

# SHAMANS, BRUJAS AND THE IASD

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*Diane Rusnak, I Dreamt a Mythology for Dad and Dottie, 3' x 4', acrylic on canvas. There are elements of Saami shamanism (Lapland; I've visited northern Finland) here. This includes their sleigh going up into the aurora borealis, giving me a way to honor the loss of my relatives. Dad (left) comes from an earlier drawing. [See p. 22, "Father as Electricity God"—Ed.]*

I'm writing in response to the article "Dream Work is not Shamanism," published in the Fall (2011) issue of *DreamTime*. As a researcher into the spiritual traditions and practices of indigenous cultures, I've had the opportunity to travel over the world to live, work and participate in the ceremonies and the daily life in shamanic communities, including those of the Birdpeople Yachaks in the Ecuadorian Andes; with the Shuar and Achuar tribes at the headwaters of the Amazon; in Tuva, Siberia; and in Ghana, West Africa.

Based on these experiences, I have views contrary to many of the key points put forth in the article and to some of the responses that followed in the subsequent edition of *DreamTime*. Specifically, at the center of my disagreements are three notions: 1) that shamanism is necessarily not dream work consistent with the IASD ethics statement, 2) that because of the shamanic belief in malevolent spirits in dreams, shamans cannot believe that dreams come in the service of health and wholeness, and 3) that shamans generally work

like "sacred authorities" or autocrats who engage directly with the dreamer's spirit, thus bypassing the dreamer's own symbolic world. I address each of these suppositions here.

## Our Connection to Ancient Traditions

Our ancient spiritual proclivities have never died. And the most sacred of shamanic understandings—the belief that a unity shines through all things, that all of nature has a sacred dimension, and that everything in the world is alive with an energetic spirit that can be experienced—has a modern day corollary in the spiritual seeker.

It's understandable why the topic of dream work and shamanism would generate so much interest in the pages of *DreamTime*, the magazine of the International Association for the Study of Dreams. We are not far removed from our indigenous ancestry. We feel that connection in the timeless expression of the sacred and powerful images that come to us in our night-time dreams. And dream workers, or those who claim

an expertise in deciphering the images that haunt our waking or sleeping lives, in most shamanic cultures are considered shamans.

The discussion and concerns about the relationship between contemporary dream work with its ethical imperatives and shamanism is confounded, I think, by narrow and restrictive definitions of shamanism, when in practice, the expression of shamanism is as diverse as the shamans who practice it, as variable as the regions where it is practiced, and as expansive as the human imagination in its desire to knit together a community in ways that ensure its survival.

## The Medical Model

Our Western perceptions of shamanism largely ignore the organic, subjective and intuitive nature of this spiritual practice in favor of a more static and doctrinaire categorization. The West has an ethnocentric bias that views the shaman through the lens of the "medical model," a paradigm in which there is a "patient" with a problem and a "doctor" who fixes it. In its most extreme form,

the medical model dismisses the emotional, cultural and spiritual dimensions of a problem. It is the doctor who has the power, while the patient is a passive recipient of the doctor's expertise. It was the familiarity with this paradigm that found Europeans assigning the pejorative term of "witchdoctor" to the indigenous healers and priests whom they bumped into during the exploration of Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Cultural bias viewed them as primitive and superstitious, but "doctors" nevertheless whose skills were inaccessible to the common villager, and whose incantations and practices "fixed" those who sought an audience with them.

We in the West continue in large measure to construct our views and teachings of shamanic practices upon this authoritarian paradigm. It's an unfortunate predisposition, and not because the model is entirely unsuccessful, or doesn't have a place in healing, or doesn't exist in practice, but because it excludes so many of the other avenues of practice that shamanism follows in indigenous cultures. The bias toward the medical model as it relates to shamanism also serves to rebuff other, more dynamic, up-wellings of the shamanic spirit as it works to express itself in Western and non-Western cultures in contemporary times.

