The Shamanism Bible
John Matthews
The definitive guide to Shamanic thought and practice
THE WORLD’S BESTSELLING MBS SERIES
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All you ever wanted to know about shamanism
DEDICATION

To Caitlin, with whom I have shared the exploration of shamanism for more than thirty years and who has taught me more than I can say. To the spirits and allies who have taught me to ‘always go deeper’, and to all the students and clans who have, over the past twenty years, shared the journey and helped me to share mine.

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The history and practice of shamanism is a vast and complex subject that takes us to virtually every part of the world and to the exploration of many cultures. To make this more accessible, I have broken the subject down into three parts.

First, after a brief introduction, comes a cultural exploration of shamanism around the world. Second is a look at the various aspects of shamanic practice as it is remembered and reported – and in many cases still practised – by those who follow the shaman’s path. Last comes a section of practical exercises, intended to give you a taste of the shaman’s craft. I suggest that you read at least the second part before progressing to the third, possibly following this with a more in-depth look at the background to shamanism as outlined in Part One. So, if you want to know about the history of shamanism, or the different practices, you can read about them in one or other of the sections; but if it’s the practical side that draws you, there are a few things to get you started. A glossary of unfamiliar terms and names, a section on further reading, as well as information on training groups and producers of equipment can be found at the end of the book.
An Hamatsa shaman communicates with the spirit of the tree during an initiation ritual in British Columbia, 1914.
The word ‘shaman’ comes from the Tungusc language of Siberia and its etymology is debated. Some say it means ‘to be consumed with fire’ [of inspiration]; others suggest that it means ‘he or she who knows’. Throughout this book the term ‘shamanism’ is used generically to apply to all kinds of spiritual transaction, and the non-genderal word ‘shaman’ to all who practise this discipline, though they have specific titles, names and roles in different cultures.
A Tuva shaman awaits the summer sunrise, Tuva Republic, Northwest Asia.
THE STORY OF SHAMANISM

Wherever we look across the world we find traces of the ancient tradition called shamanism. Its history is deeply linked to our response as human beings to the world around us, and to the spiritual dimension of that world.

Shamanism is the oldest known spiritual discipline in the world. Its outward symbols have been discovered in Australia, the Americas, Africa, the Far East, Siberia and much of Europe, dating back to the dawn of history. Rock paintings, ancient carved stones, painted shells and antique personal adornments, originating from sites as far apart as Scotland, France, South and North America, the Arctic Circle and the Australian Bush, give us glimpses into the life and practice of the shaman.

LIVING TRADITION

In many parts of the world these ancient disciplines are still practised and taught and, through the living carriers of this tradition, we have learned to add dimension to the artefacts. The world thus revealed, for all its constant overlapping with the realms of the spirit, is at times an overwhelmingly substantial one, possessing a universality that enables modern shamans to talk essentially the same language irrespective of background or race, and to practise shamanism in ways that refer back to the distant past and forward towards the future.
A Sangoma – or healer – from KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Sangomas practise healing through divination.

Because it is not a religion as such, but rather a spiritual practice, shamanism cuts across all faiths and creeds, reaching the bedrock of ancestral memory. As a primal belief system that precedes religion, it has its own universal symbolism and cosmology, inhabited by beings, gods and spiritual allies that show manifestly similar characteristics though they appear in localized forms depending on their place of origin.

**WHAT IS SHAMANISM?**

Definitions of shamanism vary from culture to culture and from tradition to tradition, but most agree on common principles such as soul flight (the journey out of the body into different states of being) and the ability to heal sickness in collaboration with spiritual allies. Anthropology terms shamanism ‘animistic’ – that is, founded on the belief that all things have spirit – but practical shamanism is much more: it is a servant of all spiritual traditions, able to draw upon the deep primordial life of the universe, preceding all of our received religions as wisdom inherited by all. It is a transcendent system that puts the
practitioner in touch with every level of creation, both inside and outside what is generally accepted as reality. Above all, it is supremely practical and requires a pragmatic, down-to-earth respect for truth, nature and knowledge – the three candles that no darkness can extinguish.

WHO IS THE SHAMAN?
The shaman has many roles, but not every individual possesses a full range of shamanic skills and individual shamans often specialize in various aspects of spiritual work. The shaman can be a spirit doctor, healer, diviner, seer, prophet, negotiator, ancestral intermediary and ritualist, among other roles. Shamanism itself is the practice of bringing healing, wholeness and harmony to body, mind and soul. Where ancestral laws or environmental boundaries have been violated, the shaman will seek to re-harmonize the relations between people and land, or with tribal ancestors. Where an individual falls into soul sickness, the shaman will journey to that person’s spiritual guardians and allies, who can take away illness and restore wholeness. When sickness comes to domestic beasts, the shaman may commune with the spirits to find healing and renewal.

A Mongolian shaman dances at a sacred stone on Black Mountain Head in the Nalaikh district of Ulan Bator.
THE SHAMANIC JOURNEY
Shamans continually travel between the otherworld of dream and vision and the everyday world of waking consciousness. These two worlds are seen as comprising a single reality. This unified vision of one world with two dimensions stands in stark contrast to the increasingly prevalent view that the everyday world and the life we live is the only reality. Shamans keep open the ways between the worlds in order to maintain this unified vision, because it is the bedrock of all healing and connection with the infinite. No one and nothing is left out of this unity.

Anthropologist Holger Kalweit, in his book *Dreamtime and Inner Space*, sums up the most widely accepted aspects of the shamanic way of life as follows:

> The shaman is part of the age-old tradition of the Perennial Philosophy – the mystical teaching of unity of all things and all being. In the realm of magic everything is interrelated; nothing exists in isolation…. This level of consciousness, like a gigantic telephone exchange, affords access to all other realms of awareness. All mystical paths are agreed that such a way of experiencing requires a suspension of normal awareness and of rational thought by means of special techniques of mind training.

*DREAM TIME AND INNER SPACE, HOLGER KALWEIT, 1984*

INITIATION
Shamanic abilities are generally brought on by a personal crisis, such as illness or sudden shock. Where this is not naturally forthcoming, initiations designed to produce the effects of such a state are used to bring about re-birth as a shaman. The shaman sees through everything, dies and is reborn, suffers the pangs of the world, and sees into its darkest corners. The near-death of initiation is common to shamans the world over and a metaphor for their experiences. Afterwards, they are never the same; everything has changed for them. They have known total knowledge and, to a degree according to their skills and strengths, have permanent access to it from that moment on.

Ecstasy is the bliss of experiencing everyday life and the otherworlds as one reality. Mircea Eliade, the greatest contemporary writer on the subject, defines this further:

> In the sphere of shamanism in the strict sense, the mystical experience is expressed in a … trance…. The shaman is pre-eminently an ecstatic. Now on the plane of primitive religions ecstasy signifies the soul’s flight to heaven, or its wanderings about the earth, or, finally, its descent to the subterranean world.

*SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY, MIRCEA ELIADE, 1964*
No one can say where or how shamanism first appeared. It seems to spring naturally from the earth and stones beneath us, the rivers and seas that surround us, the air that we breathe. It seems to dawn with the first stirrings of human awareness that we are not alone, that there is a spiritual dimension to all life, and those who recognize this are called to act as intermediaries between the world of humans and spirits.

The thread of this ancient path has been broken, restored, and revived again and again throughout history. But shamanism has never left entirely, and in our own time it has undergone an extraordinary revival, with hundreds of practitioners and students across the globe following the precepts of the different shamanic traditions and adapting these ancient skills to life in the 21st century.

A shaman of the Bora Tribe wearing a ceremonial macaw feather headdress, Amazon Basin, Peru.

One of the reasons this ancient skill is still practised is because it is effective. Just as people may not return to a doctor who brings them no relief, so, too, they will not continue to seek help from ineffective shamans. The healing that may come though this route is real. It touches not just the body but also the soul, where causes of illness often hide. By harmonizing the causes of illness and disquiet, and restoring soul and spirit to its rightful
In this book I have set out to give a straightforward account of a vast and complex subject. Shamanism cannot be explained, only experienced, and it is often said that shamans are born, not made. Here you will find a taste of what it means to be a shaman and, through the exercises in Part Three, you will have an opportunity to explore some of the experience for yourself.

John Matthews
Oxford, 2013
PART ONE

SHAMANISM AROUND THE WORLD
Brandon Mountain and lakes from Connor Pass, Dingle Peninsula, Ireland.
NORTHERN EUROPE

In the northern quadrant of the world, particularly the British Isles and Scandinavia, shamanism has flourished intermittently for thousands of years. Despite the inroads of Christianity, traditions that emerged from antiquity have been kept alive into the present. Folk medicine and traditional healing customs testify to the memory of ‘Cunning Men and Women’ who practised ancient skills and taught that healing could be obtained through trance, invocation, prophecy and otherworldly journeys. Many people teach courses in shamanism and work with clients in our own time, using concepts drawn from traditional native British sources and ancient Celtic lore.
THE CELTS

In Britain and Ireland, traces of early shamanic practice can be seen just beneath the surface of the great mythic cycles of the Celts, such as those that tell of the Irish Suíbhne Geílt, the Welsh Taliesin, and the Scottish Finn. The rich bardic lore of these people dealt not only with poetry, but with prophecy, vision and divination through invigilated sleep or trance.

Poets trained for twelve years, with the final three being given over to shamanic skills. Their belief in spiritual healing, ancestral wisdom, spirits and the sacredness of all life is inherent in everything they created. Thus we find the 6th-century bard Taliesin writing:

I have been a slender sword
A drop in the air,
A shining bright star
A letter among words…

Such statements were for a long time seen as poetic bombast, but in more recent times they have been acknowledged as accounts of real experiences. When Taliesin speaks of having ‘been’ a sword, or a drop of rain, or a star, he means that he has literally experienced what it means to be so completely at one with the things he sees and hears in such a way that he feels as if he were, indeed, one of them. He speaks from within a state of embodiment, where shaman and spirit are in the same time and place.

This kind of inner passage to the heart of all things takes place in an entranced state, and shamans can reach profound depths of understanding by this method. Modern practitioners refer to this as a ‘shamanic journey’ and use different means to achieve it. Most use a sound source, such as a drum or plucked string or song, to assist them in reaching a degree of separation from the body that allows them to send forth a thread of their spiritual self in search of knowledge; others use natural hallucinogenic substances to separate them from their physical bodies.

In this state, the shaman sends forth a part of his soul to leave behind everyday awareness and move into an altered state of being in which he or she can encounter spiritual forces, learn from them, and return with tidings of otherworldly wisdom and vision.
This image from the Gundestrup Cauldron represents what a Celtic shaman may have looked like.

THE LORD OF THE BEASTS

The image of the Celtic shaman stares back at us from the Gundestrup Cauldron, a vibrant artefact discovered in a Danish bog but recognized as deriving from Celtic culture. It shows a figure in a pose assumed by many shamans the world over, cross-legged, upright, staring forth at a world only he can see. On his head are antlers, which may be a headdress or actual horns growing from his head. He is surrounded by beasts of all kinds, the spirit allies that enable him to enter and travel unharmed through the realms of the Otherworld, and in his left hand he grasps the head of a serpent, a creature long associated with spiritual wisdom and magic.

This figure, long accepted by historians, archaeologists and mythographers alike as an ancient representation of a shaman, is sometimes known as the Lord of the Beasts – reflecting his connection with spirit allies who take the shape of animals, birds and fish. He appears dramatically in a story found in the medieval collection of Welsh myths and legends known as The Mabinogion. In this the hero, Cynon, relates the story of his adventures in the Otherworld where, having met with one of its mysterious denizens, he is instructed to go into a wood and there follow a path to a large sheltered glade with a mound in the centre:
And thou wilt see a black man of great stature on top of the mound. He is not smaller in size than two men of this world. He has but one foot; and one eye in the middle of his forehead. And he has a club of iron, and it is certain that there are no two men in the world who would not find their burden in that club. And he is not a comely man, but on the contrary he is exceedingly ill-favoured; and he is the Woodward of that wood. And thou wilt see a thousand wild animals grazing around him.

Cynon follows these instructions and there, as foretold, is the strange figure of the Woodward:

Huge of stature as the man had told me that he was, I found him to exceed by far the description he had given me.... And he only spoke to me in answer to my questions. Then I asked him what power he held over those animals. 'I will show thee, little man,' said he. And he took his club in his hand and with it struck a stag a great blow so that it brayed vehemently, and at his braying the animals came together, as numerous as the stars in the sky, so that it was difficult for me to find room in the glade to stand among them. There were serpents, and dragons, and divers sorts of animals. And he looked at them, and bade them go and feed; and they bowed their heads and did him homage as vassals to their lord.

The Mabinogion, translated by Lady Charlotte Guest, 1906

This whole passage is full of shamanic overtones. It is clearly a very primitive story, despite the fact that it was not recorded until the Middle Ages. The depiction of the figure with one eye and one foot derives from a manner of casting a spell in which the shaman would stand upon one leg, with one hand behind his back and one eye tightly closed, before uttering his incantation. Similar figures are found as far afield as the Harappan culture of the Indus Valley.
The Celts fashioned their myths into their metalwork. This 5th-century bronze head of a creature was found near the Vltava River, northwest of Prague.

**FIRST SHAMAN**

There are references in Siberian tradition to the birth of the first shaman, where the Mother of Animals gives them, new born – that is into their shamanic abilities – into the keeping of a spirit named Burgestez-Udagan, who has one eye, one hand and one leg. The fact that the figure also has a dark skin denotes his connection with the earth and with the underworld. Like all shamans, he only answers when questioned directly. He is a master of beasts, including serpents and dragons – both of which are depicted on the Gundestrup Cauldron. His method of summoning the animals, by striking the stag so that it calls the rest, seems to relate to an earlier scenario in which the shaman probably adopted the skin and antlers of the stag and summoned them by calling in the language of the beasts.

**SAINTS AND SHAMANS**

Celtic tradition is full of stories of this kind, reflecting a world view in which humankind and the natural world are closely related, where beings from the spirit realm walk openly though our world and open the way into their own. It seems more than likely that later accounts of Celtic saints, who in their self-chosen isolation stood for hours up to their waists in icy water or fell into a trance-like sleep from which they awoke having conversed with god or angel, are the natural inheritors of this more ancient practice.
Among the Norse and Germanic peoples, shamanism and magic were under the aegis of Odin (Wotan) who, as the divinity who gained wisdom by hanging upon the World Tree, or Yggdrasil for three days and nights, echoed the experiences of shamans during spiritual rebirth.

Although he lost the sight of one eye while he fasted and endured upon the tree, Odin gained interior vision and great knowledge. The Ynglinga Saga tells of him sending out his soul to travel to other worlds, and using animal spirit allies as he controls the weather, explores the elements, acquires healing powers and seeks out the unknown. He is wise in rune lore and in galdur, or chanting; he can prophesy far-off events. These skills he teaches to the priests, or godi, revealing that shamanism was part and parcel of pre-Christian Scandinavia. Most accounts of shamanism from this era derive from sagas and stories written later in the Christian era, though much archaeological evidence has also been found.

Odin’s sacrifice is reminiscent of stories that have survived the world over of shamans falling into near-death states and returning from the edges of the otherworld with new skills and insights that set them apart from the rest of their people. Though a god, Odin’s suffering was the gateway to knowledge and wisdom, just as is the shaman’s. The loss of one eye can be seen as a means of opening to otherworldly vision; Odin has one eye that sees the otherworld, one to view this world.

Another story that illustrates Odin’s shamanic role is found in the Grímnismál or ‘Lay about Grimnir’, an epic poem dating at its furthest extent from the 10th century and describing a struggle for mastery between two brothers, Geirrodr, who was raised by Odin, and Agnarr, who was brought up by Odin’s wife Frigg. When Geirrodr kills his father in order to inherit the kingdom, an argument breaks out between the god and his wife over the justice of the situation. Odin, calling himself Grimnir, visits Geirrodr, who treats his guest appallingly, at the suggestion of Frigg herself. Grimnir/Odin is tortured between two fires for eight nights, and it is only when the young Agnarr brings him water that the god bursts out with a series of enigmatic verses describing a vision of the Otherworld as well as much more. These verses contain the wisdom on which much of the subsequent spirituality of the Norse people is based.
SHAPE SHIFTERS

Many Norse stories relate shamanic accounts of shape shifting, a practice that also spilled over into the martial practice of the berserker and ulfhedhir warriors, who emulated bears and wolves as they charged naked into battle. We will meet the same idea among the ‘Jaguar Shamans’ of the Amazon.

We have an account of a typical Icelandic temple from the Eyrbyggja Saga. With a door at one end, inside the temple were the high-seat pillars studded with god-nails, said to represent the god Thor. In the middle of floor was a mighty iron ring on which oaths were sworn, which the godi, or priest, had to wear at ceremonial gatherings. In the innermost temple was the altar upon which was a bowl of blood, and around it images of the gods. A recent discovery of a highly preserved temple at Ranheim, about 10 kilometres (6 miles) north of the Norwegian city of Trondheim, has confirmed much of the literary evidence.

HARALD AND ERIK BLOODAXE
Elsewhere, in Olaf Tryggvason’s Saga, King Harald of Denmark orders a shaman to go to Iceland in the shape of a whale and then to swim ashore to spy out the land. Swimming round the island, the shaman is assaulted by various land spirits that come out to him in the forms of a dragon, a mighty bird, a bull and a giant. This account of land spirits being a force to reckon with is borne out in Icelandic lore, which forbade the beaching of longships with their prows detached lest the land spirits be offended. The animal-headed prows had to be first disassembled before beaching. Egil Skallagrímsson, the Viking poet, warrior and hero of Egil’s Saga took the Icelandic land spirits very seriously; hoping to upset them and to cause them to banish his rival, ‘Erik Bloodaxe’, from Iceland, he erected a niðstöng or ‘scorn-pole’ inscribed with insulting runes in Norway. It seems to have the desired effect, for Erik was deposed by his brother within the year.

The Temple at Uppsala, an ancient Norse religious site in Sweden, from a 1905 illustration.

GOING UNDER THE CLOAK

There are parallels between the practices of the Irish Celts and those of Iceland, particularly as regards ‘going under the cloak’ or retiring into darkness in order to obtain spirit assistance in the answering of difficult questions. An example of this practice can be found from 1000 CE, by which time most of Europe had been Christianized. Iceland found itself isolated and disadvantaged and the Icelanders had to decide whether or not to adopt the Christian religion as the conflict threatened to split their country’s people. At the Althing, or
Icelandic parliament, Thorgeir Godi, the law-giver, went ‘under his cloak’ for a whole day in order to find an answer to this decision, as reported in *Njal’s Saga*:

‘*We cannot live in a divided land,*’ he said. ‘*There will never be peace unless we have a single law.* I ask you all – heathens and Christians alike – to accept the one law that I am about to proclaim.’ All agreed, pledging under oath to abide by his judgment. He then proclaimed:

‘*Our first principle of law is that all Icelanders shall henceforth be Christian. We shall believe in one God – Father, Son and Holy Ghost. We shall renounce the worship of idols. We shall no longer expose unwanted children. We shall no longer eat horsemeat. Anyone who does these things openly shall be punished with outlawry, but no punishment will follow if they are done in private!*’

*Njal’s Saga*, translated by Caitlín Matthews, 2012

Thorgeir’s quest for advice from spirits while under the cloak of darkness, a long-established practice, resulted in Iceland becoming Christian. The law-giver went home, took his household gods and deposited them in a waterfall. The ‘going under the cloak’ method may have been absorbed into the Scandinavian practice of *uitiseta* or ‘sitting-out’ at night to obtain answers to questions. Parallels exist between Scandinavian and Celtic practices.
THE WORDS OF THE HOODED ONE

A bright land I see where there are Gods and Elves…
There Wuldor has built him a hall;
Another, Elfim, the Gods gave to Frey.
There is the third mansion,
Which the blessed Gods thatched with silver:
It is called Waleshel.
Sunkbench the fourth is called,
Where the cold waves ever murmur above;
There Woden and the Seeress
Drink every day joyfully out of golden cups.
Gladheim the fifth is called…
There the Sage chooses weapon-dead men.
That hall is very easy to know
For all that come to visit Woden;
The house is raftered with shafts,
The hall is thatched with shields,
The benches are strewn with mail-coats…
A wolf hangs before the west door,
An eagle hovers above it…

THE EYRBYGGJA SAGA, TRANSLATED BY GUBRAND VIGFUSSON AND F. YORK POWELL, 1883

THE ORACLE OF THE HIGH SEAT

Seiðr, usually anglicized as seidh, has been traced back to the 3rd or 4th centuries CE, though it probably originated much earlier. It is said that the goddess Freya first taught it to the god Odin, who later passed it on to mankind.

Seidh is a form of oracle whereby the seer consults the spirits on behalf of those who have questions that cannot be answered by ordinary means. Its practice was mostly confined to women, since oracular work was considered to be dishonourable for men. The practitioners of seidh were called, variously, vöльva, seiðkonur and vísendakona, names that impart their deep seeing and ability to give oracles. The seeress sat in a high seat, supported by her staff, and went into a trance helped by the singing of trance-inducing songs. Questioners would stand before the seeress and ask their questions; the seeress’s answer was often delivered in a gnomic or metaphorical way. Rich burials of seiðkona (plural of seiðkonur) have been discovered, recognizable from the presence in the grave of the characteristic staff that the seer held in her hands as she sat on the platform in the high seat.
The Sacred Bear Stone, where Norwegian Sami meet to perform rituals.
A 1910 illustration of the goddess Freya. She is said to have instructed Odin in the arts of seership and prophesy.

**REVIVIAL OF SEIDH**

Seidh virtually died out after the coming of Christianity to Scandinavia, and was often represented retrospectively as a negative practice, used to invoke bad weather or cause damage to other people's property. More recently it has made a return, thanks to dedicated teachers around the world, and is once again recognized as a powerful and effective shamanic skill.
THORKEL CALLS IN THE SEERESS

The 13th-century Saga of Erik the Red tells how Thorbjorg, a seiðkona or völva, was invited to Thorkel’s farm in Greenland in order to hold a seidh for the people, who were suffering sickness from a famine. Wearing a blue cloak and a headdress of black lamb trimmed with white cat skin, the seeress carried the symbolic distaff (seiðstafr) which she would use when sitting on a high platform to prophesy.

She looked all around the farm and was invited to feast that night upon a dish which had the hearts of all the different kinds of beasts found on the farm. The next morning, she made ready for the seidh and asked if anyone there knew the trance-inducing songs, or varðlokker. The only person who knew the chant was the reluctant Gudrid, a Christian woman whose foster mother had taught her the songs; despite her protestations about not wanting to be part of the ceremony, she was persuaded to help all the people by her singing.

For the seidh, Thorbjorg sat in the high seat, upon a platform surrounded by a circle of women, with Gudrid leading the singing of the varðlokker chant. So beautifully did Gudrid sing that Thorbjorg praised her, saying:

*The spirits wanted nothing to do with us before this, and would not obey us, but now I can see what was concealed from me. This famine will not last, spring will come, and the sickness will clear sooner than expected. As for you, Gudrid, I see your whole life. You will make an honorable marriage and settle in Iceland. Your lineage will be famous and on your descendants a light will shine. Go well and happy, daughter.*
Further north, in an area stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Ural Mountains and from the edges of the Arctic Circle to Kazakhstan, and which includes Mongolia and Lapland, Buryat, Yakut, Altai and Sami shamans bring us in touch with echoes of the time when shamanism first appeared.
The timeless landscape of the Altai Mountains, Siberia, is home to many shamans.
The word ‘shaman’ derives from the Tungusc and Evenki language groups, and it is in this area, among the tribes who are said to be the inheritors of the spiritual traditions of Central Asia, that the roots of shamanism can be most clearly traced.

Buryatia, in southern Siberia, sits between Mongolia and Russia. This is an ancient land, seen by many as one of the oldest cradles of shamanism. Its people have lived for centuries on the northern shores of Lake Baikal, the largest body of fresh water in the world. They follow a nomadic lifestyle in Buryatia’s mountainous landscape that has changed little over the years and continue to practice shamanism from an almost uninterrupted lineage.

Male shamans are known as boo and female as odigon; their power and potency derive from the strength of the spirits that work through them and the length of their ancestral lineage, known as the udkha. The most powerful are those who receive their knowledge and training directly from the most senior of the gods, Tengeri, the sky, from which they are known as ‘Incantators to the Sky’.

Buryat Blacksmith

Many of the most powerful practitioners are blacksmiths who, in common with other regions of the world, are regarded as semi-divine because of their ability to forge metals. It is said that if the smith does not possess a large enough collection of ancestral supporters, or if he is not surrounded by the noise of hammers and the roar of the fire, then birds with crooked claws will tear his heart out and consume it.

It is to these skilled artisans that the shamans turn to create the elaborate costumes that form an important part of their work, and enable them to journey into the otherworld. Hung with ornaments cast from iron and shaped in the fires of the smith, these costumes are passed from generation to generation, since the art of smithying is no longer widely practised and there are fewer and fewer smiths initiated into the mysteries of the older world who are still working today in Siberia. The miniature ornaments include tools that the shaman use while journeying.
Sacred flagpoles decorate the shores of Lake Baikal.

Rituals involving fire continue to play an important part in the shamanism of this ancient people. In some areas they celebrate their most important ceremonies around an anvil, where offerings are made and (when the matter is especially serious) a sheep or goat is sacrificed.

New shamans receive a call to follow the path either directly from the spirits or from an ancient shamanic ancestor, who will seize their soul during illness and carry it off to the otherworld. There the soul is educated by the gods and taken on a tour of the three worlds –
upper, middle and lower – where it encounters various deities. This same story is told in many other cultures that we shall encounter later on.

As an indicator of the importance of smiths, many spirits acknowledged by the Buryats take the form of celestial horses, which both protect the lives of the people and offer visions to their shamans.

A Shaman performs a ritual on Olkhon Island, Siberia.

CELESTIAL SPOUSE
The Buryat shamans believe in the existence of a pantheon of one hundred deities, divided into 44 from the East (the Spiteful Ones) and 55 from the West (the Benevolent Ones). Some shamans will choose to follow one or other group, polarizing them into ‘white’ and ‘black’ practitioners who, while they should not be seen as dualistic in the pure sense of the term, display great animosity towards each other. These deities have distinct functions that enable the shamans who visit them to learn what they have to teach. In addition to the gods, the people also worship Mother Earth, the sacred spirits of Fire, as well as the spirits of ancestors and those that protect the natural world.
Some of the training may take the form of sexual encounters, which take place within the shamanic journey. The soul of the candidate may sleep with the nine wives of Teka Shara Matzkalka, the god of dance.

It is said that during this time the shaman-to-be will meet the being who is to be his or her inner teacher and ally thenceforward. Some call this figure ‘a celestial spouse’, and the terminology of a marriage is used both during and after the shaman’s training. The same idea flourishes as far away as South America.

Shamanic training among the Buryats can take several years, during which time the trainee will experience spontaneous visions, fits and trembling. Most of the time he or she will live in solitude, with just a single older and more experienced shaman watching to see how he or she responds during journeys and what teachings are received from the spirits.

**INITIATION CEREMONY**

When the time finally arrives for the initiation of the new shaman, this takes place publically, after a ritual purification by water in which the initiate is immersed nine times. This purification must be repeated at least once every year, and if the shaman has carried out a particularly powerful healing he or she may be required to be purified in blood.

The central aspect of the initiation ceremony outlines the essence of the Buryat shaman’s connection to nature. A birch tree is cut down and erected in the centre of the ceremonial yurt; its branches extend beyond the smoke hole in the roof. Red and blue ribbons, representing the rainbow by which the shaman is traditionally said to cross to the Otherworld, hold the tree in place. The initiate then climbs the tree, signifying his ascent though the levels of the upper worlds. At the top he may call out messages to those below, using his visionary sight to perceive what the spirits have to say.

Nine pigs are then sacrificed and the shaman, having descended from the tree, drinks from the blood of the slaughtered animals and enters into an extended trance in which he or she will convey messages from the spirits to anyone present who requires them. The ceremony then devolves into a general celebration, involving dance and song and often lasting several days.
A Buryat shaman’s drum. The inside (bottom) shows one of the user’s spirit guides, the outside (top) depicts the spirit realm.

**BIRTH OF A SHAMAN**

When I was twenty years old I became very ill and began to see with my eyes, to hear with my ears that which others did not see or hear; nine years I struggled with myself, and did not tell anyone what was happening to me, as I was afraid that people would not believe me and would make fun of me. At last I became so seriously ill that I was on the verge of death; but when I started to shamanize I grew better; and even now when I do not shamanize for a long time I am liable to be ill.

TIUSPIUT, YAKUT-TUNGUSC SHAMAN, C. 1912
THE MONGOLS

In Mongolia the shaman is known as a boge. He or she is said to possess immense powers and is extremely influential within the community. The boge are particularly recognized by the way they tremble during ecstatic trance, as well as involuntarily speaking and singing power songs received from the spirit realm. Like the Bonpo shamans of Tibet, they honour the eternal blue sky, the mountains and the power of fire. Ancestors are incredibly important and are regarded as close to the gods.

The origins of Mongolian shamanism are traditionally said to be in the region of Chahar, in the eastern part of the country. Here the ancestral spirits caused the first shamans to begin receiving visions. The high places where the spirits lived were considered so sacred that it was forbidden to utter their names aloud. The shamanic elements of this cult of the mountain gods can be observed most clearly in the northwest corner of Mongolia, near the lake of Khoso Gol, where the shamans and other religious suppliants venerate the mountain god, Khan Boghda Dayan Degereki Khayirkhan, who is best described as a personification of the mountain.

THE WINDHORSE

The personal power of the individual is categorized by the windhorse (hiimori), a mysterious energy that is both a vehicle for power and the very essence of that power. Through this the shaman is brought into a state of perfect relationship with the universe, supported by Mother Earth and Father Heaven as well as the helping spirits and the soul of the cosmos. This in turn extends outwards until all those around the shaman, or who experience his or her influence, are also brought into a harmonic relationship with life.

Shamans must maintain the right balance of energy within themselves, or the windhorse grows weak. Everyone possesses a form of energy called buyan, but this may be diminished by inappropriate behaviour, such as the wanton killing of animals, the desecration of the natural world, or failure to respect the ancestors. Living in a positive way, according to the tenets of spiritual belief, is called yostoi, and those who follow this path are blessed and strengthened. Daily prayers, offerings of incense and drink may also foster buyan. This can help everyone, even those who are not shamans but who may be impelled to journey along with the shaman whenever a ritual is performed.
This is a more unusual aspect of shamanism, since it is comparatively rare for those without training to experience the deeper levels of knowledge. Its strongest manifestation takes place during a new or full moon, which are also times of festival.

**Tenger, Endur and Other Spirits**

The relationship of the shaman to his or her spirit allies is of immense importance among the Mongolian people, as indeed it is elsewhere around the world. There are a large number of these spirits, generally called *Tenger*. These are perceived as nature spirits, living in the sky or the clouds. Most are too powerful to be mastered, though some are weak enough to be controlled. In the sky live spirits known as *Endur*, believed to be the souls of humans who lived such good lives that they do not need to reincarnate on the earth. They are responsible for rain.

Within the earth live a further category of spirits variously called *Ezen, Chotgor, Otsoor, Ongon, Burkhan* and *Gazriin*, and these are often associated with specific places in nature. They are capable of bringing disease, mental illness, or of sowing seeds of discord among the tribes, and must therefore be petitioned or controlled by the shamans. A specific type of spirit, known as the *Utha*, may attach itself to a particular family among the shamanic community, and when it does so, acts like an exterior soul as well as a guide.

**Shamanic Calling**

Mongolian shamanism is still alive today and there is even a contemporary society dedicated to the preservation and protection of the tradition. One of the most famous recently living Mongolian shamans, a man named Ghoste, when interviewed by anthropologist Allan Coukell, reported that, ‘It is not easy being a shaman…. A shaman receives many people who are struggling with sickness. I cannot refuse. If I do, the spirits get weaker.’

This statement reveals the true nature of the shamanic calling. Once summoned, the shaman cannot turn back; to do so would be to violate the essential contract between the shaman and the spirits. Despite the many challenges, new shamans continue to be called, drawn to this unique path.
A Mongolian shaman from Khudal Aral, Khentil province.
The Sami

The Sami people live in the circumpolar regions of north-west Europe in an area known as Sapmi, comprising the Kola Peninsula of Russia and northern parts of Sweden, Norway and Finland. A Uralic people with their own language, they have traditionally survived as sheep herders, fishers and reindeer herders. The Sami shaman is known as a noaidi, ‘one who knows’. And the practice of shamanism is Noaidism, or Noaidevuohta in the Sami language.

The shamans’ work includes such tasks as healing, divination, uncovering things unknown, creating illusions, locating game for the hunt, instilling fear in enemies and fighting other noaidi, as well as communicating with the dead and the spirit world.

The Sound of the Drum

One of the chief means by which the Sami make the leap from ordinary to subtle reality is by the sound of the drum, which is usually adorned with an iconographical map of the otherworld, as understood and experienced by each noaidi. A central cross, dividing the world into four quadrants, is a feature of most Sami drums and is the symbol of the goddess Beaivi, an emanation of the sun and the mother of all life.

The 19th-century Scottish traveller John Pinkerton was present at a shamanic seance and left a fascinating description of it. (Note that, in the following extract, the term ‘Laplander’ is considered opprobrious to the Sami – this, along with the judgmental tone, is typical of the time.)

A Laplander, falling on his knees, together with all those who are present, he begins to strike his tabor all round, and redoubling the strokes with the words which he pronounces, as if he were possessed, his countenance becomes blue, his hair stands erect, and he, at length, falls motionless on his face. He remains in this state, as long as he is possessed by the devil, and as it is necessary for his genius to bring him a sign to prove that he has been at the place where he was sent, then recovering his senses, he tells that which the devil revealed to him, and shows the mark which has been brought to him…. They usually paint the following figures [on their drums]; they draw first, towards the middle of the tabor, a transverse line, above which they place the gods whom they hold in their greatest veneration, as Thor, with
underlings, and Seyta, and they draw another line a little below the former, but which extends only half across the tabor; there Jesus Christ, with two or three apostles are to be seen: above these lines are represented the sun, the moon, the stars and the birds; but the situation of the sun is under these very lines, on which they place the animals, the bears and the serpents.

A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in all parts of the World, John Pinkerton, 1808–1814

Here we can see how the influx of Christian missionaries had already begun to take its toll on the older traditions. The earliest pictures of Sami drums show no trace of Christian iconography.

Traditional drum used by Sami shamans to enter a trance and to call the spirits.

THE JOIK

Drumming was not the only method used to enter into trance; the noaidi also uses a form of chant called the joik. This is a way of attuning to the otherworld or to specific beings. Rather than singing about a thing or being, the noaide sings of it in an embodied way, as if he or she were the thing or being – so ‘invocation’ might be a more appropriate description. Joiks can be traditional vocalizations without words, handed down over generations, or a syllabic spirit language whose meaning is known only to the shaman uttering it; but they are more often spontaneous, created at the moment and in the place, blending times and places into ‘an
eternal now.'

Sami expert Harald Gaski explains and interprets the distinction between concepts of ownership of a song in Sami and Western culture:

*It is not the one who composes a yoik who owns it, but rather that which is yoiked. To no greater or lesser extent the producer, in this sense, loses the right to his or her product, while the subject assumes dominion over this same creation. This is the traditional role of art in a culture in which the central focus is on collectivity, not in the sense that the individual owns nothing but rather in the respect that a perceived solidarity is what actually holds the culture together. In such a society, an artist is not simply an individual; she or he is also a representative of the entire culture, one element in the distribution of labor within the whole."

_The Secretive Text, Harald Gaski_

In the early 18th century, Norwegian schoolteacher Isaac Olsen observed the following among the Sami in northern Norway:

…”the noaidi teaches his people and his followers to yoik … for every purpose … and the prayers, songs and magical songs which serve one shall not be used by another, he teaches those … songs … to people when they are sick, illuminating certain words, prayers and songs when they have hurt themselves…”

_The Secretive Text, Harald Gaski_

Needless to say, missionaries often concluded that people who _joiked_ were communicating with (evil) spirits.

**SAMI REVIVAL**

Traditional Sami religion was both polytheist and animistic, with a deep connection to both the land and the spirits that resided there. As one of the last peoples in Europe to be Christianized, the Sami suffered a bitter and forceful conversion in the 18th century by Thomas van Western, who burned drums to demonstrate that their power was over. He was followed by Laestadius, a Puritan Lutheran missionary, whose brand of Christianity is still followed by many Sami. However, a revival of the traditional Sami belief system is under way and, in Norway, it was officially recognized in 2012.
Many healers with the skills of the traditional *noaidi* have lived under the wire of official notice. As a 21st-century Sami said: ‘We have often heard from the time we were children that there are people who can remove pain and illness, and it is because we believe in this that we seek help from them.’

**LAESING**

Healers use *laesing* or ‘readings’, charms that are passed down from the elders, to bring healing of physical ailments. These charms are made up of a strange mixture of Biblical
verses and older lore:

Some of the healing work takes on more of a ritual form. An example in læsing involves saying the verses to water and then giving the water to a patient, sometimes to be taken over a period of time. One healer told how she would similarly læse to fire in cases of burns or to other natural elements from which the illness was thought to arise. If a rash was seen to come from a swamp, moss from the swamp was first read to and then passed over the body of the person with the rash. If the rash came from a river or stream area, the patient and healer may go to the stream and carry out the reading. Similarly, many healers carry out cleansing of homes and places where people have heard and experienced noises or unexplainable things thought to be spirits of the deceased. In such cases matches or candles may also be used throughout the house to bring ‘light’ to the house and help the attached spirits move out and into the light.

