

## ASTRO\*SHAMANISM – PART 1

Introduction

July 17, 2010

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

What This Blog is About: I have many different friends on Facebook, not all of them are interested in astrologers, so those of you not interested just skip over this blog please and understand.

A number of you have written to me about my studies of esoteric astrology, in particular shamanism as it relates to astrology. As it happens, this is my favorite kind of astrology so I will attempt to create a series of blogs on this topic. Let me know if you like it and I will continue.

Astrology is, above all, an oracle, albeit a complex one. An oracle is a direct way for the cosmos (and our own inner life) to actually speak to us, if we will listen. This writing is about listening to that inner oracle and learning how to read and interpret the signs and messages that are endlessly appearing all around us each day of our lives.

The material covered here is part of what is called “inner” or “esoteric astrology.” It is esoteric only because it is subtle enough that not everyone can get it, pick up on it. If they did, it would no longer be called “esoteric.” I will do my very best to point this material out as clearly as I can and, if you can get it, your understanding of astrology will not only deepen, but you will begin to see these inner teachings at work in the world around you, 24x7. No longer will your astrology be just from a book or a chart form. Esoteric astrology is above all a living astrology and, if this blog makes any sense to you, you will learn to see astrology is all around you in your day-to-day life, and not just out there somewhere among the stars. Esoteric astrology is the inner heart of astrology and very much worth making an effort to understand and experience. And Shamanic astrology is a principle form of esoteric astrology.

### A Personal Account

Shamanic astrology is a subject that is VERY hard to describe in words, but I will do my best. I have had excellent teachers and training, yet I must ask for your patience and understanding. I apologize in advance if any of this writing is too personal or too much or the wrong kind of prose for your taste. I have only my own personal account and life journey to use as an illustration. I cannot presume on anyone else’s experience. And please don’t read my personal account and suppose that you will experience the same thing.

### Life Initiations through Astrology

This blog is about the shamanic tradition within modern astrology, what we could call ‘Shamanic Astrology’, and astro-shamanism is nothing new. Astrologers have been performing a shamanic function in society for centuries, and they continue to do so today. Astrology, and the astrologer’s role as shaman or guide, is becoming increasingly more important in modern society. Shamanic astrology is not often openly discussed, and is generally considered, as already mentioned, a part of what has been called “esoteric astrology,” the inner or more secret aspects of astrological knowledge. This is because it has to do with the ecstatic tradition, what is commonly called out-of-the-body experience. That ecstatic tradition is what I will be presenting here.

Before we describe the process of astrological shamanism, let's review what a shaman or shamanka (female shaman) is in the literature of the world. Here we will use the better-known term "shaman" to represent both male and female shamans, so as not to have to repeat both terms endlessly.

The word origin of Shaman (SHAY-men), from the Siberian Tungus language, means one who "knows," one who has attained some degree of spiritual realization, awareness, in particular awareness of the other worlds, the next life stage or planes.

### Traditional Shamanism and "Core Shamanism"

We should distinguish here between what is called traditional shamanism and the popular-today derivative called "Core Shamanism." Traditional shamanism is a vocation that chooses you (there is no choice), while core shamanism is an avocation, a form of shamanism which anyone can choose to study and learn to use. Core Shamanism is, in a word, a sanitized form of traditional shamanism, stripped of most of the dangers and risks, something that almost anyone can sign up for, study, and eventually practice.

Both forms of shamanism exist in the world today, so it is meaningless to say that traditional shamanism is the only one to be used and the other simply an imitation, although there is some truth to that assertion. Here we are focusing on the parts of shamanism that make sense in modern astrology. Any counseling astrologer, almost by definition, is probably using one or more shamanic techniques, with or without the mind-altering experiences of the traditional shaman. These techniques are what we will discuss here.

That being said, I have found it much more useful to first understand the nature of traditional or classic shamanism, and take what we can from that, than to try to take from "Core Shamanism," which is already an extract. In other words, we can each make our own core shamanism by absorbing as much as possible from those parts of traditional shamanism that make "sense" to us, that fit our personal experience. That is the approach being followed here.

### What is Astro-Shamanism?

It is most important to understand the shaman's spiritual crisis. The traditional shaman does not choose to be a shaman. Shamanism of this kind is the result of a series of psychological visions or experiences whose very nature estranges one (at least for a time) from conventional society and the normal way of seeing things. The shaman is somehow, against his (or her) will, thrust outside of how everyone else sees life, and into a space and view that is markedly altered and mostly non-communicable to the society around them. They become invisible because society cannot see where they are at.

The shaman, usually through a personal psychological or spiritual crisis, has become aware of the inner sequence of the life processes typically hidden from society by their very obviousness, processes that have somehow become "self-secret." This propensity can come about through having a near-death or life-changing experience, mind-altering drugs, or somehow becoming psychologically separated for a time from conventional societal consciousness.

### Not the Same as the Vision Quest

The shamanic experience has some similarities to the Native American vision quest, but, unlike

the vision quest which is generally voluntary, the shaman's own internal psychological chemistry and life changes thrust the future shaman beyond convention and into an altered state of consciousness until such time as he (or she) can manage (often through what is sometimes a life/ death mental struggle) to find a balance, stabilize, and return to normal society. The shaman cannot communicate what he (or she) sees to others, because society is not able or prepared to understand it. They often are viewed by society as a little bit crazy. Society in general (by the very definition of conventional) has not had the experience needed in order to understand the shaman's view. The shaman by virtue of his unorthodox experience is just "out there" on his or her own.