Shamanism has come to connote an alternative form of psychotherapy where the shaman does the work for his or her petitioner, traveling within the human psyche to heal, or to retrieve or expunge fragmented bits of the petitioner's inner life. In this view, the petitioner is docile, and awaits the words and experience of the shaman. This type of experience can be very powerful for the audience of the shaman. And there is no doubt in my mind that we are spiritually connected enough in profound ways to allow each of us to enter into the inner life of another and provide help. But this type of practice, in its singular and authoritarian relationship between the shaman and his or her charge is not necessarily *central* to shamanic practice. It is simply one manifestation of shamanic practice in a cultural sea of thousands of others.

## A Dynamic, Not a Doctrine

Shamanism is a dynamic and not a doctrine. It is often as flexible and as adaptive as the human spirit as it winds its way through time, hemispheric changes, community building and cultural shifts. My own experience with shamans in Siberia, in the Andes, in the Amazonian rain forest and in Africa is that shamans take upon their shoulders a responsibility for the survival of their community. They are pragmatic, rallying all the forces available to them to accomplish what they see as necessary for the wellbeing of their people. They view healing as a community endeavor linked to the land, and the relationship between people and the memory of those who went before. Many feel like they ride on the winds of cosmic forces that to them are palpable in the body and identifiable to the mind's eye. They are ordinary people with extraordinary abilities who have earned the admiration of the community. They have chosen risk over complacency. They view the "big picture" rather than small cases. And they are more the facilitators within the community than the leaders who preside over it.

When French Jesuit missionaries first stumbled upon the indigenous peoples of upstate New York in the late 1700s, they witnessed an Iroquois "Dream Festival."<sup>2</sup> It wasn't so much the shaman that caught their attention. It was instead the dreamers who in ceremony under the auspices of the shaman scrambled from one tribal member to another in an attempt to explore the dream's meaning from the suppositions of other tribal members. The dreamer stopped his search when he felt he had discovered the meaning of his dream. This is group dream work at its most obvious. And it is shamanism. The festival continues into the present time in the Iroquois nation<sup>3</sup>.

## Dreams in Community

Dreams within the community reveal its disposition. And in this regard, the shaman's dreams and visions are no more important than the dreams and visions that occur within the community. Powerful dreams and visions are the

guiding motifs for most individuals within indigenous communities. And many of the most powerful shamanic traditions constellate around the shaman producing an avenue for community members to be guided by the power of their own—not the shaman's—visionary experience. Among the native peoples of North America, the tradition most clearly related to this concept was (and is) the solo vision quest.<sup>4</sup> Here, the shaman may support the members of the community in preparation for the ceremony (and this may include purification rituals, the sweat lodge and fasting, for example), but it is the participant, not the shaman, who does the spiritual work. The vision that the participant brings back, as far as the shaman is concerned, is as uncontrollable as a dream. It's a spiritual crap shoot. But with a spiritual understanding and the spiritual intent of the participant, there is trust in the truth of an individual's vision. No analysis is needed.

When I was with the Achuar tribe in the Ecuadorian Amazon river basin, our day began at sunrise with a sharing of dreams. I had a dream in which I lost my car. The shaman was with us that morning, but it was the community that offered me its help. Everyone seemed to agree that I needed to be watched over that day, that I might get lost or lose something. One community member suggested I make sure that I didn't forget my passport before leaving the country. What struck me most about this exchange was that I felt emotionally supported; others had my safety and wellbeing in mind. I contrasted that with the start of a day in the Western workplace, begun with coffee and a few perfunctory hellos. Few speak of their inner lives or their dreams. Work begins at nine. We, to our detriment, are isolated from each other.

Both the Shuar and Achuar tribes of Ecuador perform ceremonies using the hallucinogen Ayahuasca. I spent time with both tribes. The shaman spent the daylight hours boiling over a wood fire the mashed vine of the plant with shrub leaves. Those taking part in the

ceremony fasted. After drinking the brew in the early evening, we sat around the central fire under the thatched roof of the lodge. In the Shuar ceremony, the shaman and his apprentice chanted and sang throughout the night. We were left to our own experience. At daybreak the following morning, the shaman took a keen and lively interest in our stories. He listened more than he talked. He didn't speak about his journey. He primarily affirmed for me and others the existence of the visionary worlds seen that night.

