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The Shaman's World

by Georges Fery

The word shaman for most people, carries an aura of mystery and perplexity. Yet, it is a spiritual practice that began with early human societies. For people unfamiliar with, at times, perplexing practices, shamanism is often veiled in an obscure and foreign domain. So, together with the respected priest-shamans Tat Rigoberto, Tat Antolin and Tat Nicolasa, from Momostenango in the highlands of Guatemala, let us explore the significant aspects of this domain and briefly look under its veil of "mystery". The qualifier Tat is affectionately granted to highly respected lifetime priest-shamans, in Maya-K'iche' and Tzutu'jil communities, the bearers of rituals that may affect their people's well-being and economic security.

The study of ancient religious practices reveals common attributes in terms of beliefs and other fundamentals. Most rituals, ancient and historic, affirm the mythical existence of another "side" of life at the end of our days, as mythical as that "other side" may be.

The fundamentals of shamanism rest on the nature-culture dichotomy, a duality correlated with the "field of opposites" in literature. Shamanic rituals are found in traditional communities throughout the world, but we will focus here on those of the Mayas in Guatemala's highlands. So, let us first briefly look back in time when humankind, over 100,000 years Before Present (BP), had to compete for survival with the claws, teeth, swiftness and power of the animal world. Humans defenses were limited to a powerful brain and the nascent kinship of peers. For the sake of survival cooperation was crucial, especially for the protection of mothers and infants for, during the last months of pregnancy and after delivery, females could not fend for themselves. Millions of generations ago, the ring of fire was the first awakening of hunter-gatherers to a world beyond their awareness. In the dark of night, the fire lit a circle beyond which everything was threatening.

The Ring of Fire

Overcoming the fear of a different world, paid for dearly through trial and error, was the task of select people that mastered the nature-culture duality. The awakening to a spiritual world was grounded in the unshakable conviction that a group's spatial location is what stood it apart and affirmed its uniqueness to the exclusion of others. At first, the binary spiritual world was identified through daily repetition of natural events such as day-night. Over untold generations, humans slowly came to recognize that their lives reflected that of the natural world of death and rebirths in its endless repetition, but humans realized that



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they possessed something different from the animal world.

This still hidden world, alien to sensory perception, was the realization of a binary world, that of the animals in nature, and the human world of culture. The gateway between the light of day or upper world and the darkness of the night or lower world, was gradually and at a painstakingly slow pace, identified as two distinct worlds. Individuals that mastered this awakening to the duality of the worlds of nature and culture shall later be called shaman. Over the years, learning, mastery of a mythic world and esoteric exercises were trusted to those individuals to dominate the field of opposites, for their ability to associate with these two worlds. Through time, this perception took hold and became integral to the belief of traditional cultures up to our days. Inherited from a long lost past, it is perceived that all life forms, including the vegetal and mineral worlds, are indivisible from the natural universe, the Maya-Tz'u-tujil call rawajal or the "heart of things."

Neanderthals were already aware of an afterlife, as revealed by the remains of rituals found in their burials at the

Shanidar cave in the Zagros mountains of Iraq (35,000BP). In the cave is a necropolis with more than thirty-five burials, including that of a baby. Some remains were found lying in a flexed position on a bed of shaped stone points, encased in coffin-like stones with stone slab covers. In Shanidar.IV, the deceased was provided with bunches of seven types of flowers, identified by their pollens, placed in tightly packed clusters at the head and feet of the individual. The pollens were later identified by palynologists from several medicinal flowers, still used today by poor Iraqi peasants, as remedies for minor ills (Solecki, 1971:245-250). What Shanidar.IV irrefutably shows, is that Neanderthals preceded modern humans in beliefs and rituals that transcends earthly existence. Faith was already there.

