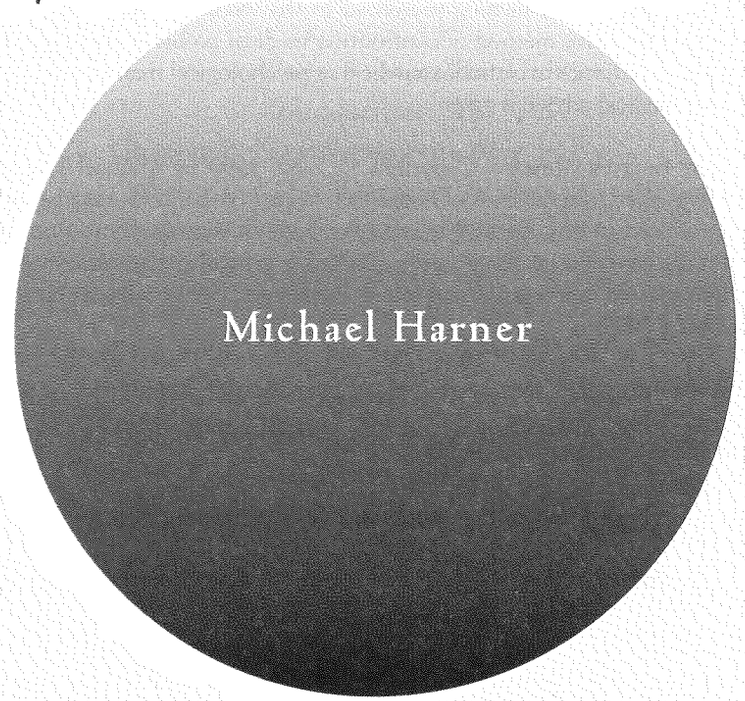
The Way of the SHAMAN



Michael Harner

HarperOne
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

The shamanic way of healing presented in this book should not be considered an exclusive method of confronting medical problems. It should be viewed as an adjunct to orthodox medical or psychological treatment, unless contrary medical advice is given.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY HARPER & ROW IN 1980.
FIRST HARPER & ROW PAPERBACK EDITION PUBLISHED IN 1990.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available upon request.

ISBN 978–0–06–250373–2

20 LSC(H) 7 0 6 9 68 67 66

Contents

Chapter 1

Discovering the Way

MY FIRST PROLONGED fieldwork as an anthropologist took place in 1956 and 1957 on the forested eastern slopes of the Ecuadorian Andes among the Jívaro [HEE-varo] Indians, or Untsuri Shuar. The Jívaro were famous at that time for their now essentially vanished practice of "head-shrinking," and for their intensive practice of shamanism, which still continues. I successfully collected a great deal of information, but remained an outside observer of the world of the shaman at that time.

A couple of years later, the American Museum of Natural History invited me to make a year-long expedition to the Peruvian Amazon to study the culture of the Conibo Indians of the Ucayali River region. I accepted, delighted to have an opportunity to do more research on the fascinating Upper Amazon forest cultures. That fieldwork took place in 1960 and 1961.

Two particular experiences I had among the Conibo and the Jívaro were basic to my discovering the way of the shaman in both those cultures, and I would like to share them with you. Perhaps they will convey something of the incredible hidden world open to the shamanic explorer.

I had been living for the better part of a year in a Conibo Indian village beside a remote lake off a tributary of the Rio Ucayali.

My anthropological research on the culture of the Conibo had been going well, but my attempts to elicit information on their religion met with little success. The people were friendly, but reluctant to talk about the supernatural. Finally they told me that if I really wished to learn, I must take the shamans' sacred drink made from *ayahuasca*, the "soul vine." I agreed, with both curiosity and trepidation, for they warned me that the experience would be very frightening.

The next morning my friend Tomás, the kind elder of the village, went into the forest to cut the vines. Before leaving, he told me to fast: a light breakfast and no lunch. He returned midday with enough *ayahuasca* vines and leaves of the *cawa* plant to fill a fifteen-gallon pot. He boiled them all afternoon, until only about a quart of dark liquid remained. This he poured into an old bottle and left it to cool until sunset, when he said we would drink it.

The Indians muzzled the dogs in the village so that they could not bark. The noise of barking dogs could drive a man who had taken *ayahuasca* mad, I was told. The children were cautioned to be quiet, and silence came over the small community with the setting of the sun.

As the brief equatorial twilight was replaced by darkness, Tomás poured about a third of the bottle into a gourd bowl and gave it to me. All the Indians were watching. I felt like Socrates amidst his Athenian compatriots, accepting the hemlock—it occurred to me that one of the alternate names people in the Peruvian Amazon gave *ayahuasca* was "the little death." I drank the potion quickly. It had a strange, slightly bitter taste. I then waited for Tomás to take his turn, but he said that he had decided not to participate after all.

They had me lie down on the bamboo platform under the great thatched roof of the communal house. The village was silent, except for the chirping of crickets and the distant calls of a howler monkey deep in the jungle.

As I stared upward into the darkness, faint lines of light appeared. They grew sharper, more intricate, and burst into brilliant colors. Sound came from far away, a sound like a waterfall, which grew stronger and stronger until it filled my ears.

Just a few minutes earlier I had been disappointed, sure that the *ayahuasca* was not going to have any effect on me. Now the sound of rushing water flooded my brain. My jaw began to feel numb, and the numbness was moving up to my temples.

Overhead the faint lines became brighter, and gradually interlaced to form a canopy resembling a geometric mosaic of stained glass. The bright violet hues formed an ever-expanding roof above me. Within this celestial cavern, I heard the sound of water grow louder and I could see dim figures engaged in shadowy movements. As my eyes seemed to adjust to the gloom, the moving scene resolved itself into something resembling a huge fun house, a supernatural carnival of demons. In the center, presiding over the activities, and looking directly at me, was a gigantic, grinning crocodilian head, from whose cavernous jaws gushed a torrential flood of water. Slowly the waters rose, and so did the canopy above them, until the scene metamorphosed into a simple duality of blue sky above and sea below. All creatures had vanished.

Then, from my position near the surface of the water, I began to see two strange boats wafting back and forth, floating through the air toward me, coming closer and closer. They slowly combined to form a single vessel with a huge dragon-headed prow, not unlike that of a Viking ship. Set amidships was a square sail. Gradually, as the boat gently floated back and forth above me, I heard a rhythmic swishing sound and saw that it was a giant galley with several hundred oars moving back and forth in cadence with the sound.

I became conscious, too, of the most beautiful singing I have ever heard in my life, high-pitched and ethereal, emanating from myriad voices on board the galley. As I looked more closely at the deck, I could make out large numbers of people with the heads of blue jays and the bodies of humans, not unlike the bird-headed gods of ancient Egyptian tomb paintings. At the same time, some energy-essence began to float from my chest up into the boat. Although I believed myself to be an atheist, I was completely certain that I was dying and that the bird-headed people had come to take my soul away on the boat. While the soul-flow continued from my chest, I was aware that the extremities of my body were growing numb.

Starting with my arms and legs, my body slowly began to feel like it was turning to solid concrete. I could not move or speak. Gradually, as the numbness closed in on my chest, toward my heart, I tried to get my mouth to ask for help, to ask the Indians for an antidote. Try as I might, however, I could not marshal my abilities sufficiently to make a word. Simultaneously, my abdomen seemed to be turning to stone, and I had to make a tremendous effort to keep my heart beating. I began to call my heart my friend, my dearest friend of all, to talk to it, to encourage it to beat with all the power remaining at my command.

I became aware of my brain. I felt—physically—that it had become compartmentalized into four separate and distinct levels. At the uppermost surface was the observer and commander, which was conscious of the condition of my body, and was responsible for the attempt to keep my heart going. It perceived, but purely as a spectator, the visions emanating from what seemed to be the nether portions of my brain. Immediately below the topmost level I felt a numbed layer, which seemed to have been put out of commission by the drug—it just wasn't there. The next level down was the source of my visions, including the soul boat.

Now I was virtually certain I was about to die. As I tried to accept my fate, an even lower portion of my brain began to transmit more visions and information. I was "told" that this new material was being presented to me because I was dying and therefore "safe" to receive these revelations. These were the secrets reserved for the dying and the dead, I was informed. I could only very dimly perceive the givers of these thoughts: giant reptilian creatures reposing sluggishly at the lowermost depths of the back of my brain, where it met the top of the spinal column. I could only vaguely see them in what seemed to be gloomy, dark depths.

Then they projected a visual scene in front of me. First they showed me the planet Earth as it was eons ago, before there was any life on it. I saw an ocean, barren land, and a bright blue sky. Then black specks dropped from the sky by the hundreds and landed in front of me on the barren landscape. I could see that the "specks" were actually large, shiny, black creatures with stubby pterodactyl-like wings and huge whale-like bodies. Their heads were not visible to me. They flopped down, utterly exhausted from their trip, resting for eons. They explained to me in a kind of thought language that they were fleeing from something out in space. They had come to the planet Earth to escape their enemy.

