

SHAMANISM

A LINK BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

by Michael Lewis

The drums pound faster than my beating heart, lifting me, carrying me into the mouth of a great cave. It's so dark I can't see the walls, but I feel I'm hurtling down a dark tunnel. A blinding light appears and I see I'm falling swiftly toward it. I fly out of the cave into the light, into a world filled with strange animals and plants, water, rocks, earth and sky, all of which are talking to me. I ask certain animals and plants to return with me and help me heal the ailing Earth. I go back through the dark tunnel and wake among family and friends who will help me and my allies in my healing work.

The Hopi word *koyaanisqatsi* means "life out of balance," or "a state of life that calls for another way of living." We are living *koyaanisqatsi* now, especially in the United States, fulfilling the Hopi prophecy of life moving faster and faster until ultimately it stops.

It's as if the governor that controls the speed of our lives is broken, leaving us to race ever more rapidly out of control. The rate of technological change has increased so drastically within the last 40 years that we are no longer able to cope, and we withdraw into chemical dependencies, mental and physical disease, war and civil strife. In our headlong rush into a technological future we have devastated Earth.

The 60's generation felt a need to return to the earth, to find its roots in the soil that gave it birth. The "back-to-the-land" movement flourished for a few years, generating countless doomed communes, seeking fulfillment in a mixture of organic plants, heady music and chemical enlightenment. Some indeed did find their nirvana and live there still, but the mass of our culture moved on to other pursuits, at a faster pace, as they passed the magic 30 mark.

The counter-culture "sold out," became the over-the-counter culture and has now taken its place in the mainstream of American life. We even have political candidates now who lay claim to coming of age among the Flower Children; those who did not do drugs, of course.

In the 80's a growing and increasingly vocal minority of individuals has demanded a halt to the destruction. Earth First! was born and remains on the front line in the effort to save our planet. But even as we hug trees, field-repair earth-raaping equipment, dance on the roofs of the Forest Circus constabulary; even as we scream, "THIS IS WRONG!" a small voice, down in the reptilian origins of our brains, whispers, "yes, but what is right?"

We stand precariously perched over the crack between two worlds, dragged into the future by a technological culture run wild, held back by a mythic, deeply buried knowledge of interconnected, Gaian existence. We will either be torn apart or fall into the bottomless abyss unless we can find something to bring these two disparate worlds together into a viable whole.

Many people seeking answers to this dilemma have looked into our past, to a time when humans lived more in tune with other species. They've examined subsistence life styles, pantheistic religions, and matriarchal societies. For the most part, the factors that make these simple societies attractive cannot be grafted to the modern world in hopes of effecting beneficial change. Our world has too much momentum in its rush to the future to allow "primitive" notions to change its path. Our only hope is to build a bridge over the cultural canyon.

Ancient peoples faced a similar problem in coming to grips with a world which did not have scientists or a priest elite to interpret and explain natural phenomenon. To the "primitive" homo, every-

thing was a mystery and the best one could hope to do was to appease the forces that often brought calamity into the lives of living things. Primitive humans knew that the world of dreams, myth, religion and imagination was as real as the "hard" world around them. It was important to be able to enlist the aid of the creatures of the mythic world in dealing with the everyday problems of the physical world. Some individuals were more successful at this than others, and as their facility became known, others sought them for assistance.

The Tungus people of Siberia called them *saman* (shaman), and that name has since been applied to any native individual involved in ritualistic healing. To the Iglulik Eskimo of Hudson Bay they were *agakok*; to the ancient Jews the shaman was *baal-shem*. The Tamang of Nepal have their *bombo*, spiritual practitioners totally separate from the more well-known Buddhist lamas. Among North American Indian peoples the "pipeholder" served as the connection between ordinary humans and the spirit world. Westerners mistranslated the name to "medicine man," also twisting the meaning of the word "medicine" to focus on physical healing.

The Tlingit people of Southeast Alaska call their spirit person *Ixt*. *Ixt* has powerful abilities to foretell the future and to see events in villages far away. He tends the sick and troubled, administering to all who come to him from villages over a far-flung area. The last Tlingit *Ixt* was Too Soow, or Gambler Bay Jim, from Kake, Alaska, who died in the 1970s.

