

# Where Shamans Go

*Journeys Into  
Extra-Ordinary Reality*

**Zoë Brân**



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## Introduction

Much of what follows in this book offers the experiences of my students and clients and also myself, over a period of many years. It echoes my fascination with and love of narrative, including narrative created during different forms of consciousness. As a child I grew up listening to tales on the radio and sat through school classes waiting to be free to return to whatever book I was currently absorbed by. For surely it is that ability to lose oneself in the tale, to forget ‘reality’ for a brief period of time, that stories offer.

Cultural critic Hugh Brody described the clash of Inuit shamanic and Christian religious narratives recorded by polar explorer Knud Rasmussen during his ‘Great Sled Journey’ across Greenland in 1922:

... all these customs, and therefore much of life, come from stories. Without stories, we are lost – to the world, because we cannot know it for what it has been, and to ourselves, because we cannot find who we are and might be able to become.<sup>1</sup>

Most of us perceive our lives as a narrative that starts with recounted stories of our own birth and moves forward through key first person memories to the present from where it stretches forward into possible futures and on toward a hard-to-imagine cessation of self. Narrative is so completely bound up with memory and our sense of self that it is difficult to imagine human existence without it. Today we still have stories from peoples and societies whose material existence has long since crumbled, yet their goddesses and heroes, their battles and journeys remain with us and continue to affect how we see ourselves in relation to them as we read new translations and watch the characters come to life on the page or screen.

In 1887, psychologist and philosopher of mind, William James wrote, ‘I myself believe that all the magnificent achievements of mathematical and physical science – our doctrines of evolution, of uniformity of laws, and the rest – proceed from our indomitable desire to encase the world into a more rational shape in our minds than the crude order of our experience.’<sup>2</sup> It is this desire to ‘shape’ the world that draws so many 21stC men and women towards talking therapies during which new ‘realities’, new stories, can be produced. It is this same desire that I believe draws a

growing number of people to engage with shamanism, the world's oldest known spiritual practice and in particular to the Core Shamanic journey, which usually reveals itself through narrative. What can be found in the shamanic journey however is a creative re-shaping of experience through the *irrational* mind and through the circumvention of expectation, the off-spring of rationality.

Many years ago I had a profound experience of connection while in an ordinary, everyday, state of consciousness. I later wrote about this event, a reminder of a powerful life-changing moment:

I'm standing on a riverbank watching a small winding stream overhung, on one side, by trees. It could be a rural scene almost anywhere in Europe except that it's 45°C here in Pansaimol and the trees are drooping. Deep in the forest, the Kushavati River moves slowly through its laterite bed and on towards its ultimate destination, the Indian Ocean. I splash a little of the river water and throw it over some barely distinguishable lines carved deeply into the dark red-brown bank. Immediately the lines coalesce into the x-ray image of a buffalo, running. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end; I've seen this before though not here, among pre-historic South Indian petroglyphs, but in a shamanic journey.<sup>3</sup>

Though I recognised the significance of the moment, which was to become seminal in my spiritual and professional life, at the time, it was only later that its full import struck me. On reflection I recognised that my shamanic journeys, which until then I'd thought entirely personal, were very possibly part of a vast universal experience stretching back tens of millennia to the earliest days of humanity. At the time this felt both unsettling and exciting.

Now, looking back, it seems only natural that I should have been drawn to shamanic journeying, to that particular way of interacting with the numinous and that others should also be attracted to this most ancient of practices. When I first made a shamanic journey in 1998 I was already a writer, mostly of travel literature. Making journeys and writing about them was what I did, so what could have been more fitting than to step beyond narratives of 'ordinary reality' and discover new worlds and new adventures within the tripartite cosmos of the shaman?

Reflecting once again on Rasmussen's stories of the Inuit shamans of the Canadian Arctic, Hugh Brody writes:

The human mind and the human condition depend on a balance of the past and the present. We know who we are and how to be in the world thanks to stories. We are held by the way the stories link this to a place;

and the world we live in is given meaning by how stories link this to our ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

Our narratives extend far beyond the personal to include family, community, nation and even humanity as a whole. Popular television documentaries trace the origins of modern humans as they emerged from Africa and spread across the globe. We want to know the story of where we came from and who we were, perhaps in the hope that this will tell us who we are now and who we could be in the future. This desire to know and to create explanatory narratives that enhance knowledge and potential seems to be hardwired into the human psyche. I believe this to be one of the reasons that the shamanic journey is such an extraordinary transformational process, both simple and profound.