The creatures then showed me how they had created life on the planet in order to hide within the multitudinous forms and thus disguise their presence. Before me, the magnificence of plant and animal creation and speciation—hundreds of millions of years of activity—took place on a scale and with a vividness impossible to describe. I learned that the dragon-like creatures were thus inside of all forms of life, including man.* They were the true masters of humanity and the entire planet, they told me. We

* In retrospect one could say they were almost like DNA, although at that time, 1961, I knew nothing of DNA.

humans were but the receptacles and servants of these creatures. For this reason they could speak to me from within myself.

These revelations, welling up from the depths of my mind, alternated with visions of the floating galley, which had almost finished taking my soul on board. The boat with its blue-jay headed deck crew was gradually drawing away, pulling my life force along as it headed toward a large fjord flanked by barren, worn hills. I knew I had only a moment more to live. Strangely, I had no fear of the bird-headed people; they were welcome to have my soul if they could keep it. But I was afraid that somehow my soul might not remain on the horizontal plane of the fjord but might, through processes unknown but felt and dreaded, be acquired or re-acquired by the dragon-like denizens of the depths.

I suddenly felt my distinctive humanness, the contrast between my species and the ancient reptilian ancestors. I began to struggle against returning to the ancient ones, who were beginning to feel increasingly alien and possibly evil. Each heartbeat was a major undertaking. I turned to human help.

With an unimaginable last effort, I barely managed to utter one word to the Indians: "Medicine!" I saw them rushing around to make an antidote, and I knew they could not prepare it in time. I needed a guardian who could defeat dragons, and I frantically tried to conjure up a powerful being to protect me against the alien reptilian creatures. One appeared before me; and at that moment the Indians forced my mouth open and poured the antidote into me. Gradually, the dragons disappeared back into the lower depths; the soul boat and the fjord were no more. I relaxed with relief.

The antidote radically eased my condition, but it did not prevent me from having many additional visions of a more superficial nature. These were manageable and enjoyable. I made fabulous journeys at will through distant regions, even out into

the Galaxy; created incredible architecture; and employed sardonically grinning demons to realize my fantasies. Often I found myself laughing aloud at the incongruities of my adventures.

Finally, I slept.

RAYS OF SUNLIGHT were piercing the holes in the palm-thatched roof when I awoke. I was still lying on the bamboo platform, and I heard the normal, morning sounds all around me: the Indians conversing, babies crying, and a rooster crowing. I was surprised to discover that I felt refreshed and peaceful. As I lay there looking up at the beautiful woven pattern of the roof, the memories of the previous night drifted across my mind. I momentarily stopped myself from remembering more in order to get my tape recorder from a duffel bag. As I dug into the bag, several of the Indians greeted me, smiling. An old woman, Tomás' wife, gave me a bowl of fish and plantain soup for breakfast. It tasted extraordinarily good. Then I went back to the platform, eager to put my night's experiences on tape before I forgot anything.

The work of recall went easily except for one portion of the trance that I could not remember. It remained blank, as though a tape had been erased. I struggled for hours to remember what had happened in that part of the experience, and I virtually wrestled it back into my consciousness. The recalcitrant material turned out to be the communication from the dragon-like creatures, including the revelation of their role in the evolution of life on this planet and their innate domination of living matter, including man. I was highly excited at rediscovering this material, and could not help but feel that I was not supposed to be able to bring it back from the nether regions of the mind.

I even had a peculiar sense of fear for my safety, because I now possessed a secret that the creatures had indicated was only intended for the dying. I immediately decided to share this

knowledge with others so that the "secret" would not reside in me alone, and my life would not be in jeopardy. I put my outboard motor on a dugout canoe and left for an American evangelist mission station nearby. I arrived about noon.

The couple at the mission, Bob and Millie, were a cut above the average evangelists sent from the United States: hospitable, humorous, and compassionate.[1] I told them my story. When I described the reptile with water gushing out of his mouth, they exchanged glances, reached for their Bible, and read to me the following line from chapter 12 in the Book of Revelation:

> And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood . . .

They explained to me that the word "serpent" was synonymous in the Bible with the words "dragon" and "Satan." I went on with my narrative. When I came to the part about the dragon-like creatures fleeing an enemy somewhere beyond the Earth and landing here to hide from their pursuers, Bob and Millie became excited and again read me more from the same passage in the Book of Revelation:

> And there was a war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels. And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels with him.

I listened with surprise and wonder. The missionaries, in turn, seemed to be awed by the fact that an atheistic anthropologist, by taking the drink of the "witch doctors," could apparently

have revealed to him some of the same holy material in the Book of Revelation. When I had finished my account, I was relieved to have shared my new knowledge, but I was also exhausted. I fell asleep on the missionaries' bed, leaving them to continue their discussion of the experience.

That evening, as I returned to the village in my canoe, my head began to throb in rhythm with the noise of the outboard motor; I thought I was going mad; I had to stick my fingers in my ears to avoid the sensation. I slept well, but the next day I noticed a numbness or pressure in my head.

I was now eager to solicit a professional opinion from the most supernaturally knowledgeable of the Indians, a blind shaman who had made many excursions into the spirit world with the aid of the *ayahuasca* drink. It seemed only proper that a blind man might be able to be my guide to the world of darkness.

I went to his hut, taking my notebook with me, and described my visions to him segment by segment. At first I told him only the highlights; thus, when I came to the dragon-like creatures, I skipped their arrival from space and only said, "There were these giant black animals, something like great bats, longer than the length of this house, who said that they were the true masters of the world." There is no word for *dragon* in Conibo, so "giant bat" was the closest I could come to describe what I had seen.

He stared up toward me with his sightless eyes, and said with a grin, "Oh, they're always saying that. But they are only the Masters of Outer Darkness."

He waved his hand casually toward the sky. I felt a chill along the lower part of my spine, for I had not yet told him that I had seen them, in my trance, coming from outer space.

I was stunned. What I had experienced was already familiar to this barefoot, blind shaman. Known to him from his own explorations of the same hidden world into which I had ventured.

From that moment on I decided to learn everything I could about shamanism.

And there was something more that encouraged me in my new quest. After I recounted my entire experience, he told me that he did not know of anyone who had encountered and learned so much on his first *ayahuasca* journey.

"You can surely be a master shaman," he said.

THUS MY SERIOUS study of shamanism began. From the Conibo I especially learned about the journey into the Lowerworld and the retrieval of spirits, methods that will be described later in the book. I returned to the United States in 1961, but three years later I came back to South America to be with the Jívaro, with whom I had lived in 1956 and 1957. My mission this time was not just to be an anthropologist, but to learn firsthand how to practice shamanism the Jívaro way. For that reason, I wanted to go to the northwestern part of the Jívaro country where the most powerful shamans were reputed to reside.

I first flew to Quito, Ecuador, in the Andean highlands. I took an old Junkers tri-motor down to a jungle airfield at the eastern base of the Andes on the Pastaza River. There I chartered a single-engine plane to Macas, an ancient white settlement at the foot of the Andes in the midst of the Jívaro country.

Macas was a strange village. It had been founded in 1599 by a handful of Spaniards who had survived the massacre of the legendary Sevilla del Oro by the Jívaro, and for centuries had been perhaps the most isolated community of the Western world. Until the airstrip was built in the 1940s, its most direct connection to the outside world had been a slippery footpath over the Andean escarpment west of the village, involving an arduous eight-day hike to reach the highland city of Riobamba. This isolation had created a white community unlike any other in the world. Even

during the early years of the twentieth century the men hunted with blowguns, wore Indian dress, and proudly declared their direct descent from the Conquistadores.

They also had their own marvelous legends and private mysteries. For example, there was the story of how, after the massacre and the retreat from Sevilla del Oro, it took them almost a century to find a new way out over the Andes. The man who had finally succeeded was still remembered in bedtime stories to the children. And there was the spectral horse, complete with clanking chains, which was reportedly such a frequent night visitor to the streets of the village that the inhabitants often huddled inside the palm-thatched huts while the monster roamed about. Its visits ended in 1924, when Catholic missionaries permanently settled in the community. At that time, incidentally, there were still no horses in Macas—the first one, a colt, was carried in on a man's back from Riobamba in 1928, almost three and a half centuries after the community's founding.

Up behind the village, surmounting the eastern Cordillera of the Andes, was Sangay, a great active volcano, snow-capped, billowing smoke by day and glowing by night. The glow, the Macabeos liked to say, was produced by the treasure of the Incas, which they claimed was buried on the slopes of Sangay.