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the greatest religious historian of the 20th century, defines shamanism as a "coherent system of esoteric beliefs and practices that attempt to organize and explain the interrelationship between the cosmos, nature and man" (1964: 66). The practices of shamanism are language specific, with rituals and archetypes grounded in



Blessing Daily Needs

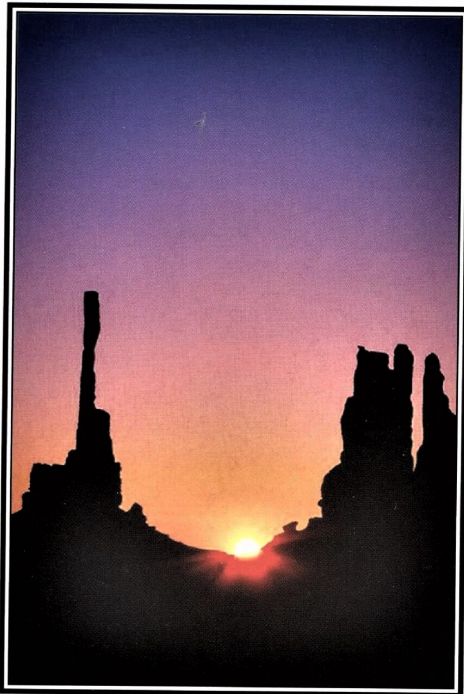
a group's immediate environment for its subsistence and survival. As my mentor Tat Rigoberto underlines "today the shaman functions are as critical to the lives of traditional communities as they were to their forefathers, because they are indispensable caretakers of the spiritual health of their society".

I ask Tat Rigoberto what do upper and lower worlds in traditional belief means? He explains that in the past, the belief in a three-level world was associated with the observation of nature's daily cycles, such as the alternances day-night and the paths of the sun and moon, among other natural events. Furthermore, worldviews of most ancient cultures are based on a seven-point observation of their spatial universe and its endless repetition. Those are: the four cardinal points, the zenith (benevolent forces), the nadir (malevolent forces) and the center (the living world located at the intersection of the first six points), that is, the seventh point where the observer stands. Of note is the fact that the nadir was believed to be an actual place, an abode of malevolent deities below the flat world of humankind. This ancient world view is supported by the observation of the sun and moon as they appear to travel through both the upper and under worlds.

The celestial bodies were seen crossing the visible world on an east-to-west path, and were believed to continue their course from west-to-east in the underworld at night, to rise again the following dawn. After all, sensory perception of a flat world could not be denied, since the sun indeed disappeared at dusk to reappear again at dawn at the same place as yesterday in an endless repetition, undeniable witness of the eternal return. Shamans, in the context of this worldview, were recognized masters of their community's sacred landscape, especially for springs and caves, abodes of water and their deities.

The interface between the upper and lower worlds is the actual world, where the observer stands. The link, between the living and spiritual worlds, is the tree of life or "axis mundi" (axis of the world) that, for Maya communities past and present, is the ceiba tree or "yaaché" (ceiba pentendra), believed to be used by gods and deities to descend and ascend cosmic levels. In traditional societies, the supernatural powers from gods and deities of other "worlds" is accessed by spiritual leaders in their sacred landscape at locations such as caves, mountain tops and everlasting springs above or below ground.

Shamanic practices are grounded in traditions than span untold generations in an unbroken chain of ascendants of the same linguistic group. Tat Nicolasa clarifies language as the sole identity qualifier, since it is believed that "malevolent forces may take the shape of a person of the family or clan but cannot speak the language." Of note is that for



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most creeds, ancient or contemporary, language is the sole vector that carries the hallowed word of "gods." That is why shamanic rituals are language specific and conform to the spiritual maturity of a group.

For each human society, there is only one tree of life in the world, theirs! This mythical tree, is believed to exist for that group alone, for its people are convinced of their uniqueness at the center of the universe. In the absence of trees in their environment, natural features such as a mountain or a cave will be accorded the same mythical value. In all agrarian cultures, the tree of life is the indisputable expression of immortality or "life undying". This perception is rooted in the fact that, with few exceptions, the world of plants for all cultures, is the undeniable

able proof of the persistence and permanence of life through its never-ending cycles of birth and re-birth.

