

# About the Nature of Celtic Shamanism

by

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The center of Shamanic work is the so called Vision-Quest which shows effect in cure and protection. Aim of this abstract shall be a modern worlds approach towards this ancient tradition of spiritual development.

## 1 A Concept with many Facets

The question what actually Shamanism is, cannot be answered easily, because there is no simple absolutely valid answer to the question for the nature of Shamanism. The concept Shamanism covers a whole number of performances which especially depend on subjective experiences of people, who more nearly deal and have dealt with this system.

Within various indigenous peoples the methods of the Shamans may externally differ from each other but specific techniques however are common to all of them, and the experiences during a Shamanic Trace-Voyage are largely similar (Michael J Harner: *Der Weg des Schamanen. Ein praktischer Führer zu innerer Heilkraft*. Ansata Verlag, Interlaken 1983).

### 1.1 Rhythm and Trance

To achieve Trance Shamans make use of acoustic stimuli. The tool or better the vehicle is mostly the Shaman-Drum. The drum is the vehicle of the Shamans into other levels of reality. It's the rhythm of the drum that carries them away and into the "Otherworld".

A flat frame-drum – like the Irish Bodhran - monotonous beaten three to seven times per second can move a person completely inexperienced in spiritual work into a deep Trance within less then ten minutes (John Matthews: *Keltischer Schamanismus. Rituale, Symbole, Tradition*. Eugen Diederichs Verlag, München 1998; Anja Senser / Klaus Lang: *Heilbuch der Druiden. Mit Steinkreisen, Krafttieren und Heilbäumen zu mehr Einklang von Körper und Seele*. W. Ludwig Buchverlag GmbH, München 1999; Paul Uccusic: *Der Schamane in uns, Schamanismus als neue Selbsterfahrung, Hilfe und Heilung*. Goldmann 1993).

Not only shamans use this magical rhythm to attain a state of Trance. An example from the youth culture is Techno-Music, where it's participants use this hard rhythms to get into Trance. Teenagers which are dancing for hours to this monotonous sounds move themselves into ecstatic mind-conditions which cannot be easily stopped willfully since drugs and alcohol are mostly consumed in addition. These kids have rediscovered the euphoristic effect of the Shamanic 3 to 7 hertz - never lost by indigenous peoples. They don't it for a certain purpose but simply to freak out for just a couple of hours.

## 2. Celtic Shamanism

The German philosopher and metaphysic Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is known for the following epigram: "If reality doesn't correspond with my theories, it is worse for reality." No Shaman actually will follow this thought, Shamans take reality, as it is represented to them, without permanently inquiring into why things are as they are. However, Shamans are connected to everything around them, whether it lives or not. A magician once said "if you cannot be a worm, then you cannot be god". This epigram is fundamental in Celtic Shamanism and told through the Lore story of "Taliesin".

An essence of Shamanism, especially in Celtic tradition, is transformation - shape-changing - symbolized by a two masks. These two masks are in fact one - if you turn it upside-down you get the other. Two apparent opposites which are in fact different perspectives of the same thing, the one and whole thing. It has a modern connection with gestalt, also about seeing things from more than one viewpoint. What you see depends on what you're looking at and where you're looking from.

### 2.1 Shapeshifting

It's the mysterious art of "thinking yourself" into another place. Everything that is "shown" to you is brought back to the "Everyday World". You can ask another "Being" if you can share their shape - if they agree, you go with them. You share your consciousness with them and they with you. You might do this because you need the wisdom of the Being or Beast with whom you travel, they may be able to help you find answers to questions (Felicitas Goodman: *Wo die Geister auf den Winden reiten. Trancereisen und ekstatische Erlebnisse*. Verlag Hermann Bauer KG, Freiburg im Breisgau 1993). One of the best examples in Celtic Tradition is the story "Finding of Mabon" within the tale "Culhwch and Olwen" where Kay and his companions travel to find the Eldest Beast. At last they are taken by the Salmon - the owl calls him *a kind of God made before me* - to the place where Mabon is imprisoned.

