

## **Alaska's Cultures**

### **Shamanism: A Personal View**

Note: This essay is not a description of shamanism that tries to make generalizations across Alaska Native cultures and peoples. There may be no one left who is qualified to make such general statements. Most of the historic understandings have been lost; shards and fragments remain. And yet it is difficult to understand Alaska's history without having at least some sense of those beliefs that were an integral part of the lives of the people who represent 99 % of the time of human occupation. This essay presents some thoughts about a belief system that lasted thousands of years, spanned a geographic scope of thousands of miles and encompassed hundreds of languages. It is intended to describe and frame some aspects of shamanism in a manner that explains why this view of the world made sense to Alaska Natives and other world cultures. While shamanism is no longer widely practiced in Alaska, it does continue to shape the world view of some people and some cultural groups from around the world.

Shamanism according to Miriam Webster's on-line dictionary (June 12, 2004) is a religion practiced by indigenous peoples of far northern Europe and Siberia that is characterized by a belief in an unseen world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits responsive only to the shamans.

This definition focuses on shamanism as a belief in the supernatural. Many people associate shamanism with such a belief and while this is not a 'technically' incorrect understanding, it is an incomplete understanding of what shamanism represented. Note for example, that such a definition hardly distinguishes shamanism from other religions of the world.

Shamanism is surprisingly varied. Many Americans have some acquaintance with the Christian faith which is also highly varied. For example there are deists and there are those who accept a particular version of the bible as theologically and historically accurate. In shamanism, there were people who accepted the tools and there were people who accepted the larger ideas, something like the difference between accountants and mathematicians. People at the more literal level of acceptance believed, for example, in the if...then propositions: If you do this, then this is going to happen. People seeking the tools of shamanism might also associate themselves to particular world views of the afterlife. For example, the belief that one creature (a representation of a spiritual concept) is of greater prominence than another. The major structures of the Christian faith are Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic. There are dramatic differences in terms of understanding among these three groups. Likewise, shamanism varied

widely from region to region and from shaman to shaman. Some shamanistic societies were darker in nature, i.e., more pessimistic about the potential of humans and super natural world creatures to live together in this world and the next, whereas, other shamanistic societies had a more sanguine and optimistic outlook. Some of the Western accounts of shamanism contain confusing and conflicting descriptions. Some of this conflict is related to the range of differences of beliefs within shamanism.

It is difficult to comprehensively and certainly describe shamanism today for several reasons. The first reason is that there is no written text. Only fragments remain and shamanism has, no doubt, been transformed, reformed, restructured, and understood differently through the ages. The second reason is that shamanism was in most cases in North America actively suppressed, often by the government (Canada and the United States) and also by the predominate religions of the Christian faith missionaries and policy makers. Those who oppressed also kept written records about shamanism. As opponents they tended to focus on the worst abuses. To learn about shamanism from these accounts would be the same as learning about Christianity from a victim of the inquisition.

Another source of confusion surrounding shamanism is the inability of those describing the belief system to distinguish between folklore and shamanistic belief. Folklore, for example, a black cat crossing your path is bad luck, is not viewed in this country as a religious belief, but it is not scientific either. It might be described as a 'customary' belief. In Inupiat, an example of a customary belief is rubbing a new born baby girl's head with a camp robber's feather so that she will have nice thick hair. For an outside observer it would be very difficult to distinguish folklore from religious conviction and, as with Christianity, some customary beliefs, over time, were integrated into shamanism. The distinction between folklore and religion is important, because if a religion judged to based on superstition it will probably be considered by most Westerners to be primitive and without intellectual merit.

Still another reason that contributes, to a lesser degree, to a lack of knowledge about shamanism is internal to the belief system. Within shamanism there was an ascending ladder of knowledge and what a person knew depended on apprenticeships, training, and experience. Relatively few people held the more complete knowledge of shamanism.

