

The Role of Percussion in Shamanic Practice

Shamans are a feature of many cultures and indigenous peoples around the world. Despite differences in belief systems, shamanic practice often involves drums and other percussion instruments (Needham, 1967., Jilek, 2005). Percussion is an important part of the shamanic journey into an altered state of consciousness (ASC).

Rhythmic drumming is also part of many rituals assisting the shaman with communicating with the spirit realm and healing (Needham, 1967). Some reasons for the prominence of drumming in shamanic practice may be due to the affect it has on the brain as explored by psychologists (Harner, 1980., Needham, 1967., Krippner, 2004). Percussion plays an important role in shamanic practice; including taking the shaman to an altered state of consciousness is a feature of many important rituals, it also has a fascinating affect on the brain.

Repetitive drumming is an effective technique employed by some shamans when delving into an ASC or trance state (Jilek 2005. Harner, 1980, Finch, 2004). Jilek (2005) describes the ASC as an 'ecstatic state' where the shaman may communicate with spirits, experience visions and perform various unearthly duties. The drum (as well as other percussive instruments such as a rattle, gong, bell etc) may be specifically used for entering into the state, so the unconscious mind of the shaman is immediately signaled to delve into the ASC (Harner, 1980, pp 51).

During the process the shaman may strike the drum himself or may have an assistant, most likely an individual who has shown an aptitude for shamanism. It is essential that the drumming continue for the shaman to maintain the ASC (Harner, 2005, pp 51). The Khakas people believe that the drum is actually a steed that carries the shaman on a journey (Jacobson-Tepfer, 2004). The ASC is just one fascinating aspect of shamanic practice and percussion often plays a major role in achieving it.

Shamanic practice involves taking part in rituals specific to the culture and belief systems of the people. Drums may serve many different purposes in shamanic rituals, such as a communicator to the spirits, a vessel that carries the shaman, a spirit catcher or a purifying device (Finch, 2004, pp. 95). Hoskins (1988) describes a healing ritual of the Kobi people from Eastern Indonesia where the drum is anthropomorphized and becomes a direct mediator with the illness-causing spirits.

In this ritual the drum itself is credited with healing power, the healed man said he 'felt better with every beat' (Hoskins, 1988, pp. 224). The Alai-Turk shamans believe the drum itself is a sacred being. The drumming is also believed to purify those present at the ritual (Finch, 2004). Percussion is typical part of shamanic practice and is therefore present in many rituals.

Why are drums able to affect the human brain and even change the consciousness of the shaman? Andrew Neher researched the affect of drumming on the brain, finding that drumming can cause a change in brain activity when the rhythm corresponded with the theta EEG frequency of the brain (as cited in Krippner, 2004, pp. 209).

The most effective range being 4-7 cycles per second; when exposed to these rhythms, the brain's central nervous system is stimulated affecting the motor and

sensory parts of the brain (as cited in Harner, 1980, pp.52). Neher's research also found that a single beat of a drum 'has many sound frequencies that simultaneously transmit impulses along a variety of nerve pathways in the brain,' (as cited in Harner, 1980 pp 52).

Crawley, a psychologist researching percussion, found that; 'the music of the drum is more closely connected with the foundations of aurally generated emotion than that of any other instrument' (as cited in Needham, 1967, pp. 7). Other studies have shown that repetitive drumming has a healthy effect on the immune system of the listeners and enhances mood (Krippner, 2004).

Percussion is a fundamental part of shamanic practice and it is used to serve many different purposes. Repetitive and rhythmic drumming has the power to send the shaman into an altered state of consciousness where communication with spirits and other necessary tasks are performed (Harner, 1980, Jilek, 2005.). Shamanic rituals such as worship festivals and healing often feature percussion.

During rituals, the drum may communicate directly with spirits, catch spirits, carry the shaman on a journey or purify the people at ritual. The drum itself is often seen as a sacred and revered object, the spirits of the drum appeased with a sacrifice (Finch, 2004.).

Rhythm can dramatically affect the central nervous system of the brain and brainwaves; Neher discovering that the 4-7 range is the most effective range of rhythm (as cited in Harner, 1980. pp 52). Percussion and rhythm is a powerful tool of the shaman, it has the ability to alter the human brain and induce an ASC and create an atmosphere for many important rituals.

<http://tranceshamanismbodyandsoul.blogspot.com/2011/03/role-of-percussion-in-shamanic-practice.html>

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