



A Journal of

Contemporary Shamanism

ONE ROAD,
MANY BRANCHES

AN AGONIZING REAPPRAISAL,
THOUGHTS ON NEW SPIRITUALITY

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Woman As Visionary Plant Shaman

By Shonagh Home

In my endeavor to share my work and my book, *Love and Spirit Medicine*, which chronicles my profound unfolding through the shamanic use of the sacred mushroom, I have noted the lack of women's voices in the area of entheogenic plant medicine research. The subject of entheogenic plant medicine has long been taboo in our culture. These substances have been egregiously abused and resolutely misunderstood. They are also illegal, which further stigmatizes their use, making it very difficult for medicine women to come forward and share their wisdom on the subject. Through the ages, numerous cultures have worked with plant and fungi teachers in a sacred manner. Plant medicine itself has long been the domain of women, and certain women were no strangers to the healing powers of the visionary selections. It is time to welcome back the woman as visionary plant medicine shaman. We have much to learn from the feminine perspective regarding the spiritual application of these medicines.

Women throughout time have had an intimate relationship with the plant kingdom. They sought plants not only for sustenance but also for their specific healing properties, which included the easing of childbirth. In addition, plants were used for ritual. Specific plants or resins, such as sage or copal, were used to clear space and remove negative forces. Other plants were and still are used specifically as a portal to the spirit realms. Many a woman shaman has used these plants, called entheogens, to access extra-dimensional intelligences known as plant teachers. These women often took on the shamanic role of oracle for their community, allowing the spirits to temporarily possess them, enabling wisdom, secret knowledge, and healing to pour through. This was once a highly respected practice among cultures like the ancient Greeks and the Norse, who treasured these women.

Sadly, the female visionary shamans have been historically ignored or marginalized, largely due to the fact that the majority of archeologists and anthropologists from pre-1950 have been predominantly male. These men had their religious and cultural biases, which influenced their studies of shamanic cultures. The priests before them, who accompanied the Spanish and English conquerors to the Americas, viewed the shamans with suspicion and revulsion, particularly the women. The notoriously cruel bishop from the 1500's, Diego de Landa, referred to the Maya medicine women of Cozumel as, "those



Dream of the Shaman

Photo: Alice Popkorn

infamous idolaters."

Barbara Tedlock, Ph.D., speaks to this in her book, *The Woman in the Shaman's Body*.¹ She says,

"That response flowed from their religious heritage. People who worked with spirits had long been interpreted as 'witches,' 'shamans,' 'magicians,' 'sorcerers,' and 'diviners,' in league with the devil. Any person who invoked spirits was calling upon the servants of Satan. This profound misunderstanding of shamanic spirituality led to the infamous sixteenth-century European witch hunts that resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent people, especially women."

Dr. Tedlock explains that the word "witch" stems from the old English word, "witan," which is the plural of "wita," meaning, "one who knows." Shamans through the ages have always known that the ingestion of sacred visionary plants gives access to "a thousand years of living rolled into a single day."

Women visionary shamans have been especially adept as oracles in addition to their skills in diagnosis and healing. Often, these women were older in years, their life experience contributing to their status as seer/healers. In addition, it was understood in matrilineal circles that the women who were no longer menstruating were now holding the wisdom blood inside, offering yet more potency to their medicine. It was the older medicine women who were targeted by the church during the madness of the witch-hunts, precisely because of the encyclopedic knowledge many of these women possessed.

During the 1760's, a scholarly traveler named Johann Gottlieb Georgi began studying an indigenous culture in a remote region of Russia. He compared the women shamans of that community to the ancient Greek oracles, noting the connection between shamanism and the sacred arts. These arts were practiced within the ancient priestesses of Greece. Johann observed the similarities between the contemporary shamans and their ancient sisters who spoke in a "flowery, unclear language." He opened the door for later travellers to study these cultures and discover the rich history of shamanism as a feminine tradition.

Rosita Arvigo does not work with the visionary plants. She is an herbalist and Maya medicine teacher, well known for her healing work with Maya abdominal massage. She wrote a recent article on the Mayan priestesses of the goddess, Ix Chel, mother of the earth, fertility, midwifery, plant medicine, the sacred waters, and the moon.² These priestesses lived at a sanctuary in Cozumel where they studied and practiced these arts in devotion to the goddess. This sanctuary was also home to the oracle of Ix Chel. This was a shamanic woman who most likely worked with visionary plant medicines like psilocybin mushrooms, entering a trance state to commune with the goddess and bring forth her messages.

Mushrooms as Teacher/Healer

My own shamanic work has evolved considerably through my reverent use of the sacred mushroom. I fell into these explorations very organically as my shamanic practice deepened. With no woman shaman to guide me, I have had to open to this ancient plant teacher and humbly make myself available to its wisdom. It was through my concerted efforts to plumb the depths of the mystery that I began to experience the temporary spirit possession that has long been a component of this work. These beings, as I call them, communicate with me and through me and they offer wise counsel for the people I work with.

