

The Archaic Echo – Shamanic Consciousness and Sacred Sites

Shamanic Culture

Throughout millennia human beings have consciously interacted with and had direct awareness of a vital force or life energy that animates the living world. Our ancestors developed technologies for harnessing this life force for healing and spiritual purposes. The Stone circles and burial chambers they built attuned them to the underlying earth energies and the movement of the heavenly bodies above. They thought in cycles of birth, death and rebirth, which reflected the movement of the life force, rather than the linear thinking of the materialist. Cultures rooted in nature have always thought in terms of circles and spirals rather than straight lines. We see this represented in ancient rock art in many different countries and in the sacred art and ceremonies of indigenous people who are still immersed in the natural world.



Figure 1. 'The Sorcerer'- cave painting (France – approximately 13,000 BC)

These cultures may loosely be called shamanic cultures. The word shaman comes from 'saman' taken from the Tungus language of Siberia. Religious historian Mircea Eliade, defined Shamanism first and foremost, as a 'technique of ecstasy'¹. The use of the word shaman did not appear in the European ethnological texts until the 18th century, when German explorers, returning from Siberia, introduced it as '*schaman*'.²

¹ Eliade, Mircea (1964) Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. Arkana-Penguin (p. 4)

² Znamenski, Andrei A. (2007) The Beauty of the Primitive. Shamanism and the Western Imagination. Oxford University Press (p.5)

Since then has been used generically to describe indigenous healers and spiritual practitioners cross-culturally. It is not a term that these people would necessarily use themselves, though a number of indigenous teachers have adopted the term as a kind of short hand for what they do, as they bring their teachings to the West. The term is also sometimes used to describe the beliefs and practices of our indigenous European ancestors, such as the Celts and their Neolithic predecessors, whose ways were eventually assimilated and decimated by the coming of Christianity. As a generic term to describe a number of cross-cultural and ancestral variations the term Shaman seems appropriate. But it can only be used loosely. The attempts to sometimes homogenise cultural variations for the sake of defining what shamanism is can result in us losing a lot of rich diversity.

The world of the shaman is multi-dimensional. Spiritual, energetic, physical, psychological and emotional elements are interwoven. The shaman moves in an inspirited universe in which the whole of creation is animated by life-force and consciousness. The role of the shaman is to intervene when things get out of balance and to restore balance. Moving into altered states of consciousness induced by techniques such as drumming, meditation, dance, fasting or the ingesting of psychotropic plants, the shaman moves between the different realms of matter and spirit, entering the flux and flow of energetic interplay that underlies the material world and coming back with visions that inform the individual or community as to how to restore balance. The shaman is the specialist within the community, but such communities are also shamanic in their sharing of the worldview of the shaman. If we go back far enough, all of us had shamanic ancestors. Shamanism, as such, was a relationship with the natural world, with both spiritual and medicinal elements to it, which predated all later healing and religious practices by several thousands of years. Cave paintings depicting shamanic themes discovered in the Chauvet cave in Southern France, indicate shamanic activity dating back to the last ice age, about 30,000 years ago.³ When we look at this in the context of the history of human spiritual practices, shamanism emerges as having had a life-span of approximately 28,000 years longer than the predominant spiritual and religious we know today, which have life spans of only 2,000 to 2,500 years. It is then, perhaps not too fanciful

³ Cottrell, Barry (2008) *The Way Beyond the Shaman. Bringing a New Earth Consciousness*. O Books. (p.9)

to suppose that somewhere in our collective psyches there exist the archaic echoes of our ancestors.

The Celts and the Megalithic Builders

In more recent times in Celtic Britain, Ireland and Gaul the Druids functioned in a similar way to shamans. They interacted with the spirits of nature and practiced many traditional shamanic skills, such as divination, healing, ritual and the passing on of oral culture. Like many indigenous shamans they were regarded as barbarians to be suppressed. In this case it was the invading Romans. Accounts of Druidism come from both Greek and Roman sources. The Druids themselves left no written accounts. From the Graeco-Roman sources it would seem that Druidism was already flourishing by the second century BC. Roman persecution and the arrival of Christianity saw a decline in Druidism over the next few centuries, although elements of Druidism survived in various forms and have been revived at various times. However the ancient oral traditions have largely been lost and modern day Druidism has had to reinvent itself, with only the most tenuous roots in antiquity to draw on. Druids have been linked with megalithic monuments in the popular mind and it is possible that they may have held ceremonies at these sites, as modern day Druids do. But the Druid-megalithic connection is largely rooted in the revival of Druidism in the Eighteenth century. John Woods, an architect and antiquarian of the time claimed that there were Druid colleges at Stonehenge, Avebury and on Exmoor and the Mendips, with the main Druidic University at Stanton Drew⁴. But there is little historical evidence for this.