One of the most powerful shamanic ceremonies that I witnessed, and one that perhaps demonstrates the deep sense of community that is entwined in a shamanic worldview, occurred in the Volta region in the West African nation of Ghana. A young and very ill child was brought back into the village from a regional hospital. The hospital physicians felt there was nothing else they could do to save the child. The priest and his apprentice placed the child in a grass hut and gathered the village together. The child was sick because the village was sick, the shaman stated. In a day-long encounter, the shaman, dressed in a horizontally striped shirt and pantaloons (think zebra) and wearing a cap with raven feathers, facilitated a meeting in which family and village grievances were aired. For the entire day family members and villagers spoke of their concerns about the child's parents and in-laws. There had been fights between family members, deceit, and abuse between the mother and father. Secrets and animosities were exposed. There was shouting and there was sadness. The shaman didn't blame or take sides. He was a skilled and compassionate master of ceremonies. By the end of the evening there was little to do but to understand the emotional pain in everyone, and believe that community tensions could be honestly managed. There followed a community dinner where everyone sat under the roof of a large thatched open-air lodge and ate together. The shaman asked that the grandfather of the child's mother and the grandfather of the child's father present to their in-laws bottles of each family's distilled palm wine.

## Each Shaman Is Unique

In 2002 I met a Siberian shaman named Nikolai Oorzhak. He is a renowned overtone singer in the tradition of Tuva, Siberia. He performs healing ceremonies in which he feels sound, through voice and instruments, resonates in the body and aligns it with a spiritual dimension. In 1995 he was the Tuvan emissary to India for the celebration of the Dalai Lama's sixtieth birthday. He spoke to me through his interpreter Eres Saltchak.

“Good shamans,” he told me, “direct people to their own spirit. The power of the spirit is joyful. When you find joy, you have found spirit.”

♦ To Nikolai, finding spirit is an inward search. “Don't look for answers outside of yourself,” he admonished me.

Rituals can change depending on the needs of the community, he said. But the most important thing is that all rituals and ceremonies be connected to spirit.

When I spoke to him about the many expressions of shamanism, including his own and others I had seen in Siberia, South America and Africa, he was pragmatic. Every shaman has his or her own way of doing things, he said. It's like people. Everyone is an individual. And if everyone could discover their own individuality, their own connection to spirit, and act on that connection, we would have balance.

“That's why I don't judge what a shaman does,” he said, “because it's the shaman's connection to spirit.” But, he warned, “if a shaman says that you have to do things a certain way, and it's against your spirit, then that person is not a shaman.”

Contemporary dream work, with its ethical imperatives, is not necessarily antithetical to shamanism. It may be antithetical to a particular shaman, but not to shamanism overall. This conflict with ethics can be seen as much in authoritarian methods of Western dream analysis as it can in shamanism.

What is antithetical to ethical dream work is a doctrinaire approach that assigns authority over the meaning of the dream to someone other than the dreamer. But this is no problem in many

shamanic communities where people routinely share their dreams, and where other community members' views about dreams and visions are respected. Certainly in shamanic communities, their world view is as relevant and heart-felt as our own philosophical, psychological and spiritual understandings. And I can say without hesitation that dream work, with respect to the primacy of the dreamer's vision and imagery, is less alien to many indigenous peoples and their shamans than it is to present-day Westerners.

Prior to a short talk I was planning to give at Sonoma State University at the 2007 IASD conference, Curtiss Hoffman, an anthropologist and one of the program chairs, suggested I read some of the analysis of shamanism by Alice Beck Kehoe, an anthropologist from Marquette University. In one of her books<sup>5</sup> she suggests that the Western view of shamanism is so broad that it might be better to narrow the definition to those practices identified in Tuva, Siberia, from which the word “shaman” originates.