The *Ixt* was trained by his uncle, inheriting the role before the death of the current spirit person. The inherited spirits took control of the new *Ixt*, who had no choice but to fulfill the role. Often a young man began his training after the occurrence of a significant event, either "real" or dreamed. This usually involved the appearance of special animals, generally Sea Otters.

Perhaps the most well known shaman of modern times was Black Elk, the subject of John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*. Neihardt spent much time with Black Elk during the last years of the shaman's life. Neihardt told of being invited to participate in a vision quest on Hamey Peak in the Black Hills. Black Elk arrived, dressed only in red long underwear. Since he was forbidden by the white authorities to possess red ochre with which to stain his body, Black Elk had resorted to a modern equivalent. Black Elk arranged his pipe and medicine bundle and began chanting a prayer, his arms held straight out at his sides. Soon a black cloud appeared and moved swiftly to a position over the two friends. It began to rain on Hamey Peak from the only cloud to be seen from horizon to horizon.

For early societies, the shaman served as a bridge between the waking physical world, and the misty, shape-changing world of spirits, allies, totems and gods. We think of the shaman mainly as a healer, and though this was an important part of his or her function, the work of the shaman was much more far-reaching than implied by our concept of "witch-doctor."

Our perceptions of shamanism are col-

ored by our view of the modern medical profession. In our world, when a person "gets sick," he or she goes to the doctor-authority to be cured. The doctor examines the patient in a professionally detached manner, declares the ailment, and prescribes drugs, mechanical procedures or other external influences to effect the cure. The human body is viewed as a machine that is broken and can be fixed by physical repair.

The shaman, in contrast, views the human body as an inseparable part of the universe, acting with and reacting to everything else in a totally living world. The presence of dis-ease means this individual body, and the consciousness which temporarily inhabits it, is somehow at odds with something else in the universe. The task of the shaman is to discover the discontinuity and bring forces into play that will help heal the rift expressing itself as physical symptoms in the patient.

The shaman cannot do this alone. The patient must be an integral participant in the process. Dreams, visions, and hallucinations are all clues for the shaman to discover the direction to be taken in the healing journey.

Even when the shaman has some knowledge of the source of the problem, he or she still has very little power to cure. The shaman does, however, have a body of knowledge telling him where to go for help.

At the beginning of this essay is a paragraph describing a simple "shamanic journey." This experience resembles the near death experience reported increasingly in our world. It is used by the shaman to enter the mythic world, where the shaman has found particular animals, plants, stones or other objects that have in the past helped with similar problems. The shaman travels to the other world, enlists the aid of the appropriate spirit and returns by the same path to bring the spirit to help the patient cure himself. After the spirit has participated in the ceremony, thanks are given and appropriate gifts offered and the spirit returns to the spirit world.

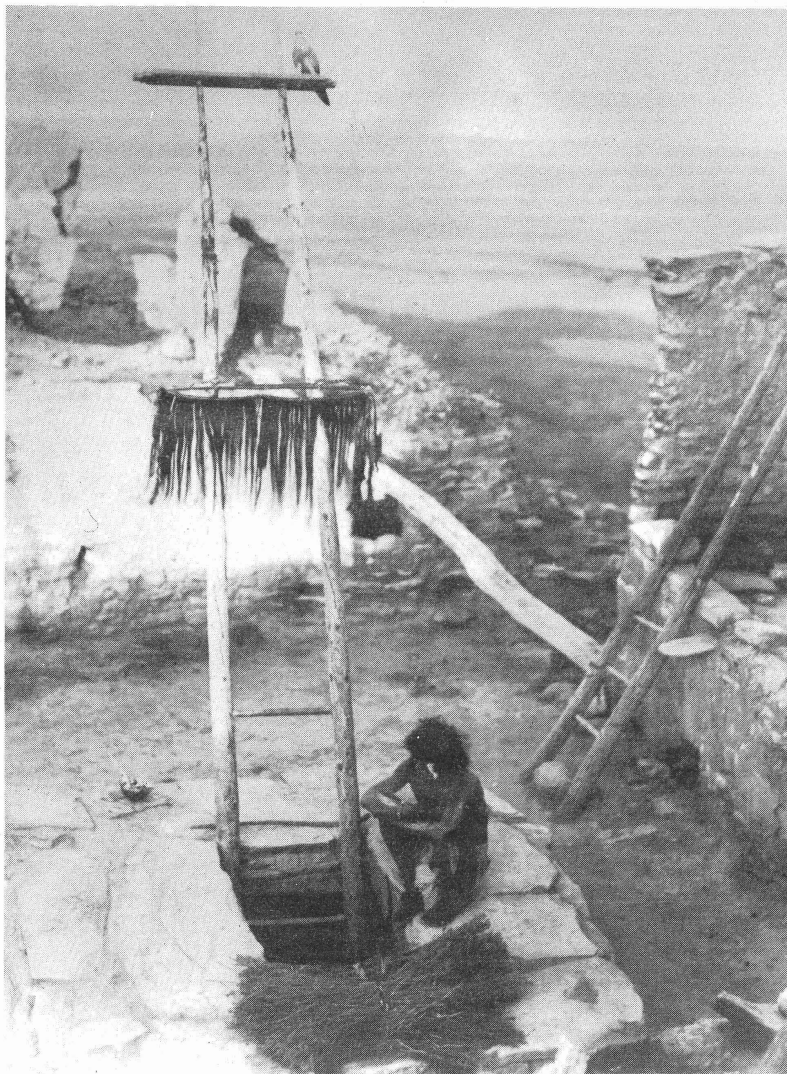
The shaman acts as a bridge between the two worlds, enlisting the aid of the spirit world to help solve problems in the physical, and carrying the expressions of appreciation from the physical to the spiritual. The shaman does *not* interpret the spiritual world for the patient. The shaman merely intercedes on the patient's behalf. The shaman also serves to heal the ills of the society in general, constantly strengthening the relationship between the physical world and its spiritual counterpart.

