

„Dreamtime“ in Central Switzerland

The magico-religious mentality at the foot of Mount Pilatus has very much in common with the notions of the shamans in the pagan cultures all over the world.

by Kurt Lussi

*He who saw everything everywhere, ruled the land
He who knew of yonder, perceived all things,
...and in equal measure;
Had all knowledge of all things.*

He also saw what was coffered and beheld what was hidden.”

(From the epic of Gilgamesh, 3rd millennium BC)

Seeing the coffered and beholding the hidden. In the epic of Gilgamesh, a South Babylonian collection of myths and legends, the deified king Gilgamesh sees things to which the uninitiated have no access. He is the bearer of hidden wisdom and has knowledge of connections concealed from others. Like the shamans of our times, Gilgamesh, whose reign may be dated to the period between 2750-2600 BC, was an initiate, one with superior knowledge. To this, he was appointed by Anu, the highest god of the Sumerians.

Don Ricardo

The world of the shamans, the reality of which takes place on another plane of consciousness, is also concealed from the external eye. In the documentary, “The voyage of lost souls. Ecstatic cults in Mexico” by Petra Spamer-Rieher, there are no external signs that Don Ricardo is the shaman of the Mazatecs. Only the interior of his hut in Santa Cruz, a small Mazatec village, in the Sierra Madre Oriental in Southeast Mexico betrays the fact that he holds a special place among his people. A Madonna draped with jewellery stands on a bracket, familiar from Spanish and Mexican churches. On the floor is a container in which copal is cured and another, containing the holy mushrooms necessary for the imminent ritual.

Next to it are some benches for the people who seek out the shaman when suffering from illnesses of the body and the soul.

Don Ricardo wears jeans and a windbreaker, which protects him from the cold. On his head is a baseball cap with the inscription “I love Jesus”. The prayers and chants, which are spoken and sung by him during his voyage to another world of consciousness and by his patients during the mushroom ritual, are also of Christian origin. He resolutely fends off the question as to how he heals: “I am not the one who heals, it is Jesus. I am merely his instrument.”

In this world view, Christian beliefs and millennia-old Indian knowledge coalesce into a whole which is almost impossible to untangle. While Don Ricardo recites the *Nuestro Padre* (The Lord’s Prayer) with his patients, nobody is concerned by the fact that the collective journey into another dimension of consciousness is made possible by taking the holy mushroom (*Psilocybe cubensis*), which the Mazatecs term *teonanacatl* (the flesh of God). The holy mushroom, which Don Ricardo only hands out in pairs, makes it possible to travel to other worlds and glimpse the future.

“What I have seen with the mushroom are not lies. They are the whole truth, because the mushroom is the blood of Christ and it contains everything in the world. With the holy mushroom, you can see everything: the firmament, the sea, the whole earth, animals and men. You go back to the origins, then into the present and even further, into the future”

(Citation from “The voyage of lost souls”)

Words of a shaman. They attest to the fact that his activity is only dependent to a limited degree on external circumstances. Crucial to everything is what is hidden from the human eye, i.e. what can only be perceived with the “inner eye”. This indicates that in a certain sense, the shaman stands outside reality. Human deficiencies, such as the pursuit of wealth and power or the use of force are things, which have no place in his conception of life and the relationship with higher powers.

Shamanic consciousness

In the journeys into other dimensions of consciousness undertaken by the shaman, past, present and future coalesce into a unity, which he re-experiences again and again. His knowledge and wisdom is the sum of tradition paired with his own experiences and perceptions.

According to the shamanic world view, the present is unbearable without respect for what came before us and without responsibility for what will be. When man infringes this unwritten law, he violates nature and becomes ill.

This insight is lacking from Western civilization, which suffers from a defective understanding of the wholeness of life. Everything is concentrated on the immediate present, so that responsibility for the future is excluded from the start.

The progress that we so vaunt is thus only apparent. Our quality of life, which according to the dominant notion is supposedly so infinitely higher than that of the Third World, is thus limited to the material. In a get-rich-quick world, the spiritual misses out; the inner needs of humans remain unsatisfied. The consequences of this development show themselves in the destruction of cultural heritage and in the annihilation of natural resources, manifesting themselves in ever clearer and more alarming ways: destruction of the environment, violence, excessive individualism and almost unbounded egotism.