⁴ Green, Miranda. (1997) Exploring the World of the Druids. Thames & Hudson (p.144)

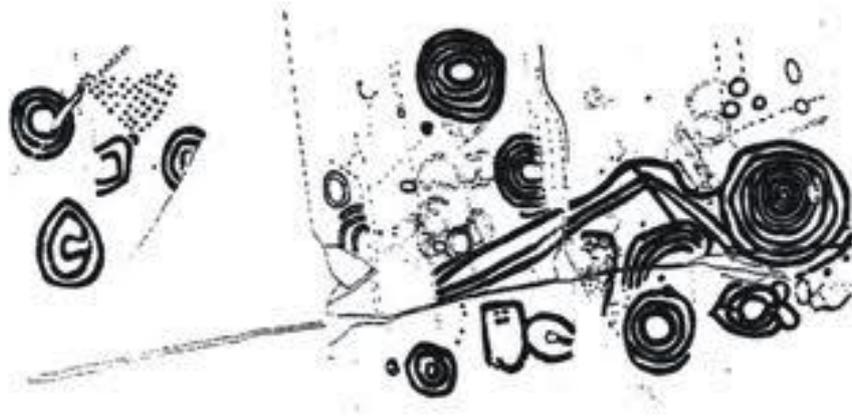


Figure 2. Entopic Patterns

Even less is known about the original megalithic people who constructed the thousands of stone circles, long barrows and chambered tombs that can be found in Britain today. But these structures were already ancient by the time the Druids came to prominence. It is the Celtic peoples respect for ancestors that would have made these sites meaningful to them. Like many tribal people the Celt's regarded the ancestors as actively interacting with their day-to-day life and with the land. The coming of Christianity with its emphasis on the transcendence of all that is earthly, which included our interconnection with nature severed this link. Later the industrial and post-industrial cultures of the West replaced the transcendent with the ideology of the mechanistic. Nature became something to conquer and exploit – transcendence in the service of consumerism, rather than God.

The construction of stone monuments such as dolmens, standing stones and stone circles started around 3,500 BC and continued for over 2,000 years. Evidence of shamanic use of these sites is suggested by the presence of certain repetitive motifs that occur in ancient rock art. These include various spirals, zigzags, waves and spider-web like designs. These patterns have also been recorded as occurring visually during trance states and have been described as 'entopic patterns', derived from the Greek for 'within vision'. Using drums, dance and hallucinogenic plants to induce trance states, Shamans move between the physical world and the various spirit realms. That they may have mapped out some of these journeys by carving the patterns they encountered into the walls of their sacred sites makes sense. Anomalous energetic phenomena have been consistently recorded at ancient sites and these seem to interact

with brain waves so as to produce powerful dreaming and visionary experiences.⁵ That these sites were constructed in such a way as to produce these effects is not incidental. The preciseness of alignments with the stars, the seasons and between various sites, reveals a great deal of sophistication. These were a people who were deeply rooted in their relationship with the land and the cosmos. This was a living relationship in which inner and outer blended into each other and the forces of nature were as spiritual as they were physical.

Having visited these sites, both alone and with groups, for many years with the intent to connect with the archaic intentions encoded within these sites, I have no doubt that they are still potent. Many of the experiences that myself and others have had at these sites are resonant with the kind of experiences that are described by indigenous shamans. Lacking the cultural grounding and intense training that indigenous shamans have, these experiences do not make us shamans. But they do demonstrate our capacity to enter into shamanic states of consciousness and interact with ancestral, spiritual and energetic forces that can breathe new spiritual life into our ecological sensibilities. When we begin to interact with the natural world in the state of shamanic consciousness we open up a direct, intimate relationship with the Earth, which side-steps the usual duality of us versus or us advocating *for* the planet. We enter and experience directly the continuum of energy and consciousness that is both us *and* the planet.

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⁵ See the various writings of Paul Devereux.