Healing in the Sami North, Randall Sexton and Ellen Anne Buljo Stabbursvik, 2010

A shaman enters a trance during initiation.

There is a clear indication that here, though the traditional shamanic skills of old may have been wiped out of history, they have not gone from the memory and practice of the Sami people.
One contemporary noaidi, when asked how he did his healing, responded, ‘It is inside me, I do as I believe I am supposed to.’ Another, who was often contacted by phone for help, told how the first thought that came to her when someone called was essential and often suggested what the problem was:

It is like someone (inside me) tells me things, that things are this way or that … that this person has a particular illness…. It comes from above…. And if I ignore the thought, and don’t do it, they don’t get well. I have tried to get used to it, the first thought that comes, and not overlook it.

The same person related that, although she knew specific verses used in læsing, sometimes other words would come to her via an inner voice or thought.

Another practitioner, who came from a long line of healers, had a series of out-of-body experiences as a young child in which she experienced travelling beyond her home and seeing things throughout the neighbourhood, things she could later confirm actually happened. When she confided in her parents about this, she was adamantly told not to speak of it, and thus kept the experiences inside her until adulthood, not daring to tell anyone. As an adult, she was contacted when people needed help finding lost or stolen objects and explained that she would often, in a similar way as during childhood, receive a picture or vision of where something was or how it had happened that an item had been lost or stolen.

Others told of their experiences of precognition, of knowing things before they happened, especially unexpected deaths or tragedies. This could come in a dream or was described as a bodily knowing, sometimes a sense of unease:

I have in some way known before something is going to happen that it will. But it has been — many times it has been very tiresome. My grandmother was the same way, so my mother said that I had probably inherited this from her.

One healer told of how she used to work herding with her grandfather, a renowned healer, in the mountains several hours from the village, at a time before there were telephones and doctors in the area. Sometimes while they were working he would suddenly say that they had to return to the village as So-and-So was sick, naming the individual. Upon returning they would find the person in question in need of help.'
Though these healers may be faithful Christians, the skills they practise have not gone away. Even today, Sami venerate *sieidis* or natural land features and places that are regarded as spirit gates to the otherworld: these can be mountains, rocks, trees or rivers.

Few Sami stray far from the presence of the personal knife which all carry and which, apart from its practical uses, was and is still used for healing. In the face of the purging of many of their traditional shamanic practices, the knife remained a vital link to older healing ways. The force of the shamanic healing often comes through the knife blade, over which charms are still said.
THE INUIT

Close relatives of the Siberian and Mongolian peoples are the Inuit, who live around the Arctic Circle. Once known as Eskimos, this name is now considered inappropriate, and Inuit is the more generally accepted term. Most Inuit groups still have a shaman, or angakok, whose task it is to mediate between this world and the other, and to call upon the spirits to set free the souls of animals so that hunting them could proceed successfully.

They also healed the sick by journeying to bring back lost or stolen soul parts which, when reunited with the sick person, restored them to health.

RITUAL AND JOURNEYING

In earlier times, elaborate rituals were carried out, with the shaman dancing, singing and chanting, describing his or her journey into the otherworld while the people sat enthralled by the dramatic performance. This has led some observers to assume that there was an element of trickery involved in the shaman’s actions, but others have noted that, whatever the truth of the matter, the shaman himself believed completely in the experience he was describing – so that when a young hunter smeared himself in the blood of a dead creature and then later described this as the sign of his great inner struggle with the creature’s spirit, there was no doubt in the mind of the observing anthropologist that the man believed utterly in his own experience.

INITIATION

Most Inuit shamans choose to follow the initiatory path prescribed for them and undertake complex rituals such as the vision quest, similar to that undergone by North American shamans, in which they imbibe a hallucinogenic drink or starve themselves into an altered state in order to communicate directly with the spirits.
The grave of Shah, a Tlingit shaman of Chilkat, Alaska, c. 1895, adorned with carved wooden totems.
Four Inuit Shaman's masks. Clockwise from top: 19th-century wood and feathers mask; whale mask; raven mask; a mask showing the flight of the shaman's spirit.

Sometimes the future shaman is singled out when the spirits send them a life-threatening
illness that changes them, or a dream that makes their calling clear. Those who manifest such signs are apprenticed to a current shaman, who prepares them to take over when the time comes.

SPIRIT CREATURES
As with other cultures, some Inuit shamans are believed to have special qualifications for their role – for example, being reincarnated from a specific animal. Such people are revered as being of immense value to the community, since their spiritual connection with a particular creature enhances their ability to sense the presence of animals sought for food and clothing.

Beliefs concerning such connections between animals and humans are extremely powerful, and among many of the different tribes it is widely accepted that humans can partake of animal nature and that the dead are reincarnated as animals. The idea of spirits in animal form is also part of the Inuit belief system, as it is of their cousins the First Nations of North America. To this day among the Inuit and related tribes, such ideas are expressed through the creation of elaborate masks, which often combine human and animal characteristics.

THOUGHT, REALITY AND LANGUAGE
Among certain groups within the Inuit community, the shamans use a particularly archaic form of language, which helps separate them from everyday reality (as well as making their work more secretive) and enables them to communicate more easily with the spirits. Other, metaphorical, terms are used in everyday speech to avoid actually describing the nature of the shamanic experience. For example, the return of the shaman from an inner journey is described as, ‘the shadow is ripening’, while the shaman is described as ‘the one with the drum’.

There also exist prohibitions against the use of certain words during a ceremony or journey. Shamans will go out of their way not to name certain objects or people in their accounts of their journeys, since to do so would bring bad luck.

This is curiously similar to a technique known among the ancient Celts, who would strive to use different words or think of the opposite image to the thing they were actually focusing upon. Thus they might think of getting hotter when they actually wanted to reduce the heat of a fever. This idea, like the wearing of clothing inside out or backwards, as practised in Ireland when someone is lost to the faery races, suggests that this reversal of reality helps the shaman to fall deeper into the otherworld and to interpret the words or visions of spirit more clearly.
SOUL RETRIEVAL AND FRAGMENTATION

Another of the primary tasks of the Inuit shaman involves the ‘releasing’ of the souls of dead animals, and the ‘retrieval’ of souls that might have strayed from humans. This is part of a belief that everyone possesses more than one soul, and that the secondary or ‘free’ soul is that which the shaman releases to undertake journeys and to experience the out-of-body states reported by all shamanic practitioners around the world.

This, in turn, has led to the idea of soul fragmentation or soul loss, or in some instances of soul theft – concepts that are part of the basic framework of shamanic practice. Shamans today regularly fetch back missing soul parts that may have been driven off by unforeseen circumstances, such as a violent accident or physical assault, or stolen either by another human being or (among some cultures of the world) an evil spirit.

An Inuit shaman driving out spirits from a young boy in Nushagak, Alaska, in the 1890s.

When a new shaman is initiated, the elder will remove the free soul and introduce it to the guiding spirits so that they became familiar with the new shaman and are more likely to respond when he summons them. Alternatively, the souls that reside in each of the vital
organs are sent to the helping spirits, who examine them and sometimes offer refinements. This has the effect of making the apprentice less fearful when he or she eventually encounters the spirits, since a spiritual connection now exists between them.

INUIT SHAMANISM TODAY

Despite the influence of incoming religious dogma, which did its best to crush the life from their tradition, the Inuit people maintained a shamanic tradition that is still alive today – though it always seems on the edge of extinction. Every so often the ‘last’ Inuit shaman is said to have died, only to be replaced by another, who rises from among the people to act as a mediator between the worlds. Overall, this area of the world holds true to some of the most ancient and long-held shamanic traditions. In almost every instance where classical shamanism is discussed or written about, it is Siberian, Sami or Inuit traditions that are cited as the most authentic.

An Inuit shaman of Baffin Island, Canada, wearing a traditional beaded headband.
Shamanism in Africa probably dates back further than almost any other region of the world, with the possible exception of Australia, and the rich and complex tapestry of shamanic practice in the continent contains so many variations that it is difficult to separate them. It is in Africa that we find the strongest sense of the ancestors as a collective, central to health and wellbeing.
The ancient landscape of Niger in Africa hides many mysteries: here, rock art thought to be 30,000 years old.
Among the many shamanic traditions, those of the Zulu, Swazi, Xhosa and Ndebele tribes of Southern Africa are the most highly developed. Shamans, known widely as sangomas, have a broader remit than in many other cultures. Not only do they perform healing work, they are also called upon to seek for lost or stolen cattle, remember and retell the myths and cosmologies of the people, drive away witches and protect their warriors when they go into battle.

They are thus, in some ways, closer to the Celtic bards and druids, who performed the same kind of function – singing the praises of their lords, keeping the genealogies and inspiring the people – giving them a much more central role in the life of the villages and townships than in many other areas.

**ANCESTRAL CONTACT AND THWASA**

Southern African shamans work with trance, mediumship and vision, journeying into the inner realms to confer with the ancestors of the tribe and bring word of both good and bad omens. Here, as elsewhere, the shaman is summoned to his or her role through a bout of sickness or aberrant behaviour. Once these signs are detected, the candidate undergoes a strict ritual cleansing, involving washing in the blood of sacrificed animals and the imbibing of sacred medicine. This is followed by a powerful training regime called *thwasa*, in which knowledge of the ancestors is imparted, including ways to appease them if they are troublesome.

**THE SANGOMA**
When the training is complete a goat is sacrificed to the ancestors, after which the new *sangoma* will often wear the gallbladder of this beast woven into the braids of his or her hair.

From here on the *sangoma* acts as a constant medium between the people and the ancestors, who are regarded as overseeing every aspect in the lives of their descendents, down to the smallest degree. The *sangoma* lives in a hut called a *ndumba*, which he or she shares with the ancestors, who are represented by intricately carved wooden figures that may be hundreds of years old. These ancestors are kept by the tribe until they are considered ‘worn out’, after which they are replaced with new carvings. Like the household gods, or *lares*, of ancient Rome, they are physical manifestations of the ancestors and are brought out on every ceremonial occasion, from births to marriages to deaths.
A Sangoma from Limpopo Province, South Africa, standing before wall paintings inspired by his dreams.
The ancient spiritual beings represented by the carvings may have specific colours associated with them, and the *sangoma* is required to wear these colours when he or she communicates with the ancestors for whatever reason. As in many other parts of the world, such communication is achieved through a mixture of chant, dance and drumming. Sometimes a plant named imphepho (*Helichrysum odoratissimum*) is burned, its aromatic smoke acting both as a consciousness-altering substance and as a signal to the ancestors to draw near.

The combining of these methods causes the *sangoma* to enter into a trance, during which he or she will often dance wildly, speak in tongues, or utter strange sounds that only they can interpret later. If a less demanding response is called for, as when dealing with simple matters of daily life, the *sangoma* may use a form of divination using small animal bones that are thrown onto the ground. The patterns they form are guided not by the *sangoma* but by the ancestors, and complex readings can be taken from them. Once again, this is a practice found in various places, including Britain and the Caribbean.

**SYMBOLIC MEDICINE**

If a patient comes to the *sangoma* with a sickness, trance or divination will be used to discover the spiritual cause of the problem, and medicine will then be prescribed. In most cases these medications are highly symbolic and designed to bring the patient back to a place of inner and outer balance, which brings harmony and healing. Medicine may be drunk, smoked, inhaled, rubbed on the skin or even used as an enema. In each case the medicine will be specific to the problem, so that, for example, lion fat may be proscribed where courage or strength is required.
CENTRAL WEST AFRICA

In Central West Africa, in particular Gabon and the Congo, shamanism is represented by Bwiti, a syncretic religion that combines animism, animalism and the worship of ancestors with a form of Christianity. The shaman here is the nganga, who acts as priest, healer and interpreter of dreams and visions.

Among the Babongo and Mitsogo people of Gabon and the Fang people of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, only those who see the ancestors can become shamans.

HALUCINATION, SOUL FLIGHT AND IBOGA

Central to the practice of the nganga is a hallucinogenic substance derived from the root of the Tabernanthe iboga plant, which is specially cultivated in the area. The story told among the followers of Bwiti tells how the last of the creator gods, Zame ye Mebege, happened upon the pigmy Bitamu collecting fruit from the atanga tree. Zame decided he wanted Bitamu’s spirit, so he made him fall from the tree to his death. Then the god cut the fingers and toes from the body and planted them throughout the forest. These digits grew into the eboka bush, from which iboga derives.

The Mboma Na Ditsuola spirit, known as the ‘Python With Feathers’, is revealed during a Bwiti trance-ceremony in Gabon.
Iboga serves to induce spiritual enlightenment though a trance state that enables communication with the ancestors. The plant has been used in initiation ceremonies among the tribes in the area for hundreds of years, and according to the potency of the dosage may induce vomiting and ataxia. In this it closely parallels the use of consciousness-changing substances by shamans around the world.

In Bwiti the process of allowing the spirits of ancestors to enter is described as ‘breaking open the head’. During the initiation ceremony for a new shaman, as much as three basketfuls of the plant may be consumed over a 24-hour period. This leads to a visionary state in which the initiate’s soul is separated from his body and wanders in the spirit world. During this time he is known as banzi, a word that is sometimes translated as ‘angel’. One initiate commented on his journey in this state in the following words: ‘I walked or flew over a long multi-coloured road or over many rivers which led me to my ancestors, who then took me to the great gods.’

As with so many cultures, not only in Africa but as far afield as Australia and the Arctic Circle, the soul flights lead to the ancestors, who act as mediators and messengers between the shamans and their gods or spiritual helpers.
Tsogho figurine of the guardian spirit Boumbo Bwiti.
The Yoruba are one of the largest tribal groups in West Africa. Their shamanic traditions are based around the followers of Orisha, a widely disseminated religion that originated in the region of the Yoruba and spread across the world via the slave diaspora.

Orisha is a spiritual extension of the god Olodumare, who appears in a variety of other religious impulses including Candomblé, Santería, Umbanda and Vodun. It is held that Odudwa, the first great king, descended to earth from heaven, bringing with him the teachings that form the basis of Orisha. The religion itself is currently believed to have as many as one hundred million followers around the world.

The Orisha
The Yoruba believe that daily life depends on proper alignment and knowledge of the ori, which literally refers to the head but also means the part of the soul that determines personal destiny. Connected to this is the concept of ase, the life force that permeates everything, living and inanimate, and causes things to happen. The term is also used as an affirmation in greetings and prayers, and is deeply connected to the concept of spiritual growth.

Followers of the divinity Orisha seek to find balance and alignment with the life force known as ori, which not only allows them to connect directly with the creator Olodumare, but also to be in contact with the ancestors. The Orishas (the name for the spirits in Orisha) are numerous, and can be invoked for a wide variety of issues.

Yoruba Medicine
Among the Yoruba herbal medicine is paramount, though it is based not so much on the study of plants as on the healing offered by the spirits that inhabit them, and who affect both choice and application to individual clients. Such medicinal work is often referred to as Yorubic or Orisha medicine and it is indissolubly entwined with the divinatory system known as Ifa. This is based on a collection of mystically inspired texts said to have been revealed to the prophet Orunmilla over four thousand yeas ago. This same divinely inspired teacher introduced divination, prayer, dance, symbolic gesture, and the use of plants in healing to the people.
Yorubic medicine has been described as similar to that practised in the Western world in that it features an understanding of germs, pictured as virtually invisible insects called *kokoro*, and tiny worms called *aron*, who inhabit the body and are a cause of most types of illness. The task of Yoruba shaman priests is to either bring these creatures under their control or expel them entirely from the body. This they achieve through thought, prayer, invocation, incantation and trance, as well as herbal medicine prescribed under the guidance of the spirits. Medicinal incantations use a form of wordplay similar to punning to invoke the power of the particular plant. Amulets are a further source of healing, and are invested with power invoked by the shaman. Much of this approach to healing probably derives from ancient Egypt, where similar practices are known to have been used. Among the Yoruba, Obàtálá is the father of all creation, and the mightiest of the Orisha. Shamans appeal to him to mediate between the powers of light and dark when they are journeying in search of healing. It is said that Obàtálá descended from heaven on an iron chain, and that this represents the links that connect humanity to the ever changing cycle of life.
Yoruba tribal mask and medicine man's instrument.
A Yoruba ritual bowl carved in the form of a woman carrying a child on her back. She kneels, offering the bowl in respect to Ifa, the God of divination. Nigeria.
Statuette of Obátálá, the shaper of human beings and the founder of the first Yoruba city.
The term Bushmen is still something of a pejorative term among these people, having been applied by foreigners as a blanket term, though today it is accepted from a desire for recognition. The people themselves have their own names, including San, Khwe and Basarwa. They have lived in and around the Kalahari Desert, spanning areas of South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Angola, for at least 20,000 years.

The Bushmen are believed to be the oldest inhabitants of southern Africa, and possibly of anywhere in the world. Hunter-gatherers who trapped small animals and ate edible roots and berries, they lived in rock shelters, in the open, or in crude shelters made of woven twigs, grass and animal skins. They made no pottery, using ostrich eggshells or animal parts for storing and holding liquids. In many ways their lives have hardly changed at all over the millenia.

The Bushmen are almost certainly among the oldest people anywhere in the world to practise shamanism. It was recently noted that in our own time close on half of the men and a third of the women in the Kalahari claim to be shamans. An astonishing number of young men strive to follow the shamanic path, not for personal gain but in order to serve their community. In their late teens they will seek out an experienced shaman and ask for training. If accepted, the apprenticeship may last some years, during which the novice will strive to absorb something of the power of the older man.

THE BUSHMAN TRANCE
The central aspect of the Bushman’s shamanic practice is the trance, usually performed around a campfire. The women clap and shake rattles in rhythm with the men, who dance around them, beating out patterns of sound with their feet. After a time the shamans begin to feel what they call a ‘boiling’ sensation in the base of the spine. This rises though the body and when it reaches the crown of the head the shaman is in a trance.
San bushmen healers in Botswana prepare for a traditional trance dance.
Animal carvings and paintings cover the rocks at Twyfelfonteins in the Namib Desert, Northwest Namibia. The art was created by the San Bushmen, who used the site for their shamanic rituals more than 2000 years ago.

As they continue to dance the shamans enter into an altered state of consciousness, during which they hyperventilate, bleed from the nose and ears and suffer excruciating pain. As they dance they stretch their arms out behind them like wings, signifying an inner transformation that takes place within the spirit world. Those with the least experience will often fall over and remain unconscious for some time, but the experienced men will keep dancing for hours, during which time they wander in the dreamworld and seek healing or guidance for the tribe. This includes controlling the weather, assuring good hunting and foretelling future events.

Sometimes, still under the influence of the spirits, the shaman will lay his hands on a stricken person, drawing the sickness into himself. Within his own body the sickness is then transformed and when this is complete the shaman will utter a high-pitched shriek, which is described as the sound of the spirit that has caused the sickness leaving them though an invisible hole in their neck.

Once the trance is ended the shaman will fall into a deep sleep, waking the next day to describe the journey. These experiences formed the basis for the astonishing rock paintings created by the Bushmen. As with virtually all such ancient art found throughout the world on rocks and within deep caves, the images reflect the shaman’s inner experience.

**THE KAGGEN**

The beliefs of the Bushmen, which inform all of their trance work, include a mystical trickster figure known as Kaggen. This being can take virtually any form and uses trickery to teach and assist the people. The name can be translated as 'mantis' and for this reason many anthropologists assumed that this was Kaggen’s primary form – but the mantis is only one of the many shapes assumed by this curious being who, when not engaged in some new escapade or adventure, lives the life of an ordinary bushman, hunting, fishing and fighting like its human counterparts.
THE ELAND

The eland became the most important of the spirits who guarded and guided the Bushmen; its flesh, skin and bones providing food, clothing and drums. It features in almost every ritual performed by the Bushmen. Every shaman seeks to assume the eland’s spiritual power, and at puberty boys are expected to hunt and kill one of these beautiful creatures, bringing it down if possible with a single arrow. The eland is then skinned and the fat from its throat and collarbone made into a broth, which the boys imbibe.

During the girls’ puberty rites, the girl is isolated in her hut at her first menstruation, and the women of the tribe perform the Eland Bull Dance, in which they imitate the mating behaviour of the eland cows. A shaman usually takes the part of the eland bull, wearing the animal’s horns on his head. Later, when the girl marries, the groom will give fat from the eland’s heart to the girl’s parents and the girl will be anointed with eland fat, thus receiving the strength and luck of the creature.

Unlike many other parts of the world, the shamanism of Bushmen is part of an unbroken tradition, which reflects practices from the earliest time.

HOW KAGGEN CREATED THE ELAND

Kaggen created the eland, an antelope that became the primary spirit of the Bushmen. They tell the story of how Kaggen came upon the discarded shoe of Kwammang-a, the spirit of the rainbow. The shoe was of animal hide and Kaggen laid it at the water’s edge and filled it with honey. Slowly the shoe grew into a tiny delicate eland that made Kaggen weep with joy. He kept massaging honey into the creature until he was a full-grown bull. Then Kwammang-a came to find out what had happened to his lost shoe. He came to where the eland was watering and shot him dead. The rainbow god then removed the hide and carried off the meat. When Kaggen returned to find the eland, all he could discover was its gall bladder in the tree. Bitterly, he began to hit it with a rock, but the organ spoke to him and warned him it would engulf him if he continued. Finally the gall bladder burst and everything became dark. Kaggen ran off to find another shoe of Kwammang-a, which he threw up into the sky to become the moon. By its light, the trickster fashioned a new eland. Now every night the little shoe walks across the sky, growing and eventually shrinking. On the dark night when the hunters can’t see to hunt, that is the night when the eland breeds.

The Eland is considered sacred by the Bushmen.
Shamanism in the Far East has always had a complex relationship with the wide variety of religious beliefs and practices that exist throughout this part of the world. Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto and Hinduism all possess a shamanic aspect, adapted to local requirements. Records indicate the existence of a shadowy, unified culture that once extended across Russia, China, Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal and Persia, each possessing its own brand of shamanism, which in time evolved into the distinct religions that still dominate these areas today.

The manifestation of this shamanic sub-culture varies largely depending on the area in question, but many Far Eastern countries still possess a thriving shamanic community able to practise with increasing openness.
Mist shrouds the sacred landscape near China’s Great Wall.
The shamanism of Korea is known as Muism (from Mugyo, ‘religion of the Mu’) and encompasses a variety of beliefs and practices. The shaman is known as a mudang and is usually a woman whose role is to act as an intermediary between spirits and human beings.

Kim Kum Hwa, the Queen of Korean shamans, performs a ceremony at her temple during the initiation of a young shaman in Inchon City, South Korea in 2008.

The mudang holds gut (services), invoking good fortune for clients, the cure of illness though the exorcism of negative spirits, and the propitiation of local gods. A gut is also held to guide spirits of the departed to other realms.

Belief in a world inhabited by spirits is probably the oldest form of Korean religious tradition, dating back to prehistoric times. Spirits and gods inhabit trees, caves and stones, and villages are looked after by tutelary gods who keep a firm check on the mischievous actions of goblins or the more dangerous activities of ghosts who may still have scores to settle and whose presence can affect the lives of the living.

MUISM

The eclectic outlook of the Korean people has made their approach to religion wide ranging, and even though many Koreans became Buddhists when the tradition was first introduced into the country in the 7th century CE, the influence of Muism remained strong. This changed during the later colonial period, when Christian
missionaries demonized mudang and Muist followers, while during more recent times the government has done its best to outlaw shamanic practice. Despite this, there has been a resurgence of Muist beliefs in South Korea, and it was reported recently that as many as 8 percent of the population are Muist. In North Korea, roughly 16 percent of the population has held true to the old way.
In Japan the Ainu are the oldest indigenous people, and among them shamanism continued as a regular practice until the 17th century, at which point it was suppressed. There were both male and female practitioners, but recent times have witnessed something of a revival of shamanic practice, particularly among women, and there are an increasing number of shamans offering their skills within the modern community.

The practice itself has shifted from the more common forms of shamanism involving trance and journey work, and has instead devolved more towards a mediumistic approach, which includes possession. Where once the shaman would invoke a spirit and journey with it to find a solution to a variety of problems, now the women tend to allow themselves to be taken over and controlled by spirits, especially those of the ancestors – though the results are much the same.

Ainu Shamans

Some of the earlier Ainu shamans were attributed with extraordinary powers, such as the quieting of storms, as well as having power over the other elements, which obey their will. They could fly, change their shape and converse with animals and birds. They also offered success in hunting, identified thieves and made predictions regarding the outcome of a journey. In all of these things they shared the oldest aspects of shamanism, common at one time throughout the world.

Community Leaders

As with many of the older societies, Ainu shamans were seen as important leaders within the community. Many served as actual political leaders, even warriors. This is rare in shamanism, where most practitioners are set apart by their nature and connection with the unseen worlds and seldom take any part in worldly or secular matters.

Over time genderal distinction separated the practices of male and female shamans, with the women focusing primarily on healing, while the men conducted ceremonies and fought by the side of their warriors. Their ceremonies could last through the night, and involved dance, chant and music. Under the influence of hypnotic rhythms they entered altered states of consciousness, during which they performed miraculous cures of the sick, predicted the future, and invoked luck upon favoured individuals.

Ainu Practices

As in most shamanic cultures, to a varying degree, the Ainu emphasize a close relationship with the natural world, believing that the life force that inhabits everything could be transferred from other living things to humans. Thus, for example, if a mother was unable to produce breast milk, the shaman could perform a ceremony in which the spiritual energy of a white birch tree was invoked and drawn off. Having given the tree a wooden prayer stick and hung a sash around its trunk, the shaman then danced and prayed to the spirit of the tree before removing several layers of bark. This was taken to the home of the patient where it was boiled into a soup, which was then consumed. Generally the tree died within the next few days, as its spirit migrated to the body of the woman.
The birch tree is sacred in Japan and associated with certain types of healing.

Shamanism continues to be practised in modern-day Japan, particularly in the North and in the Miyagi Prefecture, which still has a number of practitioners known as ogamisama or kamisama. Many of the former group are blind, their loss of sight enabling them to act as mediums, while the latter are normally sighted but do not act in the capacity of mediums. At present, there are about 44 ogamisama living in a northern part of the Miyagi Prefecture around Senboku, while 138 kamisama still live more centrally.
The last new candidate was initiated in 1938 and others are now too old for such work and have given up their practice. Many of the more ancient shamanic traditions have been absorbed into Shinto, which is now the principal religion of the country.
One of the most famous shamans in modern-day Japan was called Aiko. She was famous as a midwife and healer, and there are a number of descriptions of the rituals she performed.

Many people visited Aiko for advice, believing that she could report back to them with messages from the spirit world. The ancestors spoke through her, using her as a vehicle to enable communication. So practised was their remarkable lady that she seemed not to require any artificial means to enter into a trance, but could do so at will. Sakurako Tenaka, a researcher who visited her in 1995, reported that, although she was almost blind and unable to walk unassisted, she still possessed a remarkable power:

As I introduced myself as a novice researcher, she turned her face toward me and said, ‘What business do you have with this poor old Ainu?’ She took my left hand to examine lines on it, and the tone of her voice changed. ‘Your hand is just like mine,’ she said, ‘Oh poor woman, you have come a long way…’ She advised her daughters to help her … to pray to my guiding spirit. ‘After this … all kinds of sick people will come to you. You are going to have sicknesses and pain, all kinds of problems and yet cannot even die, like me. Poor woman, do you still want to take this path?’

AINU SHAMANISM: A FORBIDDEN PATH TO UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE, SAKURAKO TANAKA, 2003
Shamanism has been present in China since ancient times and is still practiced today. The wu, as the shamans were known, practised divination, influencing the weather, prayer and sacrifice. Emperor Qin Shi Huang, who reigned from 221–210 BCE, was said to have wandered about on the shore of the eastern sea, offering sacrifices to the famous mountains and the great rivers and to the eight spirits while searching for xian or ‘immortals’ (from xianmen, a word that closely resembles the Siberian ‘shaman’).

King Zhao of Chu (c. 515–489 BCE) once read that the sage ruler Shun ‘commissioned Chong and Li to cut the communication between heaven and earth’. He asks his minister to explain and is told:

Anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle. At that time there were certain persons who were so perspicacious, single-minded and reverential that their understanding enabled them to make meaningful collation of what lies above and below, and their insight to illumine what is distant and profound. Therefore the spirits would descend upon them. The possessors of such powers were, if men, called xi, and, if women, wu. It is they who supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters.

As a consequence, the spheres of the divine and the profane were kept distinct. The spirits sent down blessings on the people, and accepted from them their offerings. There were no natural calamities. In the degenerate time of Zhuanxu [in a mythical past of the 26th century BCE], men and spirits became intermingled, with each household indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances which had hitherto been conducted by the shamans. As a consequence, men lost their reverence for the spirits, the spirits violated the rules of men, and natural calamities arose. Hence Chong, Governor of the South, was commanded to handle the affairs of heaven in order to determine the proper place of the spirits, while Li, Governor of Fire, was to handle the affairs of Earth, in order to determine the proper place of men. And such is what is meant by cutting the communication between Heaven and Earth.

Contemporary Chinese Shamanism, Hong Zhang and Constantine Hriskos, 2010
The bringing together of heaven and earth is a very good description of shamanic work, which attempts to be a bridge between the everyday world and the otherworld. These Chinese shamans were often called upon to deal with the results of elemental weather conditions; in a drought, they would perform sacrificial rain-making dances and ceremonies. There is evidence that these ancient rituals and their performers began to take on a more official status as the court of the Chinese Emperors formalized, with court officers set to oversee the shamans:

When the country suffers a great drought, they lead the Spirit Mediums in dancing the rain-making ritual (yu). When the country suffers a great calamity, they lead the Spirit Mediums in enacting the long-standing practices of Spirit Mediums (wuheng). At official sacrifices, they handle the ancestral tablets in their receptacles, the cloth on which the spirits walk, and the box containing the reeds [for food offerings]. In all official sacrificial services, they guard the place where the offerings are buried. In all funerary services, they are in charge of the rituals by which the Spirit Mediums make the spirits descend.

THE SPIRIT DANCE

In Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, Mercia Eliade discusses the Spirit Dance. This ritual is best known today among the Native American tribes, who developed a variety of such rituals, all aimed at inviting spirits to descend into the body of the dancer. In ancient China accounts of this practice refer to a period as long as 4,000 years ago and the stated purpose reflects that of the shaman to a close degree. The movements of the spirit dancers reflect those of tai chi. The movements, stances and gestures taught to practitioners of this ancient art are based on animal shapes and actions such as Tiger, Leopard, Lion, Crane, Eagle, Phoenix, Snake, Dragon, White Ape, Monkey and Praying Mantis.

A 15th-century tale (see box) describes how this might have come about and at the same time shows the typical understanding that comes of following a shamanic path.
WANG AND THE MANTIS

A bully named Wang Lang loved nothing so much as strutting about trying to impress the locals with his kung-fu skills. When he heard that most thought him infinitely inferior to even the lowest Shaolin monk, Wang vowed to visit the nearest monastery and defeat the master of the temple. Needless to say when he arrived and issued his challenge he was at first ignored, then matched with the youngest novice, who easily beat him.

Angrily Wang headed off into the mountains, where he trained vigorously for several months before returning to the monastery, this time defeating the novice. He then challenged the next in rank and was, once again, easily defeated. Humiliated, Wang retreated again to the mountains and spent his days in meditation.

One day as he sat quietly, he was distracted by a fierce battle between a cicada and a praying mantis. Fascinated by the fighting stance adopted by the mantis, Wang captured it and placed it in a cage. Over several weeks he studied the insect, poking it with a stick to observe its response. Then, gradually he began to incorporate the movements of the creature into his daily practice before finally releasing the creature back into the world.

Soon after Wang returned again to the monastery, and this time defeated every monk he encountered, until the Abbot called a halt to the combat and asked him to explain his new technique. Wang told the story of the mantis, and in the process told how he had learned humility from the creature. Soon after, Wang himself entered the Shaolin temple as a monk, and from there the new fighting style spread outward across China.

The praying mantis: its fighting strength and grace provides inspiration to the Shaolin monks.

It is possible that this tale, as well as suggesting a possible shamanic origin for tai chi, also harks back to an even earlier time in which the shaman undertook a vision quest, travelling into the wilderness to be alone with the spirits and suffer privation, until he or she is transformed. This practice is so widely disseminated that there are few cultures that do not possess some record of a punishing regime from which the shaman emerges profoundly changed.
The link between the physical and spiritual has long been understood in China. The monks in this fresco are practicing the ancient art of kung fu.

POST-MAOIST REVIVAL

In post-Maoist China shamanism has undergone a revival. After years of suppression, in which the belief in spirits and the worship of ancestors was frowned upon, a new generation is beginning to rediscover these ancient beliefs. A contemporary account records the experience of Xu Ma whose disturbed dreams, during which she suffered the appearance of a lump on her shoulder, caused her to seek out a shamanic explanation from a healer named Wang.

Wang advised her to return to her home, buy some paper money, and make a paper house and two paper suitcases. That evening Wang visited Xu Ma’s home to perform a huanyuan (literally, “fulfilling a wish”) service... Wang had already identified Xu Ma’s dead parents as the cause of her dreams. She had seen them in the spirit world in rags, doomed in hats with no tops and in tattered, foul-smelling clothing covered with dirt and filth. “Her father came to me first, followed by her mother. I was really startled, and did not know who they were in the beginning” Wang said. Since they had no home they had come to their daughter’s house, hungry and cold. Wang asked Xu Ma to prepare the paper house and suitcases to supply her parents in the spirit world.

Contemporary Chinese Shamanism, Hong Zhang and Constantine Hriskos, 2010

In due time Wu Ma recovered and the dreams never returned.

Such ancient practices – so precious to the people – never completely went away, and even the power of the Cultural Revolution could not kill such beliefs entirely. Under the new freedom within China, the old ways are
returning and more and more examples like that of Wu Ma are being recorded.
In the area that is today known as Tibet, as well as in the adjacent Mongolian lands, shamanic traditions existed for thousands of years before the coming of Buddhism in 700 CE, when previous beliefs were assimilated into the emerging Vajrayana path, forming the religion known as Bon. The earliest form of this was clearly shamanic in style, involving spirit transactions, trance work and healing practices.

Originally the word Bonpo covered a variety of spiritual roles, including that of shaman, magician, or priest. There are some interesting parallels between the Bonpo shamans of ancient Tibet and the druids of pre-Christian Europe. Just as the druidic order was divided into the three functions – bards, ovates and druids, who were poets, seers and magicians respectively – so the ancient pre-Buddhist kingdom of Tibet was said to be protected by the Drung, who were bards and singers of epics, the Deu, who were soothsayers and diviners, and the Bonpo, who were priests and shamans.
Shaman interpreting the Tikse Oracle, the most important shamanic trance dance in Ladakh.
THE ARCHETYPAL SHAMAN

According to Bonpo tradition the first archetypal shaman, who brought knowledge from the heaven-worlds to humanity more than 1,800 years ago, was named Shenrab Miwoche – a title meaning ‘the great supreme human shaman’. But Shenrab is represented as being much more than a man: he is a fully enlightened Buddha who descended from the heavens in the form of an azure cuckoo, the herald of spring. He then incarnated as a human being, overcame the machinations of an evil magician, and went on to instruct humanity in various techniques of ecstasy that would allow them to communicate with other worlds and invoke the powers of the gods.

BONPO INITIATION

Bonpo shamans generally belonged to a clan or guild and could be male or female. They were singled out for their role in life usually by the appearance of an ancestral shaman, whose spirit visited them and sometimes spoke through them. This often provoked a period of divine madness, in which the apprentice shaman saw and conversed with a variety of gods, elementals and demons. At this juncture they usually retired to the wilderness for a period of reflection and mediation from which they emerged – if they did not die of their exertions – as fully fledged shamans. Among the experiences related are accounts of being torn apart and consumed by spirits, or having organs removed and then restored with improved or augmented functions – an experience common to many other cultures.

Once they returned from this sequestration, the fledgling shamans would be taken into the care of a senior practitioner who taught them how to work with this new-found power and to direct it wherever it was needed in their work.

Among the early people of the area Mi-Chos, ‘The Religion of Humans’, retained non-Buddhist foundation myths, genealogies and legends, including a distinctly shamanic cosmology in which the human body was perceived as a microcosm of the universe. In this way the Tibetans attempted to reconcile their place within the heaven and the earth. From this developed the idea of spirits residing in trees, rocks and mountains. Elaborate propitiation rituals were developed to quell malevolent spirits and encourage benevolent ones to serve human needs; the shamans acted as mediators between both types of spirit, keeping the dangerous at bay and encouraging the beneficent to help.

LAND HEALING

To this day, a specific aspect of shamanism among the Tibetans involves land healing. Earth energies are seen to possess both positive and negative aspects, and many problems, ranging from sickness to bad weather, are dealt with by harmonizing with the environment.

This is part of a general approach to shamanism that recognizes its ultimate practicality. In a land where there are countless ways to interpret signs, and an equal number of possibilities for offending spirits, the Tibetan shaman fulfills an immensely important role. Without his or her skills there would be no one to act as mediator between spirits and humankind and the forces of nature – generally seen as hostile – would soon be out of control.