My first day in Macas went well. My young Jívaro guide was awaiting me at the airstrip and the people were hospitable and generous. Food was plentiful, and our meals included generous portions of meat. Since there was no way for the Macabeos to get their cattle over the Andes, they had to eat the beasts themselves; thus cattle were slaughtered in the little village every day. In addition, they gave me *guayusa*, a native tea, which the Macabeos consumed throughout the day instead of coffee. The tea created a sense of euphoria, and the entire local population was gently stoned all day. *Guayusa* is so habituating that before it is offered

to a visitor, he is warned that once he drinks it, he will ever after always return to the Ecuadorian jungle.

As I drifted off to sleep in Macas that night of my arrival, images in brilliant reddish hues appeared to me in the darkness of the Macabeo house. What I saw was most peculiar: curvilinear designs intertwining, separating, and turning in a most enjoyable fashion. Then small, grinning demonic faces, which were also red, appeared among the changing patterns—swirling, disappearing and reappearing. I felt I was seeing the spiritual inhabitants of Macas.

Suddenly, with an explosion and a jolt, I was almost thrown off my slat bed. The dogs of the village burst out barking. The visions vanished. People were shouting. An earthquake had shaken the ground, and now a spray of natural fireworks shot into the night sky from Sangay. I felt, undoubtedly irrationally, that the sardonic demons had produced the eruption to greet my return to the jungle and to remind me of their reality. I laughed to myself at the absurdity of it all.

The next day the Catholic missionary showed me his private collection of prehistoric potsherds from the local area. On them were painted red designs almost identical to those I had seen the previous night.

The following morning, my Jívaro guide and I walked northward from Macas, crossed the Rio Upano in a dugout canoe, and continued walking all day.

At sunset, exhausted, we reached our destination, the house of a famous shaman, Akachu, deep in the forest. There was no *guayusa* that evening. Instead, I was proffered bowl after bowl of refreshing manioc beer, monkey meat, and raw, squirming, but delicious cheese-like grubs. Tired, but delighted to be back among shamans, I fell into a deep sleep on the bamboo bed.

In the morning Akachu and I sat formally, opposite each other on wooden stools, as his wives brought us bowls of warmed

manioc beer. His long black hair, bound into a ponytail with a woven red and white strap from which a feathered tassel hung, showed streaks of gray. I guessed he was in his sixties.

"I have come," I explained, "to acquire spirit helpers, *tsentsak*."

He stared hard at me without saying a word, but the wrinkles in his brown face seemed to deepen.

"That is a fine gun, there," he observed, jutting his chin toward the Winchester shotgun I had brought along for hunting.

His message was clear, for the standard payment among the Jívaro for shamanic initiation was—at the very least—a muzzle-loading shotgun. The breach-loading, cartridge-using Winchester was far more powerful than the black-powder muzzle-loaders, and thus much more valuable.

"To acquire knowledge and spirit helpers, I will give you the gun and my two boxes of cartridges," I said.

Akachu nodded and reached his arm out in the direction of the Winchester. I picked up the gun and carried it over to him. He tested its weight and balance, and sighted along the barrel. Then, abruptly, he laid the gun across his knees.

"First, you must bathe in the waterfall," he said. "Then we will see."

I told him I was ready to do whatever he said.

"You are not a *shuar,* an Indian," Akachu said, "so I do not know if you will have success. But I will help you try." He pointed westward toward the Andes with his chin. "Soon we will make the journey to the waterfall."

Five days later, Akachu, his son-in-law Tsangu, and I departed on the pilgrimage to the sacred waterfall. My Jívaro guide, his duties finished, had already gone home.

The first day we followed a forest trail upstream along a twisting river valley. My companions kept up a very fast pace, and I

was thankful when we at last stopped in late afternoon, beside a small rapid in the river. Akachu and Tsangu constructed a palm-thatched leanto, with a layer of palm fronds for our bed. I slept soundly, kept warm by the slow fire they built in the entrance of the shelter.

The second day our journey was almost a continuous climb upward into the mist-shrouded forest. As the virtually nonexistent trail became more difficult, we paused at a grove of *caña brava* to cut hiking staffs to help us in the ascent. Akachu briefly went off and returned with a three-inch thick pole of balsa wood. While we rested, he quickly carved it with simple geometric designs and then handed it to me.

"This is your magical staff," he said. "It will protect you from demons. If you encounter one, throw it at him. It is more powerful than a gun."

I fingered the pole. It was extremely light and obviously would be of no use in defending oneself against anything material. For a moment I felt as though we were children playing a game of make-believe. Yet these men were warriors, warriors who engaged in repeated life-and-death feuds and wars with their enemies. Didn't their survival depend upon being in genuine contact with reality?

As the day progressed, the trail became steeper and more slippery. Often it seemed that I was sliding one step back in the adobe-like mud for every two steps I made forward. We frequently rested to catch our breath and to sip water mixed with the manioc beer mash in our bottle-gourd canteens. Sometimes the others would snack on the smoked boiled manioc or smoked meat that they carried in their monkey-skin pouches. I, however, was forbidden to eat solid food.

"You must suffer," Tsangu explained, "so that the grandfathers will take pity on you. Otherwise, the ancient specter will not come."

That night, tired and hungry, I attempted to sleep in the palm-thatched leanto my companions had constructed for us on the top of a cold, dank ridge. Shortly before dawn, it began to rain. Too chilled and miserable to stay where we were, we broke camp and groped in the dark along the ridge. The rain grew in intensity. Soon bolts of lightning, accompanied by explosions of thunder, periodically illuminated our way. Many of the lightning strikes seemed to be on the very ridge we were following, so we began to move at maximum speed in order to get off the heights. In the semi-darkness of the obscured dawn I often lost sight of the other two, who were much more accustomed to the incredible pace they were setting through the forest. Even under normal circumstances, the Indians loped along at about four or five miles an hour. Now it seemed like six.

Soon I lost sight of my companions entirely. I assumed they thought that I could follow them. They would undoubtedly be waiting for me somewhere ahead, beyond the end of the ridge. So I forged ahead, wet, tired, hungry, and fearful of being permanently lost in this great, uninhabited forest. One, two, three hours passed and I still did not encounter them. The rain let up and the light in the deserted forest grew stronger. I looked for the sharply bent branches of saplings, the Indians' sign that they had passed that way. But without luck.

I stopped, sat on a log in the middle of the dripping forest, and tried to think clearly about my position. I gave the Indians' special long-distance yell, a cry from the depths of the lungs that can be heard a half-mile away. Three times I gave it. There was no answer. I was near panic. I did not have my gun, so hunting was impossible. I did not know where to go. The only humans that I knew of in the forest were my absent companions.

I was aware that we had been headed generally west, but the dense forest canopy prevented me from seeing the direction of the

sun. The ridge had numerous forks, so that I could not tell which one would be the best to follow. Almost at random, I picked one ridge and followed it slowly, breaking branches every ten feet or so to guide my companions if they came searching that way. From time to time I yelled, but heard no answering sound. I stopped at a stream and added some water to the concentrated beer in my calabash. As I rested, sweating, dozens of butterflies swirled about, often settling on my head, shoulders, and arms. I watched as they sucked the sweat from my skin and simultaneously urinated on it. I got up and went onward into the forest, supporting myself with the balsa staff. It was getting dark. With my *puñal*, or short machete, I cut branches from palm saplings and made a crude lean-to. Exhausted, I drank some beer, covered my body with fronds, and soon fell asleep.

Faint light was filtering down through the forest canopy when I awoke. As I lay there in the green stillness, I heard a muffled boom. It caught me by surprise and I could not ascertain its direction. I quietly listened for perhaps fifteen minutes when another occurred, off to my left. It was clearly a gun. I jumped up and rushed off in the direction of the sound, running, stumbling, slipping as I skidded down steep slopes. From time to time I gave the long-distance yell. Another boom, this time slightly to my right. I veered course and soon found myself climbing down a precipitous canyon, clinging to vines and slipping from one sapling to another. I became aware of a pervasive roar, like a never-ceasing freight train. Abruptly, I was on the boulder-strewn shore of a river. About a quarter-mile upstream, a stupendous waterfall was hurtling over a bare rock cliff. And near its base I could see my companions; at that moment they were my closest friends in all the world.

I had to clamber up and down immense river boulders and ford the pools of water that lay between sandbars. As I got near,

I felt the mists of the waterfall, carried down the canyon on the wind, cooling my face and arms. It took me about fifteen minutes to reach Akachu and Tsangu. Finally, I collapsed on the sand beside my companions.

"We thought a demon might have gotten you," said Akachu with a grin. I smiled back weakly, glad to accept the canteen of beer he offered.

"You are tired," he said. "That is good, for the grandfathers may take pity on you. You must now start to bathe."

