

# *Shamanic Origins of Religion and Medicine*

Weston La Barre, PH.D.\*

When we mention "the world's second oldest profession," everyone understands immediately the ladies to whom we refer. But when we speak of "the world's oldest profession," these individuals are not so immediately identified. The world's oldest profession is that of the shaman or first professional, the shaman is ancestor not only to both the modern medicine man or doctor and the religious priest or divine, but also ancestor in direct lineage to a host of other professional types. It would seem odd that both the doctor, the most secular-minded, and the divine, the most sacred-minded of modern helpers of people, should derive from the same source. But we can readily understand the seeming paradox when we recognize the basic nature and function of the primitive medicine man of shaman.

In a mysterious world full of unknown dangers like death, disease and other disasters, the shaman is the man who claims knowledge and power over these frightening mysteries that the ordinary man manifestly does not have. Clinically, we might view the shaman as a paranoiac, in his claims to omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence. And yet, since these are what his clientele demand of him, these are what the medicine man must purport to provide.

The type-anxieties of his people are those the shaman must strive to allay; these type-anxieties specifically change over time. Modern anxiety appears to somatize, to focus on the human body itself, on its functioning or malfunctioning, on its food and pills, alcohol and nicotine and other intake. Indeed, nicotine, calories and the sodium ion are the modern equivalents of Sin—hence doctors must now take over some of the former functions of priests—ours being the first society that ever worried itself sick about having too much food. But among Old Stone Age hunters, the chief anxiety had to do with the threat of too little food, with the uncertainties and dangers of the hunt, with the availability and reproduction of the food animals on which man depended for sustenance in the Ice Age.

Thus one of the oldest drawings of a shaman that we have is the famous "Dancing Sorcerer" in the late Old Stone Age cave of Trois Freres in southern France—a man dressed up in the skins of various animals which were hunted for food, and over which his ritual dance had power. It is interesting that the Sorcerer wears a headdress of deer antlers, because deer antlers in some species seem to act as an ethological "releaser" or stimulus that attracts other deer closer for combat and thus to be killed by hunters. This biological fact would seem to account for the persistent prevalence of deer antlers in hunting magic—all the way from Mesolithic Star Carr in southern England and the deer-horned Gallic divinity Cernunnus who lingered in southern France until Roman times, to the deer-antlered shamans of central Siberia still known to anthropologists in the 18th archaic China (where animal horns are still valued in magic and medicine), and indeed even to Central America where deer-magic is still closely related symbolically to the ritual hallucinogenic cactus, peyote.

Control over the spirits of animals killed in the hunt and magic power to secure their return to living animals also explains why the Old Stone Age sorcerer was so often connected with fertility cults, traces of which remain even in the Old Testament. The so-called Old Stone Age "Venuses," shown with the exaggerated attributes of female fecundity, are our best evidence for a concern over human fertility as well as the replacement of those killed by disease and in the dangers of hunting. Thus, control over the spirits of people in death and disease explains why both doctors and divines descend from the same primitive shaman. As doctor, the medicine man became highly (if not entirely) secularized; as divine, the shaman retained power over the sacred, the supernatural and the spiritual. One is tempted to overgeneralize that the doctor has a left-brain-hemispherical, secular concern with the body, while the divine has a right-hemispherical, supernatural concern with the sacred spirit.

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\*James B. Duke Professor of Anthropology, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 27706.

But I say "overgeneralize" because the modern doctor must work both brain hemispheres, and many of the ills the doctor is called upon to deal with are not so much somatic as spiritual. A good modern doctor must therefore retain both attributes of the ancient shaman and minister to the anxieties of the mind as well as to the illnesses of the body. And in taking responsibility for life and death, the doctor might even do well with a touch of protective paranoia, the same omniscience so prominent in the divine who tells us so confidently what God has said.

Let us deal first with the shaman as the professional divine. The oldest religion of which we have any secure knowledge is the shamanism of the late Old Stone Age as we have seen it depicted in the caves of southern France and northern Spain. Shamans—as opposed to priests, who preside over a codified religion, with beliefs and rituals that have become routinized on the basis of some received supernatural revelation—shamans, I repeat, derive from a direct, individual, visionary experience of the supernatural, in dream, trance, hallucination or some other dissociated psychic state. Shamanism does not necessarily involve well-defined gods as personages, but only a magic belief in the forces of nature that certain gifted individuals claim to be able to control.