The world teems with malignant, aggressive and violent spirits who can cause great mischief if not properly handled, and the ordinary Tibetan lives in constant fear of these spirits. No trouble is too great, no journey too long, no cost too high to avoid evil spirits, or to placate them once they have been offended. When an ordinary Tibetan Buddhist is troubled by sickness or other troubles, his first thought is to locate the source of the trouble in the spirit world around him, and for this he turns to the Bon shaman, who uses his skills and his fearless ability to interact with spirits to find a harmonious solution.

SURVIVAL TODAY

Undoubtedly the most striking aspect of modern Tibetan shamanism is a survival from a very early period.
This is the Nechung, or State Oracle of Tibet, a powerful medium who interprets the intentions of the gods to the Tibetan people. Oracles have played a significant part in the spiritual history of the country, as they have in neighbouring lands in the Himalayan region – similar oracles function in Nepal and Ladakh. This is very much shamanism as a public resource, and the Nechung Oracle continues to play an important part in matters of state, being frequently consulted by the Tibetan government in exile, as well as the current Dalai Lama.

THE NECHUNG ORACLE

The current Oracle, formally the head of the Nechung monastery, is known for two significant prophecies. The first concerned the imminent overwhelming of the country by China, which invaded and annexed Tibet in 1949, and the second referred to the escape of the 14th Dalai Lama, who was smuggled out of the country ahead of the invading forces. During this time the Oracle fell ill and was unable to walk unaided for several years. Though he eventually recovered, his sickness is seen as directly related to the troubles affecting the country. This is, of course, in line with the periods of sickness reported by shamanic practitioners around the world, who suffer such episodes either before becoming a practicing shaman or during their ongoing spiritual work.

In Nechung Monastery, this statue of Dorje Drakden, the protector spirit of Tibet, keeps guard over the temple.

THE KUTEN

Known as kuten, which literally means ‘the physical basis’, Tibetan mediums are trained rigorously in the nature of trance and the interpretation of omens. Their task is to mediate between the outer and inner worlds and to interpret the visions they receive in their entranced state.

A complex ritual is used to invoke the presence of the oracle onto the kuten. Drumming and trumpet calls, dance, chanting and a detailed liturgy draw the spirit into its human vessel. The kuten is dressed a fantastic ceremonial costume consisting of many layers surmounted by an ornate silken brocade robe covered in ancient symbols, which both protect him and enable him to withstand the power of the spirit he embodies.
A traditional Tibetan shaman in the early 20th century.

On his chest the *katten* wears a circular mirror edged with turquoise and amethyst. Its polished steel deflects evil forces, as do the mirrors worn by shamans in Siberia and neighbouring Mongolia. Before the ritual begins,
the *kuten* puts on a harness that supports four flags and three victory banners. As the *kuten's* trance deepens, the assistants place a headdress on him which weighs a further 13.5 kilograms (30 pounds). Altogether the regalia weighs more than 45 kilograms (100 pounds) and the medium can hardly walk in it except when he enters into trance. The curious reeling, circling movements that accompany the oracle’s vision may be at least partly attributable to this, but in his trance state he is able to function in a way that would not normally be possible.

![Tibetan healing amulet of animal teeth set into silvered tubes and bound onto cord.](image)

The spirit of the oracle dances upon the *kuten*, inhabiting him in an embodied way. While so embodied, questions of national importance are asked and answered by the Oracle. It was by this means that the 14th Dalai Lama discovered a safe route for his escape from Tibet in 1949.
Thailand has its own particular blend of shamanism, drawing upon the Bon religion mixed with a generous dash of Buddhism and Hinduism, all influenced by the powerful and ancient folk culture of the country.

Thai shamans are known as spirit doctors (mau) or more simply as respected teachers (ajaan) and, unlike most other parts of the world where the shaman acts as an all-purpose healer, they may choose to specialize in a wide range of skills – including bone setters, snakebite healers, fishbone and bullet removers, diviners, exorcists, amulet makers, love doctors, sinus, eye and tooth doctors, midwives and morticians. The honorific ‘doctor’ may be accompanied by a single word that indicates their form of specialization. Thus a diviner may be called a mau duu, or ‘look doctor’ – someone who looks into the future or parts the curtains between the worlds to discover answers for his or her client.

Some, however, seem able to combine all of these skills, as in the case of a famous practitioner who had (among other things) cured high blood pressure and glaucoma, predicted the future, found lost children, uncovered thieves, banished evil spirits, and stopped a man from beating his wife.

Thread Cross

Spirit doctors have a huge range of ritual skills at their fingertips. The use of the Thread Cross, also known as the mdos or God’s Eye, is widespread. The cross is formed by two sticks bound together in a cruciform shape. The vertical stick is known as a srog shrin, or Tree of Life. Around this is woven a complex pattern of different-coloured threads, and the whole structure can measure up to 3.3 metres (11 feet) and include a variety of geometric shapes. The same emblem is found also in Mexico where it protects against ‘the evil eye’.

The use to which this is put varies, but most commonly it is intended to house or capture a god or spirit, who may be either positive or negative. If the intended use is as a container for a demonic power; it is called a gtagi mdos; if it is for protection, it is known as a brten mdos. Small versions of these may be placed on rooftops for personal or family protection, while the full-size mdos are used as protection for larger buildings such as monasteries. When the mdos has been in place for any length of time it is considered to be full of negative energies and is taken down and either dismantled or ritually destroyed by fire. Pieces of the broken mdos are sometimes carried by ordinary people for good luck.
A village shaman pours tea for her clients.

WAII KRUI

Once a year the shamanic spirit doctors of Thailand honour their spirit teachers in a ceremony known as *wai khru*. This involves enticing the spirit to descend into an offering bowl, which is then placed on an altar. The rituals can be either very simple or immensely complex. In the latter case, the most intricate and extraordinary ceremonies are those carried out by Thai classical dancers and musicians, overseen by the government-organized Fine Arts Department of the Performing Arts. Since all dance and music is said to be inspired directly by the spirits (as is the case in all cultures that include these in their shamanic practice), the artists invoke the presence of their inner guides before undertaking a performance.

TEACHER'S DAY

Teachers’ Day always occurs on a Thursday, which is regarded as being ruled over by the planet Jupiter – the ‘teachers star’, according to Thai astrologers. A senior male dance teacher, or master dancer, who is also a shaman, acts as a medium for the spirits of music and dance, making invocations from a set of manuscripts that he alone is permitted to hold or read. So important is this position that, when the last master died unexpectedly, the king himself was forced to anoint five new masters to ensure the proper transmission of the rites.

At the beginning of Teachers’ Day, beautifully crafted masks of the teacher gods of music and dance are arranged in a pyramid on the altar and the presiding priest may invoke as many as 20 spirits or teacher gods by having their special tunes played by classical percussionists. All of this demonstrates the importance of spirit
presences and the degree of devotion invoked by and upon those who perform under the influence of divine
inspiration.
This powerful tradition has done much to preserve the practice of shamanism in the country. A surprising
number of younger people are seeking to follow the path of the shaman – though they must undergo fearsome
trials in order to do so, including the use of hallucinogenic plants such as the so-called ‘angel tree’, which
brings on fits and has been known to alter the personality.
Thai dancers, costumed according to traditional style. Their coloured masks mark them out as portraying demons.
Shamanism in the Americas has remained a powerful constant among the native peoples, from the First Nations in the North, to the syncretic religions of Central America and the remote tribes of the Amazon Basin. Despite the fact that the American continent was, for many hundreds of years, cut off from anything more than occasional and mostly accidental contact with Europe, there are so many parallels within the practice of shamanism that arguments for the existence of a global shamanic culture in the more distant past begin to look more real. Despite wide cultural differences, the underlying patterns are remarkably similar.
Millions of years have shaped the sacred rocks of the North American continent.
The sheer size of the country and the variety of cultural groups make it impossible to deal with every aspect of shamanism or medicine teachings here. Although all indigenous peoples of the Americas descend from common ancestors who came over the Bering Strait when the continent was joined to the European mainland, the many different cultures possess their own distinct traditions.

We shall discuss primarily the practices of three tribes – one from the North Western seaboard, one from the Great Plains cultures, and one from the deep forests of the North-East. For many people in the West, Native American medicine practices are synonymous with shamanism. Terms such as vision quest, sweat lodge and sun dance are bandied about freely. However, one of the first things to note about shamanism in North America is that the use of the word shaman can be inappropriate – especially among the members of the First Nation tribes.

The First Nations people possess a very diverse set of beliefs and practices, many of which can be termed shamanic, though those practising them would never use the term. Instead titles such as lore keepers, medicine people, spirit singers and traditional healers will be found in most tribal units.

Early drawing of a Chippewa (Ojibwa) Prophet’s lodge, c.1851.

Though there is a wide variety of individual practice across the continent, the basics are not that dissimilar – so while we lose something by not having the opportunity to study each tribal unit in detail, the overall picture is faithful to the larger understanding of this rich heritage.

SHAMAN SOCIETIES

Native American medicine people often band together in groups known as Medicine Societies. Although
individual shamans continue to practise alone, most belong to one of these groups, which offer mutual support and organize the many complex rituals that govern the daily lives of the people. Indeed, the Five Nations’ ethical laws and practices were studied when the Constitution of the United States was created, and some of their philosophy was incorporated therein.

In many instances these societies are designed to allow for particular specializations – for example, the Seneca, part of the Iroquois nation and thus one of the original Five Nations who live in the north-east region of the USA, have an overall Medicine Animal society which maintains close links between humans and animals, both physical and spiritual. They also have specialist groups such as The Eagle Society, one of the most powerful, which works to restore life to those on the edge of death, and perform beautiful and intricate dances in plumage-rich costume. There is also the Bear Society, which works to cure specific diseases; the Otter Society, which focuses on women’s magic and works primarily with water; and the Buffalo Society, who dance, sing and create a dish made from buffalo meat that brings healing.

![A Seneca mask used in winter rites.](image)

The same tribe also possesses a Chanter for the Dead, who is always a woman, and who works on behalf of those who are suffering troubling dreams from dead ancestors. In addition there is also a False Face Society, which works though the medium of elaborate masks divided into four groups: Doorkeeper or Doctor Masks, Dancing Masks, Beggar Masks and Secret Masks. Doctor Masks are used during healing rituals, Beggar Masks in ceremonies to request healing from the spirits, and Dancing Masks for dance ceremonies. The Secret Masks are only ever used in private ceremonies that are not open to public viewing and are considered the most powerful.

Most of these societies are extremely hierarchical, with each member being judged on their abilities and specialities. The Ojibwa, for example, recognize four kinds of healing disciplines: the icisaki or male diviner; the nanandawi or tribal doctor; the wabeno or ‘Man of the Dawn Sky’, who manipulates fire in order to interpret dreams, guide novices and heal the sick; and the meda or family healer.
RITUALS, HIERARCHY AND INITIATION

The rituals associated with joining are rigorous and powerful, designed to invoke the greatest power in each candidate. In the Midewiwin Society of the Ojibwa people, those who show an aptitude for plant medicine or other healing gifts are submitted to the spirits (manitou) for testing. If they pass – usually by receiving a dream from the spirits – they are admitted at the lowest level of the society and have to work their way up through eight levels, each one more powerful and secretive.

In the final stages of the process, the initiate lies down and has a variety of shells placed on his body. These are intended to focus the power of the manitou in the shaman and to build up protection against attacks by evil spirits. As the candidate lies on the ground, his teachers will symbolically shoot him in the areas of the body where such protection has been invoked. If the initiate displays signs of being hurt, he has failed the test; if, however, he lies still and continues to journey into the spirit realm he will, at the end, be considered to be a fully fledged shaman.

Birch bark scroll showing a sacred song from the Midewiwin Society.

THE SWEAT LODGE

The practice of going into an enclosure in order to sweat is common to many peoples in the world; and in most traditional societies this becomes a tool of spiritual discipline. The enclosure or lodge, which is often a temporary structure with poles bent over to make the frame, is heated by the bringing-in of rocks heated in the fire outside. These are placed in the centre of the lodge, while the sweaters sit around inside. In some cultures a permanent stone structure is made, like the teach an allais of the Irish, which was still being used until the early 19th century: these were heated by hot rocks being dropped into a bowl of water to make steam.

The typical sweat lodge of North America is one where intense heat causes the skin to exude sweat. This has the effect of cleansing the body of impurities, of relieving rheumatic pain or other infirmities, but its sacred effect is the humbling of the sweater who prays while undergoing his sweat. In most traditional societies of the Americas the sweat is a tool of spiritual discipline. Most sweat lodge users enter in the spirit of prayer, knowing that everyone is sitting in the same state of basic humanity in the face of a spiritual force greater than any within the lodge. Even in the modern evolution of the sweat house as sauna in Scandinavian countries, this sacred aspect of sweating is not forgotten, and there are protocols of proper behaviour so that the spirits of the sweat house are not insulted.
Early observers of the sweat lodges in different parts of North America remarked upon its healing or cleansing properties but, because none of these explorers experienced the sweat for themselves, few understood the sacred importance of its function. Once this was understood by those who wished to control the First Nations peoples, the sweat lodge became forbidden, with even the Sioux nation being forbidden by the Indian Police from entering one. Since 1979, when Native American religion was officially reinstated as a legitimate spiritual path, the sweat lodge has been fully integrated back into life on the reservation, as well as spreading around the world as a means of spiritual preparation, healing and communion. Those who enter a sweat go in to pray for ancestors or family undergoing difficulties, for situations in the world, for the relief of illness and so on; those who have been in prison or returned from war enter the lodge to be purified of the violence they have seen inflicted; rounds of prayers will be sung as the sweaters undergo the fierce heat. By suffering for others, sweaters hope that their prayers will be heard and that obstacles will fall away.
The materials of this North American Sweat Lodge are modern but the construction technique is centuries old.
A re-enactment of the vision quest undertaken by a Sioux medicine healer.

THE VISION QUEST

Among the Plains People of the central area of North America, the traditions and techniques of shamanism change somewhat. Indeed, some commentators question whether these people actually possess a shamanistic tradition. Despite the differences, however, there is sufficient evidence to support the fact that over most of the North American continent, individual tribes engage in shamanic activity. Unlike the classic practices of Siberia and the Arctic Circle, the shamans or medicine people of the plains, such as the Lakota and Blackfoot, tend to seek initiation through isolation, fasting and meditation – the most clearly delineated version of which is the vision quest.

The vision quest is almost as familiar in Western shamanic terminology through the concept of the
shamanic journey or that of power animals. Contrary to what many believe, it was widely practised in a number of cultures other than Native American; the Inuit people undertook rigorous vision quests, retreating into the frozen Arctic wastes for weeks at a time, while in Nepal those in search of wisdom may be left for days on a platform high amid the trees. Such tests are not always to do with becoming a medicine man but may be used, under supervision, to enable spirits to bring healing where it is needed.

The purpose of the vision quest is primarily to enable contact and guidance from spirits, to cleanse and harmonize the body, and to discover a personal direction or destiny in life. Often, those who undertake such a powerful and life-changing rite of passage will prepare for months beforehand.

Most vision quests take up to four days to complete – though some may be longer. Typically it takes place in nature. The person on the quest either chooses or is told the location for their journey, as well as any preparations they need to make, by a medicine person. This same person will often guide the quester in all aspects of the ceremony and provide spiritual support and guidance throughout their journey.

The quester is purified in a sweat-lodge ceremony and then taken to the designated place of the quest. There they will stay without food, water or sleep for one to four nights, giving up all the things that normally sustain them and relying entirely on inner spiritual strength. During this time the quester focuses completely on the guidance he is seeking. They must overcome earthly desires, facing their human nature to receive the vision. Once the vision quest is completed the journeyer speaks of his or her experience to a medicine man or woman, who will help them understand any message they have received. The effects of the vision quest are almost always extreme. Shamans talk of changes to body and soul, changing them for ever. Lame Deer of the Lakota Sioux described his own vision journey:

> I heard the cry of an eagle, loud above the voices of many other birds. It seemed to say, ‘We have been waiting for you. We knew you would come ….You will have a ghost with you always – another self.

*Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions, John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, 1972*

Such experiences are easily recognizable as shamanistic, and we will find many other instances of ghostly or spirit beings, visible or audible only to the shaman, in other societies around the world.

The richness and variety of the shamanic traditions of the First Nations people makes them among the most important for the understanding of the way that shamanism works in practice. It informs virtually every aspect of daily life among the peoples who have maintained their traditional identity, and much of this has passed, often unremarked, into the worldview of the United States.
Petroglyphs etched into the rocks in Chidalgo Canyon, California, record shamanic visions.

SPIRITS OF TOBACCO

Tobacco is considered one of the most powerful and potent of substances throughout much of the Americas. The tobacco spirit is reported to take the form of birds or beasts, and the shamans who work closely with this spirit have to learn specific songs, healing chants and dances. Depending on the area, the plant is smoked, chewed, sniffed or made into a syrup and used as an enema. Among the Plains Indians and elsewhere, offerings of tobacco are made to the spirits in the form of scraps of cotton cloth (usually red) tied to bushes. These offerings are made in times of trouble or to request healing or help from the spirits.
Piegan tribesman with a medicine pipe used in shamanic ceremonies, c.1940.
The Dineh or Diné are more familiarly known as the Navajo. They were among the last groups to arrive in the Southwest, probably migrating from Alaska around 1000 ce. Originally a nomadic people, they settled in the region known as the Four Corners, where the four states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado meet.

Central to Dineh spirituality is the concept of hozro, beauty, which is present within everything. It is the innate beauty of the cosmos, the perfected pattern of creation and the highest quality of human existence. All of this is combined in the concept of the Beauty Way, a mystical and spiritual practice that contains shamanic elements. Shamans and priests both follow this way, though the Dineh distinguish sharply between the two. The priests are responsible for ceremony and knowledge; the shamans with ritual and healing. (A third category are diviners, who are considered neither priests nor shamans.)

NAVAJO SAND PAINTINGS
One of the most unusual and striking ways in which shamanic healing is performed among the Dineh is the creation of sacred sand paintings known as iikhááh. The name means 'to enter and leave' and is intended to create a space into which the spirits (yeii) may descend, occupy briefly, then depart, having done their work of healing. The images are formed by scattering multi-coloured sand made from crushed rocks and metals. The shamans who create these designs are inspired by spirit and create whatever they are told to.

Each grain of sand is charged with blessings; as the images build up, both in complexity and power, the patient is required to focus on them and to meditate on their possible meaning. When the image is deemed complete, the patient will be walked around the painting and encouraged to physically enact any story or meaning they see in the picture. At the end of the ceremony the painting is destroyed, releasing the spirits back into the Otherworld.
A Navajo shaman in Arizona illustrating a story from the mythology of his people.

TWO-SPIRITS

Another aspect of Dineh spirituality is the presence of trans-genderal people known as nadles, or elsewhere Badé/Boté (Crow), Joya (Chumash), Kwiraxame (Maricopa), Ihamana (Zuni) or Winkte (Lakota). The term nadles means literally 'changing ones' and refers to the hermaphroditic or androgynous nature of these people. They are also widely known as Two-Spirits, suggesting that they share the soul of male and female within one host body. The somewhat pejorative term Berdache was applied to all such people by Western anthropologists.

Almost two hundred Native American tribes have been recorded as including trans-genderal people. Though not always shamans, when called to follow the path they are usually extremely powerful. In the mythology of the Dineh, the nadles are said to be descended from the sacred twins Turquoise Boy and White Shell Girl, who were both androgynous. It is said that these two taught the first people the arts of
pottery and basket weaving, as well as the shaping of stone tools.

Trans-genderal people are considered vital to the continued wellbeing of the Dineh, and their abilities and traditions honoured within the community.

Unsurprisingly, the reaction of the Christian priests who first encountered Two-Spirits was uncomplimentary; though one, the Jesuit Jacques Marquette, writing in the late 19th century, noted:

_They are summoned to the Councils, and nothing can be decided without their advice. Finally, through their profession of leading and extraordinary life, they pass for Manitous, – that is to say, for Spirits, – or persons of Consequence._

The importance of the Two-Spirits and their place in traditional society was emphasized by Lakota medicine man Lame Deer who, in an interview recorded in 1931, described how among his people the _winkte_ ("male-to-female") were greatly honored. They could bestow a special name on an individual, which was kept secret and considered to imbue their owners with great power. The anthropologist C. Daryll Forde, in his 1931 _Ethnography of the Yuma Indians_, wrote:

_The secret name a _winkte_ gave to a child was believed to be especially powerful and effective. Sitting Bull, Black Elk, even Crazy Horse had secret _winkte_ names.... Lakota chief Crazy Horse reportedly had one or two _winkte_ wives._

FROM THE WINNEBAGO PEOPLE, RETOLD BY RICHARD L. DIETERLE IN _THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HOCA’AK MYTHOLOGY_, 2005
Despite being attacked, the Two-Spirits continued to work as healers, mostly in secret, for several generations after their first contact with Europeans.

A BERDACHE ORIGIN MYTH

A berdache is a man who, in conformity with social convention, assumes a woman’s role in every respect…. A young man became a berdache if and only if during his fasting vision quest, he was blessed by Moon and ordered by this spirit to “take up the skirt.” If he failed to do this, it was thought that the moon would take his life. It is an institution which entails certain men who dress as women, take on female roles, and may marry other men. They are considered holy and highly respected for special gifts such as prophesy, healing, artistry, and excelling at women’s tasks.
Throughout Central and South America shamanism remains a highly developed and important aspect of society. Shamans are consulted for many kinds of ailment and solutions are sought across every aspect of life, from conception to death and beyond.
Urubamba Valley in Peru is home to many practitioners of ancient shamanic traditions.
All shamanism is inseparably linked to the land on which its practitioners live, and nowhere is this truer than in the southern and central areas of the Americas. From the shamans of the Andes, whose connection with the spirits that dwell in the mountain peaks is well attested, to those of the Amazon basin, whose entire mode of working revolves around the rain forest and the Amazon River itself.

Because of its comparative remoteness and the physical difficulties involved in travelling to their villages, the tribes of these areas have remained comparatively untouched until recent times, with the result that their practices are also less influenced than most by the modern world. Thus tribes such as the Andean Q’ero, the Mapuche of South-Central Brazil and the Avá-Chiripá of Paraguay and Argentina have been largely left in isolation, and their ways of working have been preserved, appearing much as they would have hundreds or even thousands of years previously.
**SHARED SIBERIAN TRADITIONS**

Despite the vast distance separating the two continents, the shamanism of Southern and Central America is strikingly similar to that of Siberia, which is now believed to be the original home of the American First Nations. Reports of dismemberment and reconstitution in vision, spirit flight and helping spirits are very much a part of the shamanism of both cultures, while they also share many parallels in cosmology, such as the central tree or pole connecting a tripartite universe.

One area in which there is a divergence is in the use of hallucinogenic drugs. This is widespread throughout Meso-America, and is the basis for most of the healing work carried out by native shamans from Mexico to Brazil. Over a hundred plants are known to be used to induce trance states, and these are used in a variety of ways according to the region and the tribes. Mushrooms containing psilocybin and the cactus of the peyote family are widely used; tobacco, though not of itself hallucinogenic, is often used as a purifier.

**THE Q’ERO**

The Q’ero, or ‘long-hairs’, live in a group of villages roughly 5,000 metres (17,000 feet) up on the Andean mountains of south central Peru. Their remoteness has, as with the shamans of the Amazon, preserved them from outside influence, and they were not discovered until 1949. Their heritage is unique in that they are descendents of the original Inca people, and may well have acted as a kind of priesthood for this powerful race. Some experts have suggested they are the original source of that race, who somehow survived after the incursions of Spanish conquistadors in the 17th century.

The name Q’ero was first a place where, according to their myth, the first man and woman, Inkari and Collari, were created by the god Kamaq. The children of this original couple settled in the area, and were gifted by their parents with the keeping of spiritual teachings and prophecies. Unusually the Q’ero are very committed to sharing their knowledge with the rest of the world, since they believe that they hold the keys to the future survival of mankind.

In common with many other cultures with a shamanic tradition, the Q’ero divide the cosmos into three levels. The upper or superior world (*Hanaqpacha*) holds pure energy, which flows through everything. The lower world (*Ukhupacha*) is populated with invisible beings that had been in existence before the creation of our world. This human world, with all its creatures and plants, is known as *Kaypacha*.

The Q’ero name for a shaman is *paq’o*, and they may be either male or female. Their power comes from their ability to connect with a variety of spirits that permeate everything. These include the *apus*, or spirits of the mountains, the *kuichi*, or spirits of the rainbow, and the
Inca priests still play an important part in the daily lives of the Quechua and Aymara people of Latin America. Their blessing and services are called upon daily.

**THE PAQ’O HIERARCHY**

The *paq’o* organize themselves in a series of circles, representing the levels of power exercised by each shaman. First is the shaman at the centre, who serves a specific village. Beyond his sphere of influence is a more senior shaman, who oversees the health and wellbeing of the area surrounding the village. Beyond this figure is a still more senior and powerful leader, who serves the whole region. This idea is reflected in the training of the individual shamans. At the beginning, he or she will engage with the powerful spirits present in a single place, such as a mountain; as they progress through the levels of knowledge and skill, they move on to larger and more powerful areas, always gaining strength, until they are regarded as having reached a certain level, that of master (*mesayoq*). However, the training of a *paq’o* never really ends, as they are understood to receive fresh initiation from more powerful spirits throughout their lives.
Sacred dance mask made from fox skin, Peru.

Anyone can study to become a paq’o, and will be taught the basic techniques and mysteries – but what happens next determines whether the candidate will be selected to go forward. As with shamans around the world, many may be called but few are chosen. Signs of nascent power are sought and, if found, the individual trainee will receive further initiation. This generally involves travelling to the mountains and swimming in the ice-cold springs that rise there. Sacred sites are visited and the initiate will spend days absorbing the energy of such places; the experience may be repeated every month until the initiate reaches a state of higher knowledge. Paq’o learn to relate deeply to all of the elements and test themselves against the most challenging physical situations. One of the highest forms of natural selection for a shaman is to be struck by lightning. Those who survive report changes within themselves and an enhancement of power that is seldom attained through more usual methods.
When lightning strikes a tree it is considered to be blessed by the gods.
Throughout the area of the once vast Amazonian rainforests, shamanism has remained unchanged for thousands of years. The shaman, here generally known as a payé, works with the natural world, both animal and plant, to attain the power that enables him to heal and see visions.

He is expected to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the tribe and to undergo privation and hardship in order to refine his skills to the greatest extent. A payé must also possess a good singing voice, since much of the strength of the shaman is contained in the use of chants and magical power songs. But above all he must be willing, and able, to shapeshift, transforming himself into the shapes of animal, bird or fish, for only in this way can he communicate with higher powers that enable him to heal and find true vision.

THE JAGUAR SHAMANS

One of the most common transformations is into the shape of a jaguar. So strong is the association with this beautiful and powerful creature throughout the Amazonian region that several of the words used to describe different shamans and their work derive from the name of the jaguar. For this reason they have been dubbed ‘Jaguar Shamans’, though in fact they may take on other forms.
Piaroa Indian shaman of Venezuela wears a transformative tarantula headdress.

Such transformations are attained though various means. The *payé* may take a hallucinogen, carry out a ritual, or adorn himself with jaguar bones, teeth and skins. The undoubted power of this animal, aside from its fierceness, is in its strength, its ability to climb trees, and to swim under water. Such abilities reflect those of the shaman, who climbs trees in his spirit journeys or sinks to the bottom of the river to converse with the Master of Fish.

The following jaguar spell is typical of the power songs sung as part of the ritual transformation of a shaman:

*Where do you come from, Child of the black jaguar? Nourishing the earth with The milk of your breasts, You come forth.*

*The jaguar comes from behind him, calls out to him. In the heart of the forest it screams, comes from behind him already tamed…*

Among the Desana people who live along the Negro River, a tributary of the Amazon that separates Columbia and Venezuela, the shamans concoct a particularly powerful hallucinogenic snuff, which they keep in a hollowed-out jaguar bone with a stopper at each end. When one of the elder shamans desires to initiate a group of novices into the power of
the jaguar, he will call together a group who will have previously fasted for days and chanted together for several nights. They each take a large dose of snuff and then wait for the jaguar power to choose from those among them who will be true shamans. Not everyone will be so chosen; some may simply pass out or become sick; others feel themselves transformed and report that their souls fly off into the heavens or roam the jungle in the shape of a jaguar. At this time the actual creatures in the jungle are said to roar and cry out for some time, only ceasing their calls when the shamans return to their bodies. The Desana call themselves ‘Sons of the Wind’, because of their ability to fly, leaving their bodies behind as they climb into the sky.

Many South and Central American shamans seek the jaguar for their totem.

BRAZIL

In contrast to the ancient shamanic traditions of the Amazon and Peruvian Andes, spiritual movements across the continent in Brazil such as Candomblé, Santo Daime and Quimbanda all show the cross-fertilization that come from a mingling of indigenous shamanism with both African and European traditions, including Christianity.
CANDOMBLÉ

The earliest of these is Candomblé, which originated in Africa – most probably with the Yoruba people of Nigeria, who were shipped out as slaves to work on the Brazilian sugar plantations. Though they brought their traditions and beliefs with them, these soon came under attack by Christian missionaries who saw it as their task to ‘improve the lives of the benighted savages’ by imposing Christianity on them.

The slaves soon realized that if they paid lip service to the new god they could continue their own beliefs under cover. Thus, while they followed the surface teachings of Jesus and the Saints, they continued to honour their own spirits, the Orishas. These beings slowly became merged with Christian saints, and in this way many of the traditions of the Yoruba were preserved, along with their music and songs. The shamans of the tribe, known as babalorixas (male) and yalorixa (female), continued to work in secret, healing where they could and keeping alive the ancient ways of their people. Finally, with the passing of the Emancipation Act of 1888, the Afro-Brazilian people were permitted to practise their beliefs more openly, and Candomblé emerged as a powerful spiritual movement that continues to this day.

SANTO DAIME

Santo Daime is another example of a syncretic religion that follows the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church, but with the vegetation god Daime, who is perceived as inhabiting the highly intoxicating ayahuasca plant itself, sharing a place of honour with Christ, and the sacrament of bread and wine being replaced by the imbibing of the plant. Daime is said to have emerged from the depths of the forest in response to the vast swathes of trees that are being cut down by unscrupulous loggers.
A shaman in the Coafan region in Ecuador boils leaves from the ayahuasca plant. The potion has psychoactive properties.

RAIMUNDO IRINEU SERRA
The founder of the religion was an Afro-Brazilian – a rubber tapper named Raimundo Irineu Serra, who had been initiated by Peruvian shamans in the 1920s, and learned the uses of the ayahuasca plant. During a trance-induced journey, Serra was told that he must go further into the rainforest. Continuing under the influence of the consciousness-changing plant he spent eight days in the forest, emerging with a complete doctrine that he had received from Our Lady of Conception the Forest Queen. In 1930 Serra founded the Alto Santo Church and began receiving the divine inspiration to compose what he called the Third Gospel, consisting of over 100 hymns that codify the beliefs of the doctrine.

Followers of the church share night-long ceremonies in which, having drunk a distillation of ayahuasca, they enter into a trance state during which they chant, dance and play music, all the while seeking spirit contact that will inform them how to accomplish healing work and find wisdom that will help them in their daily life.

QUIMBANDA
Another imported religious movement that has developed a powerful following in Brazil is Quimbanda, often seen as an adjunct of the African Umbanda but actually featuring far more of a highly moralistic Christianity overlaid on African beliefs and practices. The name ‘Quimbanda’ derives from the Kimbundu language of Angola and means healer or diviner, and the many shaman priests who follow this path invoke spirits to bring wisdom and healing, as well as enabling them to peer into the future. The Quimbanda rituals thus tend to focus primarily on necromancy, divination and the creation of amulets, potions and other devices that are designed to invoke supernatural aid.

Like Umbanda and Candomblé, Quimbanda has become recognized as a legitimate religion in recent years; however, several Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian churches have shown increasing intolerance towards African-derived religious traditions in Brazil, forcing the followers of the tradition to seek recourse from the law that protects freedom of religion in Brazil.
Once the denizens of a great empire, the Mayan people are now scattered across an area of the South American continent that includes Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador. While their history may have been relegated to the world of historians and anthropologists, they have not died out, as is often stated, but continue to retain their ancient roots and to practise shamanism, part of which at least may date back many thousands of years.

The word for a shaman or medicine person among the Maya is *h’men*, meaning ‘The One Who Knows’, and they may be male or female. They are selected most often by experiencing a dream in which the nine principal spirits of the Maya appear and begin to instruct the initiate in the lore and techniques of healing. Much of this work is carried out at a spiritual level, though the *h’men* also use plants to treat illnesses and injuries that have a more everyday cause.

The seat of power for the *h’men* is the *sastun*, or Stone Mirror, a power object that can take a number of forms but always has a transparent quality, or a hole, which enables the shaman to look through it. The *h’men* is thus able to see unseen causes of illness, to talk with spirits, and to answer questions asked by his or her client.

Modern shamans have not forgotten their origins and many still work using cosmological patterns derived from ancient times. In the Yucatan region the shamans carry out their rituals within a sacred space modelled on the ancient cosmic pattern inherited from the distant past.

As in almost every other part of the world the Mayan cosmos is perceived as being made up of three levels: the Sky or Upperworld, the Earth or Middleworld (which floats on the primordial sea), and the Underworld, which is known as Xibalba. This otherworldly region is filled with animals and plants and is a mirror image of the everyday world. At night it ascends to form the night sky and returns beneath the horizon at dawn. While it may appear to be an exact copy of the real world, the creatures that occupy it are actually spirits. It is to this realm that the *h’men* journey in search of healing and information for their clients.
A shaman performs a blessing in the Pac-Chen Mayan Community, Mexico.
Connecting the three worlds is the *wachu chan*, or Tree of Life, which has its roots in the Underworld and its branches in the Upperworld. The trunk and the branches that stretch outwards form ways between the inner and outer realms, which are seen as interlocking.

Orientation, in both the inner and outer worlds, is extremely important. The major axis within the Middleworld is from east to west, and is known as the Path of the Sun. Each of the four cardinal points is anchored by a sacred tree, which has a number of associations with colours, birds and gods and has its own specific rituals. Each direction has its own specific sacred name, though these vary according to the tribal area and dialect of the Mayan language spoken there.

**THE H'MEN**

The *h'men* are concerned not only with healing and cleansing, but also with weather, exorcism and divination. They may be called upon to protect the crops that are the staple of the Mayan people by turning aside wind or rain and protecting them from the attack of malevolent spirits. The *h'men* also have a close connection with animals, whom they may occasionally ask to give up their lives in order that the people may eat. This is much more than a ritual sacrifice, and involves the shaman in establishing a personal relationship with the creature. In all, the modern-day Mayan shamans have preserved many of the traditions that once informed their nation and have brought with them religious beliefs that have resisted the attack of Christianity for thousands of years.

*Huichol Indians on their mystical pilgrimage over the mountains in San Luis Potosi State, Mexico.*
The Huichol are a group of indigenous people living around the area of the Sierra Madre mountains of Mexico, whose history predates that of the Aztecs and whose way of life has remained largely unchanged through the centuries. Their myths tell how the great Cosmic Serpent, the spirit of rain, gave life to the gods, one of whom – Kauyamari, Elder Brother Deer – discovered the *neirika*, a kind of portal that connects the worlds. Through this the gods came to earth and through song and prayer brought life to the world. The name of this first land was *Wirikuta*, and it was here that the sacred Peyote grew and the first men, the great ancestors, resided. Much later, as humans spread out across the world, Tatewari, the first shaman, led an expedition to this land to gather the plant that has been used in all Huichol rituals ever since. To this day the *mara’akame*, the shaman priest of the Huichol, leads a small group on a mystical journey that echoes that undertaken by their ancestors. They sometimes journey more than 320 kilometres (200 miles) across the land, eating only peyote and tortillas on their trek. In this way they ‘find their lives’, experiencing altered states of consciousness and burning away the accretions of ordinary living. Peyote sustains the people spiritually, allowing them to make contact with their ancestors and learn all that is needful to existence.
Shamanic figures in a Huichol yarn painting. Created by pressing brightly coloured yarn into wax-coated boards, the paintings often depict symbols of spiritual significance.
HUICHOL PEYOTE CULT
The Huichol peyote cult permeates every aspect of life. It is introduced into the children while still in the womb and later through their mother’s milk. When they are old enough, they eat the sacred plant in community rituals and experience the presence of the gods directly. During the celebration of the Hikuri Neixia, the Peyote Dance, which lasts two days and nights, the families dance a total of five times around an area marked out as a temple. Each of the five sacred directions is honoured, and at each point liquid peyote is drunk.

Ceremonies of this kind are age old. The elevation of the peyote plant to the level of godhead reflects the earliest stage of human development. The visions thus garnered are part of the world of our most distant ancestors, and their extraordinary details echo within all of us. The Huichol, in particular, produce elaborately designed textiles, printed in vibrant colours, which retell the mythic interpretation of their lives and the shamanic journeys they experience in pictures.

