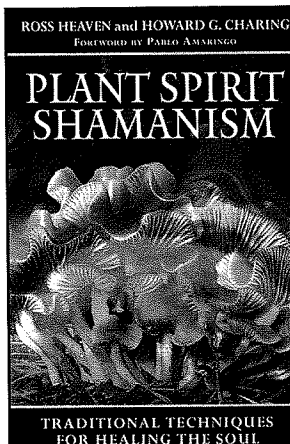




Shaman's Drum

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Plant Spirit Shamanism: Traditional Techniques for Healing the Soul by Ross Heaven and Howard G. Charing. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books/Inner Traditions, 2006. Append.; biblio.; glossary; illus.; index; notes; 250 pp.; \$16.95 (paper).

Review by Timothy White

In *Plant Spirit Shamanism: Traditional Techniques for Healing the Soul*, two English shamanists, Ross Heaven and Howard G. Charing, provide an informative introductory look at spiritual uses of plant medicines derived from various shamanic traditions—particularly Amazonian *curanderismo* and Haitian Vodou. Charing indicates that, in addition to having been trained in core shamanic methodologies, he has devoted “many months” to studying Amazonian *curanderismo* after being initiated by a life-transforming ayahuasca session ten years ago. Heaven, an author who teaches about Haitian Vodou healing practices, contributes insights into the spiritual use of plant medicines in Afro-American traditions. Together, they have produced a stimulating potpourri of short segments describing many ways of working with plant medicines.

Charing and Heaven indicate that they have been inspired greatly by their experiences working with ayahuasca and San Pedro in Peru, and they include a chapter devoted to “plants of vision,” but readers are advised that the book is focused more

on magical and spiritual uses of plants—such as the ritual use of plant perfumes and herbal baths—than on the shamanic use of entheogenic sacraments.

The stated goal of the book is to “look at the wisdom of our plant allies and show you how to work with them to develop your own communion with these great healers.” To that end, the authors present information culled from their own experiential studies, teachings provided by Indigenous healers, and writings by various Western herbalists and ethnobotanists—including ethnobotanist Jeremy Narby, botanist Richard E. Schultes, and herbalist Thomas Bartram. Because Charing and Heaven refer heavily to other sources, it is unclear how much of the book is derived from the authors’ direct experience, but they do include some field notes and personal accounts, suggesting that they are familiar with their subjects.

One of the most interesting features of this book is its inclusion of short interviews with practicing plant shamans. For example, an Andean *curandera* speaks about divining with coca, and a Shipibo shaman, Guillermo Arevalo, comments on the origins of ayahuasca. A San Pedro *maestro* (master), Juan Navaro, speaks briefly of how, in Peru, tobacco juice is imbibed nasally to help focus and enhance San Pedro visions, and he also describes how to make *seguros* (charms)—bottles containing sacred waters, perfumes, and special healing and spiritual plants—which are used to attract wealth, good luck, and love relationships. An Amazonian *perfumero* (perfume healer), Artidoro Aro Cardenas, describes the preparation and uses of *pusangos* (love potions). Loulou Prince, a Haitian *madsen fey* (“leaf” doctor), talks briefly about the use of herbal

baths in Vodou. Although I was disappointed that these short interviews don’t delve deeply into the topics at hand, they do offer some interesting insights.

The authors adopt the position that shamans traditionally use special states of trance consciousness to commune with the spirits, or energies, of plants, but they tend to reduce shamanizing to shamanic journeying. Significantly, the book explains that traditional Amazonian shamans consider it essential to undergo intensive plant *dietas* (diets) and other challenging practices in order to contact plant spirit allies. However, the authors then ignore that standard and, instead, recommend the use of core shamanic practices—such as journeying with drumming tapes—as primary methodologies for contacting plant allies. While I see nothing wrong with using imaginal journeys to seek intuitive information about plants, I hesitate to reduce “plant spirit shamanism” to imaginal journeying, as Charing and Heaven do.

In my opinion, the Achilles’ heel of this volume is that it seems to assume that imaginal journeying is comparable to entering deep shamanic trance states. I contend that the transpersonal images inspired by deep shamanic trances are qualitatively different from images generated during imaginal journeys. Our minds may utilize similar symbols in various states of consciousness, but I propose that the way we experience symbols when we are in deep trances is radically different than during imaginal journeys. For example, one may see fanged jaguars and transcendental beings in imaginal journeys, but they rarely exude as much numinous energy as those encountered in lucid dreams or visions.

Perhaps anticipating that some readers might question the efficacy of imaginal journeys, the authors state: “Even if it was your imagination (and the imagination is never to be diminished or equated with ‘fantasy’), you will have learned something important from deep within yourself, from a place of untapped potential



and natural power that we normally do not use in daily life." They suggest using a series of imaginal journeys to develop spiritual profiles of plants, and they state that it is the outcome, not the method, that is most important: "If you receive useful information from your journey, then of course it is real."

