

LIVING RELIGIONS

SIXTH EDITION

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and asking for guidance. In West Africa, there are also mediums associated with the temples; they enter a state of trance or allow themselves to be possessed by gods or spirits in order to bring messages to the people.

Mystical intermediaries

There is another distinctive type of spiritual specialist found among many indigenous peoples. They are called by many names, but the Siberian and Saami word "shaman" is used as a generic term by scholars for those who offer themselves as mystical intermediaries between the physical and the non-physical world for specific purposes, such as healing. Archaeological research has confirmed that shamanic methods are extremely ancient—at least 20,000 to 30,000 years old. Shamanic ways are remarkably similar around the globe.

These mystical intermediaries may be helpers to society, using their skills to benefit others. They are not to be confused with sorcerers, who practice black magic to harm others or promote their own selfish ends, interfering with the cosmic order. Spiritual power is neutral; its use depends on the practitioner. What Native Americans call "medicine power" does not originate in the medicine person. Black Elk explains:

Of course it was not I who cured. It was the power from the outer world, and the visions and ceremonies had only made me like a hole through which the power could come to the two-leggeds. If I thought that I was doing it myself, the hole would close up and no power could come through.²⁴

There are many kinds of medicine. One is the ability to heal physical, psychological, and spiritual problems. Techniques used include physical approaches to illness, such as therapeutic herbs, sweatbathing, massage, cauterization, and sucking out of toxins. But the treatments are given to the whole person—body, mind, and spirit, with emphasis on healing relationships within the group—so there may also be divination, prayer, chanting, and ceremonies in which group power is built up and spirit helpers are called in. If an intrusion of harmful power, such as the angry energy of another person, seems to be causing the problem, the medicine person may attempt to suck it out with the aid of spirit helpers and then dry vomit the invisible intrusion into a receptacle.

These healing methods, once dismissed, are now beginning to earn respect from the scientific medical establishment. Medicine people are permitted to attend indigenous patients in some hospitals, and in the United States, the National Institute of Mental Health has paid Navajo medicine men to teach young Indians the ceremonies that have often been more effective in curing the mental health problems of Navajos than has Western psychiatry.

In addition to healing, certain mystical intermediaries are thought to have gifts such as being able to talk with plants and animals, control the weather, see and communicate with the spirit world, and prophesy. A gift highly developed in Africa is that of divination, using techniques such as reading patterns revealed by a casting of cowrie shells. According to Mado Somé of the Dagara:

Divination is a way of accessing information that is happening now, but not right where you live. . . . The cowrie shells work like an intermediary between us and the other world. Divination is actually the inscription of information on those physical



Black Elk, visionary and healer.



Above left Traditional diviners of Mali rake sand and leave it overnight. The tracks of animals which run over it are interpreted the next day for information the client seeks.

Above right Mexican curandera (healer) Maria Sabina has eaten hallucinogenic mushrooms to enter an ecstatic state. She chants, "I am a doctor woman ... I am the morning star woman ... I am the moon woman ... I am the heaven woman ... they say it is like softness there."

things, allowing the shaman—whose eyes have been modified through the course of her various medicine journeys—to be able to read and interpret them.²⁵

Mystical intermediaries are contemplatives, Lame Deer explains:

*The wicasa wakan [holy man] wants to be by himself. He wants to be away from the crowd, from everyday matters. He likes to meditate, leaning against a tree or rock, feeling the earth move beneath him, feeling the weight of that big flaming sky upon him. That way he can figure things out. Closing his eyes, he sees many things clearly. What you see with your eyes shut is what counts. ... He listens to the voices of the wama kaskan—all those who move upon the earth, the animals. He is as one with them. From all living beings something flows into him all the time, and something flows from him.*²⁶

The role of shaman may be hereditary or it may be recognized as a special gift. Either way, training is rigorous. In order to work in a mystical state of ecstasy moving between ordinary and non-ordinary realities, shamans must experience physical death and rebirth. Some have spontaneous near-death experiences. Uvavruk, an Inuit shaman, was spiritually initiated when she was struck by a lightning ball. After she revived, she had great power, which she dedicated to serving her people.

Other potential mystical intermediaries undergo rituals of purification, isolation, and bodily torment until they make contact with the spirit world. Igjugarjuk from northern Hudson Bay chose to suffer from cold, starvation, and thirst for a month in a tiny snow hut in order to draw the attention of Pinga, helping female spirit:

My novitiate took place in the middle of the coldest winter, and I, who never got anything to warm me, and must not move, was very cold, and it was so tiring having to sit without daring to lie down, that sometimes it was as if I died a little.