### 2.2 Dreamweaving

is the ability to walk consciously between the worlds and to transfer wisdom between them. The Shaman is the walker between the worlds who links, the "Everyday World" with "Otherworld" (Paul Uccusick: *Der Schamane in uns, Schamanismus als neue Selbsterfahrung, Hilfe und Heilung*. Goldmann 1993). He knows the ways of gods and men, and is able to translate that knowledge into knowing so that both worlds are able to understand and co-operate with each other. However, knowledge is not gained easily. It needs a long and difficult apprenticeship, of many grueling trials and tests. It can be found in all of the world's heroic tales. The hero has to survive a series of deadly scary adventures before he slays the dragon, wins the princess, beheads the giant, etc (Carol S. Pearson: *Die geburt des Helden in uns, Transformation durch die zwölf Archetypen*. Knauer 1993).

### 2.3 Storytelling

There was more to the old tales than just good entertainment during the cold everlasting winternights. Encoded within the thrills and very emotional love scenes were messages and

teachings from the “Otherworld” speaking through the Shaman. The tales are the framework of the Lore, it’s the body of teachings and essential for a Shaman’s working life. Through Lore we remember the ancient strands of “Otherworld” knowledge buried deep in our unconscious and bring them to the forefront of our conscious mind (C.G. Jung: *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken von C. G. Jung*, Walter Vlg., Düsseldorf 1999; C.G. Jung: *Archetypen*. DTV München 2001). We can then see them from a new perspective and apply them to life in our “Everyday World”.

### 3 Seasons

Celtic Shamans work with the seasons over the year - which are stated by our planets walk around its sun. Shapeshifting and the Seasons are an integral part of Dreamweaving Story-Lore in Celtic wisdom.

#### 3.1 Wheel of Seasons

There are 8 season in the Celtic year - 4 overlited by the Sun and 4 by the Moon. The so called the Wheel of Seasons gives the names and times of the festivals.

The four Sunfestivals, celebrate significant times in the annual progress of Earth around the Sun, the two **solstices** and the two **equinoxes**. The solstices are the longest day - 21st June, and the shortest day - 21st December. The equinoxes are the two times in the year when day and night, light and dark, are of equal length.

The four Moonfestivals come half way between each pair of Sunfestivals. The Celtic year begins at **Samhain** - 1st of November. It is a time of death and birth, a time of change, where we die our old life and pass out of the darkness into a new life. **Imbolc** – 1st of February, is the Celtic festival of the lighting of the new fire and the Feast of Brighid, the triple aspected Goddess of Poetry, Healing and Smithcraft. **Beltane** - May Eve, the time of the may Queen and Walpurgisnacht. The name comes from Belenos, the Shining One, he is very close to the Druids the Celtic intellectual class who practiced Shamanism. Belenos lights up the heavens and warms the earth with golden-green radiance. This is the great festival of flowering that marks the beginning of summer. **Lughnasadh** – 1st of August, is he Harvest festival in honor of Lugh/Llew, the Manygifted Sun God (Anja Senser / Klaus Lang: *Heilbuch der Druiden. Mit Steinkreisen, Krafttieren und Heilbäumen zu mehr Einklang von Körper und Seele*. W. Ludwig Buchverlag GmbH, München 1999).

Celtic Shamans celebrate the “Eves”, the evening and night before the due day, for both Sun- and Moonfestivals. This is about going down into the dark, the Sidhe, for rebirthing one’s Self in the dawning of the new day and new season. The four Sunfestivals are dedicated to Great God - the male aspects - and the four Moonfestivals to Great Goddess - the female aspects of life, universe and everything.

### 4 Tree of Wisdom

This tree is about inspiration, Awen as it is called in Welsh. Its roots, also called the Lowerworld, wrap around the lip of the Well of Segais which is the fountain of all knowledge

and wisdom. By the well sits Cernunnos the Lord of the Beasts, guarding the Cauldron of Rebirth and around him are the Beasts and the Ancestors. The Tree of Wisdom reaches its branches up into the heavens and beyond where they are full of stars. The Sun and Moon hang amongst the branches. This is Upperworld, the realm of Arianrhod, Lady of the Stars and Moon. Around the centre of the trunk of the Great Tree is Middleworld, where we live our earthly incarnations. It is the spiritual dimension of “Everyday World”, holding the essences, of everything in our daily lives. Many people who work with European traditions find a Tree to be one of the main features which recurs in their work. The Nordic tradition calls it Yggdrasil (Kurt Eigel: *Deutsche Götter und Heldensagen*. Verlag Kremayr & Scheriau, Wien 1953). It is the idea of the central pole which is common in all traditions throughout the world representing the idea of the Spindle which connects heaven and earth through the Middleworlds - the Axis Mundi (Anja Senser / Klaus Lang: *Heilbuch der Druiden. Mit Steinkreisen, Krafttieren und Heilbäumen zu mehr Einklang von Körper und Seele*. W. Ludwig Buchverlag GmbH, München 1999). There are many magical places within the three worlds which is also known as the “Many Colored Land” and all are linked through the Tree of Wisdom.