While their guidelines for inquiring into a plant's healing gifts may be potentially useful, I propose that there is a reason that Amazonian shamans seeking to develop meaningful relationships with plant allies feel the need to engage in intensive dieting and ceremony—as opposed to going on half-hour-long imaginal journeys. Imaginal journeys can sometimes produce useful information and helpful insights, but the accuracy of those insights should be verified. I was pleased to find the authors encourage readers to "check the insights [received] against the information in an herbal encyclopedia to see how your assessment compares with that of others." They suggest that verifying one's intuitive insights against conventional herbal knowledge gradually enhances one's confidence. There is an even more critical benefit: verifying one's insights—before one begins to use a new, unfamiliar herb—may help avoid potentially dangerous adverse effects.

Encouraging readers to use imaginal journeys to learn about plants is a good starting point, but I think that exploring some of the shamanic traditions mentioned in this book, such as the herbal healing approach used by Loulou Prince, might teach readers more. When seeking a herbal treatment for clients, Prince begins by fasting—in order to show respect to the plant world. Then he invites the plant spirits to appear in a dream to show him which plants to pick and how to prepare the medicines. Finally, once he finds the designated plant, he makes offerings and sings to the plant before picking its leaves or other parts. In my experience, prescriptions received through dream incubations tend to produce more effective healings than intuitions received in short imaginal encounters. In any case, I caution readers to verify prescriptions received in any visionary states—before acting on them.

In one chapter, the authors describe how Amazonian shamans diet with plants for extended periods, living in isolation and consuming special teacher plants, which they call "*maestras*," in order to learn not only *about* them but *from* them. In this way, the shamans learn their special *icaros*, or spirit songs, which they use later to invoke the plant spirits during healing ceremonies. Significantly, Amazonian shamans stress the importance of establishing firsthand communication with the plant spirits, as opposed to merely learning the *icaros* from others. Direct commu-

nication with spirits is central to the efficacy of many shamanic practices.

The authors devote significant portions of the book to relating miscellaneous folk knowledge about some well-known Amazonian plant teachers. Then, recognizing that Amazonian plants may not be available in the West, they suggest various plant substitutes that may be used for similar purposes. For example, they mention that the Amazonian plant teacher *guayusa* is both energizing and relaxing, and has the effect of encouraging lucid dreams. Since *guayusa* is not easily available in the West, they propose substituting bracken, jasmine, marigold, rose, mugwort, or poplar as plant medicines that may help enhance dreaming. However, they don't offer evidence suggesting that these plants work.

The authors offer a noteworthy shamanic technique that uses plants to incubate healing dreams—they relate how Haitian Vodou practitioners sometimes make ceremonial pillows, known as *bila*, which they stuff with magical herbs and beat to release the aroma of the herbs, in order to induce trance states. The authors then invite readers to make a dream *bila* filled with mugwort, poplar, or some other dream-inducing herbs, and to sleep on it with the intention of dreaming more lucidly. The book even relates an illustrative example of a workshop participant who found, after making a pillow, that her dream experiences were suddenly much richer than before and that they included "flying over landscapes" and dreaming of friends doing specific things that were later confirmed as being true. Having worked extensively with dreams, I recognize that sleeping on dream pillows is a common and effective dream incubation technique, but I would be surprised if it produced dream results comparable to those induced by fasting and ingesting ayahuasca.

In one chapter focused on Amazonian plant teachers, the authors relate basic folk-medicine descriptions of some well-known Amazonian herbal medicines—*ajo sachá* (jungle garlic, said to improve hunting skills); *chiric sanango* (which opens hearts to love); *mocura* (said to protect against sorcery and enhance one's emotional strength); *rosa sisa* (reported to bring good luck and absorb negativity); *piri piri* (sedge roots, used to improve one's eyesight and hunting skills); *una de gato* (cat's claw, used to treat inflammations, viral infections, and tumors); *chullachaqui caspi* (a tree sap used to heal deep cuts and stop hemorrhages); and *chuchuhuasi* (a remedy for stomach-ache, fevers, and bronchial problems, as well as an aphrodisiac). Most of the information provided in these sections seems to be derived from regional folk-medicine traditions rather than direct shamanic experience. Also, once again, because the Amazonian plants aren't easy to find out-

side of the Amazon, each entry suggests some plants available in the West that might work as substitutes.

I was pleased to find that the above chapter on plant teachers eventually included some experiential guidelines for dieting with Western plants. The directions call for spending time making friends with the plant before gathering and preparing a tea from it, then drinking some tea each day for up to a month, and finally journeying to connect with the plant spirit. Although I assume that the approach could provide some intuitive insights into the plant and its uses, it would have been helpful if the authors had provided case examples demonstrating that these methods work, enabling one to obtain gifts of magical songs or other powers.