### **A Global Phenomenon**

What also attracted me deeply when I began the practice of journeying in 1998 was its very great antiquity. It appeared to have come before *everything* else: all religions, all perceptions of Spirit or ‘God’ and self. At the time this seemed to offer a kind of authenticity and an absence of the need to choose between one form of ‘belief’ and another.

There were shamans before there were gods. The very earliest religious data we know from archaeology show the dancing masked sorcerers or shamans of Lascaux, Trois Freres, and other Old Stone Age caves. The worldwide distribution of functionaries recognizable as shamans ... testifies to their antiquity.<sup>5</sup>

Altering consciousness to make the shamanic journey is thought to be the world’s oldest spiritual practice, or at least the oldest that we are aware of. It is and has been a global phenomenon; its existence not tied to any particular culture or geographical area, for at least 45,000 years and possibly very much longer. In the 21stC, shamanism remains a worldwide practice despite the persecution that began with the rise of formal religions particularly Christianity. This persecution spread across the globe with colonisation and continues to this day for socio-economic reasons in the Amazon, Siberia, southern Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.

The word ‘shamanism’ is often used as an umbrella term for anything that appears to connect to Spirit, from animism to mediumship and Vudu; but throughout this book the word ‘shamanism’ will be used solely to describe the practice of *altering consciousness* in order to make a journey out of the body to access different levels of reality and encounter personal

spirit helpers and teachers. This will be explored in later chapters but the significance of altering consciousness cannot be overstated as it is the key to understanding where it is that shamans ‘go’. Altered consciousness, whether shamanic or not, offers insight into our own nature, the nature of everything around us and the relationship between these.

There are several theories about why shamanic practice is almost universal which will be addressed in later chapters. Increasing evidence exists from forensic archaeology that what we today call shamanism may have made significant contributions to human social and spiritual developments: “All the dissociative, ‘altered states of consciousness’ – hallucination, trance ... are essentially the same psychic states found everywhere among mankind; ... shamanism or direct contact with the supernatural in these states ... is the *de facto* source of all revelation, and ultimately of all religions.”<sup>6</sup>

As anthropologist and neurotheologist Michael Winkelman points out:

A natural result of the evolution of the human brain is the fragmentation of consciousness (Loughlin et al. 1992), reflecting both the increasing modularity of consciousness and the diversification of self into more statuses. Shamanistic traditions institutionalised procedures to overcome this fragmentation of consciousness by synchronising this divergent human cognition through traditions using ritual to elicit the operations of innate modules and induce integrative brain processes.<sup>7</sup>

So, shamanism while not a religion itself, was a precursor to many of the world’s major theologies, including the Judaeo-Christian traditions, Shintoism, Daoism and Buddhism, Sufism and Central Asian Islam. Archaeological evidence of shamans and their practice in the Galilee region of what is today Israel, predates the origins of Judaism by at least 6000 years. The Old Testament of the Bible resonates with tales of shamanic journeys and encounters: Moses speaks with a burning bush, Jonah is swallowed by his vast Lower World spirit helper, a whale; Elijah rises to the Upper World in a chariot of fire. Shamanism’s ultimate claim, to be able to alter material reality through the power of spirit-led intention, describes the healings and miracles of Christ.

It is of course impossible to say with any material certainty how pre-Judaic shamans 12,000 years ago and even more remote Upper Paleolithic peoples 45,000 years ago used or understood their experience of altered consciousness. However there are correspondences too numerous to count between the images of Palaeolithic art, the recorded experiences of indigenous shamans over the last 500 years and the journey narratives of

contemporary shamanic practitioners in the West, including those of my colleagues and students. While some of these may be attributable to prior knowledge, or awareness of archetypes, most, like my own experience beside the Kushavati River, do seem to be the product of shared spiritual experience. This is reflected in the extraordinary visual similarities of rock art across the globe, often separated by tens of thousands of years. Michael Winkelman describes this as being intimately connected to the relationship between brain and mind:

Shamanistic practices illustrate fundamental aspects of consciousness and the relationship between physical and mental levels of the brain. The cross-cultural similarities in features of visions, possession, and other forms of altered consciousness and spirit world experiences indicate that they reflect biological structures and functions. Shamanistic forms of consciousness constitute important contrastive perspectives to ordinary waking consciousness and consequently, for understanding consciousness in general.<sup>8</sup>

Those altered states which expand awareness and heighten focus and which allowed our ancient ancestors to create visual marvels in badly lit caverns, are currently being re-discovered by women and men of all ages, ethnic origins and beliefs. They are seeking that source of creative connection which shamanism suggests is simultaneously within and without the space of human consciousness. As with the correspondences in worldwide rock art, which will be addressed in the following chapter, the astonishing similarities between the journeys of my students from different ages, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds never cease to surprise me.