The fact of a “paranormal” psychic state in visionary experience explains why shamanism is so inveterately connected with hallucinogenic drugs, some of which can be documented archeologically and otherwise to very ancient times. These drugs specifically include: soma, the *Manita muscaria* mushroom of the early Brahmin priests; psilocybin mushrooms, oloihqui, morning glory seeds, mints and many other hallucinogens of the Mexicans, coca of the Inca area; daturas and powerful tobacco species of both New World continents; the ergot of grains in the Eleusinian mysteries, and even alcohol in the ritual drunkenness of Mexican and Amazonian cults, not to mention the role of alcoholic liquors in the Dionysian mysteries and the wine-and-wafer of Christendom's Eucharist, which combines the substances of both the Eleusinian and Dionysian mysteries. Belladonna, which contains atropine, henbane, which contains hyoscyamine, and mandrake were all known to the classic Mediterranean peoples and the use of these drugs lingered into late medieval witchcraft, perhaps we should add here bufotenine, the powerful hallucinogen in some toad skins, so implicated with the toadstools Wasson has so prodigiously explored. Indeed the 80 or so New World hallucinogens listed by Schultes (and many of which he himself discovered) are everywhere related to American Indian shamanism and religion. A similar case could be made for the Old World. Interestingly a major Hindu god, the dancing Shiva who was Master of Animals, notoriously fond of cannabis. Thus we can see how both doctors and religionists have retained the ancient shaman's use of hallucinogens and other drugs—the one for physical cures, the other for mystical experiences.

Visionary shamanism need not always depend upon hallucinogenic drugs, though often enough it does, for dissociated psychic states can also clearly be entirely endogenous. When we think of it, however, the hard fact is that all our alleged knowledge of the "supernatural" comes exclusively from the revelations of self proclaimed experts in the supernatural, whether visionary, prophet, ecstatic shaman or founder of any "revealed" religious cult, old or new. Therefore essential shamanism is not only the earliest of religions historically but in sober psychological fact the source of all supernatural religions, even the most modern ones, since revelation is the source of all religion. Because the visionary state is the source of religion it is clear why hallucinogens and other psychotropic drugs should be so intimately associated with shamanism. The main point is not that all visions are of hallucinogenic drug origin for many of them are clearly endogenous but rather that all religious revelation is visionary in origin. All I would allege here is that on the basis of rapidly accumulating evidence far more of the visionary experiences than we have hitherto suspected have originated in the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Visionary shamanism is the source of all religious revelation. But a surprising number of revelations are derived from the shamanic use of hallucinogens, both in the Old and the New Worlds. Peter Furst and I believe the shaman/drug association can be firmly traced back to Mesolithic culture horizons.

We have shown that both doctor and divine have derived from the primitive medicine man. But as the first professional of all, the shaman is also the unsuspected father of many other specialized kinds of professionals. This allegation depends not upon mere assertion but on the rich complex of shamanism that has come down to us in many diverse cultures of many historical periods and all with identifiably shamanic associations. The phallic creator-god Shiva was not only a magic dancer like the prehistoric Dancing Sorcerer but he danced the very world into existence,

he was a Master of Animals like the Greek Orpheus and he was a notorious user of hashish. The shaman was not only ritual Lord of the Dance, but also the father of music.

Every Greek musical instrument has associated with it a deity who invented it; every Hindu god or goddess has a musical instrument specifically associated, as Saraswati with the vina, Vishnu with the conch-trumpet, etc. In early Sumeria all music was used only for sacred purposes; and throughout prehistoric America all musical instruments such as the rattle and the rasp were associated with Indian shamans (indeed in the Plains Indian sign language the sign for shaman's rattle was the inter-tribal sign for the sacred). The Greek shaman Orpheus, who accompanied Jason on the fabulous voyage of the Argonauts, could charm trees, birds, animals and mountains with his magical lyre music and when the severed head of Orpheus came to the island of Lesbos it was still singing. In fact, the British anthropologist Nadel and I both believe that song originated in the shaman's need for a special language with which to address the supernaturals every "charm" was a carmina or song; every "enchantment" a magic chant. The magic formulas of Brahmins in the Rig-Veda were largely chants of praise to the drug soma. Drinking of soma made the Brahmins into man-gods; the same "ambrosia" gave immortality to the Greek gods along with "nectar," which I believe to have been fermented honey-water or mead, a word which is pan-ludoeuropean and hence early Bronze Age and an alcoholic drink for which there is Mesolithic evidence in wall paintings in Spain. Indeed, the first artist was the shaman of the Old Stone Age caves and we now have plentiful evidence that the paintings of animals at Lascaux, Altamira and elsewhere were actually regarded as actual inseminations of the shaman in the womb of the earth.