He pointed to my staff. "Bring your balsa and come with me." While Tsangu sat on the sandbar, Akachu led me over the rocks along the edge of the great pool into which the cascade poured. Soon we were up against the wet cliff face, as drenching sprays pelted our bodies. He took my hand and inched forward along the base of the cliff. The water poured with mounting strength upon us, making it difficult to avoid being swept away. I supported myself with my staff with one hand and hung onto Akachu with the other.

Each step forward became more difficult. Then suddenly we were underneath the waterfall in a dark, natural recess. It seemed like a magical cave. Light entered only through the immense sheet of falling water, which sealed us in from the rest of the world. The incessant roar of the cascade was greater than even that of my first vision, years before. It seemed to penetrate my whole being. We were sealed from the world by the basic elements of earth and water.

"The House of the Grandfathers," Akachu shouted in my ear. He pointed to my staff.

He had told me earlier what to do. I began to walk back and forth in the incredible chamber, putting my staff before me with each step. As instructed, I continuously shouted, "Tau, tau, tau," to attract the attention of the grandfathers. I was thoroughly

chilled from the spray that swept the small cave, water which not long before had been reposing in the glacial lakes of the highest Andes. I shivered, paced, and shouted. Akachu accompanied me, but without a staff.

Gradually, a strange calm pervaded my consciousness. I no longer felt cold, tired, or hungry. The sound of the cascading water grew more and more distant and seemed strangely soothing. I felt that this was where I belonged, that I had come home. The wall of falling water became iridescent, a torrent of millions of liquid prisms. As they went by I had the continuous sensation of floating upward, as though they were stable and I was the one in motion. Flying inside of a mountain! I laughed at the absurdity of the world.

Finally, Akachu grasped my shoulder, stopped me, and took my hand. He led me out of the magic mountain, back along the cliff and to Tsangu. I was sorry to leave the sacred place.

When we had regrouped on the sandbar, Tsangu led us directly to the side of the canyon and commenced scaling the steep slope. We followed, single file, grasping at projecting roots, saplings, and vines to keep ourselves from sliding backward in the wet clay. For perhaps an hour we continued the arduous ascent, occasionally drenched by the wafting spray from the waterfall. It was late afternoon when we finally reached a small, flat ridge adjacent to the rim of the cascade. We rested briefly and then followed Tsangu along the plateau. At first the jungle growth was thick and difficult to penetrate, but shortly we found ourselves in a gallery of immense trees.

After about five minutes Tsangu stopped, and started to cut boughs for a lean-to.

Akachu began splitting a stick at one end. He split the same end a second time, at a right angle to the first cut, and stuck the unsplit end into the ground. Into the crosswise split he pushed two

twigs, which forced the end open into a four-pronged receptacle. Then he took a fist-sized gourd cup from his monkey-skin shoulder bag and set it into the space formed by the prongs. He reached again into his pouch and brought forth a bundle of short green stems. They were the *maikua* (a Brugmansia species of *datura*) plant cuttings he had collected prior to our departure from his house. One by one he held the stems over the gourd cup and scraped off the green bark. When he had finished, the cup was almost full. He reached in, drew out the shavings, and began squeezing their green juice into the cup. Within five minutes there was about an eighth of a cup of the liquid. He threw away the shavings.

"Now we will let the *maikua* cool," he said. "When night comes you will drink it. You alone will drink, for we must guard you. We will be with you at all times, so do not fear."

Tsangu had joined us, and now he added, "What is most important is that you must have no fear. If you see something frightening, you must not flee. You must run up and touch it."

Akachu grasped my shoulder. "That is right. You must do that or one day soon you will die. Hold your balsa at all times in your hands so that you can do the touching."

I began to feel a strong sense of panic. Not only were their words somewhat less than comforting, but I had heard that persons sometimes died or permanently lost their minds from taking *maikua*. I also remembered stories of Jívaro who had taken *maikua* and become so delirious that they had dashed wildly through the forest to fall from cliffs or to drown. For this reason, they never took *maikua* without sober companions to restrain them.[2]

"Will you hold me down strongly?" I asked.

"That will be done, brother," said Akachu.

It was the first time he had addressed me by a kinship term, and that one word reassured me. Still, as I waited for the dark, rising anticipation and curiosity were mixed with fear.

My companions did not make a fire, and as night came we were all stretched out side by side on palm fronds, listening to the stillness of the forest and the distant roar of the waterfall. At last the time came.

Akachu gave me the gourd cup. I tipped it up and swallowed the contents. The taste was somewhat disagreeable, yet slightly similar to green tomatoes. I felt a numbing sensation. I thought of that other drink, three years before among the Conibo, which had led me here. Was my shamanic quest worth the danger?

Shortly, however, even quasi-logical thought vanished as an inexpressible terror rapidly permeated my whole body. My companions were going to kill me! I must get away! I attempted to jump up, but instantly they were upon me. Three, four, an infinity of savages wrestled with me, forced me down, down, down. Their faces were above me, contorted into sly grins. Then blackness.

I was awakened by a flash of lightning followed by a thunderous explosion. The ground beneath me was shaking. I jumped up, utterly in a panic. A hurricane-like wind threw me back down on the ground. I stumbled again to my feet. A stinging rain pelted my body as the wind ripped at my clothes. Lightning and thunder exploded all around. I grasped a sapling to support myself. My companions were nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly, about two hundred feet away amidst the tree trunks, I could see a luminous form floating slowly toward me. I watched, terrified, as it grew larger and larger, resolving itself into a twisting form. The gigantic, writhing reptilian form floated directly toward me. Its body shone in brilliant hues of greens, purples, and reds, and as it twisted amidst the lightning and thunder it looked at me with a strange sardonic smile.

I turned to run, and then remembered the balsa staff. I looked down but could not see it. The serpentine creature was now only twenty feet away and towering above me, coiling and uncoiling. It separated into two overlapping creatures. They were now both

facing me. The dragons had come to take me away! They coalesced back into one. I saw before me a stick about a foot long. I grabbed it, and desperately charged the monster with my stick outstretched before me. An earsplitting scream filled the air, and abruptly the forest was empty. The monster was gone. There was only silence and serenity.

I lost consciousness.

When I awoke it was midday. Akachu and Tsangu were squatting beside a small fire, eating and conversing quietly. My head ached and I was hungry, but otherwise I felt all right. As I sat up, my friends rose and came over. Akachu gave me a bowl of warmed beer. I was also given a piece of dried monkey meat. The food tasted wonderful, but I wanted to share my experience with my friends.

I said, "I thought you were trying to kill me last night. Then you disappeared and there was tremendous lightning—"

Akachu interrupted me. "You must not tell anyone, even us, what you have encountered. Otherwise, all your suffering will have been in vain. Someday, and you will know when that is, you can tell others, but not now. Eat, and then we will start for home."

WE WENT BACK to Akachu's house, and with his guidance I began to acquire the *tsentsak* (magical darts) essential to the practice of Jívaro shamanism. These *tsentsak,* or spirit helpers, are the main powers believed to cause and cure illness in daily life. To the nonshaman they are normally invisible, and even shamans can perceive them only in an altered state of consciousness.[3]

"Bad" or bewitching shamans send these spirit helpers into victims' bodies to make them ill or to kill them. "Good" shamans, or healers, use their own *tsentsak* to help them suck out spirits from the bodies of ill tribesmen. The spirit helpers also form shields which, along with the shaman's guardian spirit power, protect their shaman masters from attacks.

A new shaman collects all kinds of insects, plants, and other objects, which become his spirit helpers. Almost any object, including living insects and worms, can become a *tsentsak* if it is small enough to be swallowed by a shaman. Different types of *tsentsak* cause, and are used to cure, different kinds of degrees of illness. The greater the variety of these power objects that a shaman has in his body, the greater is his ability as a doctor.

Each *tsentsak* has an ordinary and nonordinary aspect. The magical dart's ordinary aspect is an ordinary material object, as seen without drinking *ayahuasca*. But the nonordinary and "true" aspect of the *tsentsak* is revealed to the shaman by taking the drink. When he does this, the magical darts appear in their hidden forms as spirit helpers, such as giant butterflies, jaguars, serpents, birds, and monkeys, who actively assist the shaman in his tasks.

When a healing shaman is called in to treat a patient, his first task is diagnosis. He drinks *ayahuasca*, green tobacco water, and sometimes the juice of a plant called *piripiri*, in the late afternoon and early evening. The consciousness-changing substances permit him to see into the body of the patient as though it were glass. If the illness is due to sorcery, the healing shaman will see the intruding nonordinary entity within the patient's body clearly enough to determine whether he possesses the appropriate spirit helper to extract it by sucking.