THE NAHUTAL INDIANS
Not far from the lands of the Huichol, in the extreme southern region of Mexico, live the Nahutal people. A story recorded by William Madsen in the 1950s relates how Don Soltero Perez was literally forced to become a shaman. He told Madsen how, in 1918, he had moved to San Nicholas Tetelco because of the Mexican Civil War. One night a storm came to the valley and struck the house where he and his wife were living. All of the inhabitants, including Don Soltero, were knocked unconscious, but all recovered quickly, except for Soltero himself, who came round later on but remained in a dazed state. Next day a female healer treated him and he seemed well. But over the next six months he would lose consciousness at least once a week. He described what happened as the kidnapping of his soul by enanitos, dwarfish rain spirits who had lived in and around the Valley of Mexico from the time of the Aztecs. Also known as los aires, these beings are described as small, long-haired men and women who live in caves in the mountains, where they store clouds, thunder and lightning in barrels, releasing them over human lands when they are angry. They can also blow their breath at those whom they do not like or who do not believe in them, bringing them a sickness known as aire de cuevas, which can only be treated by an experienced shaman.

Once every week Don Soltero would fall down and lie rigid, grinding his teeth. Then he would go limp but remain unconscious for a period of an hour or more. During this time the enanitos would take his spirit on an exploration of their subterranean world, showing him caves with houses and fields that grew maize and squash exactly as if they were above ground. All the time the enanitos demanded that he become a healer – and when Soltero refused to do their bidding, they would beat his spirit. He would waken feeling sore all over, just as if the beating had taken place in everyday reality.

This continued for six months until Don Soltero finally gave in and agreed to become a healer. At this point he received from his tormentors a staff called a vara, which was carved with symbols that represented his power, three translucent yellow curing stones which the Don found in his pocket when he awoke from a trance, and a spirit wife whom he was forced to marry on pain of death. Only he and the enanitos can see this person, with whom the Don has children who live with their mother in the cavernous world. Since this time Soltero has been forbidden from sleeping with his physical wife, and when he dies his spirit will return to the caves where he will live forever with his spirit wife and their family.
A Nahual shaman prays before a shrine during a rain ceremony.

Such stories are rarely found in such detail, but perfectly illustrate the relationship that can exist between the shaman and the spirits who work with him. Don Soltero has been a practising healer ever since and has a reputation that has won him great respect from the people of the region.
Shamanism in the Antipodes represents one of the oldest surviving strands of the tradition. Among the Outback peoples of Australia, the Maoris of New Zealand and the tribespeople of New Guinea we find ourselves entering a world of ancient ways, age-old traditions and primitive beliefs. Healers continue the work they have always done, in some instances without interruption, for thousands of years, rituals invoking ancient gods are still practised, and contact with the ancestors and the wisdom they hold is a vital strand in the wisdom of these remarkable peoples.
The red rocks of the Australian landscape frequently hide pictograms depicting the Dreamtime.
THE ABORIGINES

The Aboriginal people of Australia have a hugely sophisticated set of shamanic traditions that have, to all intents and purposes, remained unchanged over the vast span of time these people have walked the earth.

Some estimate that the Aborigines have been around for 40,000 years, during which time their culture has changed very little, despite the effects of western incursion and the determined efforts of Christian missionaries to convert the natives to their religion. The result is a fascinating study of the ways in which ancient traditions can be preserved and how they can be subtly altered by colonization.

DREAMTIME

The central concept that informs every aspect of life among the Outback Peoples is the Dreamtime. This is both a period of time conceived of as existing before the creation of human beings, and a kind of parallel world that still exists and is inhabited by spirits and ancestors. It is to this world that all shamans journey in search of knowledge and power.
According to the teachings of the Aborigines, the Dreamtime began when infinite space was penetrated by great powers, who literally dreamt the universe into being. These beings, whose powers are limitless, are the great ancestors of humanity, and their dreams formed the world as we know it.

During the period when the earth was coming into being, the first Man and Woman walked the land. The Man shaped the rocks and rivers, the deserts and forests, while the Woman dreamed of the laws and rituals that govern all of life. Because the land and the law were created at the same time, they are inseparably related. Since everything originated from the Dreamtime, this represents the foundation of truth and reality, while life as we understand it is merely a shadow of the original creation.

All shamanic traditions within the continent derive from this extraordinary and beautiful creation myth. It governs the shape and structure of native society, the relationship of everyone with the earth, and everything else from marriage laws to rituals. Because the stories that have been passed down though the generations from the
Dreamtime were traditionally expressed not only in words but also in song and dance, ancient forms of these disciplines have remained unchanged. To observe an aboriginal ceremony (something that is rarely granted to outsiders) is to come as near as possible to looking in on a time before history was formed.

![Shaman from Palm Island, Australia, c.1930, wearing a mask and cloak.](image)

**MEN OF HIGH DEGREE**

Some commentators have described the Aborigines as the most primitive people still alive on the earth, citing their lack of possessions and nomadic way of life. Others have pointed out that by maintaining a sense of oneness with the earth, of sharing the entirety of their cultural understanding and of being connected to everything, they are in fact the most sophisticated race on the planet.
The Pinnacles Desert, a spectacular natural feature of Nambung National Park, Western Australia. It has great significance to the native population.

Because the rites and traditions of the Outback Peoples are so complex, and many are still veiled in secrecy, it is only possible to give a general overview of them here, but it will be seen immediately how much the practices of Aboriginal shamans parallel those of many other cultures – emphasizing the fact that shamanism was at one time a universal pattern of spirituality that still underlies a huge percentage of the human religious impulse.

Aboriginal shamans, known as ‘Men of High Degree’, do not undergo initiation in the same way as most other cultures. Life itself initiates them as they pass through the stages of birth, puberty, maturity and death – each stage marked by intricate ceremonies that reveal ever-deepening knowledge and wisdom. Every significant stage of life, for both genders, is marked with an extraordinary series of complex rituals, often continuing over several years, and which include dance, song, the laws for daily living, the transmission of myths and stories, and the inherited knowledge of symbols, forms and secrets relating to the landscape itself. As many commentators have observed, the land itself is a vast book in which every rock, river, hill or escarpment can be read and has a story to be told.

The poet Gary Snyder once undertook a journey by truck across a wide area of the Outback, accompanied by an Aboriginal elder. He noted that, as they drove, the elder’s speech speeded up, and realized that the man was actually telling the story of the landscape, matching his words to the speed of the vehicle. The traveller Bruce Chatwin described this in his famous book *The Songlines*, in which he described the vast network of invisible power lines that covered the continent, each with its own set of stories and songs known only to shamans of each area. These allowed the people to navigate vast areas of seemingly featureless land, literally guided by the stories associated with land features that they remembered.
Puberty rites and adult initiation prepare the way for those who are singled out for a shamanic path. This process is known as ‘being made’ and refers to the inner, as well as the physical, transformations that take place in the individual as they reach maturity. At this point, the first in a series of stages may take place.

The first is the call, which may take the form of a naturally occurring contact with spirit, or through inheritance of skills from an ancestral lineage, or through recognition by already initiated shamans. The second stage is the killing, in which the candidate experiences spiritual death during vision. This is followed by dismemberment and re-memberment in which, again in vision, body parts or organs are removed, cleansed and replaced. This type of experience parallels that of shamans all over the world, particularly in Siberia and the Arctic Circle, far from the Australian continent. The fourth stage of initiation involves the acquiring of certain substances, such as crystals, shells and snake skins, and spirit helpers, usually in animal guise, some of which are physical, others not. The fifth stage sees the initiate restored to life, waking often in a dissociated state that may last for several days. The final stage sees the candidate establishing their own connection with the ancestors and spirit beings who will continue to educate them.

Once this set of initiations has been competed, the new shaman is taken under the wing of an elder practitioner who instructs in the uses of certain specialized techniques, most involving stones, known as Atnongara Stones, as well as shells, bones and woven cords. All of these objects can be used to heal or kill and the shaman must learn how to operate them.
properly and with absolute certainty. In most Aboriginal communities newly initiated shamans are discouraged from practising for at least twelve months, while they continue their studies with an elder. Among other skills the new shaman must learn the use of the bukkur, a coil of magical rope that is gifted by the spirits and absorbed into the body. When the shaman undertakes a journey to the otherworld, this cord forms a bridge that connects the two levels of reality.

The final stage in the journey to becoming a shaman is when one of the primal ancestors contacts the novice and becomes their permanent guide and ally.

As with virtually every other shamanic culture around the world, the role of the shaman is to heal, guide and advise the ordinary members of the community, protecting them from evil spirits, sorcerous attack, and general bad luck or misfortune. The shamans are also seen as responsible for weather, hunting and divination. Nowhere is this as totally developed as among the Aborigines of Australia. They are the lynch pins who guide every step of life, from birth to death and beyond.

THE WISDOM OF THE NGANGKARI

The traditional healers of the Australian outback are the Ngangkari, who are still practicing today as they have always done, quietly and without fuss. A contemporary practitioner stated that:

You've got to remember that this is the tradition, this is the knowledge and Law. It's something that has been held on to which came from the days before there were hospitals and other forms of doctors…. We were responsible for looking after all the people. We have held onto that knowledge.

RUPERT PETER, 1941–2012
THE MAORI

As with the Aboriginal people of Australia, the extraordinarily rich heritage of the Maori people of New Zealand has retained some important details about the early practice of shamanism, which is still practised, though years of suppression and the imposition of Christianity by white missionaries have weakened the transmission of such traditions.

Before colonization the Maori possessed a carefully structured culture in which the shaman, or tohunga, played an important part in daily living. Trained in the House of Learning (whare wananga) they believed that one of their principal gods would enter the body of the tohunga during training and teach from within.

THE WHATU

But the seat of the tohunga’s power was his whatu – a stone, usually red in colour, that he received as a sign of having completed his training. The traditions surrounding the whatu are extensive. According to some Maori myths they were received at the beginning of time, directly from the gods. In South Island traditions, the hero Tawhaki was given the first stone; while in the North Island tradition it was the founding people, Tane and Tangaroa, who each received a stone that they used to establish their respective realms.
Stones used by the shamans of Papua New Guinea and New Zealand for curing illness.

The brightly coloured Kea (or Kaka) parrot is said to carry messages from the spirit realm.

Other stories tell how whatu are still being brought to the islands by the Kaka, noisy, sociable parrots that travel in large, screaming flocks. It is said that they fly to Hawakii, the Otherworld, returning with whatu that the tohunga take from them. When they do this the power of the stone enters into the shaman, who is able to do remarkable feats and heal even the most terrible illnesses. Whatu are still used in rituals, including those undergone by apprentice shamans in the Houses of Learning. A candidate about to receive instruction is sometimes given a stone to hold in his mouth while memorizing songs and wisdom. Sometimes the student is required to swallow the stone, which remains inside his body until death, when it is removed and passed to his son as a token of the passing of his power.

Illness that had no obvious physical explanation was called mate atua, the Disease of the Gods. As well as the whatu, the tohunga had a number of ways of treating such spiritually based sickness, including communication with the spirits and the reading of dreams – those of the sick person’s family as well as the patient himself. Incantations, or karakia, were also performed; and if the cause of illness was found to be due to the patient breaking another family’s tapu (taboo), the tohunga and the head of the patient’s family would both address the spirit that was believed to have caused the sickness. Sometimes, if required, they would make an apology to the spirit and invite it politely to leave the body of the patient.
THE DEMISE OF THE MAORI

The arrival of European settlers had a huge impact on the lives and beliefs of the Maori. Not only did the Christian missionaries do everything in their power to undermine the religion of the indigenous people, but the introduction of foreign diseases to which they had no immunity and which the native healers were unable to cure weakened the beliefs in the traditional gods and spirits, as well as those who served them. The introduction of modern weapons such as muskets also produced wounds that were more often impervious to traditional healing methods.

The final nail in the coffin came in 1907 with the passing of the Tohunga Suppression Act, which banned the shamans from practising. This, coupled with the effectiveness of Western medicine, made it hard for the tohunga to survive, yet they did so by simply going underground, as was the case in so many cultures at this time.

DISEASE OF THE GODS

Despite this, the Maori people never completely lost faith in their shamans, and when the Suppression Act was finally repealed in 1962, it became evident that many tohunga had continued to practise throughout the 20th century, especially in remote rural areas of the country. Today the tohunga are making a comeback, and are revered among the native population and respected by the Europeans who live on the islands.

Thomas Buddle, one of the earliest missionaries to the islands, left the following vivid portrait of a famous tohunga named Tawhaki, which stands as well for the dignity and power of the present-day practitioners. He described Tawhaki as:
... an old man, apparently about eighty years of age, with a long flowing beard, white as snow, appearing as mysterious and singular in all his movements and converse as you might expect such a person to be ... [his son] Ngawhare told me his father ... had been proof against all disease; and, though he had accompanied the tribe on many a war expedition, no spear could pierce him, and no gun had power to touch his sacred person.

The Aborigines of New Zealand, Auckland, Thomas Buddle, 1851
THE GLASS MEN OF NEW GUINEA

In New Guinea, as in New Zealand, indigenous cultures with a shamanistic background were greatly impacted by the advent of contact with Europeans. The overwhelming march of Christian missionaries has further affected not only the way in which such traditions are viewed, but also the way they have continued to work. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the Asabano, a 200-strong tribe from Duranmin, near the centre of New Guinea Island, who were only recently contacted.

Among these people the shamans were known as Glass Men, or sometimes as Secret-Sacred Men, who at one time practised soul-journey work, spirit embodiment, and mediumship similar to other cultures worldwide.

One of the central means to this was the smoking of tobacco, which put them into a semi-trance and enabled them to consult with spirits who, they reported, sat on their backs, caused them to shake and told them what to do.

Unusually, these spirits appeared to the Glass Men as human looking in shape, or as deceased ancestors whom the Asabano believed sent them the game they hunted, enabled healing and gave other kinds of support to the people.

Much of the Glass Men’s work was done at night, when they were able to fly in their dreams in search of healing or information. At such times they were able to observe the activities of witches and sorcerers, as well as the spirits of trees, stones and water, who were given to trapping human souls. The Glass Men would compel these dangerous spirits to release the captive souls by making offerings to them, and by singing power songs that could drive them off. All these things they were able to do because the spirits ‘put something in their eyes’.

As is the case within many other shamanic communities, the Asabano believed in multiple souls. Everyone had a small soul, which ruled the negative, selfish aspects of their character, and a large soul, which was responsible for generous and selfless actions. The small soul remained with the body at all times, but the large soul was able to journey out of the body through dream states and at the time of death. However, ordinary people could only see part of the other worlds that surrounded them; Glass Men on the other hand, because they had been ‘changed’, were able to see everything and communicate with the spirits.
Mount Hagen, Western Highland province, where villagers maintain traditional ways.

**CONVERSION**

Everything changed with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the 1970s. Within a decade the Asabano had been converted to an extremely militant and charismatic form of Baptist Christianity. Dramatic spiritual events followed, involving trance, shaking and visions of Jesus, as well as the traditional ‘speaking in tongues’. Mostly these manifested in the women of the tribe, who were quickly dubbed Holy Spirit Women. Their work began to replace the traditional spirit work, labelled evil by the missionaries.
A tribesman wears the traditional mud and bones of a spirit man in Sing Sing, Papua New Guinea.

The work carried out by these Christianized healers exactly echoes that of the Glass Men. The Holy Spirit Women pray over a sick person and undergo a change of consciousness, which enables them to speak with disembodied spirits – only now these spirits are representatives of the Holy Spirit, who shows them pictures rather like in a film, through which they are able to understand the causes of the sickness. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the most common cause is ‘sin’; and this is dealt with by prayer, fasting and repentance rather than magic.

In the same way, if one of the ancient tree spirits is perceived to have captured a soul, a cross will be placed in the earth near the tree so that Jesus can block the effect of the spirit and enable the release of the trapped soul. A Holy Spirit Woman, when interviewed a few years ago, said that following her prayer on behalf of a sick person, he or she would soon recover.

*When we feel the Holy Spirit go through our belly we feel very happy and nice, and feel like talking. We feel like moving and singing songs…. If people are talking a lot about fighting or other sins are coming up, then the Holy Spirit will come to the [Spirit] woman and help her to*
say, ‘Stop this, let’s have church.’ … I think it is the Holy Spirit, not me who is talking.

A villager who had lived through these traumatic changes described the experience as follows:

Before, when someone was sick they thought a stone or arrowhead was inside the sick person… So if you were sick, the sprites could come and take it out. The sick person would point to the part that hurt, and they [the Glass Men working with the spirits] could take it out, show it to the person and then throw it away…. Before, witches made people sick. So a man or woman would stand next to a sprite and speak, and remove the object —he or she was a friend of the sprites. The person would smoke, begin to shake just like when the Spirit of God possesses a person, and then he or she would be able to remove the object. The sprite comes and talks with the person, who sees the sprite and the sprite can tell him or her what’s wrong, and then he or she translates.

Glass Men and Spirit Women in Papua New Guinea, Roger Ivar Lohmann, 2003
PART TWO

THE SHAMAN'S TOOLS
Having explored the traditional evidence for shamanism around the world, it is time to take a more detailed look at the practices and skills of these remarkable technicians of the sacred.
SHAMANISM AND ILLNESS

In most areas where shamanism has continued or been revived, the first indication of someone becoming a shaman comes with a serious illness. Often this is life-threatening and can even result in death. However, those who survive are forever changed and are gifted with new abilities.

In effect, the sickness itself becomes a kind of teacher, and many shamans have described periods of illness in which they first began to encounter spirits. This shamanic illness continues until the call to practice is heeded. It can be seen as the presentation of a vocational contract that recognizes aptitude, since shamanism is not a career choice, and it is the spirits or ancestors who reach through the candidate that they might follow the shamanic path.

In Korea this process is known as shinbyeong and can manifest in a number of different ways. Sometimes the shaman, or mudang, simply loses his appetite and, having almost stopped eating, grows weaker and weaker until he passes into a kind of semi-trance. Others encounter powerful spirits within a dream state and after conversing with them become changed, able to interpret the dreams and visions of others. Some mudang suffer a type of psychotic episode and may wander off across the land in an apparent state of madness. Such symptoms can last for some time – up to eight years in some instances – but in the end the person emerges with a new set of co-ordinates that allows them to explore inner as well as outer worlds.

WILDMAN

In Celtic tradition we hear of Suibhne, a strange wild character who, after becoming apparently mad, is able to fly and spends most of his life thereafter sitting in the tops of trees, arguing with a companion named ‘the Hag’, whom only he can see. His story survives in a medieval collection, the origins of which nonetheless date back to a far more primitive period of time.
SUÍBHNE AND THE HAG

‘O hag’, said he, ‘great are the hardships I have encountered if you but knew; many a dreadful leap have I leaped from hill to hill, from fortress to fortress, from valley to valley.’ ‘For God’s sake’, said the Hag, ‘leap for us now one of the leaps you used to leap…’ Thereupon he bounded over the bedrail so that he reached the end of the bench. ‘My conscience’, said the hag ‘I could leap that myself’, and in the same manner she did so. He took another leap out
through the skylight of the hostel. ‘I could leap that too’, said the hag, and straightway she leaped. This however, is the summary of it: Suibhne travelled through five cantrefs [regions]… that day until he arrived at Glen na nEachtach in Fiodh Gaibhle, and she followed him all that time. When Suibhne rested there on the summit of a tall ivy-branch, the hag rested on another tree beside him.

Stories of this kind have associated shamans with madness, and it is easy to understand how these colourfully dressed individuals, singing, shouting and dancing, might be seen in this way. The initiatory disassociation of shamans, as well as their behaviour while entranced, led some Soviet anthropologists in Russia to assume that shamans suffered from epilepsy or were actually mad. The reality of the shamanic illness is more about the changes it imparts in the sufferer, taking them through what is really a rite of passage that leaves them forever changed and enhances their ability to understand the sickness of others.

Among the cultures where shamanism has remained either completely or partially constant – Siberia, Africa, Australia and the Americas – such bouts of shamanic illness are taken as indicators that the person in question is ready to be trained. He or she may be apprenticed to a practising shaman, who inducts them into the mysteries of their new role. But in almost every instance, the real teachers are the spirits. Fledgling shamans can be taught the techniques of entering into trance, the ancient dances and songs of his or her race, but the visions they receive and the experiences they report are not of this world.
Dismemberment and Re-memberment

Throughout the world, we hear remarkably similar descriptions where the shaman undergoes a process in which their human form is broken down before being restored in a spiritual shape. Thus in Siberia we hear of shamans who, during visions or soul flights are literally taken apart, their bones counted or cleaned, before they are restored to wholeness. As far away as Peru and Africa, similar accounts describe dismemberment and re-memberment that in each case changes the shaman from an ordinary person into someone who can travel and work in unseen worlds. This reconstitution takes place in order to help the initiate become attuned to the spirits who will work through them.

Dreams also play an important part in the revealing or creating of a shaman. As far apart as Africa and the Americas, those whom the spirits have chosen will be taken off in dream to the otherworld. These spiritual encounters become increasingly regular, until the subject grows used to them and is able to enter into the dream-like state of trance at will.

Those who do not become altered in this way may inherit their shamanic abilities from ancestors or be apprenticed to living members of their own family who are already shamans. In the modern world, shamanism still calls out to individuals who may not live in traditional societies or come from an unbroken line of teachers: it is still possible to learn and practise as a shaman, and more and more people are doing so today. Once the first stages of initiation had taken place it is the means by which trainees make contact with the world of the spirits that illustrates what it means to become a shaman.
THE HEALING DREAM

A primary function of the shaman is that of healing, often carried out through the medium of a trance or dream state in which the shaman encounters the spirit causing the sickness, and either does battle with it, or returns with information that can aid the sufferer. Evidence for this kind of practice among the Celts of Britain and Ireland comes to us from a Romano-British temple to the god Nodens at Lydney, in Gloucestershire.

Little is known about this god, who has been alternatively described as a solar deity and a god of sea or river. An object believed to have been a priestly diadem was found at Lydney, bearing a picture of the god mounted on a chariot drawn by horses and surrounded by neriads and spirits of the winds. From this some commentators have assumed Nodens (assuming this is a depiction of him) to be a sun god of the same type as Phoebus Apollo, who also rides in a four-horse chariot. However, the presence of the water beings suggests a sea god more like Neptune.

The temple itself bears a remarkable resemblance to the Asklepion at Epidaurus in Greece, where a healing ritual known as ‘incubation’ was practised. In this the sufferer, having first sacrificed to the god of the place, entered a special bath house and, after purifying themselves, was taken to a building containing a number of small cubicles. There the subject slept and, if the god willed it, received a dream that conveyed the means by which he or she was to be healed.
The Romano-Celtic Temple to Nodens. People sought to attain dream states in which they experienced healing.

The temple at Lydney is laid out along almost identical lines to those of the Asklepion, including bath house and incubation cells. In the excavation of the site, a cast of a human hand showing signs of disfigurement and a statue of a heavily pregnant woman were found, along with several images of dogs. At the Asklepion, casts of the afflicted parts of sufferers were often hung up in the temple, while dogs were allowed to roam free – another method of healing being to have a dog lick the affected area. The possible totemic significance of this should not be ignored.
WORSHIP OF NODENS

The Lydney temple itself dates from the period between the departure of the Romans and the influx of Saxon mercenaries (c. 400–600 CE); however, evidence of ritual activity there dates back much earlier and almost certainly involved the worship of Nodens or an earlier but similar archetype. Thus, although there is no precise evidence for the practice of incubation before the date of the temple, it would not be too unreasonable to suppose that it did take place there at a much earlier time. Certainly, we should note that at certain ancient sites in Ireland boat-shaped bath-stones have been found, together with collections of smaller, circular stones. These smaller stones, it has been suggested, were intended to be heated over a fire and, when they had attained a sufficient temperature, were placed in the baths and cold water poured over them to create steam. This would have produced an effect identical to that of the sweat lodges used by both Native American and Siberian shamans to assist them in reaching a trance state.
Given the similar methods of Celtic vision poets to attain inspiration, we can assume that at a much earlier time the subject, either sick patient or aspiring poet, was brought to the outer chamber of the old site, from which all light had been excluded by plugging the gaps with mud and turf. There, having made an offering to the tutelary spirit of the place, he or she underwent a ritual cleansing in the steam-filled atmosphere. Then, as the steam slowly dispersed, he or she was taken into an inner chamber and allowed to sleep on a sacred bull’s hide and in a dream state received either healing or inspiration. Such sweat houses were used from Mesolithic times all over northern Europe.

A further aspect of the shaman’s healing activity – a task for which he will often undertake unusual, even outrageous actions to bring about a cure – may be illustrated by the following example from Irish Celtic literature.

**OUTRAGEOUS REMEDIES**

In the early medieval text known as *The Vision of Mac Conglinne*, we read of an affliction suffered by the King of Ireland, Cathal mac Finguine (an historical King of Munster in the 8th century), who was possessed by a demon of gluttony that lived in his belly and caused him to make excessive demands on the hospitality of his neighbours. We then hear of Mac Conglinne, a ‘scholar’ from Armagh who travels by magic from the North to the South in a single day and arrives at the monastery of Cork expecting hospitality. When this is refused he satirizes the monks, who in reply bind and throw him into a dark cell. There he experiences a vision of the landscape of Ireland made entirely from food! When he repeats this to the monks, the abbot hits on the idea of having Mac Conglinne repeat the poem he has composed to King Cathal.
The Celtic Dream

The importance of dreams among the Celts may be judged by the following episodes, one from an Irish source, the other from the Welsh The Mabinogion. In the first, from the First Battle of Moytura, Eochaid, the High King of Ireland, dreams that he sees, 'A great flock of black birds...coming from the depths of the Ocean. They settled over all of us, and fought with the people of Ireland. They brought confusion on us, and destroyed us...'. When questioned as to the meaning of this dream Cesard, the king's shamanic advisor, replies: 'I have tidings for you: warriors are coming across the sea, a thousand heroes covering the ocean; speckled ships will press in upon us; all kinds of death will they announce, a people skilled in every art...They will be victorious in every stress.'

The Battle of Moytura,
Ed. and trans. J. Frazer, 1911

The second example is found in the Welsh ‘The Dream of Macsen Wledig’, from The Mabinogion. It describes how the Emperor Macsen (founded on the real figure of Magnus Maximus, the 4th-century Roman general who became ruler of the Western Empire) has a dream in which he crosses the Alps and reaching the shore of Britain sees a beautiful woman seated in a throne. He at once falls in love with her, and on waking sets out to find and marry her.

In both of these stories there is implicit belief in the truth of the dream, which is shown to have been accurate in every detail. The raven-warriors of the first story are the Tuatha Dé Danann, who conquered Ireland soon after; Macsen’s dream also proves to be true, and the girl that appeared in his dream becomes his Empress.
Mac Conglinne agrees and dresses in an extravagant costume in which he dances before the King while reciting his poem. As it listens to the mouth-watering descriptions of food, the demon emerges and is trapped by Mac Conglinne.

This is the kind of remedy we should expect from a shaman, who often performs magical songs before an audience – and whose repertoire includes outrageous acts or extraordinary costumes – before exacting a cure. In many cases, demons or spirits believed to be the cause of the sickness are drawn forth as a result of the shaman’s capering.
DREAMS AS GATEWAYS
Dreams unlock the doors of the soul, and thus they are extremely important among cultures that possessed or still possess a shamanic tradition. In Africa the Zulu sangomas approach the role of dream in a practical, even literal way, following the instructions received (however strange) to the letter. Elsewhere, among the First Peoples of America, a dream is a pointer to inner wisdom, to be interpreted metaphorically. Some cultures, such as the Iroquois of North America, practice a form of lucid dreaming, in which the shaman programs him or herself to dream about a specific issue and then allows the dream to supply an answer. This should not be confused with the out of the body experiences by which most shamans are able to discover answers to problems or solve issues, but it can be extremely accurate.

DREAMS AS SIGNPOSTS
Among the Ava-Chiripa peoples of South America, dreaming largely takes the place of journeying and is considered immensely important. Shamans, or nsande’ru, turn to their dreams to find suitable places for cultivation, the best time to plant and the presence of negative energies in the land which must then be disposed of. Dreams even help them to find where animals graze so that hunters can find them more easily.

INSTRUCTION THROUGH DREAMS
For the Beaver tribes, an Athabaskan people living in Northwest Canada, dreams are also a highly regarded method of receiving and collecting information. The shamans of the tribe believe that they encounter those who have died in their dreams. The dead give the shamans power songs which contain instructions on how to reach the otherworld.
The importance the Native American people place on dreams is shown by their many dreamcatchers.
SOUL FLIGHTS AND JOURNEYS

Shamans are first and foremost explorers. Just as we have always explored the physical world around us, so the shamans have explored the otherworldly realms, bringing back knowledge and information that enables them to act as mediators, healers and guides. To do this they have developed a range of methods by which they are able to leave their bodies behind and, while in trance, send a part of their soul on journeys to other levels of reality.
Shaman Gankhuyag Batmunkh from Mongolia drinks a bowl of milk after coming out of a trance. His brother, still possessed by a spirit, sits beside him.
TRANCE STATES

That there are varying levels of shamanic trance is clear from the reports received from shamans of many traditions. At the lowest level it is possible to journey (often to the sound of a drum or other regular rhythmic source) out of everyday reality and into subtle realms where visions may be experienced.

Deeper kinds of trance, attained through dance or with the use of hallucinogens, can take the traveller further – though whether ‘inward’ to the Otherworld or ‘outward’ to the higher world depends on the perception of the individual.

Clearly, this kind of trance is similar to states of ecstasy most often attained by mystics. However, there are several differences in the way such states are attained. While the shaman generally requires some kind of stimulation – either via sound or a plant substance – the mystic seeks to attain a place of silence and non-stimulation though mediation or fasting, or by withdrawing from the world, as in the case of the sweat lodge or the vision quest.

These altered states of being (as they are commonly described) have been the source of a great deal of scientific study in recent years. Almost as many explanations as there are experiences have been suggested, and apparent chemical changes in the brain have been measured, but no one has successfully charted the experience of the shamanic journey other than those who undergo it.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The varieties of experience undergone by the shaman are wide. Some remember what they see and experience in vision; others do not, yet are able to retain a level of understanding that enables them to act upon it. Most shamans are also sufficiently aware of what happens to them during their soul flights to be able to exercise some degree of control over the experience – though it must be said that ‘trusting’ the vision is a large part of the shamanic trance. Trance itself does not imply total unconsciousness: someone in a trance is not entirely oblivious of their surroundings, but rather is so inward looking that they enter a state that is really more like that of dream. The origin of the word ‘trance’ says it all – it is from the Latin transpire, meaning to ‘pass over’, signifying a state in which the ordinary side of reality becomes less imperative than the inner side. Here is what a contemporary
A Mongolian shaman enters into a trance while beating his drum in a smoke-filled tent in the Darhad Valley.
Trance induction can result from a number of methods, including movements of swaying and dance; the hearing of repetitious sounds, rhythms and songs; engaging in prayer, stillness, breath control, hypnotism etc. Trance can be of varying duration, depending on the stimulus that supports it. As the trance deepens, the brainwave patterns alter too, passing from the beta frequency of wakeful attention to the alpha frequency of relaxation, and then dipping into either the theta frequency of calm vision or into the delta frequency of deep sleep, or else the tuned and focused communion with vision. The chief purpose of trance is to allow the subject to experience union with the two sides of reality at once, or to enter into the unseen, otherworldly side of reality.

_Celtic Visions, Caitlin Matthews, 2010_
have shown that the visual language used by the entranced journeyer to describe his or her experience is largely metaphorical. Experiences can seem shocking and traumatic, but leave the journeyers unharmed.

There is a famous account of a Siberian shaman who, taken on an journey of initiation, found himself in the presence of an otherworldly blacksmith who removed his tongue, ears and eyes, recast and hammered them into shape on his anvil, then re-attached them. On waking from his trance, the shaman found that he could now hear and understand the languages of birds and beasts and that his newly tuned eyes were able to see into the inner realms. Shamans in various cultures speak of being put into cauldrons and their flesh boiled from their bones during a soul-flight journey, waking to find themselves changed and more deeply attuned to the world around them. Such seemingly violent imagery often accompanies healing transformation.

A Mongolian Tsaatan shaman uses his drum to enter into a trance and communicate with ancestral spirits.

**THE CALL OF THE DRUM**
The insistent rhythm of a drum or a plucked string, or repetitive waves of song, are still the
most common means of entering an altered state, with the shaman riding the wave of sound and allowing it to carry him out of everyday consciousness and into a state of altered awareness. Studies of different-shaped drums and different rhythms show that these can have remarkably consistent effects. Drums used by shamans from Lapland and Siberia show that a drum belonging to a particular shaman was struck in the same places on the skin over a long period of time – suggesting that the patterns of sound and the effect on the journeyer were correlative.

The resonance of the drum is what the shaman journeys to, not the beat itself. The drum is often referred to as the shaman’s horse, upon which he mounts to ride the winds of the otherworld. This is easily compared to the idea of the Tibetan windhorse, perceived as a manifestation of the shaman’s spiritual power.

In eastern Siberian cultures, the spirit drum is usually circular with a cross-shaped brace in the back. Many have a handle with a loose pebbles or dried peas inside, making it both a drum and a rattle. Among the Buryat shamans, certain drums are formed by stretching a skin (usually goat) over a round or oval iron ring. The lower part of the skin has a hole cut in it, through which an 18-cm (7-inch) handle is fitted. This is usually made of iron wrapped with strips of leather. Nine small iron rings are threaded over this and these create a rattling sound when shaken. These drums may be known as ‘peace-drums’ or ‘drums that welcome the New Year’.
A traditional Sami drum showing the sacred tree which connects every part of the cosmos. Shamans and spirits climb towards the light.

At one time the Buryats used double-headed drums, but at some time in the distant past the God of the Dead, irritated by the visits of entranced shamans who came to steal back souls, struck a shaman’s drum with a bolt of lightening that split it in half; since then, they have used single-headed drums.

DRUMSTICKS
Drumsticks vary and are just as important as the drum itself, and may be called the shaman’s sceptre. Among the Siberian shamans, these can be very elaborate. For example, they may terminate in a carved horse’s head, or a hoof, while the middle may be slightly curved in the shape of a saddle, sometimes with tiny stirrups attached. This, when combined with the sound of the drum, serves as the shaman’s horse, bearing him on his spirit journeys to the otherworld.
POWER SONGS

Many shamans sing across the taut drumhead, producing a variety of sounds, while singing in general plays an important part in the practice of shamanism in almost every part of the world. The range of sounds produced is extraordinary – from the guttural tones of the Tuvan Throat Singers of Southern Siberia to the high staccato voices of Korean shamans. Sustained notes, rhythmic patterns, repeated sounds, clicks, screams and glottal sounds can be heard in virtually every shamanic enactment.

Among the Sora shamans of Southern India an extremely elaborate set of songs has evolved, giving each contacted spirit encountered on a journey its own signature tune. These recognizable melodies are used as a means of identifying the spirits who appear – not only for the shaman, but also for those who witness the journey.

In the Americas the Yaqui Indians, who live around Sonoma in Mexico and Arizona in the USA, evolved a huge range of songs to do with the hunt. Their principal totem was the deer, and thus a number of songs are addressed to the spirit of deer, as in this example:

My old antler crown
I move my head around
My old antler crown
I move my head, head around.

Songs of this kind, sometimes known as power songs, come to the shaman from the spirit realm, often during a trance or soul flight. They are used to help find strength, to banish unwelcome spirits to call allies to the shaman, and to initiate a deeper level of trance.

Song can itself be a means of journeying. Songs arise like water though a springhead, bringing sounds never before heard, tunes and words that create soundscapes for both shaman and client or for those gathered for a ritual. These songs in turn bring dances and ritual actions through which the journey may be exteriorized within ritual space. This is invariably accompanied by the embodiment of spirits who cross the bridge of sound and song to enter our own world. The rhythm of drums or sound of rattles can also lead the visionary dancer of communal ritual, enabling trance, embodiment and enhanced awareness.
Songs come to the shaman from the spirit realm.

DANCERS TO THE GODS

In most parts of the world where traditional shamanism is still practised, an element of ritual performance is involved. Shamans dress in elaborate costumes, sing, dance and may perform extreme feats of physical activity while still in a trance. These are an outward manifestation of the inner experience that is known as embodiment, in which the shaman may fight battles against monsters, rescue the souls of sick clients, or discover deeply hidden secrets from the ancestral otherworld. On coming out of their trance, they will then recreate the experience in the form of epic stories that are used to interpret the journey for their clients and any others attending. Naturally, rhythm plays a very important part in all of this, and rhythmic dance patterns are a widely used method of entering a trance. When many people gather together for an intense performance, an element of ritual or trance takes place. Examples of this range all the way from the whirling dance of the Sufi dervishes to the Ghost Dance that was a feature of the reaction of the late 19th-century Plains Indians of North America against the efforts of the government to control the First Nations. Nor is it
mistaken to see echoes of this in the wild dancing of young people in clubs, where all forms of inhibition vanish and the group becomes an entranced unit.

Male and female shamans from the Tunguse region of Siberia in an 1835 lithograph.
The Native American Arapaho tribe from the eastern plains of Colorado and Wyoming enter into a trance while performing the Ghost Dance.

Modern clubbers: dancing to a sustained beat induces a trance-like euphoria long known to shamans worldwide.

MANIFESTING IN DANCE
The variety of shamanic dance enactment is considerable. In Siberia and the Americas, dancers imitate animals or birds, manifesting the natures of their spirit guides and helpers; while in other lands such as Korea and Tibet, the shamans manifest the forms of gods and spirits, sometimes changing their costume a number of times while still in a trance to show that they are assuming the outer form of a particular spirit. In every instance these dances are intended to raise power, as well as enabling the trance state and giving form to the inner experience.