This description that follows is related to shamanism among the Inupiat from the Bering Straits area. There was a sense that in ancient days, in the earliest days of Alaska, the world was different - physically, spiritually and

temporally. The boundaries established by physical properties, time, and spirit were not sharply distinct and strictly categorical, as people believe today. The world was viewed as being more 'fluid' and within that world there was more potential for movement across physical, spiritual and temporal dimensions. A person, for example, could take on either human or animal form. The ease with which these transformations could occur is related to past times, i.e., in the time before the present time transformations were easier. If a transformation did occur, then a person learned all about that animal - the agility, the speed, the canniness, the habits. Humans had enormous appreciation for what animals could do and they understood the limitations of being human. Animals could also become human, but there was not a sense that they aspired to do so. Not every person could become every animal and some people were more adept at these transformations of their physical nature than others. It is somewhat akin to knowing more than one language. Some people have the talent, the ear, the memory and they can become fluent in six languages. Others never transcend the boundaries of their native language. These transformations were physically significant, and also spiritually significant. The way that the physical and the spiritual would be separated today would not have been understood in those times. The door was not that thick. It was not even a door.

There are essential components in shamanism. One must believe in an afterlife with its emphasis on the family and the community, in the supernatural, in the possibility that a person can be transformed from one creature to another, and in the supernatural capacities of the person. (Unlike the Christian faith that believes in the soul, in shamanism there was more than one supernatural part of the person.) One of the most important understandings of traditional belief was that those who were no longer physically present, either by distance or by time, could be communicated with, because some people could overcome the limitations of time and space. While this may not seem plausible today, most people are aware that time is a tricky concept, sometimes it moves fast, sometimes slow and sometimes it disappears. For example, think of the case where good friends who have been separated for a number of years meet again and within moments they pick up right where they left off those years ago. Time disappears.

In shamanistic societies it was understood that the boundaries of time and distance could be transcended and that there was a danger that this ability could be lost. It was believed that as time moved forward and history moved on, more and more humans and animals became perceived as being categorically distinct. As the world gets older, things within it become understood as being fixed. Knowledge in this sense limits possibility. Time is like a person who gets more and more fixed in his habits. People can do more things than they always do, but they rarely change their habits and over time they lose the imagination to see what else they could do. Habits become our limits, but

shamen could move into trancelike states and, for example, communicate with people from the past. The shamen reminded people about the possibilities of transformation and transcendence.

Humans today find comfort in the predictability of things. Things that are always the same are reassuring. Just the idea that something could be out of synchronicity is disturbing. Some of people's most vivid memories are related to events that have been 'out of sync', not predicted, that shook up the understood order of the world. The western world today anchors its views in science and this has produced an immutable confidence that the world can be understood, predicted, and to some degree controlled. For example, what if one day you went out to your car, or snowmobile, and you found a seashell sitting on top of it. This shell would represent nothing offensive, nothing dangerous or poisonous. But some people would be bothered and approach the puzzle with a western analytical disposition. How did it get there? Who did this? What is the meaning? Why is it there? Today's scientific view of the world is accompanied by a confident belief that there is an answer and that the answer can be known.

Try to imagine instead a world that is viewed as uncertain and where humans view themselves as one small part of a larger plant and animal system. In this world people look for connections, for underlying meaning and threads to explain how it works. So, the world is held up on four posts and on top of each post are four birds: a ptarmigan, a loon, an eagle and a crane. If somebody said that this was a traditional belief (and it is for some) of the nature of the world, it could easily be dismissed as naïve and primitive. Science does not support such a belief and it does not make any sense, physically. The other way to understand it, however, is to understand that this is not a physical explanation at all, but rather an understanding that the world is land (ptarmigan), water (loon) and air (eagle) and even more that life is the mixture of the three, (crane). These are the four posts that represent the living world and that sustain life. Another idea that some would say is ridiculous is that if a pack of wolves run into water they become killer whales. While it is absurd if viewed scientifically, it is not absurd if viewed analogically. The role of wolves on land as pack animals is similar to the role of the pods of killer whales in the sea. Also, they both demonstrate cooperative group behavior and are generally not hostile to human beings. These examples show that living things can be viewed through taxonomies based on anatomical features, as in modern science, or they can be viewed by function and in relation to other living things. Shamanism and western science are two very different ways of relating to the world.