Unlike organized religions, shamans act alone and are "self-chosen," rather than appointed, in that the intensity of the shaman's own internal experiences separates him or her permanently from the other members of society. They are outsiders not by choice, but by the nature of their own inner experience and awareness, permitted to see and experience realms of the psyche the average person does not.

Typically, shamans may take years to stabilize the vision or mental experiences that they are thrust into, often struggling against mental unbalance and even madness. The shaman can be distinguished from a madman because he (or she) learns to control and understand what has been experienced. He or she masters those altered states of mind and rejoins society, but with a permanently altered view. The shaman always exists in conjunction with and in contradistinction to his society. Since shamans are defined in relation to the societal conventions they live in, without that society they have nothing to be measured against. Shamans are the original outriders, literally defining the edge of conventional time and mentality.

### A One-Way Street

It is generally agreed that once a shaman, one is a shaman for life. There is no going back and, no matter what other career or work the shaman may undertake, the function of shaman always takes precedence and is their heart function within the society. It just happens.

In other words, shamanism is not an avocation, something one chooses. We do not choose to become a shaman, but the very intensity of our own inner experiences determines a vocation as a shaman, and to what degree we are a shaman.

As my teacher used to say, "We are all initiates to life, but the question is: to what degree?" Although in some societies, shamanic powers can be inherited or run in the family, in those cases it appears to be more a product of sharing a similar mind-set and training, with the parents initiating the children. However, as pointed out, most shamans are "called" or chosen by their own internal experiences and awareness. They come to know what others do not know and cannot know. And this change in view is permanent – a realization. They cannot forget what they have seen, and it is this knowledge of altered states that makes them valuable to society.

All societies have shamans or their equivalent, because shamanism is something that happens to one, rather than something that can just be learned or passed on. In any society, there are always a few members whose personal inner experiences are such as to separate them, at least for a time, from the group. Knowledge gained from this separation then gives shamans an alternative view of life that makes them of use to the community. They alone understand other members of the community who become estranged for one reason or another and their shamanic experience allows them to communicate with those souls who fall through the cracks.

It is pretty much axiomatic that the shaman can only help others in those areas where he or she has personally had a similar experience.

### Shamans Are Not Priests or Ministers

As pointed out, shamans acquire special knowledge or abilities through their own life-changing experiences, and they are distinct from the rest of their society by the very intensity of these spiritual experiences. In this sense, they are more akin to the mystic. The shaman, as author Mircea Eliade puts it, “is the great specialist in the human soul; he or she alone “sees” it, for he or she alone knows of its “form” and its destiny.” The shaman knows the story or journey of the soul. In a very real sense, the shaman wakes in these realms, while society sleeps. They are the watchmen and protectors of the community soul.

Shamans are to be distinguished from priests or ministers and other members of organized religion who work cooperatively with one another to inform and shepherd the entire society. For the most part, shamans are independent, solitary, depending only on their own internal experience or revelation, and they seldom work in groups or attempt to convert all the members of their community to their view. Instead, they assist the stragglers in a community, those who, for one reason or another, have fallen out of the conventional mindset, and are somehow temporarily spiritually estranged.

Shamans acknowledge other shamans, but seldom group or come together. You would not expect to see a shaman conference, at least of the traditional variety. They are for the most part loners, and their knowledge is personal to themselves; it serves to separate them from their particular group or society. The idea of a shaman convention is pretty much an oxymoron.

### Societies and Brotherhoods

Shamans also differ from secret societies or esoteric brotherhoods in that they typically are not part of any particular lineage or organized group, and, as mentioned, do not attempt to shepherd or initiate the entire society, but, instead, only initiate or work with those like themselves, those who have the propensity to sustain ecstatic (out-of-the-body) experiences, that is: those who find themselves in an altered state of mind. In other words, shamans guide and inform particular members of their society who are in spiritual flux — those who have somehow fallen through the societal cracks.

As mentioned, there is no attempt on the part of the shaman to convert the larger community to his or her vision, a vision which in the shaman’s view is a calling, an exceptional state of mind. Shamans are psychic healers and stand watch over society to protect the integrity of the human psyche. They are the shepherds of the human soul in its journey through time.

### The Shaman Is Not a Doctor

Although many shamans are also healers of physical ailments, medicine men or women, this function is distinct from their role as a shaman, at least in this material. The shaman is primarily a doctor of the soul, not of the body, and administers to the psychological and spiritual realms rather than to physical symptoms. The Medicine Man is very much a vocation on its own.

Although the shaman may also use various medicines and can be a healer or doctor of the physical body, he or she is primarily a healer of the psyche, a master of ecstatic (out-of-the-body) experiences. The shaman works on the psychological and subconscious level, seeking

out the soul of an individual in distress, identifying with them, and directing them away from their current struggle or mental suffering to the next level or stage: the so-called afterlife. He or she is an intermediary between the visible and the invisible (or not yet visible) worlds.

The work of the shaman does not pertain so much to our physical death at the end of life, but to the many smaller deaths we each die in life, climacteric events (rites of passage) in life that find us dying to one phase of life and struggling or not-yet-born into the next phase. One seeks out a shaman because one is temporarily lost, and the shaman somehow can see both the realm in which we are leaving and the new phase which we are about to enter. Sound familiar? It should, because the public seeks out astrologers for very similar reasons.

If this is interesting some of you, I will next talk about shamanism in astrology.