Blessing Daily Needs

My other mentors, Tat Antolin and Tat Nicolasa, both Maya-Tz'utujil', were very helpful in furthering my understanding of the shaman's spatial multi-layered organization of their universe. They stress that in traditional societies, the upper and under worlds are perceived as being made of a number of layers that vary from culture-to-culture. In ancestral societies therefore, "what is learned is more important than what is seen", a remark that underscores the fact that all myths and beliefs are products of human imagination. In most cultures, past and present, "the upper world is regarded as the home of ancestors, benevolent deities, light and life, while the underworld is identified with malevolent deities, spirits, darkness, danger, and death" (Eliade, 1964).

Tat Nicolasa underlined the importance of the repetitive seasonal course of celestial bodies in rites, observed through manmade or landscape features to ascertain their regularity. Priest-shamans had to confirm the accuracy of a sun that would never fail to reappear at the exact same place, day after day, solstice after solstice, equinox after equinox. The first sanctuaries were built for deities, mediators between the super natural world and humankind. The only reason for this need to belie entities beyond human condition was food. For most of early human history, daily sustenance was a persistent concern; the storage of food will be mastered much later in time. Even then, however, dependence on the vagaries of seasons and climate kept communities in constant dread. Natural events such as unpredictable weather, flood, drought, or insect plagues among other factors, brought constant fear, anxiety, conflict and hunger.



Appeal to Another Reality



Those Powerful Ancestors

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Archaeological data reported in *Science* (2018), shows in lake sediments repeated severe droughts during the Maya Classic period (600-900AD), when "...annual rain decreased between 41% and 54%, with intervals of up to 70% rainfall reduction during peak drought conditions...the droughts are considered contributing factors to the eventual Maya collapse" (Evans et al, 362:498-501). Catastrophic droughts were ascribed to malevolent deities' actions that punished peoples for their lack of devotion, as well as to members of the priesthood and the nobility, who were at times overthrown as failed agents of the deities. It is no wonder then that humans sought solace and help from their shamans, needed go-betweens, to commune with the "other world" and help carry peoples unpredictable burdens.

The name shaman is gender neutral, and applies to men and women alike, recognized in traditional communities as religious specialists and masters of the sacred landscape. Initiation rituals, however, are gender specific by reason of the candidates' physical and emotional particulars. Shamans of both gender may act in concert for specific situations when called to ward off malevolent male and female deities, as well as during ceremonies when under stress by hostile forces from both gender. In the Americas, it is relatively common for husband and wife to be shamans; Tat Antolin and his wife Tat Nicolasa are an example.

Both agree with Eliade that "the role of shaman is performed by intelligent individuals who fulfill a number of important functions in their communities. They are healers, say prayers, direct puberty rituals and major ceremonies such as at the time of crop planting and harvesting among others, and for individuals' life cycles. They are keepers of the genealogies of the society, recite myths, do ritual dances and chants during traditional events. They are very knowledgeable about nature and influence decisions for hunting and conservation of resources.

Their functions as mediators in situations of social conflict within the community, or with another group, is very important" (1964). They may not, however, for any reason including sickness, use their abilities for themselves. They then need to call on another shaman or a medicine man or woman, to help them in their predicament.

Priest-shamans repeatedly confirm Eliade's pertinent remark that "shamans are first and foremost mediators between this world and the supernatural world". Furthermore, Tat Rigoberto adds, "together with the village headman or council of elders, shamans manage the community's conflicts and priorities that emerge with changes and events from beyond the village." For "they need to constantly reshape the perception and ideas of the "kaxlan" world (Maya-K'iche' for "world of foreigners"), while they still must answer to their own fundamental beliefs shaped by thousands of generations" (Tedlock, 1982).

