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Book Review

Companion Guides to Contemporary Shamanism

Hillary S. Webb (2003). *Exploring Shamanism: Using Ancient Rites to Discover the Unlimited Healing Powers of Cosmos and Consciousness*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books.
Soft Cover (222 pages). \$19.95 (ISBN: 978 1 56414 663 4)

Hillary S. Webb (2004). *Travelling between the Worlds: Conversations with Contemporary Shamans*. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc.
Soft Cover (320 pages). \$19.95 (ISBN: 978 1 57174 403 7)

by **Penny Bernard**

These two companion books by Hillary S. Webb, a journalist by training, are by no means academic texts, nor do they claim to be; rather they are an everyman's guide to understanding the key themes that inform contemporary shamanic practices drawn from an eclectic variety of indigenous earth based spiritualities.

In her earlier and relatively short book, *Exploring Shamanism* (2003), the author makes it clear from the outset that she is a spiritual seeker who has been on the path of searching how to access worlds beyond ordinary reality for most of her life. As part of a greater global movement, she sees this quest as both a response and a remedy to the deep malaise presently facing much of humanity on a global scale, manifesting in spiritual disconnection, melancholy, meaninglessness and environmental destruction.

Her companion book, *Travelling between the Worlds* (2004), reveals the extent to which she has sought to gain insight into these alternative realms from a wide range of well-known contemporary global shamanic practitioners and teachers whom she has interviewed. The conviction that shamanism can provide the route by which we can access our common cosmic consciousness and correct the present social,

ecological and spiritual imbalances, is endorsed by the recurrence of these themes throughout the interviews with the twenty-three shamans and neo-shamans included in the latter publication.

The books themselves are fairly representative of the burgeoning genre of New Age texts on self-taught shamanism, and those familiar with the field will no doubt encounter recurring and familiar themes. The reason for this is, of course, fairly obvious, since a perusal of the references the author cites reveals that she has drawn mainly from popular texts that fall into this genre of writings on shamanism.

I use the term New Age with intent, as the content of *Exploring Shamanism* is a good example of Jeffrey Macdonald's observation of what constitutes the key characteristics of New Age thought and motivations, in that it takes "traditions and practices from every culture on earth and unabashedly mixes and matches to create traditions for everyone and anyone. In so doing it affirms and validates one of the New Age's basic beliefs: the unity of all peoples and their spiritual beliefs and practices" (1995, p. 34).

For those who have been born and socialised within the Western tradition and are now searching for a way

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to reconnect with the great cosmos and the spirits that inhabit it, selecting aspects from the cultural smorgasbord of existing indigenous shamanic practices is an appealing option. The suppression and demonization of shamanic practitioners and their knowledge over the last millennium in the largely Judeo-Christian western world has meant that, as westerners, we no longer have an unbroken tradition of shamanic knowledge to draw from. Even the written accounts that we have access to are insufficient, as they have either been written by biased critics, or styled in secret allegory or fairy tales. This means that those of us who have sensed that there is more to our spiritual existence than our present legacy can provide are forced to seek knowledge, and/or appropriate what we can, from those indigenous cultures where shamanism has remained relatively intact. Webb herself notes in *Exploring Shamanism* that, "As relative newcomers to this work, we in the west may find ourselves fumbling our way through this exploration of shamanism as a spiritual path. We try a little of this and a little of that, learning the techniques and traditions of certain cultures, creating others from our own authentic interactions with spirit, doing what we can to learn to bypass the cultural conditioning that limits our experience of the world" (2003, p. 194).

Rather than selecting from or becoming immersed in one cultural tradition, Webb admits that her desire is to transcend the cultural particular and to strive for a more universal system of understanding, and this is where criticism is most likely to be levelled by those who urge for a more context-based understanding of the phenomena. The extraction of core themes from the vast variety of complex and sometimes unique shamanic practices, and its sanitization to appease western desires and sensibilities, can render the knowledge sterile, ineffective or even dangerous. It becomes commodified knowledge that can be bought and practised in one's own back yard or private room, without involving any other necessary participants or taking on any of the more onerous or less palatable cultural baggage. One simple example demonstrates this: at no point does the author mention the fact that, in many shamanic groups (exactly what constitutes a shaman is ill-defined in the text), there is a need for regular ritual animal sacrifice to be performed by the larger family or social unit in order to create and maintain the strong and clear communication channels with the spirit world. Such practices are commonplace in many of the groups she draws from, and yet she does not advocate them, probably because they would be heavily frowned upon by the target audience and the nation state or communities in which they are embedded. Even the fundamental importance of the shaman's role in maintaining

harmonious human-human, human-spirit and human-environmental relations is not prioritised, although admittedly it is mentioned and acknowledged. There is also a surprising lack of attention paid to the central role of dreams in guiding shamanic practice.