These life-denying views conflict with the shamanic world view, which does not relate to the current moment and is not tied to given times and peoples. What is decisive for human existence is not what happened in the last ten or twenty years, but what happens over millennia. At the Congress “Wanderer zwischen den Welten. Schamanismus im neuen Jahrtausend” [Wanderers between worlds. Shamanism in the new millennium] (24-29 October 2000 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen), the Australian shaman, Peter Costello, an aborigine, paraphrased this principle as follows: “Americans have been flying in outer space for forty years. We’ve already been there for forty thousand years.”

Peter Costello’s world view is characterised by the perception that our present is merely a moment in a structure which is thousands of years old. In the endless cycle of creation, man’s soul comes from another dimension, to which it returns after the separation of body and soul in order to return renewed after a certain time. The idea of eternal becoming, being and waning sketched here is native to many cultures.

Among the Aborigines, the past is defined by the creation phase of mythical ancestors. This time is named the “*dreamtime*” or “*dreaming*”. The dreamtime explains the creation of the universe. Every event and every phenomenon has its origin in the dreamtime or can be explained by it. In ritual chants, music and art, the dreamtime is contemporary. Through initiation, the ancient wisdom is passed on to the male progeny. Young males are initiated step by step into the mythological knowledge of the tribe and thereby experience a mythical return to the dreamtime. At the same time, their future life is indicated, in which they will become those who pass on the knowledge acquired by their fathers to their descendants. The life of aborigines is oriented not towards the future and also not exclusively towards the present, but the past is both present and future at the same time. Through this, the cycle of history is constantly connected to the new.

Dreamtime in the Alps

The notions of the aborigines have much in common with the magical-religious world view which has also defined life in the Alps from earliest times. There are countless signs which conceal ancient knowledge. Conspicuous stones and places, invisible paths or places inhabited by beings from another dimension announce the existence of another world, of death, of the eternal life of the soul and of its return. What happened or still happens at these places, becomes accessible to those who “*see*”, where like in the epic of Gilgamesh, the word “*see*” relates not to the external world, but to inner awareness and seeing.

As with the aborigines, after a given period, the soul returns from the kingdom of the dead in order to begin a further life in the body of a newly born baby. This belief has been maintained in many traditions. Boulders forming the object of ritual worship are still called “Kindersteine” or *Chindlistei* [“childstones”], with the midwife collecting small children from under these according to tradition. This again corresponds to the totemism of the aborigines, according to which, a child only becomes a full adult when the father or mother goes to a holy place and finds the soul of the child there in the figure of a specific object or creature.

Since, according to the pre-Christian conception, man is embedded in an eternal cycle of death and new life, he had a major interest in keeping his habitat as unscathed as possible. This, for example, explains the veneration of the Germans for nature comparable to that of the Aztecs. Trees, stones, lakes, mountains and springs were considered to be animated with the spirits of ancestors. The souls of the dead inhabited these places and from there, returned to the living in order to lead a further life in a new body. Many legends have preserved the remains of the old beliefs. The centuries-old tales warn the living of a break with the past and remind them of their duties to the dead and to the spirits of nature.

“On the Bramegg, even a few years ago, there still stood an ancient and mighty fir tree. Even though all the surrounding trees were cut down, it was spared the axe, since the warning was passed on from father to son not to cut down this fir tree since it held a spirit and it would cause a disaster. The very old sought to recall that a spell had imprisoned the spirit within it. A few years ago, the son could no longer believe the father. Older people and outsiders desperately admonished him as much as they could, but he had calculated the profit that the great fir tree would yield and resolutely decided to fell it. Indeed, he jeered at them and did it out of spite. He would never have done it after that. As soon as the tree fell down, the man who had ordered it was struck with a fearful pain in his leg and not a single plant would grow in its place.

(After Alois Lütolf, *Sagen, Bräuche, Legenden aus den fünf Orten, Lucern, Uri, Schwiz, Unterwalden und Zug* [Legends and customs from the five Cantons of Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden and Zug]. Luzern, 1862, p. 365).