### **Purpose and Paradox**

Spirits “can be thought of as ego-alien currents that step forward from the shadows of the ‘not-I’ to introduce new information to the individual who cannot access this information while in an ordinary state of waking consciousness.”<sup>9</sup>

Here, psychologist and medical historian Richard Noll describes spirits in what seems to me a simple yet profound way, offering his readers a reason for altering consciousness, which is to access ‘new information’ unavailable in an ‘ordinary state of waking consciousness’. Put simply, to meet with the numinous in the form of spirit helpers and teachers.

The word ‘spirit’ is crucial to the shaman and to shamanism. My personal understanding of spirit is underpinned by my Core Shamanic training



and draws on years of personal experience as a practitioner and teacher. Spirit is simply everything that is or has ever been, or indeed *might* be. So, an animal or plant, a plastic bag, a broken snail shell and a human being are all spirit and part of spirit. It is at once a very simple perspective and simultaneously a complex and profound one, implying as it does that all things are the entirety of spirit in themselves whilst also being a mere fragment of that entirety. Such apparent paradoxes occur frequently in shamanic journeying and in my personal experience are, among other things, teachings on how human beings perceive the world, themselves and what lies beyond the confines of everyday awareness. Because human understanding is in most cases limited to what can be perceived by our five senses, we are unable to perceive the all-encompassing nature of spirit. Thus, spirit helpers are understood to be manifestations of that ‘all’ presenting itself in a specific, simple way, for example a mouse, a tree, a wise crone, in order to offer help, healing or information in a context that we are able to comprehend and benefit from.

The idea of benefiting from interaction with spirit is key to understanding the shamanic process. Unlike many Eastern esoteric practices, shamanism works with the very clearly stated intention of changing something for the better in the everyday world. It has been described as ‘bringing heaven to earth’, a very different approach to many world religions which focus on leaving earth for heaven, either in the present or after death. There is no ‘nirvana’ in shamanism and no ‘heaven’. Instead there is a very precise focus on changing that which can be changed in order to make everyday life better. Change, transformation of ourselves and the world around us is the aim of the shamanic journey. ‘Nirvana’ and ‘heaven’ become states of being and can be everywhere and nowhere. By extension, transformative intention has the power to transform not only hearts and minds but even material reality.

So, our Palaeolithic ancestors altered consciousness to find help and information that would make their harsh lives easier. According to Stanley Krippner and Adam Rock in their book on shamanism and consciousness:

... Homo sapiens was probably unique in the ability to symbolize, mythologize, and, eventually, shamanize. This species’ eventual domination may be due to its ability to take sensorimotor activity and use it as a bridge to produce narratives that facilitated human survival.<sup>10</sup>

Questions such as: when will the herds move so that we can hunt and survive the winter? When is the best time to move on and find a new home for our clan? Who should our new leader be? Such questions are not so very different to what my students or I might ask of spirit today, because although our lives are immeasurably different to those of our remote.

This book will tell the story of a forgotten ability, a natural gift if you will, which all humans possess: the ability to choose to experience different forms of awareness, of consciousness, in order to see and be beyond the material world. The answer to how and why we choose to use this ability will emerge in part through the many and varied voices of my students and clients as they make the shamanic journey and meet their spirit helpers and teachers to ask for help, healing or information. These narratives, interwoven with examples drawn from my own journeys over the last 15 years, underpin the structure and purpose of this book, not least because the shamanic journey is experiential and while it is important and valuable to question our experience of spirit, the power of the journey lies in its emotional impact. It is primarily through emotion that spirit speaks with us and it is the direct and utterly personal *realisation* of being moved by something beyond ourselves which gives the journey its enormous impact and Life-changing capacity.

### What Follows

*Where Shamans Go* is divided into three main sections. Part One will focus on what shamanism and the shamanic journey are and are not and will outline their prehistory and history, including my own contemporary practice. This section will also briefly explore the role of altered consciousness within the shamanic journey. Without spirit(s) and without connection to specific, personal spirit helpers, there can be no shaman, so this section will describe the shamanic understanding of spirit, the relationship between the shamanic journey and spirit helpers and offer a discussion of modern views of spirit. Part One will also look at ‘consciousness and the altering of consciousness in relation to shamanic experience. What is meant by ‘consciousness’ and how does altering it allow encounters with the discarnate? How is consciousness altered during shamanic work and how is it possible to know if journeying is taking place, or not? Here I will clarify the distinction between altered consciousness and the shamanic journey itself and look at the ways in which *purpose* and *intention* distinguish the shamanic journey from other forms of spiritual and mystical experience.

