

Shamanism



Shaman's rattle.

The individual's need for explanations of worldly events led to the foundation of a belief system based on spiritualism and reinforced by strict tribal laws about behavior. In this system all creatures—plants, animals and humans—had an inner spirit; and all creatures—natural and supernatural—were understood to have a social life like humans. This meant that you could enter the spirit world of salmon and find the Salmon Chief in his longhouse under the sea, or enter the spirit world of eagles and find the Eagle Chief in his longhouse in the sky organizing his tribal members. This spiritual dimension was mediated by the shaman. People, with the right guidance, could move back and forth between the human and spirit world.





Full costume of D'sonoqua, the feared wild woman of the woods.

Opposite: One of two transformation faces of D'sonoqua by Tsangani.



Above: *Shaman's helper.*

Photo: Marilyn Williams

Right: *Shaman bone carvings.*



Shamanism is a practice whereby the shaman utilizes illusion, natural medicines and incantations combined with the altered state of the patient to access the spiritual or supernatural realm to diagnose, treat and prescribe for the benefit of the tribe, the village, individuals or self. The ways a shaman attains his altered state is by dancing, drumming, rattling, incantations and creating ceremonies to activate plant, animal and mythical spirits. The individual might attain his altered state by food or water deprivation, by withstanding extreme body heat or cold, or by suffering extensive body rubbing by prickly plants. Often four days of these deprivations were endured before the patient or person seeking a vision was additionally subjected to excitement, flickering fire lights and sounds.

The shaman, after very rigorous training to separate out his/her



Shaman invoking the spirits to heal a sick man.

own personal needs, develops several specific spirit avenues and is able to mobilize the patient's own spirits and strengths for natural healing. The shaman or medicine persons were of high status. Healing methods involved both herbal remedies and magical rites. Success depended largely upon the cooperation and personal faith of the patient. Thus, wearing special necklaces, robes and masks, and shaking rattles, chanting and dancing around the patient, the shaman sought to access guardian spirits and to exorcize or placate the disturbed or evil entities of the spirit world believed to be the cause of most ailments. If successful, the shaman would receive a fee of otter skins or baskets of clams—the payment being related to the difficulty of the cure. If unsuccessful usually no fee would be collected — unlike our doctors and pharmaceutical companies today.