Traditional beliefs were also intended to teach people about their dispositions.

A surprising number of what westerners would describe as tools of shamanism might be understood as today's lessons in self-help psychology. There is a traditional belief that as a person sings certain chants or songs, the animals appreciate them and will come. This is a very important issue - animals allowing themselves to be taken by human hunters. Moose, caribou, wolves - they are faster, they have better eyesight, they are far more agile. The miracle is that humans can successfully hunt at all and thus hunting is best explained as being a part of a larger scheme of things. Animals allow themselves to be taken. Many of them don't. Perhaps thinking about the relationship that many people today have with a pet cat or dog will illustrate some of this point. The pet owner comes into his house and is thinking about transporting the pet to the vet. The cat does not like being transported anywhere. Immediately and for no reason that the owner can perceive, the cat senses that something is up runs underneath the bed. Animals have senses that humans do not understand. Pet owners talk about it all the time. They read the disposition of humans. Is it body language, anxiety, the tone of the voice? Now imagine again the songs that the hunter sings. Perhaps these magical songs help the hunter to relax. It is hard to chant and to remain tense. A hunter has been working hard and long, he is tired and cold and finally on the horizon, within sight, is an animal that would be welcome. It is difficult not to get excited and tense at this point. Having these songs might be more about hunter success because it changes your disposition. In traditional beliefs when the animal hears the song, it comes to you.

Traditionally shamen would have helpers. Supernatural helpers, many shamen would say, were not helpers as much as partners. Shamanism is about making bargains. In exchange for assistance, the shaman would provide something valuable to the helper. There is a cost to all of these things. The more valuable the help, the greater the cost. These helpers might take on the form of certain creatures. In the historic era people describe shamans as having domesticated animals: wolves, raven, camp robbers, wolverine. Having these animals as domesticated pets is often represented as a Barnum and Bailey magician's trick. No doubt for some shamen these beliefs were beliefs of utility; viewed as ways to make a living, in the same way there were clerics and priests who may or may not have believed much of anything, except that if they performed certain rituals they had an income, a means of livelihood, a place in the world. The merit of a faith, however, is not judged by the abuses of a few.

For the shaman the supernatural helpers were a part of the larger controlling forces in the world. Imagine how difficult it would be to domesticate and live with a wolverine. The experience must have expanded a human's sense of the world. It would stretch a person's accommodation of how things are understood and expand a level of alertness to possibility. Today public television and cable networks are devoted to programs that show the world of animals. Why would

people who will never see most of these creatures in their natural environment watch these shows? Presumably there is an aesthetic value - such knowledge adds a dimension to the human experience. Knowing about animal lives, their character, their behaviors, their relationships to the world, provides humans with some unique sense of their own existence. In northwest Alaska, a world in which resources are relatively scarce, food is unpredictable, life is tenuous, it is remarkable that there was a place for domesticating animals, for living with animals beyond their physical utility and that there were people whose formal role might include living in partnership with these creatures. Surely this could have added insights into the physical world that might not have been understood in any other way.

From a European perspective the shaman played multiple roles: theologian, philosopher, fish and game manager, therapist, community social worker, doctor, massage therapist, magician, ventriloquist, entertainer, song writer, historian, strategist, funeral director, psychologist, counter balance to the political leadership, trickster, and a spiritual leader. The shaman paid attention to each part of the cycle of the year, he gave it meaning and he drew attention to each part of its social and physical nature. In a community in which so much of life demanded day-to-day and hour-to-hour attention, the shaman kept an eye on the long-term and the events on the horizon that might shape the direction of the future.

These few examples have been provided to illustrate some aspects of shamanism and to demonstrate how this belief system might make sense even through the lens of Western belief. But shamanism is much more. It is a view of the world that recognizes its impermanent nature. It is a world within which physical, temporal and spiritual realities intertwine and through which the shaman, a person carefully trained, helped people to better navigate their lives.