The idea of performance in a sacred shamanic context is not that of a modern performer standing before a paying audience, but is nearer to the roots of early theatre, where the séance or ritual is for the benefit of everyone present, who all participate in the ritual. The shaman may have prepared for such rituals with the help of others, but what happens within a ritual arises from the influence of the spirits and not from a rehearsed script.
MAGICAL COSTUMES AND ARTEFACTS

Much of the shaman’s art is concerned with sacred performance, imitating the movement of animals or birds, enacting their struggles with powerful inner beings, or describing, through dance, their complex journeys though many worlds. It is not surprising therefore that, especially in those parts of the world where indigenous shamanism still continues to be practised such as Siberia and Korea, elaborate costumes form an important part of the shaman’s equipment and regalia.
A Yakut Shaman from Siberia dressed in his complex ritual costume.
SHAMANIC COSTUME

The shamanic costume has deep traditional roots and often incorporates features, objects and decorations that reflect the cosmology of the otherworld or the personal journeys and experiences of the practitioners.

Some of these costumes are extremely ancient and may be handed down over several generations. They are intended to help the shaman assume the power required when undertaking inner journeys, and donning one of these magical coats can usher in a state of altered consciousness, as well as suggesting a visual aspect to the inner work they are performing. Often the inner cosmos of the shaman is inscribed on the costume in pictorial form, showing (for example) spirits they have encountered, giant trees that link the worlds, and a variety of helpers in animal form – as in this Siberian shaman’s costume from the Goldi tribe, who originate in the Tungus region of the former Soviet Republic.

THE TOIL

Virtually all shamans, including those who have abandoned much of their ceremonial dress, wear an apron or leather belt hung with mirrors. In the Altai region of Siberia, shamans wear nine mirrors, called toil. The apron has more than one name, including ‘the blue cloud-bee’ or ‘mount of the shaman’. Many shamans sew metal discs or mirrors onto the outside of their robes so that, when they dance, they create a symphony of clanging and ringing tones designed to drive away negative spirits and attract those who will work positively with them. The mirrors are to deflect negative magic and allow the shaman to pass unharmed through the inner realms. Kitan shamans from Mongolia sew arrows onto their costumes and seek to frighten demons away with loud cries and the sound of bells. The clattering sound made by the arrows clashing together is said to be particularly efficacious.
An elaborately decorated coat worn by a Goldi shaman from the former USSR.
Mirrors were important for a number of reasons. In China, a number of wall paintings found in tombs dating from the earliest period show men holding up mirrors to frighten evil spirits away. The shaman’s mirror or *melong* reflects everything, inside and out – including the most secret thoughts. One shaman reported that a spirit horse lived inside his mirror and would come forth when he called. But the mirror’s most important function traditionally was to turn away evil powers.

Modern shamanic mirrors in China are copies of bronze mirrors dating from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), which were once traded all over central Asia. They are smooth on one side, polished to a high brilliance, with the reverse side ornamented with flower tendrils, birds and mythological figures.

**HEADGEAR**

Head coverings are also deemed important, as this part of the body has long been seen as the entry and exit point for the soul. Buryat shamans wear red head clothes and Mongolian
shamans sometimes wear helmets with horns. East Mongolian shamans wear silk head clothes, also usually red, signifying the colour of both blood and earth.

An elaborate shaman’s costume, from 1930, decorated with heavy brass discs and three rows of bells.

In Southern Siberia, the Tofalar and Soyot shamans decorated their costumes with hundreds of textile snakes and ribbons – again designed to attract positive spirits and deflect those who were less well disposed. Shamans of the Evenki, Dolgan and Altai added beads, iron plates and fragments of bone. In the end the shaman’s costume could weigh up to 10 kilos (22 pounds), with the heaviest recorded being an astounding 40 kilos (88 pounds).

**Mystical Adornments**

Among the Yakut shamans of Siberia, a central object that must be included in all shamanic costumes is a metal plate (usually copper) about as long as an index finger and half the width of a palm. This is inscribed with the image of a man with feet, hands, head and a face clearly showing a nose, mouth, eyes and ears – in other words, all organs of the senses. This is called an *amagayat*, though the word refers more to the spirit which inhabits it. The *amagayat* dwells within the metal and is thus always present whenever the shaman wishes to
The *amagayat* represents both the shaman’s spirit protector and his most powerful ancestor, which both inhabit the metal. By including this image on his outer garments, the shaman is not only reminded of them but is also able to invoke their power directly. When the shaman dies, the *amagayat* may assist him to transform into a higher being, though if it is buried with him, it may work its way to the surface after a time and seek to transfer its power to another member of the tribe. This is seen as an indicator of latent shamanic ability and can play an important part in choosing a successor to the deceased shaman.

However, an *amagayat* can only be made by a blacksmith who has nine generations behind him; but with the gradual decline in practitioners of this ancient skill, fewer and fewer new adornments are being made. Therefore an *amagayat* may be passed down though several generations, gaining more talismanic strength with each successive era.

In Mongolia a similar object worn by shamans is known as the *amagaldzi*; it differs from the Buryat and Yakut examples by invoking the specific power of a spirit of the house. Its name derives from the word for grandmother and it is seen as a link with the ancestors.

**CAPS AND BOOTS**

Such mystical adornments do not end with the coat. Siberian shamans also wear caps and boots decorated with symbolic representations of spirits and helpers. Caps are made from a variety of materials, such as reindeer or goat hide or lynx skin; among the Teluet tribe, some were created from owl skin, occasionally retaining the feathers and in some instances the bird’s head. At one time the Altai shamans sewed metal plates onto their boots to assist their passage from one dimension to the other.
THE SHAMAN'S GARB

The following description of a Buryat shaman comes from an account written by the 18th-century German explorer, Peter Pallas. It describes

...a female shaman, who was accompanied by her husband and two other Buryat, each of them holding a magical drum. She herself held in her hand two sticks, ornamented at the top end with a horse’s head surrounded by small bells. From the back of [her] shoulders, reaching to the ground, hung about thirty snakes, made of white and black skin, in such a way that the snakes seems to be composed of white and black rings. One of the snakes was divided into three at the end...[her] cap was covered with an iron casque having horns with three branches, projecting on both sides like those of a deer.

SHAMANISM IN SIBERIA, M.A. CZAPLICKA, 1914

In Korea, shamanic costumes can be both elaborate and strange. Practitioners are likely to show up for shamanic session with a suitcase of clothes, often covered in sequins or tinsel. These are purchased from a shamanic emporium that is kept on standby while the shaman is working to enable the purchase of alternate items, ordered by telephone and delivered within minutes if required by one of the spirits.
All of these adornments are intended to enhance the shaman’s ability to interact with the spirits. In many instances, the spirits themselves actually enter and remain within the objects sewn onto the shaman’s outer garments. This they seem to do willingly and not though any enforcement by the wearer.

THE SHIRE

When not in use the garments are carefully stored to protect them from harm or theft – though few would have the courage to even touch any of the shaman’s ritual regalia. The Olkhon Buryat shamans possess a box known as a shire, in which they keep their drums, horse sticks, and other ritual equipment. The box itself is clearly regarded as a sacred object, possibly the home of spirits. One description says that the shire

...was three and a half feet long and one foot deep, standing on four legs, each two feet high. On the box are hung ribbons, bells, strips of skin, and on one of the long sides different figures are carved or painted in red. Usually on the right side is represented the sun, and on the left, the moon. The sun is depicted as a wheel, and in the middle of the moon is a human figure holding a tree in one hand. In the middle of the long side there are three images of secondary gods, one woman and two men, in whose honour wine is sprinkled several times a year. There are also depictions of war implements – bow and quiver and sword, and under each human figure there is a horse.

Materials for the Study of Shamanism in Siberia, N.N. Agapitoff and N.M. Khangaloff, 1853
SACRED OBJECTS

Shamans use a wide spectrum of sacred objects to hold and focus their power. Many of these are handed down over several generations and shamans alive today may well be using objects dating back several hundreds of years.

Among the Q’ero shamans of the Andes, one of the most important objects in which much of their power resides is the mesa, a power bundle within which the shaman keeps ritual objects and which can become a kind of portable altar. When required, the mesa will be unrolled and sacred objects spread out upon it. These usually include stones, objects that have acquired spiritual significance to the individual shaman, coca leaves used for ritual offerings, a rattle or bone whistle used to summon the spirits and a small vessel of pisco, a powerful alcoholic drink made from the skin and seeds of grapes and used in cleansing ceremonies.

ATNONGARA STONES

In Australia, the native Aboriginal shamans carry a set of crystal stones known as Atnongara Stones. These represent non-physical stones that are inserted by the spirits into the body during initiation. The experienced shaman can move these in and out of his body field at will and insert them into the bodies of his patients to counteract the negative effects of sickness or sorcery. If the shaman misuses the stones, they may be withdrawn by the spirits. If this happens the shaman must return to the place where he received his original initiation and request their return. The spirits alone decide if this will happen. If it does not, the shaman is no longer permitted to operate.

THE RATTLE

In addition to the resonant song of the drum, few shamans will venture forth without a rattle. Most cultures worldwide possess these distinctive noise makers. Shamans use the rattle to raise power, call spirits and heal, listening in to the sound that it makes. Often made of a dried-out gourd or a shaped leather or wooden body affixed to a handle, the hollow body of the rattle is filled with small stones, dried seeds, beads or other small, hard objects, so that when it is shaken, it makes a high-velocity sound.
A shaman of Onitsha, Nigeria, uses an elaborately decorated rattle during a ceremony.
This sound can be slowed or accelerated in an action that imitates the action of atoms in motion. In some parts of the world objects are suspended in the air, so that the passage of wind or the touch of a finger will cause them to vibrate together. Rattles, like the beating of the drum, can also help shamans enter trance.

The rattle’s percussive sound creates a sound landscape so that, when the shaman is healing a person, both shaman and subject will be aware of other realities that the sound
suggests or describes. The healer will often rattle over the body of the patient to ‘read’ their energy field, listening for changes in the rhythm and sound of the rattle to indicate variations or irregularities in bodily function. The distinctive voice of each rattle is part of its spirit and power.

Sacred storage chest containing power objects.

All of these varied magical objects are essential adjuncts to the art of the shaman, enabling them to make their journeys into the otherworlds and return safely with the information they require, as well as acting as storehouses for their power and a focus for their inspiration.
There is a sense in which all shamanism can be described as divinatory. The shaman’s primary task is to recover information, observing natural patterns in the world around as a means of seeking answers or healing skills and foretelling events to come. Not surprisingly, there is a wide variety of divinatory tools. Divining can be as simple as tossing a drum stick to see which way it lands, or extremely complex – for example, the cowrie shell oracles of the Caribbean and South American descendents of the African people.
DIVINING WITH OBJECTS

Divination is used for many different reasons, the purpose determining the precise method used. Divination may be performed for everything from a regular health check to life-changing occasions such as marriage, pregnancy and birth. It can also be performed for a community.

Among the Yoruba training in the use of Ifa can take several years, involving the long-term study of sacred texts and trance-inducing techniques that give the practitioner access to the wisdom of the gods. Students must work hard and demonstrate an extreme dedication to earn the title of Babalawo (‘Father of Secrets’) or Iyalawo (‘Mother of Secrets’). The Babalawo or Iyalawo seeks insights into whatever current circumstances are affecting the life of the person requesting this information, and where possible provides the necessary solution.

A tray with sacred palm nuts used in Ifa divination.
The Babalawo, the diviner of the Yoruba people, shows the cola nuts used in the ceremony.

Having made a divination – which usually involves throwing nuts, stones or shells onto a tray or a pattern marked out in the earth, or the use of a divining chair – the Babalawo recites a series of poems and proverbs from the vast collection of Ifa poetry and song that has been collected over the years. Unusually, the final interpretation is left to the individual seeking guidance, who decides how the verses should be applied to the problem at hand.

Though the number of symbols is different, the I Ching can be seen to bear some resemblance to Ifa divination. Like the I Ching, Ifa combines a huge body of wisdom texts with a system for selecting the appropriate passages from it. Unlike the I Ching, Ifa poetry is passed down orally from one Babalawo to another.
A Babalawo reading from the scattered cowrie shells in Ifa divination.
COWRIE SHELL DIVINATION

Another widely used divinatory practice is cowrie shell divination, which originated in the Dagara culture of West Africa. It has a variety of names including dilloggum, from the Yoruba word for ‘sixteen’ (a sacred number for the Yoruba, who believe that 16 divinities oversee life on earth) and, in Brazil, the jogo de búzios or ‘cowrie game’. Clearly related to the practice of Ifa and deriving from the same area, it is now found over a large area of the Americas since the diaspora of West African slaves from the 16th century onwards, and is used in the practice of Santeria in Cuba, Candomblé in Brazil, and in Umbanda houses around the world.

Different methods of divination use eight, 16 or 21 shells. Before throwing these, usually onto a prepared mat or board, the practitioner states the question aloud to the spirits. The fall of the shells is interpreted by a priest or priestess initiated into these divinatory mysteries. Cowrie shells naturally have two sides: the rounded side, which is called ‘closed’ in cowrie shell divination, and a long open curved slit on the other side, called ‘open’ during interpretation. Some practitioners shave the round side of the shell back, so that each lies down flat. Depending on the country and traditions where cowrie shell divination is made, the patterns of the shells can form as many as 256 binary patterns, each with their own oracle, as in Ifa. There is often a preliminary ceremony to see if the occasion of the question is favourable, and a number of oracles may be omitted if they lie outside the province of the diviners.

Such traditional divinatory tools are found in most cultures that either still possess or once had a thriving shamanic tradition. There are as many kinds of divination as there are days in the year, and not all are shamanic. Those that are shamanic tend to be based on the observance of natural events, such as the patterns to be found in the earth while out walking. The shape of a fallen twig, the pattern of leaves on the earth, the outline of animal or bird tracks across a field: all may invoke visions and an understanding of things as yet unknown. Each of these skills utilizes the shaman’s ability to be at one with nature, to harmonize with their surroundings, and to enter into a deeply symbiotic relationship with objects around them. Thus when the Celtic shaman-poet Taliesin speaks of having ‘been’ many things – a stick, a stone, a drop of rain, a lantern or a spade – he means this in a quite literal way. To enter a shamanic state of heightened awareness enables the practitioner to experience the world through enhanced senses.

THE DELPHIC ORACLE

One of the most famous examples of shamanic divination is the Oracle at Delphi, famed throughout the classical world. People came from all around the Mediterranean and further
to consult the priestess known as the Pythoness. This role was undoubtedly undertaken by several priestesses, who took it in turns to divine for those who came. In each case the Pythoness would sit over a crack in the earth from which issued sulphurous fumes that caused her to enter an altered state. In the trance thus induced, the priestess would utter a series of enigmatic statements that were dutifully recorded. Often these made no sense to anyone except the interpreting priests, who divined the utterance of the Pythoness for the questioner. Matters of more national importance were frequently asked and answered. In earlier times the Pythoness would hold in her hands two snakes, creatures sacred to the wisdom Goddess Athena, and interpret meanings from the writhing and hissing of these creatures.
19th-century engraving of the Pythioness.
This Chinese oracle bone from the Shang Dynasty, 1400–1300 BCE, is carved with questions for the gods.

**ORACLE BONES**

Among the many kinds of divination practised by shamans around the world we find divination from the marks on the scapula (shoulder bone) of a beast. This appears in both Norse and Celtic traditions, where in the latter the term is *slinneanchahd*, deriving from the Gaelic word for shoulder, *slinnean*. The method involved the slaughter of an animal; usually a sheep or a pig. When the flesh had been boiled from the bones, the shoulder blade was then studied and marks that appeared thereon were interpreted. An account dating from 1746
describes a soldier at the battle of Culloden predicting victory for the Hanoverian army after reading the shoulder bone of a sheep. In this practice, the bone is pulled from the fire when it begins to crack and examined like a map. This is often used by shamans in the North to enable the discovery of animals for the hunt.

Tortoise shells offered a favoured method of divination by the shamans of the Chinese Shang Dynasty.

The great Chinese sage Confucius said:

The people of the south have a saying that: ‘A man without constancy cannot be a diviner either with the tortoise-shell or the stalks.’ This was probably a saying handed down from antiquity. If such a man cannot know the tortoise-shell and stalks, how much less can he know other men? It is said in the Book of Poetry, ‘Our tortoise-shells are wearied out, And will not tell us anything about the plans.’
Confucius is referring to the practice of consulting the heated tortoise shell or ox scapula, which cracks as heat is applied. The cracks are read as an interpretive oracle. An alternative method was to use tall yarrow stalks, held loosely between the hands while asking a question and then thrown, with the diviner referring to their disposition upon the floor.

**BONES AND THE I CHING**

Consulting oracle bones was clearly an ancient activity. When the Chinese scholar Liu Eh was visiting a friend who had fallen ill in 1899, the medicine prescribed was ‘dragon bones.’ Liu Eh examined the bones produced for this medication and was astonished to find them inscribed with characters. He tracked down their source from merchants to a site at Anyang, Honan, where mound upon mound of inscribed bones were unearthed, along with the remains of a major city dating from the Shang Dynasty c.1600–1028 BCE. When these bones were deciphered, it was evident they had been used in oracle ceremonies.

It is clear that a series of characteristics have become codified over the years to create what we now know as the *I Ching*. We are fortunate that the text we know became enshrined in the set of works known as the *Five Classics*, which every official in China had to study. Its ability to speak authoritatively about any question is undoubtedly based upon its shamanic origins, as the 11th-century philosopher, Ch’eng said:
There is not a single thing that those who made the ‘I’ did not conjoin, from the obscure and bright of heaven-and-earth to the minute subtleties of the various insects, grasses and trees.

I CHING: THE SHAMAN’S ORACLE, M. PALMER AND J RAMSEY

STUDY OF STONES
The study of stones is yet another method used by shamanic diviners worldwide. Sometimes the shaman will sit for hours in contemplation of a heap of stones until one or other ‘speaks’ to him. This stone will be laid aside and when a small group of these are assembled the shaman will then examine them in detail, looking for patterns and suggestive shapes within the stones, examining every face and finding different answers inscribed upon them.

A further example of this kind of divination is practiced by the Naskapi shamans of Labrador. Here the shaman will wait for a sunbeam to strike a particular stone or stones and from this will divine the place where a herd or reindeer are gathered or a lost object found.

THE QILANIQ
Among the Inuit peoples, a ritual known as the qilaniq enabled the shaman to find answers to question asked by members of the tribe. For this, an object belonging to the individual is suspended from a strip of leather and the question asked. At this point a spirit enters into the object, making it heavier. According to its weight the shaman will divine an answer where the stones touch and are found to form a pleasing pattern.
Among the Celtic peoples a specific form of divination was practised by a group of adepts known as Neladoracht, or Cloud Readers.

This is probably one of the oldest and most commonly practised methods of divination in the world. Who can say when the first person lay on his or her back and stared up at the clouds, seeing shapes and faces therein and wondering as to their significance? The Celts seem to have taken this method of precognition to a fine art. That it was common to the Druids is shown in an ancient manuscript, now in a Dublin library, in which it is told how a certain king asked his druid to read the future for him. The priest did so by climbing to the top of Cnoc-na-Druad, ‘Druid’s Hill’, where he remained throughout the night, returning at sunrise next day. He addressed the King with these words: *Are you asleep, O king of Erin and Alban? [Ireland and Scotland]…. I have consulted the clouds…and have discovered that you shall make a conquest of Alban, Britain and Gaul, which he did soon after.*

**The Frith**

Another method, practised until recently in the Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland was the *frith* (pronounced ‘free’). Those practising the *frith* were usually people with the ‘sight’, whom we may recognize as the inheritors of shamanic abilities. These people were called *frithirs*, a title that has descended into modern usage as a surname: Freer. The Freers were hereditary state augers for the Kings of Scotland, similar to the state oracles of Tibet. The method of augury was as follows: the *frithir* would fast on the first Monday of every quarter, and would stand before sunrise, bare-headed, bare-footed and blindfolded on the doorstep of a house. He or she would put a hand on either side of the door and make an invocation. On removing the blindfold, the *frithir* would then make a prediction based upon the first thing they saw. An extensive list of possible sightings and their correspondences would have been part of the training of a *frithir*, but these are not available in any written text.
The Druids studied the clouds for meaning.
In the records of shamanic tradition in Britain and Ireland that have survived, we find three distinct forms of divination. These are *Imbas Forosna*, *Dichetel Do Chennaib* and *Teinm Laida*. The mastery of these skills formed part of the last three years of training that was undertaken by the vision poets of Ireland.

**ILLUMINATION**

*Imbas Forosna* is usually translated as ‘the Inspiration of Tradition’ or, more simply, ‘Illumination’. The technique involved entering a completely darkened place and spending some time alone and in a state of sensory deprivation. At the end of a specified time – ranging from several hours to as long as several days – the seer was brought forth into bright light, which might either be sunshine or the light of a fire. The effect of the long enclaustration in darkness, followed by the sudden exposure to brilliant illumination, seems to set free the tongue and to enable the diviner to utter an inspired vision.

An account from the early medieval Irish text known as *Cormac’s Glossary* suggests a more
elaborate ritual, in which the seer chewed a piece of raw meat, which was then placed on the threshold of a house, before entering an altered state of consciousness. It has been suggested that this may refer to the fact that when raw meat is chewed or consumed it releases endocrines in the brain, thus enhancing the consciousness.

**A SACRED ALPHABET**

*Dichetel Do Chennaib*, literally translated as ‘Invocation on the Finger Ends’, probably refers to the use of the mysterious symbolic alphabet known as Ogam, in which meanings were spelled out in a variety of ways, including the use of the fingers to suggest the shapes of the letters. Combined with the psychometric handling of objects to determine their origin or ownership, they lead the seer to conceive an inspired answer to the question asked. This may also account for the number of auguries that were attained by chewing the thumb or little finger in Irish mythology.

**THE CRACKING OF THE NUTS**

*Teinm Laida* means ‘The Cracking Open of the Nuts of Wisdom’, these being the hazels that grew above the mystical Well of Segais in the Celtic Otherworld. *Salmon* swam in this well and were believed to eat the nuts, for which reason to catch and eat a salmon was considered one road to extreme illumination. It also refers to the burning chant of the shamans by which they pass into a trance state in which they are able to journey into the Otherworld and bring back information not available to the rest of humankind.
No shaman walks alone. Each has his or her spiritual allies, who work alongside them and guide their steps. These allies may take the form of mythic heroes, divinities, spiritual leaders or ancestors. Their task is to be companions, friends who travel along the many secrets paths of the otherworld. They are there to act as wise advisors, making sure we follow the right path and travel with integrity and grace.
Allies may take the form of mythical heroes, divinities or spiritual leaders, such as Krishna, King Arthur, St George or Buddha.
GUIDING SPIRITS

Sometimes spirit guides connect us with other helpers who we might need in different situations. Thus if a shaman seeks healing, either for himself or another, his current ally might introduce him to a being who specializes in that aspect of the work. It is they who carry out the inner work or give the necessary advice to those who seek it.

Many of these guiding spirits take the form of animals, birds or fish. Insects are less frequent, though the pollinators and spiders often accompany plant spirit healings, while beetles and others show up as spirits that remove decay. Many of the creatures with which we share our world have come to represent certain skills and qualities to which we aspire and which we seek to emulate, especially in times of trouble, and the spirit guides may choose to take the form of one of these to offer help. Humans do not choose the allies; it is the allies who choose the humans. They represent and are resonant of the power that...
Thus if people are feeling fragmented by some particular event in their lives and seek clarity of vision with which to find the path back to wholeness, we might hope to discover an eagle or a hawk, both renowned for their far-sightedness. Or if strength and endurance are required, it might seem appropriate to turn to a horse or a stag. All animal allies have their own power or medicine.

TOTEM ANIMALS
Sometimes these spirit creatures are known as totem animals, an idea that springs from a time when tribal groups were often designated by a particular beast or bird or fish, but a more accurate term is power animal – a spirit being that may guide the shaman or in which much of his or her power resides. Beings of this kind often represent a particular individual in the otherworld, and many modern practitioners identify closely with several creatures that assist them in the spiritual realms, sometimes for years, becoming real friends and allies at a deep level and as familiar as any human friend.

Among the Buryat shamans of Northern Siberia, the importance of animal guides and helpers is emphasized in the following story, which both tells of the origin of shamanism in this part of the world as well as describing spirits in animal form.

According to this legend, the first shaman was an eagle, sent by the spirits to protect the Buryats and teach them to distinguish good spirits from evil ones. Eagle appeared before the
people, but they mistook him for an ordinary bird and could not understand what he had to say. When Eagle saw this, he returned to the spirit realm and asked that either he be given the gift of human speech or that one of the Buryats should be made a shaman so that humans could understand him.

The spirits decided that it was not right for a bird to be given human speech, so they decided that Eagle should be allowed to share his shamanic skills with the first human he saw.

Back went Eagle to the earth and there he saw a woman asleep under a tree. She had run off from her husband. So Eagle passed his shamanic skills to her and flew away. When the woman woke she knew everything, could see the future and the past and recognize both good and bad spirits. She went back to her husband and became a shaman. Soon after, she gave birth to a boy. Some said he was Eagle’s child, others her husband’s, but he became a great shaman in his time and fathered a long line who have served the Buryat people ever since.
Heraldic columns at the Nimkish village of Yilis, British Columbia, Canada, depicting Eagle, the owner's family crest.
SPIRIT ALLIES IN ANIMAL FORM

Depending on the culture or location, spirit allies can take any form, but they often take that of an animal, bird or fish because of the specific qualities possessed by that creature. There follow details of some of the many hundreds of totem animals and allies, drawn from many different cultures. Some have different meanings in different areas, but those included here are among the most common. Each shaman will find particular qualities in their allies, so that these vary from person to person and are not fixed. See Finding a Power Animal.
Eagle offers a clear sighted view of events as it does of the earth over which it flies.
Known for compassion, magic, guidance, gentle wisdom and understanding. Representations of deer appear in sacred and magical context in ancient Egypt, and were sacred to Isis, though the animals themselves had died out in that area before the first century CE, after which they no longer featured in Egyptian art or religion.

Among the Greeks the deer was sacred to the moon goddesses Artemis, Aphrodite, Athena and Diana, but was also sacred to Apollo at Delphi. Writers from the Classical world described how a deer wounded by an arrow would go in search of the herb dittany, which would cure it by ejecting the arrow from its body.

In the Vedic religion of ancient India, Vayu, the god of the winds, is often portrayed riding on a deer. The animal is particularly significant to Buddhism, as it is associated with the first sermon preached by Buddha in a deer park at Sarnath. Deer are depicted on either side of the Wheel of the Law in Buddhist tradition and are described as representing mediation, gentleness and meekness. In Chinese Buddhism, however, the deer is listed as one of ‘the three senseless creatures’ – especially as relating to love sickness (in the same tradition, the tiger represents anger and the monkey greed).
A statue of the Greek goddess Artemis together with her sacred deer.
Deer, especially stags, appear frequently in Celtic literature and tradition. The fact that stags grow and shed their antlers in spring gives them a significant role as harbingers of death and rebirth, and as such they were always seen as magical creatures that could lead one into the otherworld. There is evidence for the existence of a deer cult, in which the animal was worshipped as a goddess.

SHAPE-SHIFTER
In Celtic tradition the deer is a form often taken by otherworldly women, such as Sadb in the cycle of stories relating to the hero Fionn. Having mated with Fionn in human form Sadb resumed her deer shape, but later gave birth to Oisin, whose name means 'Little Fawn'. There are several deities connected with the deer among the traditions of the Celts. These include Flidais, the goddess of venery, who is driven in a chariot drawn by deer.

INTO THE FAIRY REALM
In general, deer appear as guides and enticers into the Fairy Realm. Salbuide, a son of the King of Munster, died while chasing an otherworldly deer, together with 30 warriors, 30 attendants and 30 deer hounds. In another Irish story, a jealous woman turns one hundred girls into deer. Lugaid Laigde, an earlier king of Erin, pursued a deer that turned out to be a divine personification of Ireland. There are also a number of stories in which humans take on the form of deer – notably the story of the magician Mongain and the saga of Tuan Mac Caraill who, in order to extend his life, lived for many years as a deer before metamorphosing into the shapes of other creatures.

THE DEER IN THE CHRISTIAN WORLD
The significance of the deer was not limited to pre-Christian stories. In one of the early tales relating to St Patrick, we are told that he wrote his famous invocation ‘The Deer’s Cry’ (also known as St Patrick’s Breastplate) to escape from his enemies by taking on the form of a deer. In Scotland we hear of the Sianach, a giant deer that hunts humans in the mountains.
THE DEER DANCE
The deer is also important among the Native American peoples, where it appears as a totem animal. There are a number of deer tribes and clans and in the animal myths of the people of the south-east woodlands the deer is the leader of the four-footed clans. Among the south-western tribes, the Deer Dance is enacted to encourage food and fraternity among people and animals. The deer is also described as a rain bringer, with the ability to dispense thunder and lightning, which fertilize the earth.
Deer often lead the way into realms of the spirit.
The Lakota tell a story in which a friendly spirit gave a gift to each animal as a means of protecting itself. To the deer it gave speed. But one day a doe passed the spirit accompanied by its ungainly young – and the spirit realized that, in giving speed to deer, it had forgotten the awkwardness of its young. So it gave spots to new-born fawns to camouflage them until they were able to run.

NEGATIVE ASSOCIATIONS
Among some Native American tribes the deer is seen to possess a more ambiguous nature; for the Oglala Sioux, for example, it is a shape-shifting succubus. The Kiowa, another plains-dwelling tribe, hold it in much higher esteem. According to them the deer was one of the first-born creatures, dating from before the rule of man. A deer is also one of those animals, along with Fox and Magpie, who are said to have stolen the sun.

Among the Algonquin people a white deer dwells in an evil underworld place and is said to represent negative forces. In Mexico, if a deer is slain during the hunt, it is mourned and the bones, which are said to represent the sacred peyote root, are buried as a ceremony of appeasement.
For the South American Indians the deer has a less pleasant association, sometimes carrying the soul of a sorcerer or sorceress. Ancestors can also reincarnate as deer. Mixcoatl, the Aztec god of hunting, has as his companion a two-headed deer, while in Mayan tradition the double-headed dragon sometimes appears with deer hooves. In the symbolic art of the Mayans, the deer appears at the base of supporting pillars, suggesting that the animal was a foundation upon which both society and religion were founded. Human forms with deer heads are also a common feature of Mayan art.

Among the Ainu people of Japan, the deer is said to have been created to provide food for the people; however, originally they were the hunting animals used by the gods, at which time they were white. The bones and hair of deer consumed in a heavenly feast by the gods were distributed over the mountains and the remains were changed into living deer.
Trickster, dreamer, seer. Coyote is the divine trickster of the South West Indians of North America. He is the instigator of many things and customs, in common with many other tricksters whose function is to break through boundaries and conventions that new things may come into being. He creates people, brings fire, is the one who is the bringer of death. He is also known as Sedit.

A story from the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia tells how Coyote determined to steal fire from the Fire People, supernatural beings who alone had the secret of making fire. With Antelope, Fox and Wolf, he gate-crashed a party they were having and made himself a headdress from yellow pine shavings. The Fire People danced first and then Coyote and friends did an answering dance, but Coyote complained that he could hardly see to dance and so that Fire People built up a bigger and bigger fire. As the blaze grew higher, so Coyote’s friends began to leave, excusing themselves from the party because they were too hot, but actually to get into position to help fulfil Coyote’s plan. Coyote danced alone, getting nearer and nearer to the fire until his headdress caught alight. Then he ran out, passing his blazing headdress to Antelope who passed it on to Fox and Wolf. Each of the animals was killed by the Fire People until only Coyote was left. As they grew nearer to killing him, Coyote threw his headdress into a tree, which burst into flames. From that time to this, men have been able to make fire by using wooden firesticks. This was Coyote’s gift to humans.
Coyote, known for his cunning and cleverness.
COYOTE AND THE BURROWING OWLS DANCE

Despite being a trickster, Coyote is a guardian of good behaviour, as he shows in this story, which teaches people not to be nosy like the dog. Coyote was always putting his nose into other people’s business. He once watched the Burrowing Owls dancing, seeing how they carried something on their heads. This was a bowl of foam, but the owls never spilled a drop as they whirled, limping on their short, disjointed legs. Coyote begged to be taught the dance. The owl chieftain told him that this was a sacred initiatory dance and that the thing on their heads was the heads of their grandmothers and that the limping was caused by the pain of having broken legs. Wanting to punish Coyote for his inquisitiveness, Owl said he would initiate Coyote if he went and fetched his grandmother’s head and smashed his legs with a stone. Hobbling in pain and carrying the head of his grandmother, which he’d sliced off with some deer teeth, he arrived back at the owls’ dancing ground. He was unable to do anything except a pathetic dance that caused the bowls of foam on the owl’s heads to spot their shiny black feathers. On hearing their laughter, Coyote knew that they had made a fool of him.

COYOTE AND THE INDIANS

As the bringer of death, Coyote also had to experience its pain. A legend of the Pomo Indians of California tells how one day Coyote saw a rattlesnake going down a hole and called people to look, for he wanted people to know death. He got everyone to dance around it until the chief’s daughter was bitten on the ankle by the snake. She cried out in pain, but Coyote got
them to dance on. A few hours later she had died and the chief demanded that Coyote resurrect her. He said, ‘If people live forever, there will be too many people and not enough food.’ So the girl was laid on the pyre and cremated. A few days later Coyote awoke to find that his own daughter had died, for the chief had poisoned her in revenge for his daughter’s death. Coyote mourned all night and went to the chief and said, ‘My daughter must live again.’ ‘That’s not fair!’ said the chief. ‘You said it was wise to let people die when my daughter died.’

Coyote accepted that his words must also apply to himself and put his daughter on the pyre to cremate her. He mourned for her all that night and every night afterwards, which is why the coyote always howls at night.
Of all natural creatures possessing a mythological aspect, the eagle is more widely known and widely written about than any other. Its natural grace and beauty doubtless have much to do with this, and from earliest times the eagle has represented the sun, light and the triumph of good over evil.

Some of the earliest references to the eagle in this context come from the mythologies of Babylon and Mesopotamia. In these traditions the eagle is often double headed, representing its ability to see in both directions at the same time, and emphasizing its association with wisdom. It is, of course, also often an emblem of war gods, particularly of Ninurta who was worshipped in Assyria, Babylon and Canaan. It is also a symbol of the Assyrian Asshur, who is a storm god and brings both lightning and fertilizing rain. The sun god Marduk is also sometimes depicted as an eagle in this system.

In Egyptian mythology the eagle was a symbol of both the Nile river and the Royal House of Thebes. It also represented the sons of Horus, the hawk-headed god of Ancient Egypt.

In Greek mythology, the eagle is the only bird said to dwell in the heavens. It signified extreme bravery and is often found carved on the tombs of heroes. It is even found on the tomb of the great philosopher Plato, where it represents his aspiring spirit. In Graeco-Roman myth it is associated both with Zeus and Jupiter, and with Pan, who later yielded it in favour of the king of the gods. The Roman poet Virgil called it 'the gods' weapon-bearer'. It was also an eagle that pecked at the liver of Prometheus in the Greek myth. Prometheus had offended the gods by stealing fire from heaven. His punishment was to be bound to a pillar and to have his ever-regenerating liver pecked out by an eagle every day.

One of the most famous symbolic depictions of the eagle was in the traditions of ancient Rome, where both the emperors and their legions marched under the symbol of the Aquila, the eagle standard. At imperial funerals an eagle was released to signify the soul of the emperor departing for heaven. The classical writers Aristotle and Pliny both referred to the idea that the eagle’s beak could grow in distorted fashion and bring about its own starvation. It was said that the bird would dash its beak against a rock to break off any malformed parts.
SYMBOL OF RENEWAL

Widespread belief throughout the ancient world described the eagle’s ability to renew itself every ten years. In a similar fashion to the phoenix, it is said to fly into the sun until its feathers are scorched, after which it plunges into the sea, emerging restored. This myth probably originates in a non-classical source, though it influenced the story of Icarus and his flight into the sun. The tradition is widely known and used among the Hebraic peoples and the eagle appears in both the Old and New Testaments as a symbol of resurrection. It was later associated with Christ, as a symbol of both Resurrection and of triumph over the forces of darkness. The compilers of medieval bestiaries used the eagle as a symbol of human spiritual renewal, even of baptism and the renewal of grace. Many sources claim that eagles could gaze unblinking into the sun, and that when their young were fledged the parent eagles would take them up as close to the heavenly orb as possible and force them to look into it; if any were too weak to do this, they would fall to the ground and be abandoned by their parents.

CELESTIAL GO-BETWEEN

In Syrian tradition, the eagle represents the goddess Artagatis and is believed to have carried souls up to the heavens. Probably this vision of the eagle was borrowed from Sumerian tradition, as it appeared in the myth of Etana. Here we learn that the eagle lived happily in
the same tree as a serpent until the eagle, for no apparent reason, attacked and devoured the serpent’s young. The serpent naturally turned upon the eagle at this, trapping it in its coils and breaking its foot. At this point, enter the heroic Etana, who needed help to find a herb that would bring fertility to his childless wife. He attacked the serpent and wounded it, freeing the eagle. He was then able to enlist the bird’s help in flying up to heaven, where the herb was believed to grow. Apparently Etana lost his nerve at some point and fell back to earth, but the Sumerian king lists still include his name, and declare that he lived to a great age and did indeed father a child to rule after him. In time this myth became associated with the idea of the soul’s journey to heaven, and the eagle itself became a psychopomp, carrying blessed souls to the celestial realm. In Semitic beliefs, souls came from the sun and had to return to it after death and the eagle was perceived as an appropriate vehicle to carry them.