In Oaxaca, Mexico, a shaman named

Julieta Casimiro works with the sacred mushroom to heal the people who come to her. She is one of the 13 Indigenous Grandmothers and has been very candid about her work with the plant medicine. During a healing, she ingests the mushrooms along with her client. She says that the mushrooms read the blood of the client and communicate to her the imbalances in the body. The mushrooms then tell her what must be done to restore health.³

I find this fascinating from my own experience with the mushroom. In my work, the emphasis is on the psychological state of my clients. The mushroom explained to me that after it is ingested, it studies the quality of the heart and the mind. The plant intelligence is in a kind of hyperspace and reads the analysis "like a doctor's note" asking, "How can we help? How can we help? How can we help?" It then gives the seeker an experience or awareness that will assist



Photo: Srinivasan G

them to shift their paradigm. My role is to midwife them through the experience as need be and to help them integrate the teachings afterwards.

Inroads to Understanding and Acceptance

This is sacred work and although it is not supported today by our modern western culture, there are growing num-

bers of people endeavoring to educate the public about the profound healing potentials the plants and fungi offer. Numerous conferences have cropped up over the last few years, such as M.A.P.S., the Multi-Disciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies, which gathers together over a hundred researchers from countries around the world to discuss their findings on the subject. Other plant medicine conferences are taking place in Canada, Europe, and the U.S. There has been discussion in the psychedelic community about the dearth of women speakers at these events. One woman, Annie Oak, noticed this several years ago. She told me she grew tired of attending conferences of mostly male speakers with a few token women. With great creative spirit and tenacity, Annie created The Women's Visionary Congress,⁴ which has offered women the opportunity to share their plant medicine research for the past eight years. Men are invited to speak as well

but women predominate and share as artists, activists, researchers, and practicing shamans. It is within this safe, supportive environment that medicine women have been able to speak openly about their sacred work with entheogens. It is truly inspiring to hear from women who have been quietly conducting sacred plant medicine rituals and initiating profound transformation in themselves and others.

It is a sad fact that modern society has

no touchstone whatsoever for this kind of potent transformative exploration. There is a collective disassociation from feeling that is all pervasive in the current culture. The suffering as a result of this is clearly observable as more than 70 million Americans are now taking some kind of antidepressant. If ever there was a call for the return of the female shaman, and dare I add, the female plant medicine shaman, the time is nigh. I have experienced my own deep transformation working with the mushroom teacher and I have witnessed numerous people who have found their way back to themselves through the shamanic use of the medicine. When these medicines are used in a reverent manner with a wise guide, the healing gifts are readily available. Women are naturally wired to fulfill the role of guide with our innate nurturing capacities and our protective mothering instincts. With so many stories of male shamans sexually abusing women on the medicine, especially ayahuasca, I encourage interested explorers to seek out a woman shaman if possible. They are elusive but they are out there operating with devotion and integrity.

Therapist as Mushroom Shaman

I know a woman who is both a practicing therapist and a shamanic practitioner. With certain clients she functions as mushroom shaman, providing a safe and nurturing environment for her client as they journey on the mushroom. She has shared stories with me of clients who were utterly stuck until they were able to experience a breakthrough that only the mushroom teachers could provide. Like myself, she acts as midwife and guide and later assists her client in the integration of the experience. Every person she has worked with has turned a corner in their healing for the better. She knows the risks but says that the psychological healing she has witnessed in people is too profound to ignore. She thinks of herself as not only in service to her clients but also the mushroom itself.

This sentiment is not unusual in people who work with the plant medi-

cines. As those of us who engage nature know, there is an intelligence that permeates every living thing. The shaman shifts states of consciousness to engage these intelligences, which is often done by ingesting or smoking one of nature's offerings. These plants and fungi are actual beings, which are revealed to the shaman who engages them. The shaman forms a relationship with the animating intelligence of the plant or fungi. The women I have personally met who work with these substances all have a deep love and reverence for the plant teachers. They all see themselves in service to that teacher and every one of them is helping people to heal and grow through the use of these medicines. There is a humility in these women and a palpable integrity that comes from the devoted engagement with these plant teachers.

The shaman works with the spirits in order to navigate both the etheric realms and the physical world. Here in the 21st century our societal ills clearly display a missing bridge to the etheric guides that occupy the outer realms. We will not solve our problems with the same mindset that has created them. If our dysfunctional culture is to stand a chance of healing itself in this new century, a paradigm shift must occur. We would do well to welcome back the ancient feminine arts of the shamanic medicine women. These are the wise women who deftly traverse the ethers so their communities can be healed. These are the women who dare to pass through the veils that separate the world of the mundane from the world of the numinous. These are the women who

risk all to work with illegal plants to heal their people. These are the women who midwife the birth not only of the babe, but also the infinite, shimmering potential of the great tribe of humanity.

In Lak Ech! (I am another you)

References

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shonagh Home is an author, teacher and shamanic practitioner. She takes her students beyond the watered down, new age trends and into the territory of the sacred. Her offerings focus on the cultivation of our intrinsic abilities - intuition, creativity and multi-dimensional awareness. Her shamanic work with the sacred mushroom informs both her teaching and her private practice. She is author of the books, *Ix Chel Wisdom: 7 Teachings from the Mayan Sacred Feminine, Love and Spirit Medicine*, and the upcoming, *Honeybee Wisdom: A Modern Melissa Speaks*. Visit website at: www.shonaghhome.com

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