Eliade explains how a shaman is selected by his community. "The position of shaman may be inherited or revealed in a vision or a dream. Someone may also become a shaman "simply by following the vocation, but in this case, he/she is considered less powerful" (Eliade, 1954:47). Tat Antolin concurs with Eliade that "as a general rule the shaman is not accepted in his community unless he or she has received two essential kinds of teachings: the mastery of ecstasy (dreams, trances, etc.), and traditional shamanic techniques, that will include learning the names and functions of spirits, the mythology and genealogy of the tribe, develop a secret language, and other ritual aspects" (Eliade, 1951:92). In most traditional societies, initiation requires years of arduous studies under the guidance of an elder shaman. In Colombia, the Kogi Indians require two nine-year cycles before ultimate initiation.

Gender relationship within a group, Tat Nicolasa explains, is governed by "ancestral family and community-tested rules that aim to keep antagonism

and latent violence at bay". For example, the nature-culture duality is underscored at the time of menstrual cycles perceived in ancient and traditional cultures as a dreaded return to nature. As such, the event "is recognized as a recurring antagonism to culture, given its unavoidable nature". At that time, in most traditional societies, a woman is confined to a separate hut, that is, she is temporarily excluded from culture.

In the case of young males, the initiation to adulthood aims at forcefully bridging the duality to incorporate the individual into the group. Prior to initiation, the young boy is still assimilated to nature. Tat Antolin points out that rituals "aim at testing the young man through lengthy isolation from family and the social group with often painful rites such as circumcision, because pain leaves a powerful imprint on a young mind". In most ancient cultures initiation for both genders, natural for females and ritual for males, took place at puberty to confirm the ultimate break with nature while asserting the cultural character of the individuals and their new status in society.

Appeal to Another Reality

Tat Rigoberto stresses a key aspect of rituals governing relationships between descendants and ancestors (the nan'tats), saying that, "in traditional societies, ancestor worship is the intangible constituent of individual and family spiritual lives". He underlines that "shamans may assist in communing with ancestors, but it is the descendant alone that shall address the forefathers to intercede in the resolution of family or individual conflict". Ancestors, as Eliade remark, are believed to influence the lives of individuals of the same patrilineage, trusted to help settle disputes with ancestors of other patrilineage "for grievances that may have taken place a few generations before, unsettled at the time of the demise of interested parties, the antagonism still lingering beyond the grave" (Eliade, 1964:178).

Ancestor worship brings us to the core of shamanic practices and leads us to address the rites associated with the remains of selected ancestors through second burial. The continued physical presence of select ancestors in the past, took place in the family's residential complex. For the same reasons second burial rituals today aims at overcoming social death over biological death. With this ritual, descendants keep their connection with the departed and establish the fact that the ancestor is still not "socially dead" within the family. "Not all progenitors, however, qualify as ancestors; only those lineage members who left a compelling impact on family cohesion, resource acquisition or lineage alliances are worthy of being venerated in this fashion" (Tedlock, 1982). Second burial, therefore, sanctions the rights of surviving members of the family to socio-economic claims in the community, backed up by ancestors. McNany summarizes the ritual as "prac-

tices grounded in pragmatism that drew power from the past, legitimize the current state of affairs, and charted a course for the descendants" (1995).

Those Powerful Ancestors

Second-burial rituals observed in the Yucatán today, may also be seen in other traditional communities of the Americas, albeit with local variations. After two years or more the process calls for the selected ancestor's body to be removed from the grave, and the bones cleaned by women who have long passed the age of reproduction. They are then placed in a small (3'x3'x2') wood crate lined with a flowered hand embroidered cloth. The wood crate is then placed in a permanent setting in a different dedicated cemetery. This ceremony is attended by members of the family who, at that time, share with the departed their hopes and concerns, while thanking the ancestor for their own lives. This second burial ceremony is called "Hanal Pixán" in the Maya-Yucatec language of Mexico, words that mean "food for the souls" and take place on the "Days of the Dead" (01-03 November).

Families may elect to repeat the ritual at the anniversary of the death of the departed, when the bones are again removed from the small wood crate, and carefully cleaned, while family members silently pray and petition the ancestor. Once cleaned, the bones are put back into the small crate with a fresh hand embroidered cloth with flowers and the name of the ancestor. The "Hanal Pixán" ceremony is a reminder to the descendants that they are a mere link in the precious chain of life from grand-parents to grand-children. Above all, worship of family ancestors is grounded in an age-old stern but inescapable logic: No ancestor-No descendant-No Life!