THE EAGLE AND THE SUN GOD

In Celtic tradition the eagle is often associated with the sun and with sun gods such as Lugh (‘The Bright One’). In Welsh tradition the eagle has the ability to shapeshift and is generally recognized as the possessor of great wisdom. Thus in the story of ‘Math fab Mathonwy’ from The Mabinogion, when Lleu Llaw Gyffes receives a fatal blow from Gronw, his wife Blodeuwedd’s lover, he transforms into an eagle and flies off to roost in the top of a tree. There he is discovered by his brother Gwydion, who tracked him by following a trail of dead meat that fell from his wings and was able to restore him to his former shape.

OLDEST ANIMALS

In Ireland, there is a tradition extant that says that Adam and Eve are still living and that they took the form of eagles to dwell forever on earth. This is reflected in the idea that eagles live to a great age – anything from one hundred to five hundred years. In the Irish text known as ‘The Oldest Animals’, the eagle’s life is shorter only than that of the salmon. In the Welsh story of ‘Culhwch and Olwen’, when the hero is seeking the lost child god Mabon, he asks a series of animals for help. The Eagle of Gwernabwy’s answer is that it has pecked a mountain down to the earth and that it has heard no word of Mabon – yet another instance of the bird’s great age.
In Icelandic mythology, the giant Thassi shapeshifts into an eagle to steal meat from the gods.

In Norse mythology the eagle is said to roost in the branches of the World Tree Yggdrasil, and to engage in endless conflict with the Midgard Serpent, which lives beneath its root and represents darkness and chaos. The eagle is also connected with the god Odin who, in the form of an eagle, carried off a sacred drink known as the Mead of Poetry. According to this myth, after the war between the Aesir and the Vanir, both parties sealed their peace by spitting into a vessel. From their mingled saliva was then created a being called Kvasir, who was eternally wise. Later, however, he was murdered by two renegade dwarves and his blood drained into a cauldron. This blood was then mixed with honey and then brewed into mead. Anyone who partakes of this becomes a poet.

This myth can be traced back to even more ancient tales such as that from the Vedic tradition of India, in which the intoxicating drink known as Soma is stolen by the god Indra. Soma is also a drink of inspiration for poets.

In Finland the North Wind itself is said take the form of a vast invisible eagle, the flapping of whose wings brings storms and darkness. In the same tradition, the father of the gods manifests as an eagle, and the giant Thjazi takes on an eagle’s form when he abducts the goddess Idhun.

Further east, the Chinese associate the eagle with warfare. It is perceived as a solar
creature, whose power evokes images of carnage. But warriors, especially those who are fearless in the face of all odds, tenacious, or keen of vision, invoke the eagle as their totem.

**MESSENGER, GUARDIAN AND FRIEND**

In Japan the Ainu regard the golden eagle as a manifestation of the Great Spirit, a bird of paradise who dwells in the highest heaven. This eagle never touches the earth, but gazes upon its beauty. He is the guardian and friend of the Ainu, and his task is specifically to help them. He is venerated because he is said to have saved them from starvation at some distant point in the past.

Among the Native American people the eagle is of huge importance, considered to be the greatest of birds. The eagle feather headdress worn by the chieftains of many tribes acknowledges the existence of the Thunderbird, who carries messages between earth and sky. In this tradition the eagle is the master of the heights and the upper air and its feathers are said to carry the thoughts and prayers of the people to the Great Spirit. The Hopi people say that the eagle holds both this world and the next in its talons, while to the Zuni the White Cap or Bald Eagle is ‘passing stout of heart and strong of will’ and guards both the upper region and the heavens.

In Aztec and Mayan culture, the eagle was so important that there were several military orders named after it. For these people the eagle represented celestial power, the brightness of day and the rising sun, which devoured the serpent of darkness.

In Australian aboriginal tradition the eagle carries the souls of the dead back to the Dreamtime.
Tewa Dancers from New Mexico perform the Eagle Dance. Native American tradition considers the eagle a link between heaven and earth.
BEAR

Watcher, guardian, bringer of strength, courage and willpower, bear will walk beside you at all times, allowing you to draw upon its strength in times of need. Its stamina, coupled with its hibernatory habits, makes it not only a powerful companion to have at one's side but also an excellent guide into the realm of sleep and dreaming.

The bear is a mighty guide and way-shower, as well as being acknowledged as an important guardian animal in most regions of the northern hemisphere, where it remains one of the largest land mammals. Fossil remains of the great cave bear, known to the Neanderthal, have been discovered from between 30,000 and 10,000 years ago, when it became extinct. The connections between bears and humans have long been noted, for bears are omnivores that can stand upright, their paws having five digits, and with an intelligence that seems almost human.

The behaviour of the bear has given rise to myriad beliefs in which it is seen as the one who helps renew the world every spring for, in the species that hibernate, the bear seems to die every winter and is reborn in the springtime. In Switzerland and central Europe, the bear is a seasonal marker of the roots of spring. The month of February, when the bear reappears from hibernation, is colloquially called 'the Bear’s Fart,’ when bears pass wind after their long sleep. The most northern bears give birth while hibernating, which informed the classical belief that bear cubs were born without form and had to be licked into shape by their mothers.

THE MYTH OF LITTLE BEAR

Among the Ostyak shamans of Western Siberia, the myth is told that bears originated in the heavens. One day when Father Bear went out to hunt, Little Bear broke the lock of their house and entered the courtyard of heaven. His paw sank through the floor and through the hole he observed people. When his father returned, Little Bear begged to be allowed to visit the world below. He was lowered on a golden cradle with silver chains into the honey blossom that grew below, and was instructed to leave good people alone but to oppress the evil-doers. At the time of the bear ceremony, when he is sent home again, Little Bear fills his knapsack with silver as a present for his father, who raises him up again.
Bear is associated with strength and courage.

This bear ceremony is widely performed by shamans around the circumpolar regions of Asia. The most famous example is found among the Ainu people of Hokkaido and Sakhalin of Japan, where the bear is central to one of their most important rites. They regarded the bear as a divine animal, and as recently as 1930, still practised the *Iyomande* or ‘sending home ceremony.’ In this, bear cubs were raised for several winters as adopted god-children, who would speak for the people to the mountain bear spirit. They were lovingly fed and tended until their ritual dismissal, where they were slain or ‘sent home,’ with gifts to the divine bear parents.
Carved wooden pole including a bear's head in an Ainu village on the shores of Lake Akan, Hokkaido, Japan.
For the Inuit, the polar bear is both ancestor and way-shower in the hunt. They imitate the bear’s posture when they stalk the seal, doing as he does by moving against the wind, crouching below the horizon and moving only when the prey moves away.

**THE BEAR WIFE**

For the indigenous peoples of North America, the bear is a central teacher. The Haida of British Columbia tell how a young woman was taken into the bear’s den and became a Bear Wife. She grew a pelt and bore twin children who were half human, half bear. But her brothers had been searching for her all this time; when they discovered the den, the Bear Husband knew he must die – but he taught her and his sons the songs that hunters must use over his dead body to ensure good fortune. The Bear Sons became great hunters once they had removed their bear coats. They showed their kinsmen where bear dens were to be found and taught them the sacred songs before returning to live among people once again. Respect for the bear at the point of death is shown across the world. The Koyukon of Alaska never pull a bear out of its den by ropes or chain and keep dogs away from him.

The bear is the supreme physician and herbalist, because he digs in the woods for herbs and plants and because he has the ability to heal his own wounds, as many hunters who wounded bears have testified. A Hupa Indian story tells how Bear discovered medicine for pregnant women:

*Bear fell pregnant and found herself growing too big to walk. She wondered whether she would be the same if she visited the Indian world. As she had that thought, a voice cried, ‘Put me in your mouth. You are in this condition for the sake of the Indians.’ She saw a redwood sorrel growing and put it in her mouth, thinking that this medicine would also help the Indian. She gave it to the Indian nations and every time it is used in childbirth, they will be able to talk to people through it.*
Loyalty, companionship, truth. The dog was domesticated as long ago as 7,500 BCE and it has been with us ever since. Seen by most societies as a friend and companion, a guardian and defender, others have regarded it, especially in sacred or mythological terms, in a less friendly light.

This ambiguous history is reflected in the fact that dogs are associated with both the sun and the moon. Solar dogs chase away winter, bring fire and destroy enemies. Lunar dogs, such as those associated with Artemis, goddess of the moon and the hunt in classical mythology, act as intermediaries between various deities of the moon.

MANY ROLES

The 2nd-century Roman writer Apuleius says that ‘the dog… his face alternately black and golden, denotes the messenger going hither and thither between the higher and the infernal powers’.

The dog is also, of course, a guardian of the underworld, as in the case of the famous three-headed dog, Cerberus. The Roman author Plutarch says that dogs symbolize ‘the conservative, watchful, philosophical principle of life’.

THE UNCLEAN SCAVENGER

Throughout the ancient world, the importance of the dog varies hugely. In ancient Babylon it was revered, but in the iconography of the Semitic lands it is a companion of lizards and scorpions and has a far less favourable position. In Phoenician traditions it is associated with the sun and becomes an emblem of the great physician Gala, giving rise to a class of priests called ‘Dogs’. The Arcadian goddess Belit-ili is represented either with a dog sitting by her side or on a throne supported by four dogs. Hittite ritual records how a small figurine of a dog was made of tallow and placed on the threshold of a building. The following invocation was then spoken aloud: ‘You are a little dog of the table of the royal pair. Just as by day you do not allow other men into the courtyard, so do not let any evil thing in during the night’.
The habitual dislike of the dog among the Semitic races was carried over into Judaism, where the dog was held in contempt and is considered unclean and a scavenger. According to the Biblical Book of Revelations, it was said to be the companion of sorcerers, fornicators and blasphemers. This idea was shared in Islamic tradition, where the dog is regarded as unclean and driven away from inhabited places, though greyhounds were occasionally used for hunting.

THE FAITHFUL COMPANION
Dogs were venerated in Egypt and were considered sacred to Anubis the jackal god, and to Hermes as a messenger of the gods. In the classical world in general, the view of the dog is ambivalent. The term *cynic* – meaning dog-like – implies an impudent form of flattery. Homer calls the dog shameless but associates it with Aesculapius, the physician and healer. Sirius, the Dog Star, was a faithful companion of the hunter Orion. Hecate had a pack of dogs that signify her warlike aspect, and dogs were sacrificed to her at the roadside.
In the Zoroastrian religion the dog is venerated. The *Avesta* and other sacred books of the Zoroastrians describe it as symbolizing sagacity, vigilance and fidelity. All dogs are to be treated with kindness and reverence and food should be given to any stray dog that comes by. Anyone close to death in this tradition would invoke a spirit dog to accompany their soul on its journey into the afterlife, while the death of a woman in childbirth required two dogs for the two souls – her own and that of the unborn child. In the hierarchy of the Zoroastrian religion, the dog ranked second only to human beings in the order of creation.

> *Dog is acknowledged for his faithfulness.*

In ancient Indian tradition the Vedic goddess of the dead, Yama, has two ferocious dogs as companions, each with four eyes, who act as his messengers and scout the world looking for souls of those about to die. Indra, chief of the Vedic gods, has a hunting dog as his attribute and constant companion.

In China the celestial dog T’ien Kou symbolized both creation and destruction. The reason behind this may lie in an ancient association of the dog with comets, meteors and eclipses, which were seen to have both detrimental and beneficial effects. At his most destructive the Celestial Dog is known to carry off newborn children if they are left unguarded, while the
HEALER, HERO, MESSENGER: GUARDIAN TO THE OTHERWORLD

In Celtic tradition we find a reference to three green dogs (certainly fairy animals) named Fios, Luaths and Tron (or Knowledge, Swiftness and Heaviness). It is also notable that a surprising number of names, both Irish and Welsh, derive from the word for dog – cu in proto-Celtic language. Thus: Cu-cuchlainn, or Hound-of-Culain, Cu-negllassus, or Grey-Dog, Con-can-cness or Dog-without-skin, Kentigern or Hound-King, and many more. The word cu is also glossed as meaning ‘hero’, so we can see how important the dog was to the Celts. Frequent references are found to the Cwn Annwn or Hounds of Annwn, a pack of red-eared, white-bodied hounds that hunt across the lands of mortals as well as in the Otherworld. They are said to be the same as the Wild Hunt, references to which abound in Celtic and Teutonic mythology, as a pack led by the Lord of the Otherworld, Gwyn ap Nudd (or sometimes Arawn himself), in pursuit of the souls of evil or unworthy people.

The dog was also associated with healing by the Celts, its saliva being believed to have curative properties. A shrine exists at Nettleton Shrub in Wiltshire dedicated to a Romano-British deity named Apollo-Cunomaglus (Hound-Lord), which shows that in this area, and therefore probably elsewhere, there was an established association between hunting and healing, qualities known to have been combined in the figure of Apollo.

In Norse and Teutonic mythology, Odin is accompanied by two dogs and two ravens, which act as both counsellors and messengers. A monstrous dog named Garm is the guardian of the underworld.
Among the Native American people, the dog has long been recognized as faithful companion, guardian and protector. It is seen as a culture hero and messenger, bringing rain and discovering fire. The Iroquois tribes sacrificed a white dog at the New Year festival in the belief that it would carry their prayers to the next world. The Huichol Indians of Central America describe themselves as descended from the dogs who survived the Great Flood. The Aztec God Quetzalcoatl takes on the form of a dog before entering the Land of the Dead – suggesting again the dog’s ability to open the ways between the worlds. There is also a Dog God named Xolotl, who is said to be the twin brother of Quetzalcoatl. Figurines of dogs have been found interred with the dead throughout Central America, particularly along the coastline of Peru.

Among the Ainu of Japan, dogs are stationed along the road to the otherworld and act as guides to passing souls, directing them on their way to their proper destination. Among the Aborigines of Australia, to whom dog is a totem animal, wild dogs or dingoes are to be found around the campsites of the native people, who protect them as valuable members of the tribe.

Wherever we look in the culture and mythology of the world, we find the dog portrayed as a constant companion, guardian and guide to humanity.
Carving of the Aztec dog god, Xolotl.
Hunting skill, independence and individuality. Cats have walked among us and lived around us for millennia. The big cats still walk by themselves and are given a wide berth by those who have cause to fear their depredations, but the domestic cat remains our constant companion as both pet and putter-down of vermin.

The relationship between cats and humans is often perceived as both opportunistic and helpful, enabling the cat to generally be the one who benefits most. Cats have been central to myth and legend for a very long time.

**THE EGYPTIAN CAT CULT OF BUBASTIS**

Among the Egyptians the cult of Bastet, the cat-headed goddess, one of the daughters of the supreme god Ra, was based at Bubastis. In all probability this myth originated with the story
of the great jungle cat which cut off the head of the evil serpent that tried to strangle the sacred persea tree. It was death to kill a cat since they were the living exemplars of Bastet. If the cat of the household died, it was customary for the householder to shave off his eyebrows and to mummify the cat’s body with the same care and respect as would be shown to a human body. If your house was on fire, it would have been wise to rescue your cat before retrieving any possessions.

**THE CAT AS PROTECTOR**

Cats also had divine duties in ancient Thailand, where Siamese cats were the traditional guardians of temples and palaces. The original Siamese breed had a bent tail and crossed eyes – features that have now been bred out of the animal, but which were said to come about because the cat concentrated so hard upon the object of its guardianship, wrapping its tail about the object to protect it.

Statue of the cat goddess Bastet from ancient Egypt.

In Celtic tradition, the cat often shows its troubling and punitive nature. In the Irish
Voyage of Maelduin, the sailors enter a great treasury guarded by a cat leaping from pillar to pillar. The gold and jewels prove too great a temptation for one of Maelduin’s sailors, who puts a piece of jewellery under his shirt intending to steal it, but before he is able to step over the threshold and escape, the cat transforms itself into an avenging bolt of flame that instantly incinerates the thief. In another story, the warrior Arthur encounters the Cath Palug, which was an offspring of the great sow, Hen Wen. Arthur only kills it after a prolonged struggle. The significance of the cat that we can derive from this is that it is strong in guardianship and a good protector of one’s own inner powers.

THE CAT DEMON
Further east, in China, the cat is seen as a shapeshifter. It is understood to be under a curse for not having wept when Buddha died. For the Japanese the cat is associated, along with Fox and Badger, with shapeshifting, trickery and the power to subdue ghosts and vampires. Japanese sailors keep a cat on board to protect them from sea monsters and ghosts. The Ainu of North Japan believe that cats bring misfortune because they arose from the ashes of a demon that was defeated by the Mole god. Another Ainu story tells how the cat was created to chase the rats that bit off the devil’s tongue. Both legends give good reason why people should be careful around cats, since they had demonic origin.

This demonic connection is also found among the Zoroastrians, who take the perceived division between cats and dogs into a wholly more serious area of debate. They believe that dogs are the animals belonging to Ormuzd, defender of all good, while cats are the animals beloved of Ahriman, the prosecutor of all evil. As a result, in Persian tradition nearly all the false gods are depicted with a cat’s head. But in Muslim belief, it is the dog that is outcast and cursed and the cat who is respected, for it received a blessing from the prophet Mohammad.

OTHER BELIEFS
Among the Romans, the cat was the companion of the Goddess of Liberty and a symbol for the throwing off of all restraint – an excellent image for the complete relaxation of the sleeping cat and for the lascivious freedom of the cat that roams by night. In Scandinavian tradition, cats pulled the chariot of the Norse goddess, Freya.

In Native American myth, the younger brother of Coyote is Wild Cat, the patron of stealth and scouting. But the Tiger Cat or Cat-a-Mountain is a symbol of fierceness and ingratitude. In Peru, the cat, Ccoa, is the spirit of the storm; hail rains from the eyes and ears of its huge head. Elsewhere in South America, there is Guirivulu, a cat monster with a tail that ends with a claw.
Cat superstitions are widespread. Sailors did not use the word cat when at sea, but used to keep black cats at home to ensure fair weather for their voyages. It was once believed that what you say in front of a cat will not necessarily remain a secret. According to more recent superstition, a black cat who crosses your path brings luck.
Raven

Trickiness and wisdom; a messenger and observer. The myths of the clever raven are found worldwide. This extraordinary bird makes a frequent appearance as a trickster spirit, in both raven and human form. Their throaty, almost human, calls have been the subject of divinatory speculation and their movements and obvious intelligence have led to many stories about ravens being messengers between gods and humans.

In Norse myth, Odin’s ravens Huginn and Muginn (‘Thought and Memory’), fly about the world bringing him all the news, alluding to the raven’s notoriously nosy nature. As a bird of wisdom it is unparalleled. Because it is a scavenger, it sometimes acquires an evil reputation for attending the field of slaughter, and was greatly honoured by Norse shamans.

In the Irish stories of the Ultonian hero, Cuchulainn, the hero is much at odds with the raven-goddess, the Morrigan, because he repulses her amorous intentions. She then pursues him mercilessly throughout his short but vividly bloody career. Finally, Cuhulainn is unable to fight any longer and ties himself to a pillar stone to die standing up as a warrior should. As the life leaves his body, the Morrigan perches upon the stone to be the first to peck out his eyes. The Morrigan’s sisters, Badbh and Macha, form the triple Morrigu of ravens who can take human form.
The Irish goddess Morrigan, in the form of a raven, approaches the hero Cuchulainn.
THE DEFENDER

In Welsh myth, the god of wisdom in ancestral memory is Bran the Blessed, whose name means ‘Raven’. After a fruitless battle with the Irish, he ordered that his few surviving followers cut off his head and bear it to the White Mount, there to be buried to repel invasion. His legend lives on in the tradition of the Tower of London, the site of the White Mount, that if the resident ravens that are still kept in Bran’s memory leave the Tower, then Britain will suffer invasion. In the story ‘The Dream of Rhonabwy’ in The Mabinogion, there is a famous scene in which Arthur and Owein play a board game in which the playing pieces mirror real life: Owein’s ravens (perhaps warriors in raven dress) fight with Arthur’s soldiers, killing endless numbers of them until Arthur finally calls halt.

SOLAR SYMBOLISM

To the Roman followers of the Persian god Mithra, the raven was a symbol of initiation into the grade of the sun. As such, it is the remover of pollution, as in the Zoroastrian tradition. This solar symbolism is reflected in Greek legend, where the raven was the companion of the sun god Apollo. In China, it was believed that a three-legged raven lived in the sun, its legs representing the rising, midday and setting of the sun.

In the Pacific Northwest the raven brings fire, while among the Inuit he is the hero who brings life. Once Raven was born out of darkness. As he was walking about, he felt trees, plants and grasses. The more he pondered their meaning, the sooner he realized that he himself was the Raven Father who created everything. He flew out of the darkness and found the earth, causing plants to grow upon it. Then while he was overflying the land, he found a giant pea pod from which the first man emerged. Raven made caribou and musk oxen for man to eat, teaching him how to respect his fellow creatures. Then he created a female companion for the man and showed them how to make clothes, shelters and canoes.
The Trickster god Raven, depicted in this image from the American Pacific Northwest.
Raven is linked to wisdom and the ability to strip away outmoded ideas.
DOLPHIN

Wisdom, sense of wonder, depths of emotion. Dolphins have been considered sacred from the earliest times and were known in Egypt as well as the Classical world of the Mediterranean.

In some cultures they are known as the King of the Fishes and represent the power of the sea itself. The Roman writer Pliny wrote that: ‘the dolphin is the swiftest of all other living creatures whatsoever, and not of the sea fish only… it is quicker than any fowl, swifter than the arrow from the bow.’ The dolphin is also seen as a saviour and a guide to souls in the underworld. In the traditions of seafarers all over the world, the dolphin is honoured as a saviour of shipwrecked mariners and believed to be both kinder and more sensitive than most human beings.
THE DOLPHIN AND MUSIC
The dolphin’s long-standing association with music, which it both makes with its song and apparently enjoys, also dates back to classical times, when we read of ‘the music-loving dolphin’. In several stories from Greek myth the dolphin saves people who would otherwise have drowned in the sea; both the immortal hunter Orion and Telemachus, the son of Ulysses, being among those listed. One tradition says that the Isthmean Games were founded in honour of a man named Melicantes, whose dead body was brought ashore by a dolphin. In both Greek and Roman traditions the sea gods (Poseidon and Neptune) have the symbol of the dolphin as their emblem. The dolphin is also said to represent Aphrodite, the Woman of the Sea, and both nymphs and neriads are generally depicted riding on dolphins.

EMBLEM OF LOVE
In the classical world the sun god Apollo is closely associated with the dolphin, which is found carved in relief on the walls of his temple at Delphi. In his aspect as Apollo Delphinos, founder of the Delphic oracle, Apollo is also said to assume the form of the creature. Symbolically the Greeks associated the dolphin with the ‘marriage’ between the masculine Sun God and the feminine power of the Earth Mother, Gaia.
A Greek story from the 2nd-century BCE, tells how a dolphin fell in love with a lovely boy from the gymnasium of Iassos, on the borders of the sea. Whenever the boy paddled, the dolphin would come closer. At first fearful, the boy soon learned how to ride the dolphin out into the deep whenever school was finished. But one day, the boy forgot where he was and flung himself belly down onto the dolphin’s back, catching himself on the dorsal fin, which ruptured his flesh. The dolphin felt how heavy the boy was riding and how the sea was turning purple with his blood. The dolphin then ran itself upon the shore with the boy upon his back. They lay lifeless on the beach and died. The people of Iassos built a mausoleum for them both, showing the two lovers together.

MESSENGER AND GREAT SPIRIT
Among Native American peoples, the dolphin is seen as a messenger between this world and the next. It is also said to represent the Great Spirit, the essence of everything. In the area of the Amazon basin, it is reported that the tribes believe that river dolphins change into male mortals at night and join in with the festivities and dancing with the women. The idea of
dolphins transforming into humans is an ancient theme. In Northern Australia, the native people of Groote Island tell a story about their origins that accounts for the special relationship they share with dolphins to this day. Millennia ago, in the early days of the Dreamtime, lived the Indjbena or dolphins. These ancient sea-dwelling creatures were arrogant and took little notice of the dangers in the ocean. Eventually their tiresome presence among the shellfish resulted in a request for help from Mana, the tiger shark. All but one of the dolphins was slaughtered, and their souls left their bodies to become humans. One dolphin – a pregnant female – was spared, and the son to which she gave birth, named Dinginjabana, was the first of the friendly, intelligent dolphins we know today. In time, this dolphin swam into the shallow waters and recognized her mate, Dinginjabana’s father, and in her joy transformed into human form. They had many children, who became the ‘Dolphin Tribe’ of Groote Island.

CHRISTIAN SYMBOL

Christian symbolism sometimes replaces the more usual fish, which is said to represent Christ, with the dolphin, and a dolphin with a ship or anchor can represent the Great Ship of the Christian Church. A dolphin pierced by a trident, or hung upon an anchor, is said to symbolize the Crucifixion.
Horse

Endurance and freedom. In mythology, the horse frequently appears in connection with the sun as the animal that draws it across the sky. This is found in early Bronze Age finds from Northern Europe through to the Greek myths of Helios and his sun chariot pulled by his four-fold team of horses.

Horse races and the modern racetrack probably both originate from sacred games that celebrated the circuit of the sun. Greek funeral games included chariot races. Erichthonios, the legendary King of Troy, had a herd of 3,000 horses that were desired by the North Wind, Boreas. He turned into a stallion to mate with the mares, which produced 12 young. These fillies were said to be swifter than any other horse.

Horse Traditions

In early Celtic tradition, wherever the horses moved, that was the area of land that they owned. To turn loose your horses was therefore a symbol of conquest, although in medieval legend the unbridling and turning loose of horses to their wild state was the act of a warrior whose wounds or infirmities stopped him from pursuing the art of chivalry or knighthood.
Horses are seen as bearers of burdens and worthy companions upon inner journeys.
The Uffington White Horse, carved out of the chalk in Oxfordshire in the 1st century BCE.

The horse was always sacred to the Celts and is in many ways the totem animal of Britain and Ireland. Evidence for the widespread existence of horse cults has been found all over Britain and may well be linked with the worship of the horse goddess, Epona. The Uffington White Horse, carved out of the chalk on the Wiltshire downs, has been a focus for ritual for over 2,000 years. Recent archaeological investigation has pushed back its date to the Iron Age and beyond. Epona was the only Celtic divinity to have a feast day of her own in the Roman calendar – 18 December, when it was usual to rest all cloven-footed and hooved animals for the midwinter rites preceding Saturnalia. This resting of the beasts came down into the Christian tradition of the kneeling animals who acclaim the newly born Christ in the stable, and possibly to the folk tradition that all animals speak on Christmas Eve.

The belief in horses speaking is retained in the expression, ‘the horse’s mouth’, whereby the truth is discovered, and can be traced back to India where the sacrificial horse was the source of all speech. Wise, speaking horses that help their riders are found across the world. Wish horses are what beggars ride upon when their dreams have not yet come true.

**Horses in Magic**

Magical steeds abound in Celtic tradition, from the horses of Manannan Mac Lir, which can carry people across the wave tops to the otherworld kingdom of the sea, to the favoured mounts of such heroes as Cuchulainn, who possessed two horses – Dubh-sron-gheal and Dubh-srannal (Black-white-nose and Black-snorter). Fionn’s steeds were Dubh-saoileann (Black Eyes) and Liath Macha (Grey Mist).
In European folk tradition, the hobbyhorse dances are connected to the encouragement of the growing season. Most hobbyhorse dances are done around the midwinter period or at May-time, when winter and summer begin. In Wales and Ireland, the hobbyhorse known as the Mari Lwyd and Lair Bhean, or The Grey/White Mare, goes about, knocking at doors and entering into riddling dialogues with the householder before barging into the house to bring its wild energy.

In Hindu tradition, the horse figured in sacrificial rites called the Asvamedha. The Vedas see the horse as an embodiment of the cosmos, with dawn as his head, fire in his mouth, the year in his soul; the heavens are his back, his belly is the whole of space, his flanks are the earth, his limbs the seasons, his joints are the lunar months, his bones the constellations, his yawns are lightning and his movement thunder, while his urine is the rain. Vishnu takes the form of the horse-headed Hayasirsa.

In Tibetan tradition, horses are associated with power, wealth and spiritual wisdom. When a fine riding horse dies, it is accorded a simplified sky burial such as humans have and its skull is split open to enable the horse’s consciousness to be reborn. The horse-headed Dharmapals called Hayagriva or Tamdrin is one of the emanations of the Amitabha Buddha.

**HORSES IN THE NEW WORLD**

Although it is now hard to think of North America without horses, the horse was unknown to New World; when the Spanish conquistadors arrived on horseback, people believed the man and horse to be a single being like a centaur. The North American Indians were immensely taken with the horse and it soon became a central part of Indian life, lore and warfare. The Dakota Indians, having no name for the animal, called it ‘a mysterious dog.’ Their legends told how the horse had originated from the foundations of the Otherworld that were covered with fire, water, wind and waves.

**HERO ANIMAL**

The horse is still greatly venerated today, appealing to young girls who long to have one of their own as well as to those who are interested in affairs of the turf. The ancient European games, where the racing of the sacred horses replicated the track of the sun across the sky, are now more mundanely continued at every racetrack across the world, where the horses run for money and prizes. Yet the original sacred riding is still continued in many parts of the world where horse-back processions go out seasonally to demark the territory and ensure the well-being of the land.

Aside from its obvious speed and stamina, another aspect of the horse as totem is its ability to know the ways into the otherworld and to be a good and faithful guide therein.
Thus, one of the greatest taboos was against the eating of horse flesh or their deliberate maiming. When, in *The Mabinogion*, the troublesome Efnissien cut off the eyelids, lips and tails of the horse of the visiting Irish king, he sparked off a war.
Pathfinder, truth seeker, devoted companion. We hear of wolves less frequently than some animals, probably due to their predatory nature, which casts them in the mode of enemies rather than friends; but the cleverness of the wolf is also celebrated, and the stories relating to Ysengrim and his contests with the fox Reynard were immensely popular in medieval Europe.

Many Native American tribes look to the wolf as a brother and teacher, one who shows the way beyond death. According to legend, Kawatilikalla was the first being of the Tsewatenok peoples of the Pacific Northwest of North America. He and his wife were wolves. One day when it was raining heavily he said to her, ‘I don’t see why we should remain animals. Let us take off our skins and keep them only for dancing.’ The Nooka people of that region believe that the wolf was the one who taught people how to dance, as in this story.

Yanamhum was a youth whose people did not believe he was man enough, so he purified himself and visited the land of wolves. He obtained a magical club from their sacred temple and lived among them for a year, becoming one with them. His family had thought him dead, but when he re-emerged from the forest, they did not recognize him and attacked him. When he uncovered his great club, every person fell dead. He sprinkled water upon those who had believed in him and raised them from the dead; those who had disbelieved in him he left for dead. The Wolf Dance of the Salish indians is danced in honour of the strength that the youth found among the wolves.
THE WOLF AS PROTECTOR MOTHER

There is evidence that the Celts cross-bred wolves and dogs to produce fierce war-dogs, and we read of various helpful wolves, such as that which aided Kevin of Glendalough. This wonderful creature protected rather than attacked a doe that was giving milk to the infant son of the king of Ui Faelain, who had sent his child to be fostered by the saint. Elsewhere in the lives of the saints we hear of at least two who were suckled by wolves. One of these, St
Ailbe, the patron saint of Emrly, Co Tipperary, is said to have retained throughout his life, ‘a kinship with the milk’ of the wolf who adopted him.

Ciwa, a Welsh saint, who was also suckled by a wolf, was known as the Wolf Girl and had a long nail like a claw on one of her fingers. Morrigan, the battle goddess of the Celts, sometimes took the form of a wolf, notably during her long battle with the hero Cuchulainn. In an earlier encounter she prophecies that she will ‘be a grey wolf against thee ... and I will strip a stripe of flesh from thee, from thy right hand till it extends to thy left.’
In Classical myth Rome was founded by the twins, Romulus and Remus, who were fostered by a wolf.

Later she carried out this threat, in battle at the ford of Faughart, Co Louth, where she appeared as a shaggy, russet-coloured she-wolf. While Cuchulainn was fighting with a warrior named Lóch, Morrigan distracted him long enough for his adversary to inflict a wound, but the hero threw off the wolf and killed his opponent. However, Morrigan’s repeated attacks, in the form of various animals, weakened the hero and helped bring about his death soon after.

Wolves also appear in the foundation myths of many peoples, notably in the story of the foundation of Rome, in which the twins Romulus and Remus, the sons of Mars and a Vestal Virgin, are set adrift on the Tiber to die. They wash up near the cave of Lupercal where a she-wolf finds and suckles them. When they became the founders of Rome, the wolf was not forgotten; the popular festival of Lupercalia, celebrated on 15th February, was held in honour of the fertility of flocks and fields. It involved two noble youths, smeared with blood, who struck everyone they met with strips of skin from a sacrificed goat to make them fertile.

**THE LUNAR MAMMAL**

There are many legends in which the wolf is the devourer of the light. In Hindu belief, the wolf of darkness swallows the quail that heralds the return of the sun; the divine twins, the Asvins, who are representatives of the day and night help revive the quail. In Norse myth, the wolf is one of the three creatures responsible for the bringing about of Ragnarok, the
ending of the world. The fast-running Wolf was one of the animals who helped Coyote steal fire from the Fire People in a story from British Columbia in Canada.

In Norse mythology, Fenris is chained until the end of time, when he will break free and consume the world.

In Norse myth, Fenris the wolf is one of the beings created by Loki to bring trouble to the world, while Odin’s two wolves Skoll and Hati, whose names respectively mean ‘Repulsion’ and ‘Hatred’, pursue the sun and moon trying to bite pieces out of them to plunge the world into darkness.

Not always an easy totem to work with, the wolf is famed not only for its fierceness but also for its faithfulness (wolves mate for life) and care of its family. In journeys to do with family problems, therefore, the wolf can be a valuable ally.
OWL

Wise and watchful, steerer of fate, asker of riddles. In the ancient world, the owl was associated not only with wisdom but also with darkness and death. It was sacred to the goddesses Athena and Demeter, and in most places its hooting presaged death or misfortune.

In ancient Chinese mythology, Owl was a one-footed dancer with a human face who had originally been in the form of a drum. The raven-nosed emperor Yu forced Owl to perform a dance of submission for opposing him and made the owl the emblem of smiths. To this day, Owl is not afraid of thunder because it was his dance that invented thunder and lightning.

GOOD BIRDS AND BAD BIRDS

In the lore of the Ainu people of Japan, the owl is generally considered to be evil, and to bring misfortune. However the eagle owl is trusted, as it warns people of approaching evil. Such owls were kept in cages and venerated, though they were eventually sacrificed so that their spirits would take messages to the gods. The screech owl was said to warn against danger and to confer success in hunting, but the horned owl was a carrier of ill omen. It is considered unfortunate to have an owl fly in front of one, but total disaster to see it fly across the face of the moon. In the first instance evil consequences can be avoided by spitting, but in the second the situation is so serious that the only remedy is to change one’s name and leave town!

Throughout much of Africa, the owl is considered to bring bad luck. In East Africa, to hear its hooting at night can be disastrous for a newborn baby. If the child already suffers from an illness, people say in Swahili that he or she has been hooted over. In Ghana it is believed that witches have owls for familiars or can change themselves into the shape of these birds. In this form they enter people’s houses at night and attack their victims on the astral plane. The Yoruba of Nigeria relate that witches or sorcerers can leave their bodies at night and that, when they do so, they take on the shape of owls. In daytime they sit dozing harmlessly in the shade, but at night they enter their victims’ houses through a hole in the roof and suck their blood.
Owl offers visions in the darkest places.

**THE OWL AND VOICE**

According to the Cree people of North America, the presence of owls makes speaking normally very difficult. Owls are believed to cause stuttering that, in turn, causes the owls much mirth. If someone stutters inadvertently, it is said to attract owls. However, if any of the Cree believe owls to be causing supernatural difficulties in the village, someone will go and purposely begin to stutter in the woods. This will summon an owl that can then be confronted with the problem and made to resolve what has occurred.
DIGNIFIED SONG
Among the Aboriginal peoples of Arnhem Land, Australia, it was the owl that taught the correct song to sing at funeral rites. The song made the snake spirits dance in a lascivious way, which caused the owl to sing such a plaintive melody that they all slowed down and began a dignified dance that now heralds the funeral rites.

This Aboriginal painting by Malangi depicts a funeral ceremony in Arnhem Land.

LONELY AND WISE
Despite the fact that the owl is considered a bird of ill omen among the Celts, it also possesses a strong association with wisdom and with transformation. The owl is strongly associated with the figure of Blodeuwedd, the woman created from flowers by the enchanters Math and Gwydion. Her name, which means ‘flower face’, seems to have foreseen her destiny, which was to be turned into an owl as a punishment for her betrayal and connivance in the death of her husband Lleu Llaw Gyffes. In The Mabinogion story of ‘Culhwch and Olwen’ one of the significant animal helpers is the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, who along with his fellows is of great age and wisdom.
The owl is ancient and has seen many ages pass. Yet its lot is a lonely one, ostracized as it is by other birds.
Blodeuwedd by Christopher Williams (1930), the maiden who was transformed into an owl.
Possessed of grace and silent power, protective and challenging the puma or panther are often transposed and share similar symbolic attributes. According to Classical lore, the panther was believed to sleep for three days after it has fed before awaking with a roar. It was thought to emit a wonderful fragrance that made it attractive to all animals except the dragon. This wonderful scent was also thought to overcome its prey gently.