There's unintended irony in her suggestion, for you can find no broader a palette of shamanic practices than in Siberia, especially in Tuva. The wizened old man who kills the lamb to be cooked for the ritual feast is a shaman. The storytellers who keep alive the teaching stories of the culture are shamans. Those who divined the meaning of cast stones were shamans. The herbalist was a shaman. The curator of the Tuvan museum was a shaman. The drum maker was a shaman. And the throat singer, on whose voice we seemed to be carried into other worlds, was a shaman.

The literature on the topic is just as scattered. Eliade<sup>6</sup> identifies the shaman as “healer” and “psychopomp” who “commands the techniques of ecstasy.” Grim<sup>7</sup> states that the shaman is one “who experiences, absorbs, and communicates a special mode of sustaining healing power ... evoked ... in ritual prayer and sacrifice...” Halifax<sup>8</sup> compares shamans to “psychologists, entertainers, and food

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finders” familiar with “cosmic as well as physical geography.” And Bean and Vane, in an introduction to the art of the Huichol Indians,<sup>9</sup> preface their account with the statement that “... there is no consensus among scholars as to exactly what a shaman is.”

I’ve come then to view shamans as the paragons of what Christians call “right livelihood.” In my own experience in indigenous cultures, a shaman’s *particular* genius is his or her shamanic ability and practice. Their talent, their link to what we might call spirit in whatever human endeavor they feel called to, is their “medicine.” And their abilities flourish as much on their forays into a deeply experienced and palpable spiritual world as they do upon learning.

We carry the shamanic impulse into contemporary times. And in my view, modern-day Western equivalents to the shaman can be recognized for the same reasons shamans are recognized in indigenous cultures: They carry within them a trait we call charisma, wisdom or expertise. They are spontaneous and alive. They are “characters.” They seem to have the understandings (spiritual or otherwise) we are looking for. And their reputations are built on the strengths of their successes. If their back-story is one of pain and suffering, surmounting painful odds or heroic struggles with enemies, all the better. And I must admit that through my lens of reality, a number of modern shamans can be found in politics, art, medicine, music, theater, education, and in the membership of the International Association for the Study of Dreams.

## Good Shamans and Brujas

Of course we can be deceived. There are good and bad shamans out there. And then there are *really* bad shamans out there. When I was in West Africa I discussed with an elder the idea of the Bruja, or bad witch or wizard evident in stories from South America. Brujas are said to be able to throw “curses” on peo-

ple. He affirmed to me his belief in malevolent forces: bad spirits, gods and goddesses. Priests and priestesses (he didn’t use the word shaman) can ally themselves with bad spirits. But you can tell the bad from the good, he said. One seeks to control others. And the other inspires.

The Ecuadoran Shuar and Achuar tribes believe that anger and malice can take the form of invisible darts that can strike and kill people. People with power, shamans or others who have allied themselves with evil, can direct these darts into a village and cause illness. Such is the power of hate.

In dreams we can witness the malicious spirits identified in the indigenous world. They may or may not look like darts, but look like people. Where these malicious forces or spirits come from, or whether they are “real” or metaphorical, is not as important to the shaman (or to us) as the more practical question of how we must engage with them. For unless we want to argue (and I don’t) that facing the forces of adversity, fear, deceit, rage and even the threat of death, diminishes us and ultimately kills the human spirit, we must eventually admit that *what frightens us most becomes our best teacher*. I’ve always appreciated Arnold Mindell’s<sup>10</sup> take on shamanism when he states that while others look for peace and love, the shaman looks for trouble. The shaman, like our dreams, helps us to engage with the ignored, the frightening and the forgotten. From these experiences we learn about the totality of life, and gain the wisdom to live well. If we fail to admit that these forces, however unpleasant, are recognizable because they have some semblance in our own makeup; if we choose to believe that malevolent forces are alien to our own drives and somehow outside of us, these forces evade our consciousness. And as in the Jungian concept of the “shadow,” we become unwitting and blind pawns to the disregarded powers that touch our lives. These forces can come at us in our dreams and visions looking like monsters.

