refer to them as visualizations, guided imagery, guided meditation, or waking dreams. Commonly, pa-

tients are asked to create images of themselves going to meet people or entities that will provide insight, understanding, and healing (Vaughan 1979, 1986).

While such experiences have much in common with shamanic journeys, they usually differ in several ways. Unlike guided imagery, journeys usually occur in significantly altered states of consciousness, often involve an experience of traveling to other realms, and are believed by the shaman to be real rather than imaginary experiences.

Experiences closer to the shamanic journey can occur under hypnosis. Here subjects enter an altered state of consciousness and can experience themselves, if directed to do so, traveling through other worlds and realms. While hypnotized, they may believe these worlds to be real and in no way creations of their own minds. The similarity of these hypnotic journeys to the shaman's is not surprising as both occur in trance states. The difference is that the shaman is able to enter and leave the state at will and does not require another person, the hypnotist, to enter and direct the state.

WESTERN JOURNEYS

It is apparent, then, that several types of shamanic journey-like experiences can occur either spontaneously or through deliberate cultivation. This leads to the interesting question of whether people from nonshamanic cultures, including contemporary Western culture, can learn to journey shamanically. The answer for the large majority of people appears to be yes. With the aid of drumming, most people seem to find it surprisingly easy, and, over the course of a single weekend workshop, it is not unusual to see people deeply moved to joy or tears by their experiences.

Michael Harner, who has conducted thousands of people on shamanic journeys, reports that

approximately nine out of ten persons have the capacity for the visualization necessary to the shamanic journey. Interestingly, among Westerners, those who tend to have the most difficulties are often professionals in the fields of law, mathematics, linguistics, and philosophy—so-called left-brain specialists heavily devoted to logic in their work. (Harner 1985, 452)

Of course, this is not to say that people have equal talents. For all we know, there may be wide variations in the depth of trance and in the intensity, meaningfulness, and apparent reality of journey experiences.

It is interesting to note the marked contrast between the percentage of people who are apparently capable of journeying and the number who have actually engaged in it historically. The majority of people may have had the capacity. It was traditionally the shaman, however, and the shaman alone who engaged in cosmic travel while his compatriots, though perhaps having similar potential, remained steadfastly earthbound.

PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS

It seems then that the majority of people may have a latent capacity for journeying and that shamanic journey-like experiences can occur under a variety of circumstances. The question then arises as to how we are to interpret these experiences philosophically. For the shaman, this is not a problem; the experiences, realms, worlds, and spirits are all real, as real as this world and perhaps even more so (Harner 1982). However, this position is hardly likely to satisfy most contemporary Westerners, who are more likely to regard the experiences as examples—however dramatic—of vivid imagery or imagination.

Philosophically speaking, we have here two different ontological perspectives. The shamanic view is a realist one because it regards the phenomena found in the journey as real, objective, and independent of the shaman's mind. The shaman views the journey as, to use the precise technical terms, truly *exosomatic* (out of the body) rather than as *imaginal* (mind created imagery) (Irwin 1985).

This perspective is consistent with the shamanic worldview, which holds that other worlds and spirits exist and can be accessed directly through cosmic traveling. As the worldview may have been derived in part from shamanic journeys, this consistency is hardly surprising. Some people who have out-of-body experiences and near-death experiences interpret them similarly. They believe that the soul separates from the body and journeys through realms and meets beings that are quite separate and independent from themselves.

Certainly, the idea that there is a soul and that it can leave the body to travel to other realms is an ancient and perennial one. Plato described the soul as "imprisoned in the body like an oyster in his shell." Likewise, Socrates is quoted as saying that the mind only perceives absolute truths "when she takes leave of the body and has as little as possible to do with it, then she has no bodily sense or desire,

The idea that there is a soul that can leave the body to travel to other realms is an ancient and perennial one.

but is aspiring after true being" (Jowett [1892] 1937, 65).

More common today, however, is the subjective imaginal perspective that would interpret shamanic journeys and similar experiences as mind-created images. These images may be interpreted as either pathological or beneficial. Pathological interpretations would view them as hallucinations, whereas positive interpretations would see them as potentially helpful and healing products of the imagination.

A more radical perspective is that of Tibetan Buddhism. Here the realms to which the yogi travels in dreams or meditation are regarded as mind creations, but so too is everything in ordinary waking experience. This world and all worlds are ultimately regarded as dreams and creations of consciousness or Mind. Only in enlightenment is waking from all dreams, both sleeping and waking, said to occur. When asked for proof for this position, the yogi might give either a philosophical argument or the centuries-old advice, "to see if this be true, look within your own mind."

RESEARCH STUDIES

Research studies on shamanic states and journeys are few and far between. We have a number of good reports of shamanic experiences during journeys but as yet almost no other research has been done. An attempt to measure electroencephalographic activity during a journey failed because the shaman's body movement interfered with the measurements (Achterbert 1985). As yet, we have almost no research data on such things as the precise nature of shamanic states of consciousness or the effects of the journey on the shaman's physiology and personality.

However, while there has been almost no meaningful research done on shamanic journeys, there has been some on out-of-body experiences. Charles Tart (1977), one of the most thoughtful researchers of parapsychological phenomena, reports some evidence of

extrasensory perception and unusual EEG patterns in a subject claiming to have out-of-body experiences. A more intensive study of extrasensory perception during OOBES, however, produced results that were decidedly negative (cited in LaBerge 1985). In this study, approximately one hundred subjects were tested, all of whom believed they could readily induce OOBES and extrasensory perception while in them. The subjects were asked to visit a specific room while in the OOB and subsequently describe what they saw. In all but a very few cases, there was almost no correspondence whatsoever between the room and the descriptions.

Steven LaBerge has interpreted these negative findings as supporting his hypothesis that out-of-body experiences are actually misinterpreted partially lucid dreams (LaBerge 1985). This hypothesis would appear to account for a number of anomalous features of OOBES and for the fact that the experiences occur most often at night. Certainly, there is as yet no firm evidence that out-of-body experiences are actually associated with consciousness separating from the body. How one could even test such a thing is unclear.

Whatever interpretation of the shamanic journey one adopts, however, and whatever future research reveals, it is clear that the experience of apparently leaving the body and traveling to other realms is a perennial worldwide phenomenon. It may occur spontaneously or be deliberately cultivated, and techniques for inducing it are widespread among both ancient religions and contemporary psychologies. Those who experience it commonly report that it can be surprisingly helpful, healing, and insightful. It is therefore not surprising that variations on this ancient technique are now creeping into contemporary consulting rooms and that psychotherapists are beginning to follow the footsteps and flights of humankind's earliest therapists and mystics: the shamans.

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