A shaman sucks magical darts from a patient's body at night, and in a dark area of the house, for it is only in the darkness that he can perceive nonordinary reality. With the setting of the sun, he alerts his *tsentsak* by whistling the tune of his power song; after about a quarter of an hour, he starts singing. When he is ready to suck, the shaman keeps two *tsentsak*, of the type identical to the one he has seen in the patient's body, in the front and rear of his mouth. They are present in both their material and nonmaterial aspects, and are there to catch the nonordinary aspect of the magical dart when the shaman sucks it out of the patient's body. The

tsentsak nearest the shaman's lips has the task of incorporating the sucked-out essence within itself. If, however, this nonordinary essence should get past it, the second spirit helper in the mouth blocks the throat so that the intruder cannot enter the interior of the shaman's body and do him harm. Trapped thus within the mouth, the essence is shortly caught by, and incorporated into, the material substance of one of the curing shaman's *tsentsak*. He then "vomits" out this object and displays it to the patient and his family saying, "Now I have sucked it out. Here it is."

The nonshamans may think that the material object itself is what has been sucked out, and the shaman does not disillusion them. At the same time he is not lying, because he knows that the only important aspect of a *tsentsak* is its nonmaterial or nonordinary aspect, or essence, which he sincerely believes he has removed from the patient's body. To explain to the layman that he already had these objects in his mouth would serve no fruitful purpose and would prevent him from displaying such an object as proof that he had effected the cure.

The ability of the shaman to suck depends largely upon the quantity and strength of his own *tsentsak*, of which he may have hundreds. His magical darts assume their supernatural aspect as spirit helpers when he is under the influence of *ayahuasca*, and he sees them as a variety of zoomorphic forms hovering over him, perching on his shoulders, and sticking out of his skin. He sees them helping to suck the patient's body. He drinks tobacco water every few hours to "keep them fed" so that they will not leave him.

A healing shaman may have *tsentsak* sent at him by a bewitcher. Because of this danger, shamans may repeatedly drink tobacco water at all hours of the day and night. The tobacco water helps keep one's *tsentsak* ready to repel any other magical darts. A shaman does not even go for a walk without taking along the green tobacco leaves with which he prepares the water that keeps his spirit helpers alert.

The degree of violence and competition in Jívaro society is famous in the anthropological literature and contrasts radically, for example, with the peacefulness of the Conibo. And both the Jívaro and the Conibo stand apart from Australian and many other tribal peoples who have long practiced shamanism without employing psychedelics. Still Jívaro shamanism is highly developed, dramatic, and exciting. So in 1969 I again returned, filling in gaps in my knowledge, and in 1973 I engaged in more shamanic practice with them.

During the years since beginning shamanic work among the Conibo, I have also studied briefly with shamans of a few western North American Indian groups: the Wintun and Pomo in California, Coast Salish in Washington State, and the Lakota Sioux in South Dakota. From them I learned how shamanism could be practiced successfully without the use of the *ayahuasca* or other drugs of the Conibo and the Jívaro. This knowledge has been especially useful in introducing Westerners to the practice of shamanism. Finally, I learned from the worldwide ethnographic literature on shamanism, where lie buried many gems of information that supplement and reaffirm what I had been taught firsthand. Now it seems time to help transmit some practical aspects of this ancient human legacy to those who have been cut off from it for centuries.

Chapter 2

The Shamanic Journey: Introduction

SHAMAN (PRONOUNCED SHAH-MAAN) is a word from the language of the Tungus people of Siberia, and has been adopted widely by anthropologists to refer to persons in a great variety of non-Western cultures who were previously known by such terms as "witch," "witch-doctor," "medicine man," "sorcerer," "wizard," "magic man," "magician," and "seer." One of the advantages of using the term is that it lacks the prejudicial overtones and conflicting meanings associated with the more familiar labels. Furthermore, not every kind of medicine man or witch doctor is a shaman.

A shaman is a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness—at will—to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons. The shaman has at least one, and usually more, "spirits" in his personal service.*

As Mircea Eliade observes, the shaman is distinguished from other kinds of magicians and medicine men by his use of a state of consciousness which Eliade, following Western mystical tradition, calls "ecstasy." But the practice of ecstasy alone, he properly

* For simplicity, I shall hereafter use the male pronominal form in referring to the shaman or the patient, with the clear understanding that shamans and patients may be of either gender.

forest on my right. It felt perfect. No other place in the area felt right, but that spot felt perfect.

Then I came back. I just jumped into the spring and swam back to the opening where I began. The strange thing was that when I got back and had gotten out, I had the distinct impression that something had come back with me. It was right behind me. It was beneficial or benevolent; it was not bad.

Chapter 3

Shamanism and States of Consciousness

SHAMANISM REPRESENTS THE most widespread and ancient methodological system of mind-body healing known to humanity. Archaeological and ethnological evidence suggests that shamanic methods are at least twenty or thirty thousand years old. Quite possibly, the methods have much greater antiquity—for, after all, primates that could be called human have been on the planet for more than two or three million years.

Today shamanic knowledge survives primarily among people who, until recently, had primitive cultures. The knowledge that they preserve was acquired over hundreds of human generations, in situations of life and death. The ancestors of these peoples painstakingly learned and used this knowledge in their efforts to maintain health and strength, to cope with serious illness, and to deal with the threat and trauma of death. These custodians of the ancient methods are very important to us, for almost none of their cultures left written records. Thus it is only from their remaining living representatives that we can learn the shamanic principles.

One of the remarkable things about shamanic assumptions and methods is that they are very similar in widely separated and

remote parts of the planet, including such regions as aboriginal Australia, native North and South America, Siberia and central Asia, eastern and northernmost Europe, and southern Africa. Even in the historical literature from the Classical Mediterranean, or from medieval and Renaissance western Europe, one finds evidence that the same basic shamanic knowledge once existed there until it was largely eradicated by the Inquisition.

The widespread similarities in shamanic methods and beliefs throughout much of the world have been extensively documented by Eliade in his classic work, *Shamanism*.[1] It is precisely because of the consistency of this ancient power and healing system that Eliade and others can speak with confidence of the occurrence of shamanism among peoples long isolated from one another.[2] For example, one anthropologist notes: "Wherever shamanism is still encountered today, whether in Asia, Australia, Africa, or North and South America, the shaman functions fundamentally in much the same way and with similar techniques—as guardian of the psychic and ecological equilibrium of his group and its members, as intermediary between the seen and unseen worlds, as master of spirits, as supernatural curer, etc." The shaman is able "to transcend the human condition and pass freely back and forth through the different cosmological planes. . . ."[3]

The remarkable worldwide consistency in basic shamanic knowledge has also been noted by many other anthropologists. Wilbert, for instance, writing on the nature of shamanism among the Warao Indians of Venezuela, notes, "It will have been immediately apparent to anyone familiar with the literature on shamanism that the Warao experience contains much that is near-universal. . . ." He provides a long list of the practices and beliefs that the Warao shamans share with those elsewhere in Australia, Indonesia, Japan, China, Siberia, and native North America, Mexico, and South America. Wilbert further concludes

that there is a "remarkable correspondence . . . not only in general content but specific detail" between the shamanic journeys of the Venezuelan Warao and the Wiradjeri of Australia, an ocean and continent away.[4]

The shamanic approach to power and healing was maintained in a basically similar form in primitive cultures that otherwise represented radically different adaptations to contrasting environments and to distinctly different problems of material survival. Through prehistoric migrations and isolation, many such groups were separated from other divisions of the human family for ten or twenty thousand years. Yet, through all those years, the basic shamanic knowledge did not seem to change significantly.

Why was this? It was obviously not due to lack of imagination on the part of primitive peoples, for there is great contrast and variation in their social systems, art, economics, and many other aspects of their cultures. Why, then, is shamanic knowledge so basically consistent in different parts of the primitive world?

I suggest that the answer is, simply, because it works. Over many thousands of years, through trial and error, people in ecological and cultural situations that were often extremely different came nonetheless to the same conclusions as to the basic principles and methods of shamanic power and healing.

Shamanism flourished in ancient cultures that lacked the technological innovations of modern medicine. In my opinion, the low technological level of those cultures compelled their members to develop to the highest degree possible the ability of the human mind to cope with serious problems of health and survival. Some of the most interesting methods that humans possess with regard to the health and healing potentialities of the mind are those of the shamans in these low-technology cultures.

To perform his work, the shaman depends on special, personal power, which is usually supplied by his guardian and helping

spirits. Each shaman generally has at least one guardian spirit in his service, whether or not he also possesses helping spirits. In her classic work on the concept of the guardian spirit in native North America, Ruth F. Benedict observes, shamanism "is practically everywhere in some fashion or in some aspect built around the vision-guardian spirit complex. . . ."[5]

Outside of North America, the guardian spirit is similarly important, but is often called by other names in the anthropological literature, such as "tutelary spirit" in works on Siberian shamanism, and as "nagual" in Mexico and Guatemala. In the Australian literature it may be referred to as an "assistant totem," and in the European literature as a "familiar." Sometimes the guardian spirit is just called the "friend" or "companion." Whatever it is called, it is a fundamental source of power for the shaman's functioning.