According to this, ancestral spirits are not just anywhere, but dwell invisibly among the living. At particularly distinguished places: sacred trees or particular stones, they may be recognised. This is the location of the threshold between this world and the next. These are sacred gates, which represent not the end but the continuation into another reality, until the time is ripe for a return to earth. The following legend tells of a meeting with spirits:

“Left of the road from Entlebuch to Wohlhusen, an hour before this place, stood a proud old fir tree. It was the “holy fir tree”. One evening a man Entlebuch was driving home cattle bought from Entlebuch homewards to Wohlhusen. As he drew closer to the “holy fir tree”, he saw children dancing around it. He thought they were his own, and that their mother had sent them to meet him. But when he arrived at the tree, one after the other had shrunk to the size of a mouse and

scurried away through a hole under the tree, around which the ground was always clean.

(After Alois Lütolf, *Sagen, Bräuche, Legenden aus den fünf Orten, Lucern, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden und Zug* [Legends and customs from the five Cantons of Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden and Zug]. Luzern, 1862, p. 364).

The soul comes from nature and returns to it after death. Pre-Christian notions have also been preserved in popular beliefs and speech. In Meiringen and Lucerne, the children “came” from a hollow tree, and until a few decades ago, in the hinterland of Lucerne, a coffin was called a “*Totenbaum*” [tree of the dead].

This world view, which in almost every culture encompasses past, present and future, is on the point of crumbling away. This is shown in the lack of respect for nature of our society, as well as in the increasing and irreversible destruction of our environment. The concentration on the present is replacing the all-embracing shamanic world view. Whether our descendants will someday have an existence worth living does not affect materialistic thinking: in our culture, the dreamtime has turned into a nightmare time.

The Shaman as Healer

The fact that many shamans are healers follows from their sensitivity, their approach to creation, life and what comes after it. Anyone who essentially questions the further existence of the soul after death must inevitably reject ideas about the next world. For such people, there is no hereafter and consequently, no god, gods or mystical ancestors. Their thoughts and wishes are concentrated on the present, since according to this view, existence, any existence, ends with death. Connected with this conception is the temptation to arrange the few decades of active life in the most agreeable way possible, to enjoy existence and to remain in this world for as long as possible, since for such individuals, it is followed by nothingness, by lifeless eternal darkness.

On the other hand, those who recognise that there is life after death in another reality and furthermore, who learn that the bliss dominant there cannot be compared with anything in this world, experience an inversion of values. The material and the actual lose their importance and are replaced with strong feelings of love and understanding for the tribulations and hardships of their fellow human beings. These processes are of an extraordinary subtlety. They first manifest themselves in a scarcely perceptible opening of consciousness. In contrast to the effects of ingesting specific substances for limited periods, this subtle opening is enduring. It consolidates itself and acquires increasing influence over the lives of human beings and their approach to the environment. At the same time, the sensitivity of the soul develops. Observations and experiences of violence against human beings and nature become almost unbearable for such individuals.

This group of spiritually sensitive people forms a vulnerable counterpart to the unscrupulous and cold-hearted whose feelings are atrophied. Since feeling, thinking and action are always reflections of the state of the soul, spiritually jaded people concentrate on their own advantage. By contrast, people who develop a

shamanic world view feel a calling to help others and be there for them. In shamans, and even in spiritually sensitive people, energies build up as a result of this development, which are discharged as compassion for others. This process has nothing to do with any given religion but originates in one's personal attitude to life and creation. For this reason, it relates to shamans in the primordial cultures as well as to priests and lay people in the various religious communities. What is decisive is the inner readiness to donate love, an ideal that is also of central meaning in Christianity. This nevertheless includes accepting man and his culture and not seeking to impose one's religious ideals on others.

The process sketched here is the basic postulate for penetrating other realities and for developing a shamanic consciousness supported by acquired perceptions. Only as a consequence of this development will the individual be destined to become a healer. Mostly, this does not happen as the result of a person's own impulse but as the result of a special event or through the dictates of spirits. Shamans who have reached the highest levels of understanding thus do not have a huge body of acquired knowledge available but generally foster the conviction that they themselves are not the healer. Like Don Ricardo, they merely regard themselves as tools in the service of a higher power.

The vocation of shaman

For this reason, the shaman seldom decides to follow his activity but carries this vocation in himself. A special experience, the survival of an accident, full recovery from an illness or the inexplicable avoidance of a danger is interpreted as a sign of his election by powers to which he feels obliged. It is not he that has decided but the powers of another dimension have ordained that he shall develop his knowledge further and become active as a shaman. Unlike Western doctors, or many self-styled shamans, healing activity does not begin with an apprenticeship and the subsequent opening of a clinic, but through an assignment from god or mystical ancestors, which may only be inwardly perceptible. The shaman recognises this assignment either through special signs, through a shaman or through people who ask for advice and assistance with various matters. A precondition for initiation is the sensitivity of the soul, Only when the shaman succeeds in activating these feelings inside himself, while he opens himself internally to this mystical immersion, will he be receptive at a deeper level of consciousness to the tribulations and hardships of his counterparts: concerns which often originate from imbalances in the soul.