Again, the shaman and shamanism are not static entities. They are in a state of

flux like the cultures of which they are a part. And if we look at our shamanic ancestors, their hallmark (as is true of all *Homo sapiens*) is that they were adaptive. They spread throughout the earth and survived as much in snow as in deserts, in thin mountain air and in the humidity of rain forests, through tectonic shifts, ice ages and diaspora. They absorbed the gods and goddesses, the spirits and philosophies of those they overran, or of those who besieged them. Their dynamics, what was and wasn’t embraced, and their focus, shifted with the needs of the community. The process continues to this day. And where shamans once intuited from their own expertise the migratory patterns of game, many now attempt to intuit the economic vagaries of their region. The Amazonian Shuar, for example, as described in a recent book titled *Spirit of the Shuar: Wisdom from the Last Unconquered People of the Amazon*,<sup>11</sup> now consider how best to use a portion of their tribal land for ecotourism. It’s this flexibility that assures there never was, and never will be, a shamanic Bible. Deities shift. Cultures absorb what works best and discard what no longer serves them. There will always be teaching stories for wisdom, rituals and ceremonies to mark experience, guides to help on the human journey, and dreams and visions to consider. But shamanism is a moving target. What it was or is in different countries, what it is now, what it is becoming, and how will it express itself in the future makes any meaningful conversation about its relationship to modern dream work very difficult.

## Becoming a Shaman

However, let me tell you a story. In 2001 I was given the opportunity to travel to Tuva, Siberia. There were six of us traveling with an organization called Dream Change Coalition,<sup>12</sup> led by Lyn Herrik. Four of us were from the United States, one from England, and another from British Columbia. We flew into Moscow and slept overnight in a hotel near Red Square. In the morning we took a Russian Aeroflot jetliner into Abakan,

Siberia, where we met one of our translators, and journeyed off in an old bus into the heart of Siberia, to Kyzl, the capital of Tuva on the banks of the Yenisey River.

You can't be more land-locked anywhere else in the world. We were approximately one hundred miles from the northern border of Mongolia, in the middle of the Eurasian continent. The rolling steppes were boundless. Outside the city the horizon stretched like a dome in all directions. Occasional herds of horses raced across the land, and eagles soared aloft wherever we went. The land reminded me of the windswept and dry plains of southern Wyoming, albeit with the great Sayan Mountains breaking into the blue sky to the west of us.

We met the shaman Ai-Tcourek, or Moon Heart, there. She was the most influential and formidable shaman I had ever met, known as a powerful healer. She established her reputation with her impassioned speeches aimed at rekindling the cultural dignity of the Tuvan people, an identity wounded by Russian colonialism, then later by the collapse of the USSR and the resulting unemployment, alcoholism and crime.

Like most Tuvans, Moon Heart was Eurasian with black hair and almond-shaped eyes. In ceremony she would wear an ankle-length caftan, a large owl and eagle-feathered headdress, and the traditional pointy-toed leather boots. Streaming from the shoulders and torso of her caftan were hundreds of bright, multicolored strips of cloth.

Our group traveled with her and a larger group of Tuvan shamans into the steppes and Tiaga of Siberia. We traveled in three worn Russian World War II era vans that bumped over dusty roads into poor rural villages and into the mountains where Tuvans live in nomadic communities. We slept in yurts.

We joined the Tuvan shamans in ceremonies. We walked the roads together, as we sometimes had to get out of our vans to help the vehicles chug up the steep roadsides. We ate together in villages. We paid homage on our knees to the sacred sites and shrines that dotted

the landscape. We watched communities gather around Moon Heart to listen to her. We talked.

"Everyone's power is unique," she said to us one night. "But we are one soul. Shamanism should be felt, absorbed. It needs to be experienced, not taught."

One night a huge bonfire was built on a rolling mountain top. More than one hundred people from the community joined us. As the night progressed Moon Heart eventually moved toward the fire, her arms out like a bird. She swooped and dove toward the night-time fire with the strips of ribbons from her body glowing from the orange light. With the wings of her headdress hugging the side of her head, she would stretch her arms outward as if flying, and move in and out from the edges of the fire. The other shamans would join her, beating drums that from the top of the hills could be heard for miles.