Only towards the end of the thirty days did a helping spirit come to me, a lovely and beautiful helping spirit, whom I had never thought of; it was a white woman; she came to me whilst I had collapsed, exhausted, and was sleeping. But still I saw her lifelike, hovering over me, and from that day I could not close my eyes or dream without seeing her. . . . She came to me from Pinga and was a sign that Pinga had now noticed me and would give me powers that would make me a shaman.²⁸

For many mystical intermediaries, initiation into the role is not a matter of their own choice. The spirit enters whom it will. Tsering, an aged Nepali *dhami* (shaman), relates,

We never wanted to become dhamis. In fact, we tried hard to get the gods to leave us. We pleaded, performed worship ceremonies, even carried manure around with us to offend them, but nothing seemed to work. When calamities began to hit my family—when my brother died falling off the roof and our best horse drowned in the river—I realized I had no choice and had to make the initiatory journey to Kailas.²⁹

Ichurek is a famous shaman from Tuva Republic, Russia. She has been a healer and visionary since childhood, but people originally thought she was mad.

Once there, the new *dhamis* had to plunge naked with unbound hair into the freezing Lake Mansarovar in order to commune with the spirits. Then, on returning to their village, the deities who had possessed them insisted that they prove their spiritual connection by terrible feats, such as drinking boiling oil. Thereafter, those *dhamis* were respected as authorities.

In addition to becoming familiar with death, a potential mystical intermediary must undergo lengthy training in spiritual techniques, the names and roles of the spirits, and secrets and myths of the tribe. Novices are taught both by older shamans and reportedly by the spirits themselves. If the spirits do not accept and teach the shaman, he or she is unable to carry the role.

The helping spirits that contact would-be mystical intermediaries during the death-and-rebirth crisis become essential partners in their sacred work. Often it is a spirit animal who becomes the shaman's guardian spirit, giving him or her special powers. The shaman may even take on the persona of the animal while working. Many tribes feel that healing specialists need the powers of the bear; Lapp shamans metamorphosed into wolves, reindeer, bears, or fish.

Not only do mystical intermediaries possess a power animal as an alter-ego, they also have the ability to enter parallel, spiritual realities at will in order to bring back knowledge, power, or help for those who need it. An altered state of consciousness is needed. Techniques for entering this state are the



same around the world: drumming, rattling, singing, dancing, and in some cases hallucinogenic drugs. The effect of these influences is to open what the Huichol shamans of Mexico call the *nariéka*—the doorway of the heart, the channel for divine power, the point where human and spirit worlds meet. It is often experienced and represented artistically as a pattern of concentric circles.

The “journey” then experienced by mystical intermediaries is typically into the Upperworld or the Lowerworld. To enter the latter, they descend mentally through an actual hole in the ground, such as a spring, hollow tree, cave, animal burrow, or special ceremonial hole regarded as a navel of the earth. These entrances typically lead into tunnels that, if followed, open into bright landscapes. Reports of such experiences include not only what the journeyer saw but also realistic physical sensations, such as how the walls of the tunnel felt during the descent.

The shaman enters into the Lowerworld landscape, encounters beings there, and may bring something back if it is needed by the client. This may be a lost guardian spirit or a lost soul, brought back to revive a person in a coma. The mystical intermediary may be temporarily possessed by the spirit of departed relatives so that an afflicted patient may finally clear up unresolved tensions with them that are seen as causing illness. Often a river must be crossed as the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead. A kindly old man or woman may appear to assist this passage through the underworld. In cultures that have subdued the indigenous ways, this mystical process is retained only in myths, such as the Orpheus story.

Group observances

Indigenous ways are community-centered. Through group rituals, traditional people not only honor the sacred but also affirm their bonds with each other and all of creation. Humans can help to maintain the harmony of the universe by their ritual observances.

In order to maintain the natural balance and to ensure success in the hunt or harvest, ceremonies must be performed with exactitude. For instance, there is a specific time for the telling of specific stories. Chona, a Tohono O’odham (Papago) medicine woman, told anthropologist Ruth Underhill:

I should not have told you this [the origin of Coyote, who helped to put the world in order, with a few mistakes]. These things about the Beginning are holy. They should not be told in the hot time when the snakes are out. The snakes guard our secrets. If we tell what is forbidden, they bite.²⁰

Rituals often take people out of everyday consciousness and into awareness of the presence of the sacred. According to the Tsalagi (Cherokee) priestess Dhyani Ywahoo, paying attention to the proper forms brings clarity of attention and creates a sacred space in which many things can happen:

What’s important about ritual is that it has a beginning. And before that beginning there has been a preparation, so that people’s bodies and minds are brought to a certain level of vibrancy.²¹

In such altered states, participants may experience a heightened group consciousness that powerfully binds individuals together as a community.