The experience of healing

Almost all humans wish for a dialogue with the numinous. Whether this develops into a shamanic world view depends on whether the sensitivity of the soul is promoted and becomes an inner mouthpiece. For example, many people possess a fine intuition for the spiritual condition of individuals close to them. Above all, mothers feel instinctively when their children are not well, even if the child in question says nothing and attempts not to reveal anything. This connection occurs on a level of consciousness that is not directly perceptible. Through it, a dialogue takes place, which cannot be explained in rational terms. This can go a long way.

From the time of the Second World War, we know that driven by their sudden inner disquiet, mothers instinctively felt that their sons had just died. Notices of death in action later confirmed a conspicuously large number of these intuitions.

A similar connection to the one between mother and child often arises in people who love each other and have thereby developed something like a seventh sense. This spiritual love, which can also be described as compassion or inner sympathy, is also the level of relationship between shaman and patient. Without this link, nothing happens, since the shaman will be unable to experience unspoken feelings and spiritual blockages where he has no attachment to the patient. If the unconsciously perceptible access to the soul of the patient is closed to the shaman, he will also be unable to perceive the causes of the illness. In such cases, the ritual will remain an empty and ineffective transaction.

As the shaman creates a level of spiritual connection to his patient, he becomes a healer. On this level, he succeeds in *seeing* the interior of his counterpart and recognising the blockages which cause illness. The materialisation of this connection presupposes the patient's trust in the shaman and willingness to open up inwardly.

Spiritual communication between healer and patient is a precondition for recovery, since only when the patient opens his innermost being to the shaman, will the blockages be exposed which are potentially responsible for the flaring up of the illness. Here, at the moment of the deepest internalisation, the shaman can attempt to remove the negative thoughts and stresses from his patient. The shaman does not actively initiate this process, however, but in a certain sense, gives the patient guidance on self-healing. The shaman strengthens the patient's soul as he transfers part of his own positive energy to the patient. At the same time, he isolates the negative energy, described as an evil spirit, demon of illness or evil spell adhering to the patient. As soon as the basic malady of the disease has been named, it loses power, since what has so far been unknown acquires a comprehensible size. At this stage, the ritual develops its greatest effectiveness. It now serves to restore the balance of the soul, disturbed by evil-minded people, demons or disquiet spirits, or as the Mazatecs say, to restore the breach with nature.

The ability to reach another dimension of consciousness through special rituals and to engage with higher powers on this level is a notable characteristic which distinguishes shamans from normal healers.

All in all, it emerges that shamanism has a world view defined by an altruistic love for other people. A precondition for shamanism is the development of consciousness. It follows from this that the shaman is not an innate healer but gradually develops this ability. Nor is he any priest, although he may carry out priestly functions. Above all, the shaman is a human being who has developed a particularly pronounced compassion for other human beings and can reach another reality through an inner opening. "Shamanism", says the Nepalese female shaman Maile Lama, "is applied love". This love may be donated by people who,

like Gilgamesh, have seen what is coffered and beheld what is hidden, and through this, have knowledge of things.

Conclusion

In the Alps, Christianity by no means displaced pagan culture, but rather draped itself like a net over the existing mentality. In the course of time pagan thought and Christian faith intertwined with one another. The resultant magico-religious mentality forms the basis of popular belief and traditions. They are important for the self-confidence which is on the other hand the basis for the quality of life in the sense of spirituality. This view of the world has very much in common with the notions and the spirituality of the Australian aborigines and the shamans all over the world. From this follows that the spirituality is the basis for international understanding and subsequently for peace.

About the author

Kurt Lussi, born 1956 in Lucerne, is curator at the Museum of History in Lucerne and official responsible for the donation Dr. Josef Zihlmann. His main points of research are the practice of people's beliefs and people's medicine in the Alps. Editor of the magazine „Volksfrömmigkeit und Brauchtum“ [People's devoutness and tradition]. He is author and freelancer of different yearbooks and professional journals.