In the study of ancient religion I believe the role of the shaman as a showman has been somewhat neglected. Paleo-Siberian shamans were out-and-out entertainers of their people, with ventriloquism, tent shaking and the bird calls of their supernatural helpers. Ancient Persian mages and magicians were still entertaining mountebanks in Roman times. Roman tricksters or jocolators evolved both into "jugglers" and the jongleur singers of late medieval times. The early American medicine shows always had an Indian entertainer and advertiser of the miraculous snake oil sold there. The serious rain dances of the Hopi Indians had to have their "Mud Clowns" or koiyemshe to entertain the people and behavior in the Falseface Society longhouse rituals of the Iroquois Indians was often sheer slapstick

Shamanic make-believe rituals have several times independently given rise to the drama. Early rural Dionysian rituals in Greece were transformed in Athens into literary dramas, both tragic and comic, though they retained aspects of the shamanic contest. In Bali, in the Caribbean and in Ceylon early curing ceremonies became transformed in time into ritual dramas. In Ceylon the masked shaman dancer exorcized the demon disease spirits out of his patients; a theoretically "general practitioner" would have a set of 18 masks, one for each disease demon, plus another mask for the Raja-Naga Rakshasha or "King of the Snake Demons," for use in curing insanity; in practice Singhalese specialists nowadays have at best only two or three masks. In the shamanic dances of the Paleo-Siberians it would be hard to tell where animal imitations in the hunt, magical hunting rituals and the make-believe hunting drama began and ended.

All the Greek gods had associated with them an animal helper or familiar or source of supernatural power Athena the owl and the snake; Apollo the wolf; Artemis the stag; Aphrodite a dove; Demeter the sow; Hermes the goat; and Zeus the rainmaker, an eagle, though he took many other animal forms in his amorous pursuit of maidens and goddesses. The eagle as Thunderbird in early Europe and Asia is in fact so ancient that he must be equated with the American Indian Thunderbird. Every Hindu god also has his shamanic animal familiar Ganesha the rat; Shiva the bull and the snake; Durga the lion; Saraswati the peacock; Varuna the elephant; and so on. In fact the so-called "departmental gods" of the Greeks look very much like shamanic specialists Zeus the rainmaker; Poseidon and Proteus lords of the sea animals; and Dis ruler of the underground realm of dead spirits. Poseidon still carries the three-pronged trident, the symbol for a shaman, from the inland Eurasiatic Master of Horses from whom the sea god Poseidon is derived. Proteus could magically take many different animal forms. For that matter modern doctors take as their symbol the twin-serpent twined and winged caduceus, which was originally the magic wand of Hermes, the intermediary between spirits and humans. Asklepios, the first Greek medicine man,

was a snake shaman with the serpent as his animal familiar. In fact Moses and Aaron were both snake shamans in the Old Testament the shaman staff of Moses turned into a snake at the court of the Pharaoh and back again into a staff,

he turned a healthy hand into that of a leper and water into blood; with his shamanic rod he struck water from a rock in the Wilderness, defeated the Amalekites in battle and parted the waters of the Red Sea. In the Wilderness he set up the Nehushtam or brazen serpent which remained a cult object in Jerusalem until well into the Kingdom.

The seemingly diverse attributes of the (Greeks' favorite god, Apollo, can noNn be clearly seen as merely the expectable traits of the ancient Eurasiatic shaman. Apollo is the Sun, giver of all animal and plant life; he is the fertility demon of cattle, the Oxen of the Sun. Apollo sends the plague with his archer's arrows and he is likewise the great healer. He was also an old Aegean hunter god—his animal familiar the wolf. Apollo was the god of oracles both at Pythia and at Delphi and he bestowed his healing powers on his son Asklepios, the first physician. But most of all, as god of magic music, Apollo was the leader of the Muses, patronesses of all artistic, intellectual and humanistic activities.

Another trait of Apollo, as yet unmentioned, reminds us of still another function of the shaman as intermediary with the supernatural. This was Apollo's prognostic power as prophet and advisor to the state. Until the end of the Peloponnesian War, Apollo's oracle at Delphi vvas a powerful influence on the Greek city-states, whose leaders consulted the oracle for political advice. This trait is deeply rooted in the old shamanic complex. Among the Gauls the Druids had great political powers and Julius Caesar, already bearing the old sacral title of Pontifex Maximus, was forced to drive the Druids to Britain before he could complete his conquest of Gaul. The old shaman bards were politically powerful in other Celtic lands, and in the conquest of Ireland only after the Battle of the Boyne was their power broken. In ancient Caucasian north Africa even petty chiefs had their shamanic advisors, while in Moslem countries this personage developed into the Grand Vizier, a sort of prime minister to the hereditary political rulers, and in India as advisor to the rajahs. The eminence grise was never far from the seats of political power throughout history. The first king of the Hebrews, Saul, had the help of the "seer" Samuel—not without the aid of the Witch of Endor, "a woman who hath a familiar spirit" and who "saw gods ascending out of the earth" (I Samuel 28 7~. For that matter, as Pontifex Maximus, the Roman Pope sanctioned all European kings and emperors from Charlemagne until late modern times.