Several chapters focus on the use of special herbal baths and perfumes, mainly derived from Amazonian love magic traditions and Haitian herbal medicine practices. The authors explain that the baths and perfumes may be used for both medicinal and magical purposes, but the recipes seem to be more typical of folk-magic practices than they are of shamanic applications. Mention is made of an intriguing Welsh practice utilized by one of Ross's teachers, Adam, a "sin eater," which involves "burying illnesses" beneath aromatic plants. Ross reports that the sin eater "would bury an animal bone with the name of a patient scratched on it ... then plant certain flowers or herbs on top of these 'graves' according to the nature of his patient's illness." This practice utilizes a basic imaging technique used in magic and shamanizing: "Each morning, Adam would walk his garden, whispering to the plants and crushing a few of their leaves between his fingers." It was believed, based on the principle that there is an "energetic or sympathetic connection" between the plant and the bone representing the patient, that releasing the plant's aromas would carry away a little more of the illness each day, until the patient was totally cured. In the hands of a mindful shaman, such a ritual practice might prove as effective as other shamanic healing prayers, but, once again, the authors offer no case examples indicating that this practice actually works.

The book also includes a provocative section describing the Amazonian magical use of *pusangos* (charmed perfumes). After addressing the ethics of using such charms, the authors describe how *pusangas* are made from plants that are typically selected for their metaphoric associations. For success in legal affairs, the root pods of an *alacrancito*, a plant named after an insect with a nasty sting, may be used. For enhancing sexual attraction, the leaves of a plant that resembles female genitalia is ground into a powder known as *polvo de la*



buseta. From a traditional shamanic point of view, it was assumed that the shaman must be in communication with the plant spirit and the spirit of the patient in order for a *pusanga* to work. In contrast, the authors propose that this practice ultimately relies on the power of the patient's faith: "You must believe absolutely in the effectiveness of the *pusanga* and its ability to work for you." In short, their view seems to be that it is the power of suggestion that produces magical results.

The book offers directions for making a modern *pusanga* using more commonly available Western plants. It suggests going for a walk, using the doctrine of signatures to stalk plants to be used in the mixture, and heeding the call of particular plants. For making a love *pusanga*, it suggests using plants that are attractive or have meaningful names—"passionflower or honeysuckle." Finally, it recommends adding some shamanic energy into the mix: "Sing your plant song into the bottle to create a deeper connection ... then add your intention by blowing three blasts of tobacco smoke into the *pusanga* bottle." Once again, the authors do not document the efficacy of these Western *pusangas*, although I assume that they could work as well—or as badly—as any other charms.

One of this volume's most useful features is that it introduces readers to many plant medicine terms and concepts that may come in handy for those starting to work with plant medicines. The book includes a glossary of some shamanistic terms—drawn mainly from Amazonian *curanderismo* and Haitian Vodou traditions. Moreover, interesting insights into some old familiar folk terms are scattered throughout the text. For example, while explaining how to make a "*mojo bag*—a bundle of plants and consecrated items made to bring luck and protection," the book points out that the "word *mojo* comes from the West African *mojuba* (prayer) and denotes a method of directing spiritual energies to similar effect." Understanding the origins and meanings of plant medicine terms can be helpful, because they call attention to key concepts of working with plant spirits.

In the book's last chapter, "The Scream of the Mandrake," the authors look at some potential political and social issues facing those who work with plant medicines in both Indigenous and Western cultures. For example, they report how, in England, adverse reactions to pharmaceutical drugs lead to an estimated five thousand to ten thousand deaths per year, while herbal preparations are implicated in only a few hundred serious reactions, and almost no deaths. Significantly, they observe: "In Europe, herbalists are under increasing pressure to become educated, validated, and registered in the same way as scientists, leading to a decline in intuitive healing and knowledge about plant spirits." Ironically, the authors of this volume seem caught in a similar dilemma—by focusing on technical uses of plants, they undercut shamanic methodologies.

The authors close the book with two appendixes—"A Caribbean Herbal" and "A Peruvian Herbal"—which list plant medicines from those regions, along with their scientific names, medicinal uses, magical attributes, and potential substitutes. While such technical charts provide useful reference information, they tend to promote empirical uses of the herbs rather than encourage shamanic contact with their plant spirits.

My primary reservation about this book is that, while the authors introduce various shamanic approaches to working with plant spirits, they seldom offer illustrative case examples demonstrating whether those approaches work. Nonetheless, despite the book's heavy emphasis on magical—as opposed to shamanic—uses of plants, *Plant Spirit Shamanism* offers a readable melange of information, insights, and viewpoints on spiritual plant medicines. I feel comfortable recommending this volume to readers interested in magical herbs, as well as to those beginning to work shamanically with plant spirits.

Timothy White is founding editor of Shaman's Drum.