In North American Indian traditions, the panther was considered by the Algonquin and Ojibwa to live in the underworld and have a less than savoury reputation. Among the Cherokee, the panther was a sacred animal, able to see in the dark, though the Apache saw him as an omen of imminent death. Among the Zuni we hear that the ancient gods declared that the world should be guarded by those creatures with the keenest sight and scent, and the puma was set to guard the North, while the Miwoks saw him as the perfect hunter.

In Navajo myth, when a hero was wounded by witch objects shot into his body, the puma...
extracted them and saved his life. They also believed that the puma benefited them by leaving the better part of the portion of its kill for the people to eat. To many Indian societies it was both a totem and a source of help for hunting and warfare. In fact, the Hopi and Zuni took carved mountain lions when hunting deer in the hope that they would be as good at it as the mountain lion was. In many cultures, the puma was often deified for its ability to hunt.

As a totem, the panther is extremely powerful. Like most large cats, it is a symbol of ferocity and valour, embodying aggressiveness and power. The musculature of the panther enables it to use over five hundred voluntary muscles at will and when serving as a totem animal or helper reflects an ability to do a variety of tasks at once.

THE JAGUAR OF SOUTH AMERICAN CULTURE

Among the people of South America, both the puma and panther are especially potent. The Inca hunted many animals in great round-ups where they would hunt the hunter, but found it much easier to catch bear and deer then panthers. The Tucano Indians of the Amazon heard the roar of the jaguar as thunder and the black panther (jaguar) was seen as a god of darkness and could swallow the sun. The Arawak Indians declare that everything possesses jaguar energy, which binds together all manifestations of life. For them, becoming the man-jaguar was the ultimate shapeshifting ritual. The Olmecs created monuments to the jaguar, and the Aztecs and Mayans spoke and taught about the power in becoming half human and half jaguar.
Panther is regarded as a creature of otherworldly power.
**Salmon**

Wisdom, determination, decisiveness. Fish, especially the salmon, are seen as particularly potent symbols of wisdom in the Celtic tradition. The salmon is one of the oldest of animals, whose memory is proverbial, going back to the roots of creation itself.

Salmon is synonymous with wisdom and knowledge among the Celts.

All that has ever happened is retained in the salmon’s memory. As we saw in the Welsh story of ‘Culhwch and Olwen’, the seekers after Mabon son of Modron inquire of many animals, each of whom sends them on to another. But it is the salmon who is last in line and the great fish actually bears the seekers on its back and helps them bring Mabon out.

The salmon’s mysterious powers were observable by all who watched its yearly return to its birthplace to mate and spawn. The rainbow-speckled fish teeming in great abundance
would make a great impression as they sought their source. The Celts, too, were a people who returned to their source and kept faith with it.

**THE SALMON’S WISDOM**

The quest for the Salmon of Wisdom became one of the prime shamanic tasks, hence the story of Fionn, in which the ancient Finn Eces (Finn Seeker) sets Fionn to tend the fish and make sure that it does not burn. In so doing he loses his chance of all wisdom, because hot liquid splashes from the fish onto Fionn’s finger. When he puts it in his mouth to cool Fionn derives the power for himself. Thereafter Fionn had only to put that finger in his mouth to know whatever he needed about anything.

The Salmon’s association with wisdom and the acquiring of knowledge probably derives from the fact that it swims in the Well of Segais, beside which grow the Nine Hazels of Wisdom. Nuts fall from the trees into the water and are eaten by the salmon, which is then able to transmit the wisdom to individuals. The Salmon of Assaroe is one of the most famous fish in the Celtic world; it was at least as old as time and had seen most of the comings and goings of mankind.

Loki, the trickster god in Norse mythology, tricked the blind god Hod into killing Baldur, the most beloved of all the gods. To escape the wrath of the other gods, Loki transformed himself into a salmon and leapt into a pool. But Thor was quick enough to catch the trickster and to this day the tapering shape of the Salmon’s tail is said to be the result of Thor’s grip.

**SALMON AS FOOD**

Salmon remain an important food source in many northern cultures, and for Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest, salmon are a key part of their diet and culture. Among the Haida people they tell of a boy who was hungry, but when his mother gave him a piece of fish to eat the boy refused to eat it, saying it was mouldy. Soon after, he was swimming in a nearby river when he drowned. The salmon people caught his soul and took it beneath the sea.
The wisdom of the salmon made it a greatly sought-after food in several parts of the world.

Once in their village the fish changed into human form. The salmon village looked like his own. When the boy grew hungry, he was told to take a young fish from the stream, cook and eat it. There was one condition – when he had eaten he had to return the bones, scales and whatever else was left to the stream. He did as he was told, but later heard a child crying. The child said that his eye hurt. Concerned, the boy looked along the river bank and found an eye he had missed. He threw it back into the water and the child stopped crying at once.

When the salmon people returned to the river in the spring, the boy went with them. It chanced that his own mother caught him, and she recognized him by a necklace he was wearing. She set the fish aside and after a day or two the boy’s head emerged from the fish’s mouth. In a few more days, the boy came out entirely, leaving the empty skin behind. Thereafter, the boy became a shaman and taught his people the way of the salmon.
Transformation and rebirth; new beginnings. Snakes and their larger relatives, the serpents and worms, have a central place in world mythology. Their ability to cast their skins and to move about the world without feet has always made them appear in a magical or fearful light.

The snake, with its ability to shed its skin, is associated with rebirth.
The Egyptian sun god Ra, in his cat form, kills the snake god Apophis, god of the underworld and symbol of the forces of chaos and evil.

In Egypt, the snake was believed to offer life-giving powers. It was the sign of the four goddesses amongst the eight primordial gods: Naunet, Hehet, Keket and Amaunet, who represented water, space, darkness, and invisibility respectively. The goddess of harvest, Thermuthis, was a snake or a woman with a snake’s head. The evil snake Apophis was the opponent of the sun god Ra. But the symbol of the hooded cobra Uraeus was the emblem worn upon the brows of diadems of the Middle Kingdom, an emblem of kingship.

In Africa, the snake is believed to be a representative of the spirits or to be the actual
spirits in snake form, so that they are accorded great respect. Snakes come as messengers from the ancestors. There are frequent instances of people becoming possessed by snake spirits and falling down and writhing like them during their trance. Snakes are drawn to music and dances, and can give oracles about diseases.

According to Hindu tradition, the reason that snakes are able to renew themselves is traced back to the myth that tells how Kadru, the ancestor of the monstrous snake-like nagas, enslaved Vinata, mother of the birds. In order to ransom her, the gigantic Garuda bird stole the elixir of immortality, the amrita, from the gods. But before the serpents could taste it, the God Indra retrieved it. As he fled with the amrita, some drops of the liquid fell to earth and the serpents slid through it, coating their skins with the renewing liquor.

**TEACHER-HEALER**

In Navajo tradition, Snake is one of four creatures, along with Bear, Frog and Turtle, who go on an adventure to procure a wife for Snake. They find a woman called Glisma who is enchanted by the lovely Snake, who shapeshifts into a human man in rainbow-coloured clothing. Despite her subsequent escape and recapture by Snake, Glisma learns from him how to paint the sand paintings by which the people can be healed and the Hozoni chants that accompany this unique form of healing. Glisma’s encounter with Snake and the Snake People is much celebrated as the source of the Navajo healing way.
Strength and endurance, swiftness, power and masculine energy. Wherever deer roam in the world, the male deer or stag is taken for a symbol of sovereignty and virile male strength.

The stag is associated with the watchfulness of a celestial guardian, for in Norse mythology four stags representing the four winds stand about the world-tree Yggdrasil. In Chinese myth it is the emblem of Shou-Hsien the God of Immortality. In Japan it is the Celestial Stag. In Greek mythology, the chariot of the virgin priestess in whom Artemis was embodied is drawn by stags.

In Hungarian mythology, the founders of the Magyar people, Hunor and Magor, followed a white stag which led them into a new land which was then called Scythia. From Hunor came the Huns and from Magor the Magyar people. The many-antlered stag with its head turned back over its shoulder remains an important emblem for Hungarians today.

In Christian mythology, the European myths of St Hubert and St Eustachius tell how the saint was out hunting as a carefree young man when he cornered his quarry in the thicket. Before he could shoot the stag, Hubert and Eustachius saw that between the stag’s antlers was the cross of Christ with the Saviour living upon it. He spoke words of restraint and called the young man to the spiritual quest instead.

CELTIC FOLKLORE
The stag is one of the oldest and most prevalent figures of Celtic tradition. This can be judged by the astonishing number of antlers found in graves and pits where offerings were made. In one such excavation, at Colchester in England, archaeologists digging at a shrine to the local god uncovered a bronze figurine of a stag on which the inscription read Silvanus Callirius, the ‘Woodland King’. The fact that stags grew and shed their antlers in spring gave them a role as harbingers of death and rebirth.
Often seen as a guardian spirit, Stag is renowned for its virility and power.

There are numerous appearance of stags in stories throughout Celtic mythology and folklore. In the Fionn cycle, the hero chases a stag that is the god Donn in disguise. He later marries a woman of faery origin who often takes the form of a deer, and their son Ossian is
THE HUNT

Again and again, as in the story of ‘Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed’ from *The Mabinogion*, where Pwyll encounters a stag that is pursued by Arawn, stories of otherworld visitation begin with the hunting or chasing of a stag. In the story of ‘Culhwch and Olwen’ from the same source, the stag is one of the mighty beasts with whom Culhwch communicates and who helps the young hero capture the boar Twrch Trwyth.

In the Celtic poem, ‘The Song of Amergin’, is the line: ‘I am a stag, of seven tines’. The number is not only a sacred number, but emphasizes the stag is fully grown and powerful. The stag’s antlers symbolize the spreading branches of the wood and it is for this reason that horned gods such as Cernunnos and the Lord of the Beasts are so depicted.

*Stags from the Lascaux caves, Dordogne, France, painted some 18,000 years ago.*
Wisdom, defence and feminine strategy. Swans are familiar presences in worldwide iconography, appearing in a number of sculptures and ritual objects, some dating back as far as 1500 BC. Essentially swans were perceived as otherworldly birds, often disguising the forms of faery women, who seem to have preferred this disguise more than most.

To our ancestors, swans were thought of not only to accompany spring, but also to usher it in. Swans have long symbolized aspects of the divine, and were often viewed as gods in disguise, or pulling the vehicles of gods and goddesses.

In Greek myth Zeus takes the form of a swan in order to seduce Leda, whose children are not born from the womb, but instead hatch out from eggs. One of these egg-born children is the famous Helen of Troy, whose fatal beauty caused that city’s downfall when Paris bore her away.

**SWANS IN IRISH MYTH**

Several swan myths are found in Irish lore. In the first myth, the four Children of Lir are cursed by their stepmother Aífe and turned into swans. The eldest, Finnguala, retains the power of speech. They spend three terms of three hundred years in different locations, during which time their fate is realized and Aífe is punished by being turned into a vulture, or in some retellings, a demon. Gradually the Children of Lir are forgotten until their singing is heard by the monk Mo Chaemoc, a disciple of St Patrick. He takes them in and links them together with a silver chain. The new Queen of Connacht, Lairgnean, hears about the singing swans and commands that she possess them, but as they are led away from the monk’s cell the term of their transformation ends and they return to human form. Unfortunately, their eternal youthfulness only remains while they are still swans and the 900-year-old Children of Lir are baptized by Mo Chaemoc prior to dissolving into dust.
In a second great Irish myth, the god Oengus mac Og falls into a love sickness upon seeing a beautiful woman in a vision one day. She comes and plays upon a *tiompain* or hammered zither and he falls into a trance. None can tell who or what the cause of this sickness is until
the great doctor Fergne divines the cause. He bids Oengus’ mother Boann to seek for a woman who answers the woman’s description. Boann discovers it is none other than Caer Ibormeith, or Caer Yew-Berry, the daughter of the fairy king Bodbh.

Bodbh cunningly offers Boann to let Oengus go down to the lake where Caer and her 150 maidens are to be found. If they can identify Caer, then Oengus can have her. Oengus recognizes her but has no strength to take her. His family try to coerce Bodbh into letting them marry, but he is adamant. But he lets slip that Caer and her attendants will alight upon the lake called Bel Dragon at next Samhain (Hallowe’en.)

When Oengus is brought to that lake, Caer and her attendants are in the form of swans. He recognizes her again and, taking the form of a swan himself, he joins Caer and flies away with her.

**CUCHULAINN AND THE SWANS**

Swans seem to have always had a deep connection with the great Ultonian hero Cuchulainn. A party of destructive swans with silver chains about their necks attacks Emain Macha the night Cuchulainn is born. Later, in the story of the Princess Derbforgaill’s love for the hero, we see her as a swan, a disguise that she has put upon both herself and her servant in order to observe the hero more closely. When he first sees them, Cuchulainn believes them to be real swans and idly throws a stone at one, bringing it down. It is Derbforgaill he has hit. She returns to her human form and lies bleeding at his feet. Cuchulainn attempts to restore her, in the process sucking some of her blood. Because of an obscure law, he is thus unable to marry her and she ends up as the wife of his son.

Swan, is associated with wisdom, femininity and faery power.

In Germanic myths the Valkyries could transform into swans. As the attendants of Odin they presided over warfare, bringing victory to one side or the other. Once a battle was over they selected the most valiant of warriors who had died and escorted them to the halls of Valhalla. Sometimes they were known to shed their plumage and appear to men in human
form, and it was said that if a man stole their plumage they were bound to do his bidding until it was returned.

In Norse mythology, two swans drank from the sacred Well of Urd situated in the realm of Asgard, home of the Gods. According to the Prose Edda, the water of this well was so pure and holy that all things that touched it turned white, including the original pair of swans from which all others are descended.

**ANCESTOR OF THE AINU**

In a Japanese folk tale of the Ainu, the swan is a divine bird that dwells in heaven. When a feudal war broke out amongst differing Ainu tribes, all were killed but for one small boy. A swan descended from heaven and transformed itself into a woman and reared the small boy to manhood. The swan-woman later married her charge in order to preserve the Ainu race.

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*Leda is courted by the God Zeus in the shape of a swan in this Roman mural.*

The abiding myth of the swan was also noted by Leonardo da Vinci:

> The Swan is pure white, without spot, and sings sweetly as it dies, dying upon the very strain of its song.

This myth of the dying swan derives from Classical sources, which see the swan as the symbol of the Muses. The swan was specifically the emblem of Apollo, who is shown flying upon it. He is not the swan’s exclusive passenger, however, for the Hindu swan Hamsa bears the god Brahma upon its back, although this is sometimes said to be a goose.
LION

Courage, guardianship, protection. The lion’s roar reminds us of just who is King of the Beasts – although this title should perhaps be reserved for the lioness, which is much busier about the business of the kill than the male lion, which sleeps up to 18 hours a day in a truly regal torpor.

From Mesopotamian tradition onwards, the lion was a regarded as a truly representative beast of kingly prowess and power. To reinforce this comparison between the king of the animal kingdom and the sovereign himself, medieval kings began to keep lions in their menageries to impress ambassadors and to act as a visible emblem of power.

The lion-hunt reliefs from the Assyrian period in the British Museum are a testimony to the respect placed upon the lion in Mesopotamian culture, where a prince had to slay his first lion in order to ascend to the throne. But the attributes of the lion were not seen exclusively as masculine prerogatives. Divinities such as the Mesopotamian Innana and later Ishtar were compared with lions in their ferocity and warlike nature, while the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet whirls out of the deserts in the form of a lioness, killing and rending whoever falls in her path.

THE ROYAL BEAST

In Thailand, the oldest royal family traces its descent from the lion that elopes with the king’s daughter and persuades her to live in the wilderness with him, where she gives birth to a human son called Singh (Lion). Singh comes to court and when he attends a lion hunt, he recognizes his father and refuses to kill him. The prince’s mother reveals Singh’s identity to those at court, whereupon he ascends to the vacant throne of his grandfather.

In Africa, the lion is revered as a god and, like the Thai story above, is believed to be the founder of many dynasties. Magical lion forebears taught the arts of hunting, bush lore and the spell craft that brings game to their human descendants.

In Sudan, there are stories of women who are the offspring of lions and humans, but they can be easily discerned, for they will eat nothing but meat; no grains or vegetables; it is good to notice this before you marry one, unless you wish to be the next meal!
The power and might of Lion reminds us why it is known as the King of the Beasts.
Strength and endurance. The buffalo is the bovine species most commonly found in warmer latitudes. What people call ‘buffalo’ in North America are really bison. Buffalo, in common with other cows and bulls, shares qualities of life-sustaining fertility and gentleness as well as of virile power and wildness.

Among the Zulus of Southern Africa, the buffalo is believed to be able to possess the soul of a human. The young men who tend the buffalo herds frequently draw blood from the vein of a living creature in order to partake of the animal’s strength and endurance.

But in many parts of Africa, it is only the male buffalo that is sacrificed and eaten and sometimes only once a year. Among the Baule people of the Ivory Coast, the spirit that protects the village is Goli, the water buffalo. Among the Senufo of Ivory Coast, the buffalo Nasolo opens the way in to the mysteries.
THE BUFFALO OF ASIA

In Central Asia a black buffalo was sacrificed to the god of the chase, while the buffalo was one of the forms in which the Buddha chose to appear. In Hindu iconography the god of the dead, Vana, rides upon a buffalo. In Hindu tradition the great goddess, Durgha, slays the mighty buffalo, Mahisha, in a cosmic struggle.

In Chinese lore, the buffalo is seen as a symbol of man’s unregenerate nature, which is why the sage Confucius is shown riding a buffalo, symbolizing his triumph over his animal nature. Taoist tales speak of how the buffalo is green in colour, or changes from black through to white as the spirit increasingly learns how to spurn base desires.
CROW

Carrion who strips away unnecessary thoughts and feelings. Like the raven, the crow appears in world mythology. In Australian Aboriginal legend Crow, along with Tortoise and Frog, dissented in the corroboree (gathering) that suggested that Kangaroo and Emu, Dingo and Goanna, should mate.

In this story the animals fell to fighting, but when they grew hungry the Pelicans dived for fish to feed them and a fire was started to cook them. Crow warned them that to cook fish away from where they’d been caught was illegal and the animals began to argue. Frog threw his voice to make it sound as if Crow was insulting Kangaroo and so confused the other animals that they fell out even more and decided for ever after to have their own languages.

THE CROW AS SEER

Crows and ravens have a prominent place in Celtic legend. The Irish battle-goddesses, Morrigan and Badbh, regularly took the shape of crows, and both crows and ravens were their allies and companions.

In Scottish folklore, the crow is said to have 27 different cries (three times nine), each one relating to a different event (this perhaps relates to their ability to foretell the future) and when there is a molmacha or flock of crows all crying together, it is said that no one but the wisest seer in the land can understand their words. This in turn is reflected by the tradition that the Druids used to divine by watching the behaviour of ravens, while in ‘The Wasting Sickness of Cuchulainn’ the great hero is advised by two ravens. In another Cuchulainn kills a large number of ravens and, when he has done so, cuts off the head of the last one and bathes his hands in its blood. This may account for the animosity of the goddess Morrigan towards the hero.
Crow, the trickster, leads the way into the Otherworld.
MOUSE

Tricky and wise. Its smallness allows it entry to most places. The humble mouse has many fascinating associations in world mythology. In Classical Greece it seems to have been worshipped as a creature that, living below ground, was therefore in touch with the powers of the Underworld.

Mouse, despite its tiny size, has long been seen as a powerful guide to the Underworld.

Both Zeus and Apollo were connected with the mouse, possibly because mice were used as food for the snakes sacred to these gods. It was also believed that the mouse was a soul animal, a form likely to be adopted by the soul as it left the body.

POWER IN WEAKNESS
In the Old Testament mice are considered unclean and are equated with the Devil as devourer. Some early Christian art depicts the mouse gnawing at the roots of the Tree of Life. In the *Fables* of Aesop, the Mouse and the Lion symbolize strength in weakness and weakness in strength, and this symbolism is found also among the Native American people, where the mouse can represent both great power and great weakness. Among the native people of Dakota, the waning moon is said to be nibbled away by mice. In Japan the Ainu say that the mouse and the rat are of one family and were the first beings to be created together. Providing they are honoured they do no harm, but if ignored they can wreck havoc and destruction.

**NATIVE AMERICAN**

Among the Miwok People of the San Fernando Valley, Tol-le-loo, the White Footed Mouse, is a hero who stole fire from the neighbouring people of the mountains by hiding it in his flute. In general, among most Native America tribes, mouse is special because of its smallness, which allows it to get into places where larger creatures cannot go.
Shamans are explorers, as we have seen – and like all explorers, they need maps. Over the centuries patterns have emerged from the accounts of journeys left behind by shamans the world over. The first that we know of are the pictograms carved or painted on cave walls by our earliest ancestors. Here we find images that tell of the inner world of the shaman – the creatures that inhabit it and the places where they are found.
Mysterious cave paintings from Horseshoe Canyon, Utah, suggest the vision of a shamanic universe.
THE OTHERWORLD

From the distant past come more and more detailed accounts of the journeys undertaken by later shamans. Amongst the various attributes of the shamanic cosmos is the central pole or axis (originally from a tent) used by most Siberian shamans to represent the Centre of the Universe or the Cosmic Tree. Whilst climbing this, the shaman would pause at various points to describe what he saw, each level representing a further stage in a voyage to an altered state of reality.

Similarly, the many Celtic stories of Immrama ‘voyages’ among the Blessed Isles across uncharted seas represent a map of the soul’s voyage through life. In Ancient Egypt the same idea was current in the journey of the soul after death, in the Boat of Millions of Years. A shaman recorded by the anthropologist M. A. Castren reported that:

God has appointed that I must wander both beneath and upon the earth, and has bestowed on me such power that … I can [know] the future, the past and everything which is taking place in the present, both above and below the earth.

THE CELTIC OTHERWORLD

In Britain and Ireland the Celtic view of the Otherworld is extraordinarily detailed; perhaps in no other part of the world do so many full and varied descriptions exist that we can actually tabulate them and relate them to different states of being. Over a hundred different names are known for the inner worlds. The three central divisions were the Otherworldly Paradise, which is usually situated on an island; the Land-Beneath-the-Waves; and the Underworld, which existed beneath mounds where the ancient faery race known as the Sidhe were believed to dwell. All three levels are at once very distinctive and yet so mutable in outline that they often overlap or blur into each other.

For the Celts, as for many other cultures, the Otherworld lay very close to the world of ordinary reality. It was often no more than a step, often via one of the elements, from this world to that, and it could happen in the twinkling of an eye. Here are four descriptions, all drawn from the early writings of the Celts, which show how the early shaman-poets and story tellers perceived the Otherworld.
The Celtic Otherworldly Paradise

There was a large fortress in the midst of the plain with a wall of bronze around it. In the fortress was a house of white silver, and it was half-thatched with the wings of white birds. A fairy host of horsemen were at the house, with lapfuls of the wings of white birds in their bosoms to thatch the house. Cormac saw a man kindling a fire, and the thick-boled oak was cast upon it, top and butt. When the man came again with another oak, the burning of the first oak had ended. Then he saw another royal stronghold, and another wall of bronze around it. There were four palaces therein. He entered the fortress and saw the vast palace with its beams of bronze, its wattling of silver and its thatch of the wings of white birds. Then he saw in the enclosure a shining fountain, with five streams flowing out of it, and the hosts in turn drinking its water. He entered the palace. There was one couple inside awaiting him. The warrior's figure was distinguished owing to the beauty of his shape, the ameliness of his form, and the wonder of his countenance. The girl along with him, mature, yellow-haired, with a golden head-dress, was the loveliest of the world's women. Cormac's feet were washed by invisible hands. There was bathing in a pool without the need of attendance. The heated stones themselves went into and came out of the water.

FROM CORMAC’S ADVENTURES IN THE LAND OF PROMISE.
MEDIEVAL IRISH TRANS. BY J & C MATTHEWS

The Land-Beneath-The-Waves

That which is a clear sea
For the prowed skiff in which Bran is,
That is a happy plain with profusion of flowers
To me from the chariot of two wheels.

Bran sees
The number of waves beating across the clear sea:
I myself see in Mag Mon
Rosy coloured flowers without fault.
Sea-horses glisten in summer
As far as Bran has stretched his glance:
Rivers pour forth a stream of honey
In the land of Mannanan son of Lir.
The sheen of the main, on which thou art,
The white hue of the sea, on which thou rowest,
Yellow and azure are spread out,
It is land, it is not rough.
Speckled salmon leap from the womb
Of the white sea, on which thou lookest:
They are calves, they are coloured lambs
With friendliness, without mutual slaughter.
Though but one chariot-rider is seen
In Mag Mell of many flowers,
There are many steeds on its surface,
Though them thou seest not.

THE VOYAGE OF BRAN MAC FEBAL IRISH, TRADITIONAL
THE UNDERWORLD

My chair is in Caer Siddi,
Where no-one is afflicted with age or illness.
Manawyddan and Pryderi have known it well.
It is surrounded by three circles of fire.
To the borders of the city come the ocean’s flood,
A fruitful fountain flows before it,
Whose liquor is sweeter than the finest wine.

FROM THE BOOK OF TALIESIN,
14TH CENTURY WELSH, TRANS BY J MATTHEWS

In numerous instances, the heroes who visit the otherworld do so by entering the earth by way of a faery mound or cave, within which lies the entrance to another dimension that shares its appearance with our own world, but is generally enhanced – being more colourful, beautiful, rich and filled with plenty. In most cultures the way to such dream-like vistas is downward, by way of wells or lakes. These approaches are such a commonly observed practice among shamans that their importance is clear.

The shaman went into the earth to visit the ancestors, and so, in a sense, did the shaman-hero. Again and again we find evidence of this. The ancient dead are recalled to tell of some past great event, or to advise the visitor on the direction of his own life. The Roman author Tertullian (De Anima, 57), recording the words of Nicander, reports that the Celts spent nights at the tombs of their heroes in order to obtain special oracles. Archaeological evidence abounds for the existence of ancestor cults among most cultures around the world, who made offerings to their great dead in much the same way as to the gods themselves. It
is likely that they saw their most famous ancestors as actually attaining the status of gods – or at least as holding a place of honour among the denizens of the Otherworld.

THE CELTIC OTHERWORLD

A fair stream of silver, cloths of gold,
Afford a welcome with abundance.
A beautiful game, most delightful,
They play (sitting) at the luxurious wine,
Men and gentle women under a bush
Without sin, without crime ...
A wood with blossom and fruit,
On which is the vine’s veritable fragrance,
A wood without decay, without defect,
On which are leaves of golden hue.

ANON. 9TH CENTURY IRISH, TRANS. BY KUNO MEYER, 1911

The Giant’s Causeway is inherently suggestive of another world.

Common factors pertaining to the shamanic universe are found in every culture. Allowing for general variations there are almost always three worlds (or multiples of three) – an upper world, a middle world and a lower world – and the shaman visits these according
to the kind of work he or she is undertaking. The upper world tends to be a place of inspiration and wisdom and is sometimes seen as the home of the teaching spirits. The middle world is an extension of the everyday world in which we live, but with a spiritual dimension that includes helping spirits and beings that are not normally viewable with the everyday sense of sight. The lower world is the home of the ancestors and as such is a repository of prior knowledge and wisdom into which the shaman can tap.

THE COSMIC TREE

Yakut and Norse shamanism are filled with depictions of the great World Tree, Yggdrasill, and among the records of Native American medicine people are accounts of climbing ladders that, while they are anchored in this world, lead to other realms.

Indeed the notion of climbing to enter the cosmic world is widely recorded. In Siberia, as we have seen, the shaman will often climb the central pillar of the yurt, sticking his or her head out though the smoke hole into the sky. From here shamans can obtain a clearer view of the inner world around them.

The imagery of the Tree of Life appears in almost every culture, often associated with shamanic cosmos. Whether it appears as the Green and Burning tree of Celtic tradition or the mighty Yggdrasill of Norse myth, the birch tree of the Tungusc peoples of Siberia or the divine cedar of Native America, the Tree of Life is seen as a link to the otherworld and to other states of being. For many it is the *Axis Mundi*, the centre of the universe around which everything revolves, and to climb it, either literally or figuratively, is an expression of the ascent to a higher state of being or the home of the gods and spirits.

This mighty glyph can take many forms. To the people of India it is the *bo* tree, under which the Buddha sat in contemplation and received divine inspiration; to the Native American First People it is the Sun Tree, which is the central pole of the Sun Dance ceremony in which young warriors undergo incredible suffering in order to transcend their physical selves. The powerful and multifaceted totem poles that dominate many Native American cultures are not only carved from trees but also represent the physical presence of the spirits who dwell within the land.
Tree of life stone from Izapa, Mexico.
Shaman celebrates the divine fire at the top of a 10,000 foot mountain in Western Mongolia.

**SUPPORTING BRANCHES**

In Siberia, the tree is represented by the birch erected at the centre of the shaman’s yurt, and which he ascends in quest of visions. Among the Yakut the frame of their magical drums is always seen as originating either from the great tree itself or from one of its many scions. In the Mongolian world, it is a central post (again, of birch) carved with seven or nine notches that represent the levels of the inner world. In Nepal, the apprentice shaman is blindfolded
and taken to a fragile platform high in the branches of a tree, where he must remain though the night seeking visions.

Exploring the inner worlds is aided by such cosmological maps as the Tree of Life and the Four Directions. Some shamanic societies enact journeys publically for the tribal members as a demonstration of their ability to travel into the otherworld.

*Map of the sacred ash tree Yggdrasil of Norse mythology whose branches overhang the world.*

All of these cosmological maps act as adjuncts to the practice of the shamans, as do the costumes and regalia of the shaman worldwide. Though they are sometimes secondary in importance to an innate ability to interact with spirits each, in its own way, enhances the skill of the individual shaman.
Earliest known depiction of a Siberian shaman by Dutch explorer Nicolaes Witsen, who travelled in Siberia in 1682 and published a detailed account of the people.
SPIRIT CANOE

The tribes living along the North Western Seaboard, including the Salish, the Kwakiutl and the Haida, all possess a developed set of shamanic traditions. The most fascinating of these is the Spirit Canoe ceremony practised by the coastal Salish. In this a number of shamans, who are normally rivals, band together to form a spirit canoe that voyages in vision to the Otherworld, either to recover a lost soul part or to find a guardian spirit (usually in the form of an animal) for the patient. Together the shamans sit round, making the shape of the vessel, with the medicine person leading the ceremony sitting or lying next to the patient in the bow.

Each shaman will be armed with a pole that functions as an oar and several small carved figurines representing the gods who will go with them on their journey or whom they will encounter when they arrive in the Otherworld. There is usually a piece of cedar wood on which is painted a picture of the canoe in its visionary form. The ceremony often takes place at night and includes a variety of activities, including song and dance, drumming, feasting and gift giving. The journey can be extremely dramatic as the shamans enact what they see and do, exactly as if the voyage were taking place in the physical world. They may stop to hunt, fish or collect berries and other resources as they would on a long voyage. Eventually, they reach the land of the dead, and sometimes fight off ghosts in order to recover the lost soul part or bring back the spirit ally. Once they have captured whatever they went in search of, they return and give it to the patient, who then rises and joins in a dance.

![Monika'nga Tongva village canoe ceremony.](image)

The ceremony probably recalls a distant memory of actual journeys in which the Salish ferried the bodies of their dead to an island off the coast, which over time has become a semi-mythical place. The same is true of the Celts, for whom the Orkney Isles became synonymous with the burial of their most important leaders.
PART THREE

PRACTICES FOR TODAY
The ceremonial or ritual aspect of shamanism is hugely important, for it is thus that the inner worlds are made manifest. Shamanic ceremonies may involve chanting, dancing, journeying or embodiment – sometimes all of these, as we have seen. Such rituals serve both to focus the consciousness of the individual and to celebrate the natural power and energy into which all shamans tap when they work. It is also about recognizing and honouring the existence of a universal web of life that connects everything. These things are not just limited to the past, or to tribal culture, but are every bit as vital and important to people of our own time and place.
A Teleut Shaman sings to the spirits in Bekovo, Russia.
MAKING AND KEEPING A SHRINE

A shrine is a way of keeping in touch, of reminding yourself of your connection to spirit, a way of honouring the ancestors and allies who are part of the shamanic universe. Shrines are homes for the spirits and can be as simple or as complex as you like.

If you are fortunate enough to live in the country or have a garden, you can create a natural shrine by hanging small objects that represent your personal scared practice on a tree or bush. In many parts of the world you will find trees with small scraps of cloth tied to them, small flags of colour that represent prayers to the gods, or those who have made the journey to the otherworld. Semi-precious gems, jewellery with special significance, images carved in wood, natural things found on the beach or by the roadside can make your garden shrine a thing of beauty as well as a focus for your daily practice.

INDOOR SHRINES

Indoor shrines are every bit as important. Many people have a shrine at the spiritual centre of the house, which may be a hearthstone or a fireplace, depending on the kind of building you live in. Here you can create a place that represents your beliefs and dedication. Again, found objects or carvings made by you or bought in any of the many shops specializing in statuary and other representations of the gods can form a central focus. If your particular dedication concerns animal spirits, then a picture or pictures of any of these, with a votive light in front of it, can serve as a point of welcome for your spirit helpers.
An outdoor shrine in a garden.
An indoor shrine created with found objects, images of spirit helpers and personal items.

Some people use tarot or oracle cards, which often include representations of individual figures from myth or spirituality. At the simplest level you can create a shrine by putting one of these on a shelf with a tea-light or larger candle in front of it. (But please be careful of an open flame – far too many small fires have been caused by leaving an unguarded candle burning through the night.)

**TENDING AND USING**
The most important thing about a shrine is the use it gets. There is no point in spending time erecting a beautiful set of statuary or pictures of sacred items if you then neglect them. Ideally, you should be praying or meditating with your shrine every day – or at least as often as you can, lighting a candle or burning incense. Every time you tend your shrine, you
should recall the reason you created it and the deity or other beings it honours. Sometimes people create shrines for specific reasons – to remind them of a departed loved one or of a particular dedication or promise they have made. But above all let your shrine be a place of joy and welcome, where anyone who enters your home can feel at ease. Always clean, dress and feed your shrine with love, for it is a seat of the spirit.

A natural outdoor shrine dedicated to the ancestors and the elements.
ATTUNING TO THE GUARDIANS OF THE SEVEN DIRECTIONS

Aligning yourself to the directions is the first thing you do before beginning any ritual action. This means acknowledging all that exists in the universe and putting yourself in a state of connection and clarity.

Wherever you live on the planet, you can attune to the Guardians of the Seven Directions. The form these may take is something that only you can discern. There are many traditional figures associated with the directions, but it is the spiritual manifestations of your own heart, as well as of the place where you are standing, that you should invoke when you turn to each of the directions.

First, consider the four cardinal points – North, South, East and West. Then the three further essential directions: Above (the Upperworld), Below (the Underworld) and Centre, where the heart of the cosmic web intersects the centre of your own being.

Welcoming the morning to the East.
Before you do any shamanic attunement, acknowledge these seven directions by singing or rattling in the directions by turn, or with specific welcome songs or prayers to each direction. Use whatever comes to you in the moment, even if it is just a few simple words. Seek to align yourself with the spirits that dwell there (this may seem difficult but you will be surprised at how quickly you find yourself becoming aware of the energies that each direction holds.

The usual protocols are sunwise in the Northern Hemisphere and starwise in the Southern Hemisphere. The ascription of the elements to the directions is based on the observation of prevailing winds. In the Northern Hemisphere, the cold wind is from the North, from the Pole; while in the Southern Hemisphere it blows from the South, The hot wind blows from the equator which is South in the Northern Hemisphere and North in the Southern Hemisphere. The wet and dry winds are determined according to where the nearest large ocean is situated.

Once you are oriented to the four directions, call upon the spirits and energies of the
Upperworld and Underworld. Lastly, turn to the silent Centre of your own soul; visualize your soul and the heart of the cosmic web intersecting with each other. Take time to allow the powers of these directions to communicate with you; listen for the voices of wind or water, earth or fire. When you conclude your session, reverse this procedure, this time thanking rather than welcoming from the Centre point, to the Upperworld, then the Lowerworld and the four directions.
MAKING A HEALING OFFERING

All shamanic cultures have a way of making an offering to the spirits to promote health or to get rid of unwanted feelings or problems.

FIRE CEREMONY

The simplest method is to place an object you hold sacred on a shrine and call upon a specific spirit you know and trust to send healing energies to you. Another method is to build a small fire and make your offering by burning an object that will carry your aspirations to the spirits on the air. The more carefully you build and tend your fire, and the more attention you give to it, the greater will be its efficacy. If you wish you can make prayers and chants of your own to invite specific allies see the chapter Allies and Helpers for some examples) All fires possess their own spirit, and if properly petitioned, will carry your hopes and dreams to the appropriate place.
Among Tibetan practitioners who follow the Bon religion, there is a more specific method of making an offering.

First of all, make a very simple dough mixture using just flour and water. (A cup full of flour and three dessertspoons of water should be sufficient.) When the dough is solid enough to hold a shape – neither too wet nor too dry – roll it into a ball. Rub a little oil onto your hands to prevent the dough from sticking, then hold the ball in one hand. (Bon shamans say men should use their right hand and women their left, but Western practitioners suggest you use the hand you favour – so your right hand if you are right-handed and your left if you are left-handed.) Squeeze the ball in your hand until it picks up the patterns of your palm and finger ends. All the time, keep in mind the problem you are experiencing. Then, when the dough is properly imprinted, imagine the sickness or bad thoughts passing into the dough.