#### **4.1 Lowerworld**

is the place of the Ancestors. Sometimes it appears like a great hall, sometimes a grove. It is under the charge of Arawn and Rhiannon and is called Annwn. It is a prime source of wisdom and knowledge, it also holds your powers until you are able to use them without damaging everything around you (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Der Zauberlehrling*).

Although it is called Lowerworld, the Welsh name “Annwn” can be translated as “Inner World”, which lies deep within the heart, soul, core or center of everything. In this sense it is the source, the primal place from which everything stems, and also like the “glue” which holds everything together.

Lowerworld is full of surprises, full of things which look like things you already think you know – and then you find that they are different. We all have prejudice, preconceptions, ideas of how things are, the problem comes when we refuse to accept that our ideals may not be large enough to encompass the reality we experience.

#### **4.2 Upperworld**

is in the guardianship of Arianrhod, the Lady of the Moon and Stars. Her spinning spiral tower, called Caer Sidi, is here. It is also the dwelling place of the spirits and totems and the source of the patterns which shape the universe and the lives of all that lives within it. It is the place where Celtic Shamans usually find their primary Teacher and learn about their place in the larger scheme of things. This world is very empowering and brings a whole new outlook on life – making it a lot more fun!

The Celtic Tradition has far less information readily available about this realm than the other two and it seems a bright and shadowy place even after many visits. There is always something more, new, different to discover – which usually requires a change of viewpoint too. It is full of ideas, plans and dreams waiting to become real in “Everyday World”, not all of them will but the potential is there. As you travel around this realm you will find your own

mind expands from contact with things you never had dreamed of yet (John Matthews: *Keltischer Schamanismus. Rituale, Symbole, Tradition*. Eugen Diederichs Verlag, München 1998).

### 4.3 Middleworld

has many guardians – including even the Shaman. It is the place of experience and also the place where we can manifest the ideas and learning we have got from the other two worlds. Through us it feeds the Upper- and Lowerworld as well as being nourished by them. The gods cannot work here on their own they need the Shamans as mediums and mediators who can make things real here. As you travel more and work in Middleworld you will find yourself able to see, sense and/or feel the strands of the Web. Many people seem to find they have an actual “feel” of the threads in their fingers, like on a spinning wheel or weaving loom, both of which are Celtic symbols as well as used by other traditions.

You can take any question which concerns you about anything to do with the “Everyday World” into Middleworld and find new and wider perspectives on it. Sometimes these are not too comfortable as they require to change your attitudes and prejudices. You may also find that common current socially acceptable attitudes do not hold up under “Otherworld” scrutiny which can be difficult. Every Shaman still has to live in the “Everyday World” so somehow you have to find a way of living with your “Inner Knowledge” and still conforming, to some extent, to public opinion. Perhaps one of the foremost lessons of Middleworld is that you cannot change anything except yourself but in changing yourself you will find the world changes around you (Paul Uccusio: *Der Schamane in uns, Schamanismus als neue Selbsterfahrung, Hilfe und Heilung*. Goldmann 1993).

### 5 Practising Celtic Shamans

People who really work with magic look like the postman, or the cool guy with his red Porsche making money on Wall Street, or the doctor, or the woman who runs the grocery next door. They do not wear long feathers on their “magic hats” and funny-looking “mystique robes” or invite you over for an evening’s light drumming, they really look carefully for new apprentices.

Magical workers of all persuasions are invisible. They are Shapeshifters and assume the shape which will gain them their ends in whatever situation they decide to join in. This shape is depending on what they decide will serve best. If they get it wrong they accept the consequences, have a sulk and a whine more or less quietly in their pillow, then come back out having learned something and ready to give it a try again. They do not blame others. They know the onus is always on them to ask, find out, listen and then make an informed choice. To be a Shaman, even as an apprentice, is to say “Yes. I accept responsibility for my choices and actions.” This is what the King does. And, as with the Fisher King, sometimes he gets it wrong and the land becomes a Wasteland (Carol S. Pearson: *Die geburt des Helden in uns, Transformation durch die zwölf Archetypen*. Knauer 1993). He then has to sort it out ....

## 6 Bibliography

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