The best-known way to acquire a guardian spirit is in a spirit quest in a remote place in the wilderness. The location may be a cave, the top of a mountain, or a tall waterfall or an isolated trail at night, as among the Jívaro. There are also involuntary as well as special shamanic ways to secure a guardian spirit.

Without a guardian spirit it is virtually impossible to be a shaman, for the shaman must have this strong, basic power source in order to cope with and master the nonordinary or spiritual powers whose existence and actions are normally hidden from humans. The guardian spirit is often a *power animal*, a spiritual being that not only protects and serves the shaman, but becomes another identity or alter ego for him.

The fact that a person has a guardian spirit does not in itself make him a shaman. As the Jívaro point out, whether an adult knows it or not, he probably has, or has had, the aid of a guardian spirit in his childhood; otherwise he would not have had the protective power necessary to achieve adulthood. The main difference between an ordinary person and a shaman with regard to

their guardian spirits is that the shaman uses his guardian spirit actively when in an altered state of consciousness. The shaman frequently sees and consults with his guardian spirit, travels with it on the shamanic journey, has it help him, and uses it to help others to recover from illness and injury.

In addition to the guardian spirit, a powerful shaman normally has a number of spirit helpers. These are individually minor powers, compared to the guardian spirit, but there may be hundreds of them at a particular shaman's disposal, providing great collective power. These helping spirits have specialized functions for particular purposes. It usually takes years for a shaman to accumulate a large crew of them.

There does not seem to be any obvious difference between the sexes in terms of shamanic aptitude and potentiality. In many societies, such as that of the Jívaro, for economic and social reasons that have little connection with the practice of shamanism itself, most of the shamans are men. But even Jívaro women, after they have finished raising their children and reach middle age, sometimes become shamans, indeed very powerful ones. In medieval and Renaissance Europe, widows and elderly women similarly often became healing shamans, partly to support themselves. Of course, the Inquisition termed them "witches," as Christian missionaries commonly still call shamans in non-Western societies.

Shamans are especially healers, but they also engage in divination, seeing into the present, past, and future for other members of the community. A shaman is a *see-er*. Our word "seer" refers to this kind of activity, a survival of our almost vanished European shamanic heritage. A shaman may also engage in clairvoyance, seeing what is going on elsewhere at the present moment.

The shaman moves between realities, a magical athlete of states of consciousness engaged in mythic feats. The shaman is

a middle man between ordinary reality and nonordinary reality, as Castaneda has dramatically described. The shaman is also a "power-broker" in the sense of manipulating spiritual power to help people, to put them into a healthy equilibrium.

A shaman may be called upon to help someone who is dis-spirited, that is, who has lost his personal guardian spirit or even his soul. In such cases, the shaman undertakes a healing journey in nonordinary reality to recover the lost spirit or soul and return it to the patient. Or a shaman's patient may be suffering from a localized pain or illness. In such a case, the shaman's task is to extract the harmful power to help restore the patient to health. These are the two basic approaches to shamanic healing: restoring beneficial powers and taking out harmful ones.

Shamans have to be able to journey back and forth between realities in these healing tasks. To do this, in some cultures, shamans take mind-altering substances; but in many other cultures they do not.[6] In fact, some psychoactive materials can interfere with the concentration shamanic work demands.

One of the interesting things about shamanism is that, when a drug is used, it is taken by the curer or healer rather than the patient, although there are exceptions when both partake. This contrast with modern Western medicine is easily understood if one considers that the shaman must do his healing work in an altered state of consciousness. The idea is to provide access to the hidden reality. Such work is the responsibility of the shaman, not the patient.

In its essence, shamanic initiation is experiential and often gradual, consisting of learning successfully how to achieve the shamanic state of consciousness, and to see and journey in that state; acquiring personal certainty and knowledge of one's own guardian spirit, and enlisting its assistance while in the shamanic state of consciousness; and learning successfully to help others as a shaman. A characteristic phase of more advanced shamanism

is having personal certainty and knowledge of one's own spirit helpers. There are even more advanced phases, as well as some important kinds of shamanic experiences, that are not dealt with in this book. If you succeed in experiencing the first three phases listed above, however, you can probably call yourself a shaman. But shamanic initiation is a never-ending process of struggle and joy, and the definitive decisions about your status as a shaman will be made by those you try to help.

A new shaman, after learning the basic principles, methods, and cosmology of shamanism, builds personal knowledge and power by shamanic practice and journeying. As this knowledge is acquired, the shaman becomes a guide for other people. For example, a person in his community may have a dream or vision and ask the shaman about its meaning. The master shaman is able to say, "Oh yes, what you experienced fits in there . . ." on the basis of what he has experientially, learned so far. The shaman is forever trying to articulate his personal revelatory experiences as though they were pieces of a great cosmic jigsaw puzzle. Many years of shamanic experience are usually necessary to arrive at a high degree of knowledge of the cosmic puzzle, and even a master shaman does not expect ever to complete the puzzle in a mortal lifetime.

A true master shaman does not challenge the validity of anybody else's experiences, although less capable and less humble shamans may. The master shaman will try to integrate even the most unusual experiences into his total cosmology, a cosmology based primarily on his own journeys. If he can do it easily he is probably a master, like the Conibo Indian shaman who told me, "Oh, they're always saying that."

The master shaman never says that what you experienced is a fantasy. That is one of the differences between shamanism and science. Yet there are similarities between the shaman and the scientist. The best of both are in awe of the complexity and magnificence of the universe and of Nature, and realize that during

their own lifetimes they will come to observe and understand only a small portion of what is going on. Both shamans and scientists personally pursue research into the mysteries of the universe, and both believe that the underlying causal processes of that universe are hidden from ordinary view. And neither master shamans nor master scientists allow the dogma of ecclesiastical and political authorities to interfere with their explorations. It was no accident that Galileo was accused of witchcraft (shamanism).

The shaman is an empiricist. One of the definitions of empiricism is "the practice of emphasizing experience esp. of the senses" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*). And indeed the shaman depends primarily on firsthand experience, of the senses, to acquire knowledge. Still, the master shaman is humble. After all, none of us really knows what is going on. Everyone is limited to his own small window onto the universe. As a Mohave woman named Hama: Utce: said:

> Every shaman tells a different story of the creation. One may hear it told in several ways. All stories relate to the same event, but the way of telling it is different, as though different witnesses related it, remembering or forgetting different details. It is as though an Indian, a Negro and a Frenchman would tell it, or as though I, my husband, Hivsu: Tupo: ma (burnt raw) or you were describing a car accident we witnessed.[7]

Shamans are people of action as well as knowledge. They serve the community by moving into and out of the hidden reality when asked for help. But only a few shamans become true masters of knowledge, power, and healing. There is typically a great deal of critical evaluation by the people in their communities as to how proficient particular shamans are, how successful they are in healing people. Shamans' "track records" are well known, and people decide which shamans to go to in matters of life and death. So, although many people can become shamans, only a few are recognized as outstanding.

The Shamanic State of Consciousness

THE SHAMAN OPERATES in nonordinary reality only a small portion of his time, and then only as needed to perform shamanic tasks, for shamanism is a part-time activity. Among the Jívaro, the Conibo, the Eskimo, and most other primitive groups, the master shaman is usually an active participant in the economic, social, and even political affairs of the community. He is commonly an accomplished hunter or gardener, craftsperson and artist, thinker, and responsible family and community member. Indeed, the ability of the master shaman to operate successfully in two different realities is seen as evidence of power.

He follows the precepts of shamanism when engaged in that kind of activity, and follows the precepts of ordinary reality when not engaged in shamanic work. The shaman moves back and forth between the two realities deliberately and with serious intention. Whichever the reality, the shaman thinks and acts in the ways appropriate to it, and has as his objective the mastery of both his nonordinary activities and his ordinary activities. Only he who successfully masters his actions in both realms is a master shaman.

Both personal realities of the shaman, the nonordinary and the ordinary, have their correlative states of consciousness. Each reality may be coped with successfully only when one is in the state of consciousness appropriate to it. Thus, if one is crossing a busy city street, the proper state of consciousness is different from that to be employed in entering the shamanic Lowerworld. A master shaman is fully aware of the appropriate consciousness for each situation with which he is faced, and enters into that state of consciousness as needed.