Hanal Pixán, Pomuch, Yucatán

What are the means, I ask my mentors, a shaman uses to establish his association with the supernatural world? They answer that to do so, a shaman is compelled to attain altered states of consciousness that vary among cultures, and may be achieved through deep meditation, sensory deprivation or sudden visions of supernatural beings or situations. In the Americas, however, ecstasy is more frequently attained by using psychotropic plants, the so called "vines of the soul," since nature is regarded as a "gift from the gods, providers of food and medicinal plants on which human lives depend" (Tedlock 1990:87). The shaman's tasks require communion with other stratas of reality so how do they access the various levels of those "other worlds"? According to the beliefs of indigenous tribes, the echeloned worlds lying beyond the field of ordinary perception correspond to a microcosm (or micro-world-view) consisting of a sequence of dimensions of an individual's own interior world, or inner scale of human con-



sciousness. The shamans claim that in their sensory experiences, induced by psychotropic natural substances, they penetrate into the different levels of those "other worlds" as though through narrow openings.

The use of hallucinogenic natural substances is an ancient worldwide cultural practice. In most traditional cultures, its use is associated with the so called shamanic "flight," or feeling of dissociation during which "ch'ulel" the "soul stuff of the living universe from the other world" (Freidel-Schele-Parker, 1993:142), as the Maya-K'iche' refer to it, is believed to separate from the body and penetrate into other dimensions of the cosmos.

Tat Rigoberto agrees with Eliade when the later says that "during these flights shamans call on supernatural and ancestral beings about present and future events, learn new spells, chants and dances, or search for cures to ward off disease. "They roam the underworld for remedies to cure the souls of sick people and help those dying through the difficult path on the way to their last resting place. The idea of other dimensions as dwelling places of the spirit of the dead and fantastic beings is based on the experience of the ecstatic journey of the shaman. "The image shamans form of these dimensions and the description they give of them depends on the projective process of their psychological personality and experience as practitioners, as well as on the cultural and religious tradition of the community and its environment" (Eliade, 1964:124).

A Past Still Alive

Are there "bad" shamans? I asked my mentors. Yes, as all humans they may have a darker side that must be overcome, alone or with the help of another practitioner. He or she may not succeed in overpowering the influence of the underworld, for all beliefs and creeds

have their dark side. It is up to spiritual leaders to stand up against such destructive forces, however, as for all human endeavors, they may or may not succeed. Other important ritual aspects such as, conception, birth, marriage, the shaman's "na'wal" or totem animal and more, will be examined in a forthcoming paper.

"Ancestor veneration is not a cultic practice by a group sharing an obsessive or esoteric interest in the dead. Neither is it a mindless worship of idol, nor is it about the dead. It is rather, about how the living make use of the dead" (McAnany, 1995). It is a type of active discourse with the past and the future, embodying what Carlsen and Prechtel described as "the centrality of Maya understanding of death and rebirth, as described in the K'iche' and Tz'u'tujil traditions" (1991:42) Neither is ancestor veneration a substitute to religion regardless of creed. The foremost difference between monotheism and ancestor worship, is that the first is collective while the second is strictly individual. Their antagonism, following the conquest of the New World, stems from the fact that ancestor worship was understood as an inadmissible means of escape from the new religion.

During the 26-days sacred Tzol'kin calendar, ceremonies, seven public fires burn in dedicated altars throughout Momostenango (Mumut'zli in K'iche'), to receive supplicants offerings. The seventh and last altar (the kokoch) is in front of the town's church. At pre-conquest times, however, infomants say the kokoch was located at the crossing where the transept within the church is today, below which is believed, revered shamans are still buried. Shamanism, as old as humankind, was forcefully coerced by history to bend to new truths and realities, but still defies the test of time. ■

References upon request