At the end of one ceremony Moon Heart asked the townspeople to hold hands in a circle around the waning fire. At her command, and with a shout, all the townspeople there yelled in celebration and in a shrinking circle rushed toward the edge of the fire. We pushed against each other in a giant, happy mass. Still holding hands, we then scrambled backwards, away from the fire to where the circle began, laughing. Children squealed with delight as their little feet left the ground, as the larger adults pulled them back into the widening circle. We repeated the effort four or five times. The organized pandemonium seemed to unite everyone in a common cause of hope and joy. Under a starlit night we had each other. And there I was, a stranger from tens of thousands of miles away, held like a member of their community, desiring what they all desired: that this township and, by extension, this world, be able to live with the happiness it deserves.

One afternoon, in a forest clearing, Moon Heart met with our small group. She told us that in the next community we were to visit, we would be introduced as shamans. And we would bring our

shamanic powers into the community. We were stunned. We saw ourselves as observers, students—not shamans. We protested, and felt cornered. I had seen Moon Heart mad one other time. It was when she noticed a woman in our group had purchased in Abakan a bottle of vodka in a decanter in the shape of a peasant. She had bought it as a novelty to take home with her. But the sight of the vodka angered Moon Heart. How could we bring alcohol with us when vodka had caused so many problems in Tuva! We poured the vodka onto the dry soil and threw the bottle into a trash heap.

But as she faced us now she was even more enraged. She could not understand how we could decline her invitation. She yelled, sentence by sentence, to allow our translators time to capture her words.

"In this land," she shouted, "life doesn't allow for half measures. To live, you had better forcefully claim who you are and enlist the help of others who have done the same, or perish in the elements. All of you have studied shamanism. You have apprenticed. At a great expense of money and time you've traveled thousands of miles to be here. That is the call! You've answered it! Your apprenticeship is over! You have skills. You have power. Use it! You are shamans! The only question you must ask yourselves is whether you are a shaman with great power, or a shaman with slight power. The choice is yours." And she walked away.

One of the women in our group said she felt ill, and vomited onto the ground. I sat under a tree to think. We all met later in the day to discuss what we were going to do.

That afternoon, in a wooded area outside the village we were in, each of us cleared a small spot on the forest floor. We placed objects we wanted near us. I placed stones I had gathered, sprays of Juniper and a bottle of water at my side. I placed the ceremonial scarf I had been given in Kyzl around my neck. And the people in the community came to us, choosing one or the other of us to sit with. For that evening, we were their shamans.

I performed bits of ceremonies I had learned in Ecuador. I sat and listened to people's stories as I would for an old friend. Early in the afternoon a young man sat down with me and told me his dream. In the dream a beautiful, strong horse stood off at a distance on the horizon. The horse pawed the ground and looked at him.

I was struck by the powerful image. The Tuvans speak of Windhorse, a mythological steed in the manner of the European Pegasus. When one is referred to as riding Windhorse, that person is riding with the powers of nature. Windhorse can mean "luck." But it's the luck that comes when riding the forces of instinct. And in my version of that dream, that force longed for me as much

as I longed for it. It beckoned.

At the periphery of the woods I could see Moon Heart and the other shamans. Some were talking to each other. Others were with some of the villagers. I looked at the dreamer. I told him, through our translator, that his dream was beautiful and powerful to me. I told him that there were many meanings to dreams, and many wise people in his village who could help him to understand the dream. He would know, I said, what meanings would be his own truth because he would be able to feel it in his heart.

And then I told him that I would tell him what the dream would mean to me, if his dream were mine. And I told him about Windhorse, and how I longed for its spirit.

Before the final ceremony in Kyzl, the evening before our group left for Abacan, one of the shamans we had been traveling with approached me. She wanted me to have a gift. And she handed me a small, hand carved and polished figurine of a horse. She smiled, and we bowed to each other. The carving now stands on a shelf in my living room. It's my Windhorse. And every time I look at it I think of the magic and the visions that connect us all. And I think of the gifts of others who through their link to creation confirm to us what we most deeply know, and lead us to who we are. ■

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### Notes

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