A perception of two realities is typical of shamanism, even though some Western armchair philosophers have long denied the legitimacy of claiming such a dual division between the ordinary world and a hidden world among primitive peoples, apparently assuming that primitives cannot distinguish between the two. As I earlier explained, the Jívaro not only make such a division consciously, but they ascribe much greater importance to the nonordinary or hidden one.[8] I agree with Ake Hultkrantz when he says:

> . . . If such [primitive] peoples do not consciously make such a dichotomy—which they sometimes do—they do in fact unconsciously order their cognitions according to this model. One proof of this is the shamanistic trance. The world of ecstasy is the world of supernatural powers and agencies, therefore the shaman dives into it. He exists in two worlds: outside the trance he lives the daily life of his tribesmen, inside the trance he is part and parcel of the supernatural world, sharing with the spirits some of their potentialities: the capacity to fly, to transform himself, to become one with his helping spirit, and so on.[9]

The emphasis I make here on drawing a distinction between the experiences one has in the SSC and the OSC, or that Castaneda makes between nonordinary reality and ordinary reality, is not a distinction that is usually noted in the conversations of shamans among themselves or even with Westerners. Thus, if you were to listen to a Jívaro shaman talk, you might hear in his everyday conversation accounts of experiences and deeds which could seem to you, as a Westerner, to be patently absurd or impossible. For example, he might tell you of splitting a large tree at a distance with his shamanic power, or that he saw an inverted rainbow inside the chest of a neighbor. In the same breath, he might tell you that he is making a new blowgun, or that he went hunting the previous morning.

The problem is not, as some Western philosophers would have it, that primitive peoples such as the Jívaro exhibit a primitive "prelogical" mind. The problem is that the Westerner is simply unsophisticated from a shamanic point of view. For his fellow tribespeople, the Jívaro does not need to specify which state of consciousness he was in to have a particular experience. They immediately know, because they have already learned what kinds of experiences occur in the SSC and what kind occur in the OSC. Only the Western outsider lacks this background.

The Jívaro sophistication is far from unique; in fact, it is probably true throughout virtually all of the shamanic cultures. Unfortunately, Western observers, lacking extensive experience with altered states of consciousness, altogether too often failed to inquire as to the cognitive state in which their native informants were when they had "impossible" experiences. As the Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner properly observes:

> It is fatally easy for Europeans, encountering such things for the first time, to go on to suppose that "mysticism" of this kind rules *all* aboriginal thought. It is not so. "Logical" thought and "rational" conduct are about as widely present in aboriginal life as they are on the simpler levels of European life. . . . And if one wishes to see a really brilliant demonstration of deductive thought, one has only to see [an aborigine] tracking a wounded kangaroo, and persuade him to say why he interprets given signs in a certain way.[10]

In other words, the limitations are not those of primitive peoples, but our own in understanding the two-tiered nature of their experiences and the respect they accord them. Because our Western culture is not shamanic, it is necessary in teaching

shamanism to make clear the distinctions between the SSC and the OSC, or between nonordinary reality and ordinary reality, as Castaneda does. When and if you become a shaman, and if there are other shamans with whom you can converse, you will find it no more necessary than a Jívaro or an Australian aborigine to specify the state of consciousness you were in when you had a particular experience. Your audience, if composed of persons of knowledge, will know.

The altered state of consciousness component of the SSC includes varying degrees of trance, ranging from essentially light (as with many North American Indian shamans), to very deep (as among the Lapps, where a shaman may temporarily appear comatose). Indeed, this entire range is reported for Siberian shamans. As Hultkrantz points out, "Pronouncements to the effect that the shamanic trance is invariably of the same depth are therefore misleading."[11] Similarly, Eliade observes: "Among the Ugrians shamanic ecstasy is less a trance than a 'state of inspiration'; the shaman sees and hears spirits; he is 'carried out of himself' because he is journeying in ecstasy through distant regions, but he is not unconscious. He is a visionary and inspired. However, the basic experience is ecstatic, and the principal means of obtaining it is, as in other regions, magico-religious music."[12]

What *is* definite is that *some* degree of alteration of consciousness is necessary to shamanic practice. Outside Western observers have frequently failed to be aware that a shaman was in a light trance, precisely because they were external observers lacking personal shamanic experience. Hultkrantz quite properly notes:

> A shaman may seem to act in a lucid state when, in actual fact, his mind is occupied with interior visions. I have myself witnessed a North American medicine-man operate during curing in a twilight context not easily discovered by an outsider; and his testimony to me afterwards of what he saw during his curing stressed the fact that he had been in a light trance.[13]

At an earlier, critical point in his life, before taking up shamanism, the shaman may have entered this altered state of consciousness very deeply, although there are many individual and cultural exceptions. Sometimes such an experience occurs in an intentional vision quest to get guardian spirit power. Other times it occurs at the climax of a serious illness, as among some North and South American Indians, as well as in native Siberia. Such a radically profound and revelatory experience often encourages the individual to take up the way of the shaman. My own first psychedelic experience among the Conibo Indians in 1961 is a personal example.

The word "trance" will be generally avoided here, because our Western cultural conceptions with regard to this term often carry the implication that it is a nonconscious state. Reinhard similarly avoids the use of "trance," noting, ". . . what we are really trying to establish is that the shaman is in a nonordinary psychic state which in some cases means not a loss of consciousness but rather an altered state of consciousness."[14*]

---

* Probably the most commonly accepted definition of an altered state of consciousness is by Arnold M. Ludwig, who describes it as "any mental state(s) induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness." (Ludwig 1972: 11.) A problem with Ludwig's definition is that it may carry the implication that an "alert, waking" state may not characterize an altered state of consciousness. While the shaman is occasionally sometimes neither alert nor waking in the SSC, commonly he is very alert even if not in a fully waking state; and very commonly in the SSC he is both alert and waking. Katz (1976a: 282–283), in his study of !Kung Bushmen trance-healing, also expresses some reservations about Ludwig's definition.

It is in the SSC that one "sees" shamanically. This may be called "visualizing," "imaging," or, as expressed by Australian aborigines, using "the strong eye."[15] Although such seeing is done in an altered state of consciousness, it would be an unempirical prejudgment inimical to achieving firsthand understanding to dismiss such visions as hallucinations. As the distinguished Australian anthropologist A. P. Elkin observes, the vision of an aborigine shaman "is no mere hallucination. It is a mental formation visualized and externalized, which may even exist for a time independent of its creator. . . . While the person is experiencing the vision, he cannot move, but he is conscious of what is going on around him. As one [shaman] of the Kattang tribe, N. S. W. [Australia], told me . . . he could see and know what was happening, but was as one dead, feeling nothing."[16]

The SSC normally permits full recall later of the experience when the shaman has returned to the OSC, unlike the characteristic trance of the Western spirit medium or of the participant in Caribbean or Javanese spirit possession dances.[17] In other words, the SSC does not typically involve amnesia. In the SSC, part of the shaman's consciousness is usually still lightly connected to the ordinary reality of the physical or material environment where he is located. The lightness of his trance is a reason that a drum beat often must be maintained by an assistant to sustain him in the SSC. If the drumming stops, he might come back rapidly to the OSC, and thus fail in his work.

Basic tools for entering the SSC are the drum and rattle. The shaman generally restricts use of his drum and rattle to evoking and maintaining the SSC, and thus his unconscious mind comes automatically to associate their use with serious shamanic work. The beginning of the steady, monotonous sound of the rattle and the drum, which has been repeatedly associated with the SSC on previous occasions, becomes a signal to his brain to return to the SSC. For an experienced shaman, accordingly, just a few minutes

of the familiar rattling and/or drumming is usually sufficient to achieve the light trance in which most shamanic work is done.

The repetitive sound of the drum is usually fundamental to undertaking shamanic tasks in the SSC. With good reason, Siberian and other shamans sometimes refer to their drums as the "horse" or "canoe" that transports them into the Lowerworld or Upperworld. The steady, monotonous beat of the drum acts like a carrier wave, first to help the shaman enter the SSC, and then to sustain him on his journey.

The importance of the drum as a "mount" or "steed" is illustrated by these shamanic verses from the Soyot (Tuvans) of Siberia:

SHAMAN DRUMS

Oh! My many-colored drum
Ye who standeth in the forward corner
Oh! My merry and painted drum,
Ye who standeth here
Let thy shoulder and neck be strong.

Hark, oh hark my horse—ye female maral deer!
Hark, oh hark my horse—ye bear
Hark, oh hark ye [bear]!