The book’s central section will question what is happening within the brain during the shamanic state of consciousness (SSC) and explore, from a practitioner perspective, the physiological and neurobiological aspects of the shamanic journey, including the uses of modern technology such as energy photography and fMRI scanning. There are many debates about the nature of shamanic experience, but few of them are written by practitioners, so in this section I will draw together contemporary research on the

subject and explore it through the medium of my own experience of journeying and that of my clients and students. What indeed is the nature of the SSC trance and can it be distinguished from other forms of trance in other practices? Earlier I mentioned that the shamanic journey is conducted in the language of feeling, that spirit ‘relates’ to us through emotion; I will explain how this partial bypassing of the everyday mind allows existential ‘realisations’, both minor and profound, to occur. This section will also touch on the relationship between ‘imagination’ and the transpersonal and the role of Jungian theory in modern understandings of such things as archetypes and concepts of universal and transpersonal consciousness. The role of memory and imagination in moving from everyday consciousness into the SSC will be explored.

In its form, its technique, the Core Shamanic journey is pragmatic and goal-orientated because, despite its contemporary Western usage, shamanism is not traditionally a means of self-development but rather of service to individuals and to community. I’ve mentioned that altering consciousness to meet with the unseen was the spiritual and problem-solving practice of our hunter-gatherer ancestors for whom group survival was paramount. This section will make a detailed exploration of what underpins the experience of the Core Shamanic journey. What is the goal of the shaman during the journey? What and whom is she making the journey for? What or whom is she journeying to meet? Where, in fact, *do* shamans go? Here you will find the process of making the shamanic journey itself. I should point out that this book is not intended as a ‘how-to’ guide. There are many such guides available, some better than others, but there’s a world of difference between learning *about* something and learning to *do* something from a book and my personal feeling is that reading is not the ideal way to experience what is, after all, an empirical, not a theoretical, practice. There is a reason why traditional shamans served long, long apprenticeships.

Finally, this central section of the book will explore the shaman’s tripartite cosmos, the Lower, Middle And Upper worlds, the destination of most shamans’ journeys. How do these differ both around the world and in terms of traditional versus modern Western journeying? The changing perception of the significance of these levels of reality in contemporary academic research will be described, particularly as it relates to prehistoric art, altered consciousness and human cognitive development. When and how did the shaman’s world-view create the heaven and hell of the Judaeo-Christian and other religious traditions?

The third section explores the techniques and experiences used in Core Shamanic journeying and touches on how these compare with indigenous and traditional forms of shamanic experience. The structure and format of the journey as it relates to intention, that is, the shaman’s purpose

and goal, will be explored through numerous examples of journeys, their stated aims and the results of the experience. Journey narratives, my own and my clients' will be used to further interrogate matters raised in Part Two regarding how journeying works, how it affects individual and even group consciousness. What, if any, are the potential downsides and pitfalls of journeying? Is it really something that just anybody could or should do? This part will expand on the experience of travelling within the three worlds of the tripartite cosmos described in Part Two, exploring journey narratives specifically in relation to the shaman's destination i.e. The Lower World, Middle World or Upper World.

Where are these 'worlds' and how if at all are they distinct from each other in terms of the experience and content of a journey? What indigenous traditions does Core Shamanism draw on for its understanding of these realities and how do the different 'worlds' support the shaman's intention and the goals of his journey? On an individual level the journey offers help for problems of confidence and self-esteem, overcoming trauma, creative development, and promoting healing and greater connectedness to self and others; it also has the potential for revealing the answers to existential questions regarding the nature of spirit itself, the relation of the individual to the 'all' and questions of life and death.

### **Clarity of Intention**

The first journey I made to ask for advice and information about writing this book suggested I should aim to nourish the reader intellectually, take the discussion around Spirit and consciousness as far as my skills allow and make space in which the reader can perceive what Spirit is and what it does for us. Spirit, I was shown, is like a circle without beginning or end and we, as part of Spirit, are also part of that great endless circle.

Despite, or perhaps because of, increasing public interest in shamanism there are many confusing and conflicting understandings about what shamanism is and what it is not and I hope that *Where Shamans Go* will contribute to greater clarity for anyone interested in learning more about this oldest of spiritual practices and its role in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.