The shaman bard Orpheus accompanied Jason and the Argonauts into the unknown Black Sea on their wild adventure in search of the Golden Fleece and in Colchis the shamaness Medea aided the hero against a brazen giant who threatened to destroy their ship. The war shaman was of course the necessary companion on many American Indian war parties. With so persistent and widespread functions as these, we are forced to consider these as very old traits in archaic shamanism.

In connection with the role of political advisor is that of ambassador. Because of supernatural protection, the shaman ambassadors could travel into enemy lands with impunity, often performing additionally as spies. The Welsh shaman bards were ambassadors for rulers into historic times and in Latin countries there is still a tradition of appointing literary men to ambassadorships. This tradition most probably stems from the function of the Greek god Hermes who, besides being a patron of magicians and medicine men and lord of departed spirits, was the chief ambassador and messenger of the gods.

The shaman as poet, bard, historian and depository of tribal lore is of course well-known, often in the context of shamanic rivalry. This tradition of rivalry persisted in the Welsh eisteddfod and in the Greek contests for the prize in the dramatic contests among the great classic tragedians; some scholars even believe the tradition of Plato's dialogues began in the contests of visiting intellectuals.

Because of their supernatural powers, it is not surprising to find ancient craftsmen enjoying shamanic status also. In Polynesia the tubunga priest in making his dugout canoe magically sang it into a new structure in the universe. In both Asia and Africa in particular, ironsmiths had special supernatural status. The magic smith Hephaestus was even a god among the Greeks and in Athens a large suburb of pottery makers enjoyed the patronage of Athena herself, who protected them from such dangers as the breaking of pots during firing. Prometheus was a culture hero in stealing fire from heavenly Zeus for the uses of human beings. Zeus sometimes had to punish Greek medicine men because they

performed so many cures that they were depopulating Hades, spirit kingdom of his brother Dis. The trickster-transformer among American Indians plainly had out-and-out shamanic powers. In South America, besides being themselves the political leaders or chiefs, the shamans were god-men who could even move mountains and control the weather. But of course weather magic (as practiced, for example, by Pueblo rain priests) was a quite usual trait of the old Eurasiatic-American shaman.

Those readers who are members of the American Medical Association may be interested in knowing that primitive medicine men also had their professional societies. One of the most colorful of these was the "Grand Society of Midewewin" among some Algonkian-speaking Indians. At these assemblies shamans indulged in spectacular rivalries through competitively displaying their supernatural medicine power and magic tricks such as shooting shells into their opponents. Elsewhere, as among the Plains Indians, the medicine society was a more cooperative group because of a peculiar but logical belief among them. The shaman was the first one who had cured himself with supernatural medicine power (Algonkian manitou, Siouan wakan, Iroquoian orenda) of some supernatural disease from which he had once suffered. If, for example, he had obtained medicine power from his animal helper, the bear, to do this, then each successive patient he had cured was initiated into the shaman's Bear Society. Cure was evident proof that the patient now shared the shaman's power too and thus the society of cured people formed a kind of Alcoholics Anonymous to help other patients similarly afflicted.

We have ranged widely in space and time in delineating the shamanic complex which many anthropologists believe dates back to an original Paleolithic Ur-kultur that spread with human groups to the far cultures. It is quite amazing how that first professional, the shaman, historically influenced all later professionals. First and foremost the old shamanic medicine man is the clear ancestor of the modern medicine man, the physician. But if, as I believe, shamanism is the Ur-religion and indeed the essence of all supernatural religions, then the shaman is also the direct ancestor of the priest and of all divines and founders of religions, old and new. Perhaps we can summarize by stating that the ancient shaman was basically the first specialist in all the spirit-induced supernatural arts. The shaman was the original artist, dancer, musician, singer, dramatist, intellectual, poet, bard ambassador, advisor of chiefs and kings, entertainer, actor and clown, curer, stage magician, juggler, jongleur, folksinger, weatherman, artisan, culture hero and trickster-transformer. Certainly the purveyors of supernatural religions still manifest this powerful charisma. Perhaps also the doctor in modern times still possesses some of the charisma of the ancient medicine man in his/her bedside manner. For in modern times the doctor is still forced to become the physician of the spirit as well as of the body, especially in dealing with those great mysteries of life and death.

#### NOTE

The extremely compendious references corroborating the assertions in this paper are all to be found in The extremely compendious references corroborate Weston La Barre's *The Ghost Dance Origins of Religion*: (New York: Delta, 1972).