When you feel you have accomplished this, take the ball of dough outside and throw it away from you in the direction opposite to the one associated with your birth sign. Thus if you are a Pisces, which is associated with the West, throw the dough ball into the opposite direction, East.
There are no specific correlations between the directions and the astrological signs, however those that are most commonly ascribed are North: Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn; South: Aries, Leo, Sagittarius; East: Gemini, Libra, Aquarius; West: Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces.
LEAVES OF DIVINATION

Divinatory devices of many kinds proliferate in today’s market place – everything from tarots to specific oracles. Several of these are shamanic in nature, but many of the shaman’s tools can be found in the world around you.

The use of natural divinatory objects was almost certainly common practice in older times. Key among these was the use of leaves. The simplicity of the device and the way it allows contact to the deeper levels of the consciousness make leaves a powerful tool for the shaman.

Gather some leaves from the garden or the park and dry them. (If you do not have access to any outdoor places, then make your leaves by drawing them on paper and cutting them out.) You will need around ten. When you have gathered them, consider your question or issue. Now write opposing words on opposite sides of the leaves using a permanent marker pen. They should be as relevant to your current situation as possible. For example, if you are wondering whether or not to move home, on one leaf you might write ‘Stay’ on one side and ‘Go’ on the other, while on another leaf you might write ‘Yes’ and ‘No’. Depending on which way the leaves fall, you will get different answers. Use enough variations to give yourself the maximum number of variables.

Once you have done this, if you can, go outside, and taking your heap of leaves in both hands throw them into the air. If there is a wind, watch out for the ones that blow back to you. If it’s a still day or if you are inside, look at the patterns formed by the leaves as they fall. Are they spiralling, or in a circle? Which one is nearest and which furthest away from you? Which ones are next to each other? If necessary, repeat the action more than once until you see the answers you are looking for. You may be surprised at the accuracy of the oracle. What do they say?
Receiving the offering of the trees.
MAKING A SHAMAN’S POUCH OR POWER BUNDLE

Shamans all over the world have always carried a bag or bundle that contains objects sacred to them or that represent the focus of their spirituality; these objects may include stones, twigs, shells, fossils and bones, as well as other items imbued with magical energy.

An African sangoma's beaded medicine bag made around the turn of the 20th century.

Even those who are not practising shamans today may find this a useful way of keeping track of objects that have special power or meaning for them. The ancient shamans believed that such objects contained spirit allies and power and seldom travelled anywhere without them. Such things may come to you gradually if you decide to keep a pouch of your own; at certain sites, on certain occasions, you may find yourself attracted to a particular pebble or feather. Keep these things in your bag or pouch until such time as you feel you no longer need them, at which time dispose of them back to the natural world with honour and forethought.
Sacred power bundles are particularly important among Native American tribes, and are found throughout Meso-America among the descendents of the Aztec and Maya. They are still used in planting and harvesting ceremonies and contain the necessary implements used at such times. Among the contents are bird bones, hawk bells, counting sticks and glass beads sewn on leather. The bundles, along with the rituals that accompany them, are passed from generation to generation, always owned by women and inherited through the female line, but only to be used by men. To open or use a bundle without appropriate ritual and ceremony is strictly forbidden.
Sacred Native American medicine bundle made around the turn of the 20th century.

MAKING YOUR OWN SHAMAN'S POUCH
To make your own shaman’s pouch, all you require is a piece of hide about 30 centimetres (12 inches) square and a leather thong some 30–40 centimetres (12–15 inches) long. Using a leather punch or other implement, make a series of holes around the outside edge of the hide at intervals of about 6 mm (¼ inch). Thread the leather thong through the holes and draw the hide into a pouch:

What your pouch contains depends on your own focus and the objects that come to you. We put things in because they represent power to us. If you have a raven ally, for instance, a raven feather will be powerful to you. If you draw inspiration from the sea, then a shell or pebble from a beach has that power in it. These objects may be used in ritual or healing ceremonies. Before you undertake a journey or sit in vision, you might take an item from your pouch and make a small shrine to call your spirit allies to you.

RITUAL USE
Ritual use makes ordinary things other. When a stone or a twig is placed in the circle, it is no longer just a twig or just a stone; it has become representative of the element of that thing, with its network of correspondences.

Once you learn to see the ceremonial objects you collect for your shamanic pouch in this light, you are operating in the dimension from which all shamanic ‘power’ originates. The objects that you collect form a record of what you have done, where you have been, what you saw, felt and evoked there. You can include anything that you feel moved to put in, no matter how strange or unusual it may seem. Such objects are emblematic of your own
energies and resources. These are holy things, not to be shown to all, but to be guarded and preserved for as long as is needful.
FINDING A POWER ANIMAL

Our society has learned to distrust the unseen and the unknown, and the idea of out-of-body travel and contact with spirits often seems bizarre or fearful. The truth is that shamans and visionaries have been talking and relating to non-physical beings of this kind since the beginning of recorded time. Shamans of every tradition, from Australia to North America, Siberia to Europe, have all learned to listen to the voices of their inner helpers, in whatever form or way these manifest – including that of the power animal.
Lion watches over the land from his vantage point.
POWERFUL ALLIES

Among people who possess a more or less unbroken shamanic tradition it is commonly held that, just as one is born with certain innate gifts such as the ability to sing, a talent for painting, or a gift for languages, so everyone has a spirit being attached to them from birth. Sometimes such beings must be sought for in the subtle realms.

At one time, humanity and the animal kingdom were more closely related than at present, allowing closer inter-species relationships and communication. Gradually, the differences became greater and the gaps between the species widened. Ever since that time, shamans have kept the avenues of communication open by working with inner world creatures in the shape of animal, bird, or fish. From these they have learned to adopt the skills and sometimes the shapes of the creature, borrowing their strength, swiftness, keen-sightedness and cunning as adjuncts to their own lives and abilities.

SPIRIT GUARDIANS

It is still commonly held that everyone has a spirit being attached to them from birth. This being will often take the form of an animal and act as a guardian and guide both in the inner realms and in the world of manifestation. It may take the form of an unseen companion, and in form be animal, bird or fish. You will find a list of the most often encountered creatures in the chapter Allies and Helpers.

In each case these beings are not actual creatures, but spirits which take the form of the animal representing the need of the individual. Thus if you seek the keen sight required to get a better view of a situation, you may find yourself with an eagle for your power animal; or if you need strength and stamina a stag or bear may step into the frame. What is clear, is that we can almost never seek out the creature we would most like to have; those who attempt this often find themselves meeting the exact opposite.
Eagle – the celestial go-between – hunts in the snow.
For this journey you will need a CD of drumming. Details of these can be found in the resource list. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed for at least 30 minutes, then lie down on the floor. (Some people prefer to journey sitting up. This is fine. It is more important to be comfortable.)

- Cover your eyes with a scarf or darken the room. When you feel ready, start the CD. Listen not to the beat of the drum, but to the ‘carrier wave’ of sound that comes from it. Follow the sound until you leave behind your normal state of consciousness and enter into another reality. Follow the imagery of the scenario given below – or, if you prefer, visualize being at a place in nature where you feel particularly happy and aligned. Follow where the imagery leads and prepare to welcome your animal.
- As you listen to the drum, begin to climb down a great tree, which grows not only above the earth but also under it. Follow the roots of the tree into the realms beneath. They may seem to go on for ever, but you will reach the bottom eventually, and once you are there, you will emerge into the Underworld.
- At the foot of the tree you will see a powerful figure, sitting cross-legged on the earth. Though human in form, there will be an Otherworldliness about him, characterized by the fact that he sports a set of great antlers. He will seem extremely strong and dark and powerful – but not unfriendly. In Celtic tradition he is known as ‘The Wild Herdsman’ or ‘The Lord of the Beasts’, and he is the guardian of all creatures.
- When he sees you, the guardian will beat upon the bole of the tree with a great club. As he does so, you will become aware of an animal of some kind, or a fish, or a bird, which makes its way towards you. It can be any creature at all, from a mouse to a golden eagle or a wild cat. Whatever it is, greet it with friendship and make it welcome. (Only if it appears threatening or aggressive towards you should you question its presence.)
The Lord of the Beasts from a 1st-century Roman altar.
Horse represents freedom of spirit.

- Ask it: ‘Are you my Power Animal?’ If it indicates that it is not, then you should wait until another creature appears. Often more than one will come, for the spirits are above all curious, and this can be confusing at first; but if you keep your intention clear and enquire of each animal, you will quickly discover which one is intended for you.
- Once you have done so you should spend a little time conversing or dancing with your animal. If you find that you have taken up all the time with the journey itself, then take your leave of your animal and return again on another occasion to begin the process of interacting with your new helper and friend. On this occasion, when you hear the call-
back signal on the CD, bid farewell to the Lord of the Beasts and your ally and climb back up the tree. As you do so, allow your consciousness to make the change back to your normal surroundings. Spend a few minutes re-establishing contact with normal space and time and, if necessary, make yourself a cup of tea or coffee to earth yourself after the journey.

All of this may seem strange at first, but once you have begun to work with your ally you will soon find that it becomes second nature to be aware of it. Here, as with all spiritual helpers in whatever form they choose to adopt, you now have an invisible ally and friend on whom you may call whenever you need – exactly as you would call upon a friend or trusted colleague in the outer world.
The elements were immensely important to our ancestors, who understood that without fire and water, air and earth, there would be no life. Spirits of these elements are constantly invoked by the shamanic cultures around the world. All of the elements purify, change, cleanse, sustain and restore us, as Fire and Water, Air and Earth are the cradle of all life. To feel your connection to these universal springs of energy, cleansing and power here are two brief rituals.
Castlerigg Stone Circle, Northumbria, England: a place of natural power.
THE STONE COUNCIL

It is not always necessary to journey to make a connection with your spirits. The alliance between yourself and your allies is one that should always be cherished. Honour it by selecting a small stone to represent each new ally you make.

Lay them out in a circle. Now sit with each stone, holding it in your hands and praying aloud in gratitude:

‘Dear (ally), you have given me so much. I thank you for your wisdom and support. I set this stone here for you.’

You might focus on one stone for each session, until you have honoured all your allies. Finally, place a stone in the middle to represent yourself, saying:

‘Dear allies, I place this stone here to represent myself. Wherever I am, your help guides me. Thank you.’

If you can, leave the circle of stones on a shrine. Then, when you need council, sit within the circle of stones once again and pray for the help you need. Here is a possible formula for the prayer:

‘Dear allies, today I’m experiencing [the situation you want help with]. Please sit with me and help me.’

Again, commune with each stone, allowing each ally to speak. You may experience this as a sensation or a perception. Take up each stone in turn and do the same. Sit with your own stone to finish and give thanks. At the time you may be aware simply of their support. In the next few days, be aware of your dreams, of what people say, things you read or hear. Focus on the perceptions that lie beneath ordinary awareness. If you feel sad, doubtful or confused, remember the circle of stones who are your council; be aware of your stone sitting with theirs. Be aware of the help that is coming to you.
Feeling the energy of the stone opens the door to its deeper spiritual essence.
PURIFYING FIRE

Most fire rituals take place out of doors, though it is possible to invoke the spirit of fire simply by lighting a candle and opening yourself to its energies. Intention is all, in this as in all rituals; without it nothing will happen.

There are various intentions that you may wish to consider in this context. Fire purifies; so that if you are troubled in mind or spirit and wish to rid yourself of unwanted thoughts or ideas, or to make fresh changes in your life, you may find that setting a fire and allowing it to burn these away is a good step to take.

GIVING TO THE FIRE

Consider what it is that you want to put into the fire to be burned away or changed: what is stale, broken, and unworkable in your life? You can make a list of things you would like to give up to the fire on a piece of paper, or you can make an object that represents what you are giving to the fire. Make this as carefully as you can, as if you were making an offering or a gift. Your list or object represents a contract between you and the spirit of life: when you let something go, something new comes in. It is good to fast for at least half a day before this ritual.
Mongolian initiation ceremony.

Ritual fires are always laid with fresh materials: your fire does not have to be big. In worldwide shamanic traditions, fire is honoured as the flame of life and the heat that changes, and the purity of the fire is of immense importance. Assuming that you have access to an outdoor site where there is no risk to yourself or anyone else, begin by collecting the wood you intend to use. Wherever possible, always select dry fallen wood rather than cutting still living timber.

The energy of fire in the hands of a Hindu priest.

Build your fire with care, as if you were making a place for Spirit to inhabit. If you prefer find a cast-metal fire bowl, which may contain your fire more easily and safely. When you are ready, light your fire, saying:

‘I light this flame in the name of life and light
I call to this place the spirit of fire and the energy of flame
To bless and cleanse my spirit
And to take way all unwanted things
That are no longer needed.’

When you are ready, place your list in the fire, watching as the paper turns first red, then black, and the sparks fly up into the air. Let your negative thoughts or feelings fly with them, leaving you purified. If you wish, as the fire burns, you might circle it slowly, stopping at each of the directions to ask for renewed energy or new opportunities for growth and change. At each of the cardinal points turn outward and say:

‘I call upon the spirits of the [direction] to bring me strength/peace/light/energy/wisdom.
In the presence of the spirits of this fire I ask these things,
and bear witness to their truth.’

Spend some time sitting by the fire and watching as it burns. Many people across the world
divined by looking into the embers at the heart of a fire, watching for shapes and messages therein, and this still works well today.

When you are done, make sure the fire is properly doused and, once it is cool, dispose of the ashes thoughtfully (putting them on your garden enriches the soil). Remember that in some soils, fire can burn beneath the ground even when your ritual is over.

If you do not have access to an outside place, you can place an upright candle in a holder within a metallic or flame-proof ceramic bowl and prepare your ritual in the same way.

_A glimpse of inner human light, under the Milky Way._
CLEANSING AND BLESSING WITH WATER

Use this ritual when you want to make a fresh start, or after a troublesome phase of your life from which you want to move on. You can do this as part of your fire ritual, or after your fire ritual.

If you are able, visit a place of fresh running water such as a spring or stream, or visit the seashore. If you are unable to do this, draw some water from the tap and put it in a bowl.

To create the shape of your ritual, consider what blessings you are seeking for the next phase of your life. What do you need for the next phase? Every day, for a few days before the ritual, make your prayer to the spirits who guide your life, asking for their help with making the changes you need to invite.

When the day arrives and you feel ready, collect some water from the spring or stream into a bowl. Add some salt, saying:

‘With salt I bless this cleansing water.
From every shame, I cleanse myself,
From every hurt, I cleanse myself …,
From every …. [make your own prayer, as you best know what needs to be cleansed] I cleanse myself …,
As the waters flow to the sea, may these cares flow from me.’
As you say each ‘From every…’ lave your face and hands with some of the water. If you are outside, discard the water onto the land, with prayers for these residues to be changed and purified.

If you are by the sea, you can stand in the waters and let them do their work. As you speak your prayer, let each wave do the cleansing. If you are indoors, then the water can be poured away down the sink. As you pour the water, say:

‘I thank the cleansing waters.’
May you return to source,
Changed and purified upon your way.’

Now cleanse the bowl and draw fresh water into it, saying:
‘As the rains let fall blessings upon every soul,
May every blessing from the realm of mercy
Brighten my soul this day.
A wave of joy upon my heart [lave the water on your breast],
A wave of wisdom upon my hands [lave your hands],
A wave of kindness upon my lips [lave your mouth],
A wave of peace upon my head [lave your head],
The blessing of [state the blessings you seek] upon my way
This day and night, on every day and night,
That my soul may shine.’

The cleansing power of water.

Now, into the directions around you, send a handful of water that they may receive blessing
also. If you are at the sea, again, each wave can help bless you. If you are inside, a spot of water in every direction will suffice. Be silent and feel the beginning of the new phase of the rest of your life. Finally, turn to each of the directions and give thanks.

Invoke the blessing of the waves.
THE WEB OF LIFE

We are all connected to life through various things: blood and breath, bone and sinew, the elements and seasons – by the essence of everything. Each of us exists at the centre of our own universe, which is different for everyone yet shared by all.

From this centre you can reach out to recognize your kinship with every living thing, and be in a place of harmony with all. To experience this is to feel both a tremendous freedom, and a profound sense of the glorious nature of life. In the exercise that follows, we offer a means of establishing and maintaining that kinship with the web all of creation.
A modern shamanic student contemplates the world.
‘The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back to where they were. The life of a man is a circle, from childhood to childhood, and so it is with everything where power moves.’

Black Elk, Oglala Sioux (1863–1950)
A central aspect of shamanic practice is a close connection with the natural world, both as it is perceived in visionary mode, and to the everyday senses of sight, scent, hearing, touch and taste. The following ritual enables you to acknowledge your own place in the web of life and being.

• Begin by seeking a place outside or clearing a space within your home and standing at the centre, facing the East. Close your eyes, breathe deeply and relax your muscles as much as you can.

• Now reach out with your senses towards the East, acknowledging it as the place of beginnings, of light, of dawn and spring, of new life. As you breathe, become aware of the air entering and leaving your lungs. Without it you cannot live. Acknowledge the way the air sustains you, the way it sustains the birds that fly upon its back. Feel the thread of life that connects you to the East, acknowledge the energies that come to you from this direction.

• Now turn to the North and be aware of all that comes from that direction. Consider the strength and endurance of earth and stone that sustain you, the chill winds of winter that strip away dead leaves and cleanse the world in readiness for its winter sleep and eventual rebirth. Remember the creatures that run and walk upon the land, with which we share our place in the world. Acknowledge your connection to everything that breathes and has its being upon the earth.
Polar Bear amid the Northern wilderness.
• Now turn to the West and feel the energies that come to you from that direction. Be aware of the life-giving element of water, without which there is no life. Remember the fish that swim in its depths and are sustained by it. Acknowledge the importance of water in bringing life into being as the rain falls on the earth and promotes the growth of all things. Consider the fullness and purpose of life that is all around you. Be aware of dusk, of soft skies, and cool moisture. Feel the thread that connects you to the West.

• Now turn to the South and be aware of all that comes toward you from that direction. Be aware of the blood moving in your veins, of the warmth of the sun that sustains all life, of the pulse of creation and the burgeoning of everything through the summer months. Be aware of the noonday light, or shadows and shade, of the scent of flowers and greenery. Acknowledge the glorious gift that is life and all the riches it brings. Feel the thread of life that connects you to the South.

• Now feel the strength of the earth beneath you, which holds you up and sustains your every waking moment, whether you walk or lie upon it. Then reach out with your thoughts to the sky that covers you, that holds you as a mother would, with tenderness and care, giving you life and strength and bringing wise rumours from all points of the compass.

• Stand for a while and be aware of all six directions, and of a seventh, your own inner strength and spirit, of how each one connects you to all the rest, weaving you into the
web of life, sharing its bounty with you, creating new beginnings with every moment that passes and every breath you take. Acknowledge your own part in this endlessly continuing process. You, too, are an essential part of the world and from your personal centre you can reach out in every direction to honour the web of life to which you belong.

Flowers express the energy of the earth.

When you are ready open your eyes and look around you, acknowledging the sacredness of everything you see, whether it is within the embrace of your home or outside in nature. When you have completed this ceremony several times, you will begin to feel the threads of the web of life more often, sustaining and energizing you, and connecting you with the universe in which we live.
By welcoming the power of the directions you are filled with elemental energy.
Wherever we look around the world we see manifestations of shamanic practice. The level to which this is developed or practised depends to a large extent upon cultural or historical circumstances. Where indigenous groups have been left to practise their skills untouched, these remain clearer than elsewhere, where the inroads of the major religions or the shifting patterns of cultural exchange through invasion or war have left us with a picture that is less easy to read.
Modern shamans enter the mists of the future.
CONTINUING PRACTICES

As we have seen, shamanism was, at one time, a worldwide human response to a dawning spirituality. Fragmented though it may be today, it continues to exist, embedded deep in the unconscious minds of people around the world. Today, many levels of interest and experience are to be seen, from anthropological studies to those who have taken up and in some instances transformed ancient traditions for our time.

Shamanism is very far from being a lifeless body of study. There are few places in the world where the ancient shamanic traditions are not either still active or undergoing a revival, while throughout the western world in particular, a recent upsurge of interest in this archaic practice has seen a tidal wave of interest. Some commentators have dubbed this disparagingly ‘neo-shamanism’, implying that those who follow this path are somehow disconnected from the traditional methods and values of the cultures that gave rise to them. Doubtless this is true in specific instances; certainly there are practitioners who call themselves shamans without foundation, and who offer a risky and far from secure path, as well as those who work without a community. Others blend traditions, borrowing from one or other cultural source to create something new and not always viable. However, no one would expect a modern day shaman to follow some of the more intense or atavistic methods described in this book. Few would now consider animal sacrifice in any way appropriate. Yet for many, following a shamanic path is a means of connecting with the deepest level of ancient cultural values.

We cannot, in most instances, become part of the kind of traditional society where shamanism is still practiced as it was in the past (though some remarkable and courageous people have successfully been accepted into such societies). Nor should we forget that, just as society and its spiritual basis have evolved over the centuries, so have our understanding and awareness of the past and of other kinds of reality. Despite some determined attempts to do so, it is very difficult (some would say impossible) to work as a shaman today in the same way that the shamans of old would have done. One might ask why we should wish to do so, since we live not in the ancient world but in the present. Shamanism has to work in the times and places and conditions of our modern culture, where spiritual connection and wholistic vision are often lacking.
John Lockley, a traditionally trained Xhosa Sangoma, lights African sage during a ceremony.
There are those who have spearheaded a revival not only of study but also the practice of
shamanism; others continue to explore the enormous and still largely untapped resources
of less familiar cultures. Students can learn to journey and find their spiritual connections,
but this is not the same as practising as a shaman – shamans are called by spirit – they do not
make a career choice! What is eminently possible is that we can learn to ‘live shamanically’,
integrating the skills of the shaman into our daily lives. In the end what is emerging from
these studies is still a long way from being fully assimilated or understood. But the
fascination remains, and the richness and power of the shamanic world are beyond
question.

**SHAMANS TODAY**

Practitioners of shamanism today are undoubtedly performing a service, as well as learning
about a past that was more spiritually active than most of the world today. Traditional
shamanism was always about service – to the individual and to the community – and the
same is true today. Shamanic healing, not always understood, is still effective and produces
some remarkable results. If nothing else it teaches how we, as modern people, can still come
into the presence of the sacred, irrespective of our spiritual affiliation, encounter the
beautiful and astonishing world inhabited by the spirits, encounter our own ancestors and
the primal founders of our race and genus, and find ways to grow and flourish on many
different levels in today’s world. Shamans support and are supported by the community, and
this is still a radical test of shamanism today; where a shaman heals effectively there a
community will gather.

Though the outer world may be very different, the inner realm of The shaman remains
largely unchanged. Shamanism is just as efficient today as it ever was, and just as
enlightening to those prepared to look beneath the surface. To this end there are many
reliable and well established organizations which offer training and courses of study to
enable those who are drawn to shamanism to practise it both as part of their spiritual
practice and, when called, within the community. (See Resources and Further Reading.) In
the process we may learn more about ourselves, about the world around us, and discover
that the universe is actually a lot bigger, and far more radiant, than we thought.
Japanese shaman Miko at the Imamiya shrine, Kyoto.
A contemporary shaman sings to the spirits, welcoming them into the sacred circle.

Drumming for the spirits in Ireland, this modern day shaman enters the dreamspace.
The concept of the Power Song or chant is known all over the world and modern shamanic practitioners as well as traditional shamans, use them all the time. They are a means of calling your power to you, and they generally come from the spirit realms and are received either during a journey or while meditating.

They may take virtually any form and are entirely personal. Many people use them as an opening for a ceremony or to announce their presence at the threshold of the otherworld and call their spirit helpers and allies to them, as well as summoning their power. Here are a few examples. Once you begin working with the spirits you will begin to create some of your own.
SOUL SONG

I am the bright one
I am the bright one
With shoes of fire.
I walk in the night
I dance in the day
In a hidden manner
Till I come with dawn
And with dawn leap forth
Into the day.
I am the bright one
I am the bright one
With shoes of fire.
SHAPESHIFTING SONG

Spirit of stag be mine.
Power of stag be mine.
Strength of stag be mine.
Endurance of stag be mine.

Spirit of fox be mine.
Cunning of fox be mine.
Swiftness of fox be mine.
Strength of fox be mine.

Spirit of eagle be mine.
DRUM SONG

Drum is my voice
Drum is my friend
Drum is my guide
Drum is my helper
Drum is my summoner
Drum sends me out
Drum calls me home
Drum beats my song
Drum is my voice …
SONG OF THE THREE WORLDS

Oh deep ways opening,
Memories awakening
Oh deep ways opening,
Memories awakening
Oh deep ways opening,
Memories awakening
Oh pathways opening,
Memories awakening
Oh pathways opening,
Memories awakening
Oh pathways opening,
Memories awakening
Oh sky-ways opening,
Memories awakening
Oh sky-ways opening,
Memories awakening

BY CAITLIN MATTHEWS
EARTH CHANT

May the Earth receive my words
May the Earth receive them
May the Earth listen to them
May the Earth believe them
May the Earth respond to them

I ask the Earth to hear
I ask the Earth to listen
I ask the Earth to respond
I ask the Earth to bear witness
I ask the Earth to bear witness
That her children have not forgotten
That her children have not forgotten
That her children still respond
That her children still can hear
That her children will not forget
That her children are sorry
And I ask the Earth to bear witness
That we shall make amends
That we shall restore her
That we shall continue to love her
That we shall continue to love her
That we shall remake what we have unmade
That we shall put back what we have taken
That we shall listen to her voice

May the Earth receive my words
May the Earth receive them
May the Earth listen to them
May the Earth believe them
May the Earth respond to them.
MORNING GREETING

Welcome the sun, Welcome the sun, Welcome the sun,
Welcome the sun, Welcome the sun, Welcome the sun,
Blessed the light that glows,
The shining warmth that flows,
Welcome the sun, Welcome the sun, Welcome the sun now.

Welcome the rain, Welcome the rain, Welcome the rain,
Welcome the rain, Welcome the rain, Welcome the rain,
Blessed the rain that falls,
The glowing earth that calls,
Welcome the rain, Welcome the rain, Welcome the rain now.

Welcome the winds, Welcome the winds, Welcome the winds,
Welcome the winds, Welcome the winds, Welcome the winds,
Blessed the winds that blow,
The magic tides that flow,
Welcome the winds, Welcome the winds, Welcome the winds now.

Welcome the earth, Welcome the earth, Welcome the earth,
Welcome the earth, Welcome the earth, Welcome the earth,
Blessed the lands beneath
The ground beneath our feet,
Welcome the earth, Welcome the earth, Welcome the earth.

BY CAITLIN MATTHEWS
STONE CHANT

Old stone
old stone
stone is old
stone is old,
old stone
old stone
you are always
old stone
you are old
stone old
old stone
stone is old
stone is old
old stone
living stone
old stone
stone is old…

Shaman speaking to lake spirits on Lake Kotan.
Inevitably in a book spanning many cultures and eras, there are a number of terms and names that may be unfamiliar. There follows a brief glossary, which includes as many of these as possible.

ACHACHLE Spirit of all living things among the Q’ero of the Andes.
ALLY Name for a spirit helper.
AMAGAYAT Spirit breastplate used by the Yakut shamans of Siberia.
AMAGALDZI Spirit breastplate used by Mongolian shamans.
ANGAKOK Name for an Inuit shaman.
ANIMISTIC Objects for people possessing spirit or being animate.
APUS Q’ero name for the spirit of the mountains.
ASE Life force in Yoruba tradition.
ASKLEPION Classical Greek incubation temple dedicated to healing dreams.
ATNONGARA STONES Magical vision-stones used by the Aboriginal shamans of Australia.
BABALAWO Yoruba name for a male diviner.
BABALORIXAS Yoruba name for a female diviner.
BADÉ/BOTÉ The Crow name for a transgender shaman.
BANZI Name for a shaman in Bwiti religion.
BOGE Mongolian word for a shaman.
BOO Siberian/Buryat word for shaman.
BON Tibetan religion.
BUKKUR Magical spirit rope used by Aboriginal shamans in Australia.
BUYAN Mongolian term for spiritual energy.
BURKHAN Mongolian name for a spirit.
BWITI Syncretic religious movement in Central West Africa.
CANDOMBLÉ Brazilian syncretic religious movement.
CHOTGOR Mongolian name for a type of spirit.
**DICHETEL DO CHENNAIB** Celtic method of divination.
**DILLOGUN** Dagara name for cowrie shell divination.
**DREAMTIME** Place of the source of life among the Aboriginal peoples of Australia and the period of time before the creation of human beings.
**ENANITOS** Spirit beings of the Nahutal people of southern Mexico.
**ENDUR** Mongolian spirits of deceased good people.
**EZEN** Mongolian name for a type of spirit.
**FRITHIRS** Seers from the Highlands of Scotland.
**GALDUR** Norse spell singer.
**GAZRIIN** Mongolian name for a type of spirit.
**GLASS MEN** New Guinea name for those who practised shamanism before the coming of Christianity.
**GODI** Norse word for a shaman priest.
**GUT** Shamanic ritual in Korea.
**HANAQPACHA** Q’ero spirit of the mountains.
**HAWAKII** Maori name for the Otherworld.
**HIIMORI** (windhorse) Mongolian name for a spirit helper.
**H’MEN** Mayan title for a shaman.
**I CHING** Chinese system of divination.
**IFA** Divinatory method used by the Yoruba tribes of Africa.
**IHAMANA** The Zuni name for a transgender shaman.
**IMBAS FOROSNA** Celtic method of divination.
**IMMRAMA** Spiritual voyages to the Blessed Isles in Celtic tradition.
**IMPHEPHO** *Helichrysum odoratissimum*, an African plant with hallucinogenic properties.
**INUIT** Tribal name for the people formally known as Eskimo.
**IYALAWO** Yoruba name for a female diviner.
JOIK  Sami name for shamanic chant.
JOYA The Chumash name for a transgender shaman.
KAGGEN Trickster figure among the Bushmen of the Kalahari.
KAMISAMA Japanese name for a demi-god or spirit.
KAYPACHA Q’ero name for a spirit of the mountains.
KHAN BOGHDA DAYAN DEGEREKI KHAYIRKHAN Mongolian mountain god.
KOKORO Tiny creatures responsible for sickness in the Yoruba tradition.
KUTEN Tibetan spiritual medium.
KUICHI Spirits of the rainbow among the Q’ero people of the Andes.
KWIRAXAME The Maricopa name for a transgender shaman.
LAR(S) Household spirit in Classical Rome.
LORD OF THE BEASTS Celtic title for a being who rules over the Underworld.
LOS AIRES Name for spirits among the Huichol people.
MALQUE Spirits of the trees among the Q’ero of the Andes.
MANITOU North American name for the all-powerful spirit god.
MARA’AKAME Huichol name for a shaman.
MATE ATUA Name for a disease of the Gods among the Maori peoples.
MAU Shaman spirit doctor in Thailand.
MDOS Protective shield constructed by Thai shamans.
MELONG Chinese name for a shaman’s mirror.
MESA Power bundle of the Q’ero people of the Andes.
MESAYOQ Q’ero master shaman.
MI-CHOS Non-Buddhist foundational traditions in Tibet.
MOTHER OF ANIMALS Goddess figure among the Siberian peoples.
MUDANG Name for a shaman in Korea.
MUISM Shamanic tradition in Korea.
NANANDAWI Ojibwa tribal name for a shaman.
NECHUNG State Oracle of Tibet.

NELADORACHT Celtic diviners from clouds.

N’GANGA Zulu name for a shaman.

NOAI’DE Sami name for a shaman.

NDUMBA Shaman’s hut among the Swahili tribes.

ODIGON Siberian/Buryat term for a female shaman.

OGAMISAMA Japanese name for a deity.

ONGON Mongolian name for a type of spirit.

ORI Name for the life force among the Yoruba.

ORISHA/ORISHAS Religious movement among the Yoruba people of Africa and the name of both the god and spirits of that movement.

OTHERWORLD The home of the spirits with whom shamans work.

OTSOOR Mongolian name for a type of spirit.

PAYÉ Amazonian name for a shaman.

PAQ’O Name for a shaman among the Q’ero of the Andes.

PEYOTE Hallucinogenic plant from South and Central America.

PISCO Alcoholic drink used by the shamans of the Andes.

POWER ANIMAL Spiritual ally in animal form.

POWER BUNDLE Container for shamanic objects of personal power.

POWER SONG Song sung by shamans to summon spirits.

POWER STONES Objects containing innate power.

PYTHONESS Classical Greek name for the visionary priestess of Delphi.

QUIMBANDA Brazilian syncretic religious movement.

SANGOMA Widely used African word for a shaman.

SANTO DAIME Brazilian syncretic religious movement.

SASTUN Stone divining mirror used by Mayan shamans.

SEIDH Norse practice of vision and divination.

SHINBEYONG Korean name for a sickness of the spirit.
**SHIRE** Buryat shaman’s box for storing ritual objects.

**SIEIDIS** Sami name for a sacred land feature.

**SLINNEANCHAHD** Celtic method of divining from the shoulder bone of a beast.

**SONGLINES** Lines of power which connect places of spiritual power in Australia.

**SOUL FLIGHT/SOUL JOURNEY** Shamanic journey out of ordinary consciousness into subtle reality.

**SROG SHRIN** Thai Tree of Life.

**SWEAT LODGE** Widely used term for a temporary structure used for sweating out evil humors and entering into a trance state.

**TABERMANTHE IBOGA** Hallucinogenic plant from Central West Africa.

**TCISAKI** North America Ojibwa tribe name for an important shaman.

**TEKA SHARA MATZKALKA** Siberian god of dance.

**TENGER** Mongolian name for spirits.

**TENGERI** Siberian/Buryat name for the highest god.

**TEINM LAIDA** Celtic method of divination.

**THWASA** Type of shamanic training among Southern African tribes.

**TOHUNGA** Name for a shaman among the Maori people of New Zealand.

**TOIL** Reflective spirit mirrors worn by Altai shamans.

**TOTEM ANIMAL** Powerful spiritual ally in animal form.

**UDKHA** Siberian/Buryat ancestral lineage.

**UKHUPACHA** Q'ero name for a spirit of the mountains.

**UITISETA** Norse word describing sitting out on a sacred spot to gain wisdom.

**UTHA** Mongolian spirit being.

**VAROLOKKER** Norse word for one who looked into the future.

**VISION QUEST** Native American term for a test undertaken by those wishing to become shamans.

**VOLVUR/VOLVA, SEIKONUR/SEIOKONA, VISENDAKONA** Names for various visionary shamans in Norse traditions.
WABENO North America Ojibwa tribe name for a shaman.
WACHU CHAN Mayan Tree of Life.
WAI KHRU Thai ceremony honouring teachers held once a year.
WHARE WANANGA Maori name for the House of Learning, in which apprentice shamans study.
WHATU Power stone used by the shamans of New Zealand.
WINKTE The Lakota name for a transgender shaman.
WIRIKUTA Name for oldest land among the Huichol people of Mexico.
WU Ancient name for female shamans in China.
WUHENG Spirit mediums in China.
XHOSA Native people from south-eastern South Africa.
XI Chinese name for a male shaman.
YALORIXA Brazilian Condomble term for a vision seeker or shaman.
YGGDRASIL The world tree in Norse myth.
YOSTOI Mongolian spiritual path.
YU Chinese rain-making ritual.
YURT Skin tent; the traditional dwelling of the Siberian and Mongolian people.
ZAMI YE MEGEGE Central West African creator god.
ORGANIZATIONS AND TRAINING

The Foundation for Inspirational and Oracular Studies (FiOS)
FiOS is dedicated to the shamanic and sacred arts and runs a full shamanic programme enabling practitioner training. At FiOS, we are dedicated to the re-enchantment of the soul through the restoration of the sacred arts. By respecting and practising the sacred arts that unify our understanding of the apparent and unseen world in one reality, one universe, we remember how to hear and trust the oracles from the heart of All That Is. FiOS also supports the training and work of shamanic practitioners in conjunction with the Walkers Between the Worlds training programme. The acronym FiOS forms the old Irish word for Vision, Memory and Dream, the knowledge that is available by oracular and inspired means, rather than by written or theoretical sources. FiOS is also the modern Irish word for Knowledge.

Annual membership of FiOS is £40 (£50 outside UK)
Cheques payable to Caitlín Matthews, BCM Hallowquest, London WC1N 3XX, UK

Membership includes course discounts and two issues of Hallowquest Newsletter.

list of shamanic courses, FiOS joining and curriculum:
www.hallowquest.org.uk

A CD, Drumming Between the Worlds, is available from the above address. It contains several timed sessions with call-back signal.

The quarterly Hallowquest Newsletter lists events, courses and books. An online edition is available at:
www.hallowquest.org.uk

The Scandinavian Centre for Shamanic Studies
An excellent and long-established series of courses. For further information, go to www.shaman-center.dk or contact the founders of the Centre at the address below:

Jonathan Horowitz
Asbacka
Byggetsrundan 293
266 95 Munka Ljungb, Sweden
AFRICAN SHAMAN

John Lockley is an ancestrally trained and initiated Xhosa Sangoma – a traditional South African Shaman. For further information go to:

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*In pursuit of the Siberian Shaman*, 2006
Joiking among the Sami

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