Oh, painted drum who standeth in the forward corner
My mounts—male and female maral deer.
Be silent sonorous drum,
Skin-covered drum,
Fulfill my wishes

Like flitting clouds, carry me
Through the lands of dusk
And below the leaden sky,
Sweep along like wind
Over the mountain peaks![18]

Laboratory research by Neher has demonstrated that drumming produces changes in the central nervous system. The rhythmic stimulation affects the electrical activity in "many sensory and motor areas of the brain, not ordinarily affected, through their connections with the sensory area being stimulated."[19] This appears to be due in part to the fact that the single beat of a drum contains many sound frequencies, and accordingly it simultaneously transmits impulses along a variety of nerve pathways in the brain. Furthermore, drum beats are mainly of low frequency, which means that more energy can be transmitted to the brain by a drum beat than from a sound stimulus of higher frequency. This is possible, Neher states, because "the low frequency receptors of the ear are more resistant to damage than the delicate high frequency receptors and can withstand higher amplitudes of sound before pain is felt."[20]

Recent research on the shamanistic spirit dances of the Salish Indians of the Northwest Coast supports and expands Neher's findings on the capacity of rhythmic drumming to induce an altered state of consciousness. Jilek and Ormestad found that drum beat frequencies in the theta wave EEG frequency range (four to seven cycles per second) predominated during initiation procedures using the Salish deer-skin drum. This is the frequency range, Jilek notes, that "is expected to be most effective in the production of trance states."[21]

It is hoped that such research will eventually be accompanied by the telemetering of the EEG of shamans while they are engaged in SSC work. It seems likely that this kind of investigation will lead to the finding that the SSC commonly involves the theta level as well as the less-deep alpha level.

The shaking of the shaman's rattle provides stimulation to higher frequency pathways in the brain than does the drum, reinforcing the drum beats and further heightening the total sonic effect. While of a higher frequency, the sound of most rattles is of a sufficiently low amplitude as not to cause pain in the ear receptors.

While the shaman may beat the drum himself when entering the SSC, his full arrival there requires an assistant to take over the task of maintaining the drumming, as among the Tungus of Siberia, so that the shaman's altered state of consciousness will be maintained.[22] An alternate technique among the Tungus is to let all the drumming be done by an assistant, even before the shaman enters the SSC. This is the method I prefer, since otherwise the physical demands of beating a drum can interfere with my transition into the SSC. The shaman should, however, still regulate the speed of the drumming, for only he can sense the appropriateness of the tempo. In the techniques I have adopted, I shake a rattle, typically starting at a slow tempo and increasing it as I feel the need. The sound of the rattle not only provides the lead for the drummer, but also supplements the sonic drive of the drum with a higher frequency input. When the shaman using this method finally enters the SSC, he is no longer able to shake the rattle, so the drummer carries on for him, continuing the drumming in the tempo last heard from the rattle.

When the Tungus shaman's assistant does all the drumming, however, the shaman does not use a rattle. Instead, he sets the tempo by dancing, the rhythm of the bells and iron trinkets on his costume leading the drum and supplementing it with higher frequency sounds.[23] This is a technique which provides a body motion input into the shaman's nervous system that matches the sounds since, as Shirokogoroff observes, ". . . the 'dancing' is partly called forth by the necessity of producing rhythmic sounds."[24]

The change into an SSC is also helped by singing. The shaman typically has special "power songs" that he chants on such occasions. While the words may vary somewhat from shaman to shaman in a particular tribe, usually the melody and rhythm of

the songs are not the invention of the individual shaman but are shared in a particular tribal region.

The songs tend to be repetitive and relatively monotonous, mainly increasing in tempo as the shaman approaches the SSC. They may have the latent function of affecting central nervous system activity in a manner analogous to yogic breathing exercises, although I know of no research carried out to determine this. The shaman is often helped into the SSC by the members of the audience, who join him in the singing. The words help evoke the SSC, tending to refer to the shaman's spiritual guardians and helpers, and to reaffirm his power.

The learned component of the SSC includes the ascription of full reality to the things one sees, feels, hears, and otherwise experiences in the altered state of consciousness. These firsthand, empirical experiences are not viewed by the shaman as fantasy, but as immediate reality. At the same time, the shaman recognizes the separateness of the SSC reality from that of the OSC, and does not confuse the two. He knows when he is in one or the other, and enters each by choice.

The learned precepts used while he is in the SSC include the assumption that animals, plants, humans, and other phenomena seen in an altered state of consciousness are fully real, within the context of the nonmaterial, or nonordinary, reality in which they are perceived. The shaman enters the SSC to see and interact with these nonmaterial forms. Such forms are not visible to the shaman or others when in the OSC, and do not constitute part of ordinary reality.

The learned aspect of the SSC involves a deep respect for all forms of life, with a humble awareness of our dependence on the plants, animals, and even inorganic matter of our planet. The shaman knows that humans are related to all forms of life, that they are "all our relations," as the Lakota Sioux say. In both the SSC and the OSC the shaman approaches the other forms of

life with familial respect and understanding. He recognizes their antiquity, relatedness, and special strengths.

The shaman accordingly enters the SSC with a reverence for Nature, for the inherent strengths of the wild animal and plant species, and for their tenacious abilities to survive and flourish through eons of planetary existence. Approached in an altered state of consciousness with respect and love, Nature, he believes, is prepared to reveal things not ascertainable in an ordinary state of consciousness.

Many North American Indian tribes still preserve an essentially shamanic view of reality as, for example, in this statement by a Hopi:

> To the Hopi all life is one—it is the same. This world where he lives is the human world and in it all the animals, birds, insects, and every living creature, as well as the trees and plants which also have life, appear only in masquerade, or in the forms in which we ordinarily see them. But it is said that all these creatures and these living things that share the spark of life with us humans, surely have other homes where they live in human forms like ourselves. Therefore, all these living things are thought of as human and they may sometimes be seen in their own forms even on earth. If they are killed, then the soul of this creature may return to its own world which it may never leave again, but the descendants of this creature will take its place in the human world, generation after generation.[25]

Even in broad daylight, one can learn to see shamanically the nonordinary aspects of natural phenomena. For example, the following is a method of rock-seeing, a technique I learned from a Lakota Sioux medicine man. First decide upon a problem for which you wish an answer. Then simply walk through a wild area until a two-fisted-size stone on the ground seems to attract your attention.

Pick it up and carry it to a spot where you can comfortably sit down with it.

Place the stone on the ground in front of you, and pose the question to which you want an answer. Carefully study the upper surface of the stone until you are able to see one or more living creatures formed by its lines, crevices, and other irregularities. It may take a few minutes.

When you are satisfied that you have discerned one or more animals, plants, insects, faces, human forms, or other entities on the stone's surface, then think about what the stone is trying to tell you about the problem you have posed. Fix your conclusion in your mind and then turn the rock over. Repeat the same process of seeing and thinking using the new surface. If the stone is thick enough, you can repeat the process again with the remaining two sides of the stone.

Next, quietly contemplate how the individual communications from each of the four sides can be put together to form a message that constitutes an answer to your question. Then respectfully, and with thanks, return the stone to the position and place where you found it.

Once you have gained enough shamanic experience, you can use this technique to help another person. Have the person go through the same steps as above. The difference is that you both participate in seeing the answer to his problem. As each side is viewed, let him first describe and analyze what he sees. On the basis of your greater experience, you may be able to suggest how what you see fits in with what he sees. Then turn the stone over and repeat the process for all four sides. Finally, the person makes his own synthesis of the four sides into a general answer to his problem.

Obviously, there are similarities and differences between this shamanic approach and a Rorschach test or psychoanalytic techniques of free association. But the fact that there are differences

does not make the shamanic technique operationally inferior. From the shaman's perspective, there are animals and beings in the stone. The concept of fantasy has no place in the shaman's world. For him, all of nature has a hidden, nonordinary reality. That is something one learns to see in following the shaman's way.

This free adaptation by David Cloutier of a shaman's poem from the Chukchee tribe of Siberia illustrates what I am talking about:

THINGS A SHAMAN SEES

Everything that is
is alive

on a steep river bank
there's a voice that speaks
I've seen the master of that voice
he bowed to me
I spoke with him
he answers all my questions
everything that is
is alive

Little gray bird
little blue breast
sings in a hollow bough
she calls her spirits dances
sings her shaman songs
woodpecker on a tree
that's his drum
he's got a drumming nose
and the tree shakes
cries out like a drum
when the axe bites its side

all these things answer
my call

everything that is
is alive

the lantern walks around
the walls of this house have tongues
even this bowl has its own true home
the hides asleep in their bags
were up talking all night
antlers on the graves
rise and circle the mounds
while the dead themselves get up
and go visit the living ones[26]

Chapter 4

Power Animals

SHAMANS HAVE LONG believed their powers were the powers of the animals, of the plants, of the sun, of the basic energies of the universe. In the garden Earth they have drawn upon their assumed powers to help save other humans from illness and death, to provide strength in daily life, to commune with their fellow creatures, and to live a joyful existence in harmony with the totality of Nature.

Millennia before Charles Darwin, people in shamanic cultures were convinced that humans and animals were related. In their myths, for example, the animal characters were commonly portrayed as essentially human in physical form but individually distinguished by the particular personality characteristics possessed by the various types of animals as they exist in the wild today. Thus Coyote is distinguished in the stories by his mischievous behavior, and Raven often by his unseemly dependence on others to kill game for him. Then, according to various creation myths, the animals became physically differentiated into the forms in which they are found today. Accordingly, the myths explain, it is no longer possible for humans and animals to converse together, or for animals to have human form.