



## Shamanism

In the 60's, the UCLA graduate anthropology student Carlos Casteneda rose to fame after his best-selling publication of *The Teachings of Don Juan*. In this book he describes his attempt at an ethnographic study of the Yaqui Indian sorcerer Don Juan. As the book unfolds, it becomes clear that while Carlos thinks he's an anthropology student doing field work, his sorcerer informant sees Carlos as his apprentice sorcerer. Using various botanical extractions, including peyote, Don Juan eventually manages to crack open Carlos' western rationalist world view. The result is a much vaster vision of his true nature. A whole series of books detailed Carlos' progress on the sorcerer's path to self mastery. In these books, Carlos "plays the fool", as often the reader gets the point Don Juan is trying to get through to him long before Carlos seems to "get it". While I was an undergraduate at UC Irvine during Spring 1972 Carlos Casteneda came to teach a couple of courses. This was about the time he was writing *A Second Reality*. At this time Carlos said he felt as if he had one foot in the world of the Western anthropologist, and the other foot in the world of Yaqui Indian sorcery. This wasn't just a matter of Carlos becoming enculturated into Yaqui Indian culture. For even a Yaqui apprentice would have to drop his or her Yaqui world view to master the sorcerers' path, a path to true Self-knowledge.

For the hippies of the 60's, Casteneda's books helped to legitimize their own experimentation with entheogens to explore the potentials of human consciousness. Rather than escaping "reality", the hippies found entheogens opened the door to deeper and more profound "Realities". Many of these former hippies became dedicated Buddhist monks, yogis, Christian mystics, Sufis, and many other types of mystics. Having glimpsed the potential, they entered into arduous disciplines of realization. Interestingly, Casteneda soon learned that the only reason Don Juan had given him entheogens was that he had been so stubbornly stuck in his old habitual ways of thinking and perceiving that it took something powerful get through his thick skull. Don Juan

explained that a student with more aptitude (or less stubbornness) wouldn't have required such a severe approach.

Don Juan taught that all conventional knowledge was highly limited and limiting. While conversing with Carlos at a café, he likened all conventional cultural knowledge (the *Tonal*) was like the few items on the small table between them. The knowledge the sorcerer courted (the *Nagual*) was more like everything else in the world that wasn't on that table top, and was also the very source of that table top. Entheogens can be useful to shake one out of one's habitual patterns of thinking and perceiving, allowing one to thus experience a much vaster Reality.

Interestingly, Aldous Huxley (the writer/philosopher) who popularized the term *Perennial Philosophy* when he published a book by that name, himself did more than a little experimentation with entheogens like mescaline (the active component of the peyote cactus). For him these substances provided a visit to the world of the mystic. Beyond words, the depth of the experiences demonstrated to him that the words of the mystics describe very real, and very profound experiences, far beyond words (see his classic, *The Doors of Perception*).

"If the doors of perception were cleansed every  
thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things  
through narrow chinks of his cavern."

- William Blake,

More recently, the modern shaman Terrence McKenna advocated a merging together of the so-called primitive indigenous shamanistic traditions with the modern scientific world view. To Terrence, the amazing magical world revealed by science itself can be a means to awaken higher states of consciousness. For our conventional world views are in complete contradiction to reality as revealed by science. What is thought of as "reality" is but an illusion of reality. The reality revealed by science is more akin to that described by mystics (as well as some experiences catalyzed by entheogens) than the reality commonly believed to exist.

In a Plant Medicine retreat sponsored by UCSB that I attended a few years ago, I met several contemporary "shamans" including Maria Teresa Valenzuela (they prefer to call themselves healers). These indigenous mystics have a great love for nature, and a deep reverence for all living things. When they need a few leaves from a plant, they first reverently ask the plant's permission, and leave offerings (usually tobacco) to the plant. It became very clear that the shaman habitually opens her heart via such rituals. This is what science needs, and what our culture notably lacks - a deep reverence and love for this magical wonderland in which we find ourselves (the universe); a profound gratitude, respect, and reverence for all that is.

## **Further reading on Shamanism**

[Wikipedia's entry on Shamanism](#)

[Terrence McKenna Website](#)

Terrence McKenna audio, etc: <http://deoxy.org/media/McKenna>

[Marie Teresa Valenzuela](#)

[International Conference on Shamanism](#)

[Global Medicine Project, UCSB](#)

## **Videos relating to Shamanism**

Terrence McKenna (there is much else by him on YouTube!)

- [Culture is Your Operating System](#)
- [Linear Society, Non-linear Consciousness](#)