Through shamanic journeys, vision quests, sweats, drumming and dancing, the shaman becomes as familiar with the spirit world as we are with our own. He comes to know the inhabitants of that world, and learns the ceremony and ritual that work best for him to enlist their help.

In our modern society we look on such views as hopelessly simplistic and quaint, amusing to view through the air conditioned bus window as we vacation in Taos, but not "real" in any sense in our world. But more and more, scientists and even some doctors are beginning to scratch their thinning pates and wonder about some of the seemingly spontaneous cures occurring in what they considered hopeless cases. Detailed case studies abound; we need not detail them here. Suffice it to say, the universe is not impressed by the limitations set on it by mere scientists.

The important lesson in the shamanistic approach to life is the view of the universe as an integrated, living whole. We speak abstractly of Gaia, the living Earth, but the only

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A Hopi man sits guard at the entrance of the Antelope kiva at the village of Walpi, AZ. Kivas are sacred chambers and are characteristic of prehistoric and modern pueblos. Inside, men prepare for public dances and rituals are performed. The bundle near the kiva entrance and the horsehair banner indicate that ceremonial activity is taking place within the kiva. Photograph by C.C. Pierce or George Wharton James, around 1898. Courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles.



This portion of a large painted mural is from Palmarito, Baja California. Many of the figures in this gallery were painted high on the cave wall, and appear to be floating above the valley they overlook. Humans and animals are regularly shown together, and may illustrate the connection humans have with animals, or the ability of shamans to change into animal spirits.

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way to experience this reality is to live our own lives as if it were really true, in all its implications. If Mother Earth is indeed a living, breathing body of this Being, then we can communicate and cooperate with the Great Mother and with each part of the Mother Corpus. As we dream, hallucinate and create visions, so does Gaia, and these visions are every bit as real as a corporate boardroom or the Oval(tine) Office. Dreaming is our means of communication with the Earth Mother and with her other co-inhabitants.

We need a new generation of shamans, knowledgeable of the spirit world of Gaia, on speaking (dreaming) terms with Pan, divas, and Mescalito, and living fully in the modern physical world, aware of the problems Earth and all its inhabitants face. The allies and earth spirits we abandoned when we embraced the Industrial Revolution are still there, waiting patiently for us to come to our senses. They don't even ask that we really believe in them, only that we cooperate in saving Earth.

Many individuals are beginning to follow the shaman's path. Many are seeking the few remaining traditional shamans around the world. Books such as Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan epics are increasingly popular, as are many new publications, both popular and scientific, detailing shamanic traditions.

There is also a need for a shaman coming from the Western, North American culture. We need to develop a tradition embracing the concepts of shamanism, but also palatable to a Christianity-based, materialistic culture. Pantheistic philosophy is the antithesis of fundamentalist Christianity and is opposed by mainstream religion of all persuasions. We need to find a way to encourage the assimilation of shamanic principles, without needlessly alarming the Christian majority.