Webb's main focus is on how to shift our (individual) consciousness and "open" our minds through the techniques of visualisation, awareness, mindfulness, or even *grokking* (a term used to describe the shaman's ability to shape and construct the universe at will). This all involves mind work, not social work. Even though the author tries to distance herself from psychologizing the subject, in effect this is the end result.

Another problem with selectively highlighting certain core features that may be present in a few shamanic traditions is the tendency to then assume that these are universal features found in all cultural traditions - which may lead to the further erroneous assumption that these themes are always present and that they are fixed and immutable. For instance, the cosmological concepts of the axis mundi and the tertiary structure of lower, middle and upper worlds are not concepts that are commonly expressed in African healing/shamanic cultures.

Despite these problems, Webb does indeed identify many recurring core themes, and these are neatly dealt with in each of the chapters in *Exploring Shamanism*. She concludes each chapter with a series of spiritual or consciousness elevating exercises that the reader can apply in his or her efforts to experience the shamanic state of consciousness. Chapter one deals with what Webb regards as the central core of the shamanic vision of reality; the various levels of transcendence or descent into upper and lower worlds through the axis mundi; the microcosm as a reflection of the macrocosm; and the shamanic connection with animism. She makes a point of distinguishing shamanism from the more mystical Eastern traditions, on the grounds that shamans, rather than trying to transcend reality, attempt to reshape or transform it. Shamans, in this light, thus become the ultimate constructivists, which probably accords them more agency in shaping reality than they would like to be responsible for. Chapter two continues in similar vein, but concentrates on the need for the aspirant shaman to disengage from the self and abandon the ego-centred view of the universe in order to begin to merge with the divine. Webb identifies common themes that are encountered in this process of recruitment and mergence through the calling, purification, revelation and worldly return stages, and deals respectfully with the existence of spirit entities - which, to her credit, she makes no attempt to

explain away - a topic that she deals with more fully in chapter three. Of interest are the recurring themes of the wounded healer, and the frequent accounts of suffering and illness, or even near death experiences, in those who are subsequently called to be shamans. These common experiences are well illustrated in the interviews with the shamans included in *Travelling between Worlds*, and rightly deserve more academic attention. Other topics explored in the subsequent chapters are the various techniques of ecstasy, engaging with spirit allies, and the central importance of the ritual process in shamanic healing.

Along with some vagueness in expression, however, there is a frustrating lack of referencing to support occasional strong assertions. This lack of intellectual

rigour is most evident when the author tries to validate some of her ideas with scientific backup, as exemplified by the following statement: "I've heard it said that going into wide-angle vision causes the brain to jump instantly into an alpha brainwave state" (2004, p. 185).

Despite these weaknesses, one cannot fail to admire the author's commitment to the subject and the extent to which she has sought to make sense of the glimpses of alternative realities she herself has experienced. For those on similar journeys of spiritual exploration, or academics who are interested in the various facets of shamanism and neo-shamanism within the modern era, these two texts would be useful additions to their bookshelves.

About the Author

Penny Bernard is a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. Her primary interests are in the fields of religion, healing and the environment, and the interconnection between these. These interests are reflected in the courses she teaches, such as medical anthropology (healing and belief systems), environmental and landscape anthropology, and indigenous knowledge systems. She is currently engaged in PhD research on the phenomenon of water spirits in Southern Africa and their role in the "calling" of traditional healers. In the process of her research, she has become initiated into a healer-diviner (*izangoma*) training school in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands.

Reference

MacDonald, J. L. (1995). Inventing traditions for the New Age: A case study of the earth energy tradition. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 6(4), 31-45.