Many people have begun incorporating rituals into their lives, as they seek to deal with the problems that beset our world. In Alkali Lake, British Columbia, for example, a group of Canadian natives pulled themselves from the abyss of alcoholism and initiated a movement called New Directions. Combining elements from EST, Esalen and other "mainstream" human consciousness practices with Native American traditions, New Directions teams have given hope to people who have all but lost their cultural underpinnings. The workshops make use of smudging with sage and the "talking feather" or "talking rock" passed between participants. The Medicine Wheel of the Northern Plains tribes is a ritual that consecrates stones brought by participants from their homes. The stones are then taken home to be the centers of expanding circles of empowerment.

The act of physical opposition is a ceremony in itself, a right of passage marking the transition between an ideology and an active arbiter of change. To realize that clearcutting old growth forest is morally wrong is one thing, but to stand in front of the bulldozer, or to take part in ecotage to prevent destruction, takes one into a different realm of interaction.

Many followers of the Earth First! ideal have taken that latter step, by performing the simple ceremony of laying their lives on the line with their beliefs. We can magnify this act by surrounding it with ritual that binds it to Earth. As we occupy the halls of the constabulary, we can burn the cleansing

sage and pass the talking feather to empower our voices. Not only does this increase the effectiveness of our protest, it also baffles the authorities. Faced with sincere ritual, even the most hard-hearted Forest Circus official will think twice before taking physical action.

As we contemplate the forces destroying the world, we must equally turn our attention to healing energies. Many techniques of meditation and trance-forming give access to the realms of power animals and earth spirits. The phenomenon known as the "One Percent Effect" demonstrates that when 1% of the population in a given area practices meditation, or some form of contemplative activity, crime rates decrease along with instances of mental illness and disease. We literally can "dream back the bison, sing back the swan."

There are many ways to learn more of the shamanic approach to life. Traditionally, seekers of knowledge have apprenticed themselves to a practicing shaman, much as Castaneda has with Don Juan. Several organized "schools" of shamanism, such as the Sun Bear Tribe near Spokane, Washington, teach traditional approaches.

But we are a literate society, and many books detail these practices. We can become aware of the various traditional methods and adopt those most appropriate to our lives.

The shaman's path has never been easy. The crack between the worlds always threatens to widen and plunge us into the dark abyss. As we seek to slow the pace of technological "advance," we must also reach back and embrace the earth spirits that help make our universe whole. The bridge we forge will serve all of Earth's co-inhabitants, helping to bring our world once again into balance.

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Howling...

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such action is to unify the team with enthusiastic team spirit, and in this it parallels the synchronized group-howling of wolves and Coyotes that takes place immediately before they trot off on a team hunt. Canine howling also resembles the sound and spirit of cheering by sports fans.

In effect, when wolves and Coyotes howl, each is saying, by virtue of her or his distinctive voice, "I am here!" But with the rest of the pack, this becomes a collective, harmonized, "We are here together!" Likewise, during the spring mating season, the mated pairs howl to reaffirm their togetherness.

Wolves and Coyotes also respond by howling when they hear the howls of other packs in the distance. In this case the message received by any strange packs nearby is

Dreamtime and Extinction

by Mark Sunlin

During the 19th century, a few enterprising California citrus growers, anxious to protect their orange trees from wind damage, imported eucalyptus trees from Australia for use as windbreaks. These trees, with the pleasant aroma of mint and the tear-shaped leaves of the willow, could grow quickly and untended in the arid California climate where few other trees could even survive. One of these trees, planted in 1889, is 100 this year, and stands 150 feet in height; some 2000 miles of eucalyptus (or gum) tree windbreaks exist in California today, plus gum trees in parks, suburbs, and growing wild. Amid these haunting, aromatic trees, Americans may experience the atmosphere that spawned what Australian Aborigines call *Dreamtime*.

Legends passed down through the 38,000-year history of Australia's Aborigine tribes tell of a time when the deserts were covered by lush forests of gum trees nourished by cooling rains, a time of monsters lurking at night near water holes, and of birds taller than mountains. These are the legends of Dreamtime, a twilight era at the beginning of time when mystical creatures roamed the Earth.

Fanciful as they might sound, such Dreamtime legends may actually be based on real creatures. In fact, since the 19th century, scientists have recognized that the strange legends of Dreamtime were triggered by Aborigines finding the fossil remains of extinct creatures, for giant marsupials resembling the creatures of Dreamtime did once populate eucalyptus forests in what is now desert. Such tales may even have been handed down from aborigine ancestors 10,000 years ago, before such creatures went extinct — perhaps due to human over-kill. Paleontologist Patricia Rich, of Australia's Monash University, leaves this possibility open, saying it is unclear whether such legends are "based on real tribal memory, or on stories spun from findings of bones at water holes."

One Aborigine Dreamtime legend tells of a giant man-eating creature with the

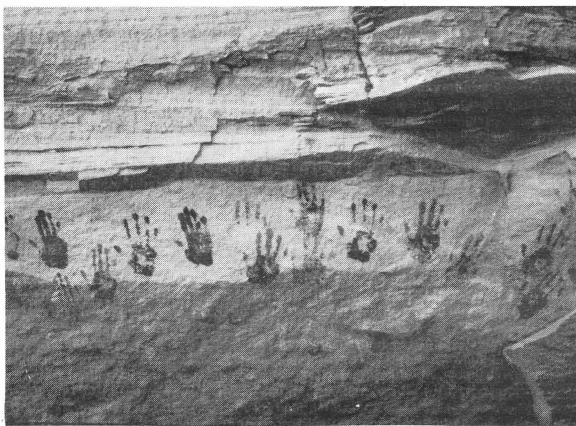
innocuous sounding name of Bunyip. Some paleontologists, including Rich, feel that the source of the Bunyip legend may have been the real-life *Palorchestes*, an extinct, bull-sized marsupial who lived on a diet of eucalyptus leaves and bark, aided in this by a set of bark-ripping claws which appear formidable enough to suggest a diet of humans. Another giant, *Diprotodon*, also a peaceful vegetarian, reached the size of a rhinoceros, and was the largest marsupial the world has ever known. Fossilized skeletons of such giants, uncovered at the eroding shores of water holes, could easily give the Aborigines the impression of monsters who had once haunted such pools in the dark of night.

Other inhabitants of this real-life Pleistocene Dreamtime included *Thylacoleo*, a marsupial "lion," and *Propelopus*, a carnivorous kangaroo. One order of extinct mammals is even classed by paleontologists with Dreamtime-like mysticism as *Thingodonta*, said to be "entirely unlike anything on the rest of the planet."

Two modern-day descendants of Dreamtime exist today: the Duck-billed Platypus, who has changed little since the Age of Dinosaurs 110 million years ago, and the Koala, a miniature version of the Bunyip/*Palorchestes*. Koalas nearly joined their ancestors in Dreamtime: They were heavily hunted for their furs early this century; two million skins were shipped out of Australia in 1923-24, falling to 600,000 four years later as Koalas disappeared. Koalas tottered on the brink of extinction until a measure of protection was granted them in the 1940s. Indeed, earlier overhunting similar to this by Aborigines 10-20,000 years ago is considered by many the most likely explanation for the fact that so many of Australia's former giants now exist only in Dreamtime legends.

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Handprints, made by pressing paint-coated hands against the rock, are widespread. They express physical and spiritual contact with a place.

more territorial: "They are THERE together!"

The howling is heard as a long-distance warning that the region from which the sound emanates is occupied. More than that, it indicates occupation by a self-assured group, for canines are most apt to howl when they are on familiar grounds — or when they have a kill: Fred Harrington, of Mt. St. Vincent University in Nova Scotia notes that "packs at fresh kills have responded to neighbors' howls in more than 4 of 5 cases observed."

In the long run, such a broadcast "Occupied" sign, as Theberge noted, prevents territorial conflict that would inevitably occur if two packs met on one or the other's territory. Researchers have found that wolves' territories do at times overlap. I have noticed overlap among Coyotes in California. So, accidental meetings of clans are a very real threat. Wolves and Coyotes want to avoid

crossing into another pack's territory. They cannot afford injuries resulting from a territorial clash, which would slow them down over the great distance they must cover in hunting.

Ultimately though, the one factor inspiring howling as a personal locator, an anthem for the pack, and a broadcast "Keep Out" sign is the motivation of the canines themselves. In each of these cases, howling wolves are proclaiming themselves as individuals and as a group.

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