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The Shamanism Magazine

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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)



WORKING WITH THE TEACHER PLANTS

Eliot Cowan
talks with
Nicholas Breeze Wood



During the summer of 2010 Sacred Hoop met up with Eliot Cowan during a visit he made to Pembrokeshire in West Wales. We published the main part of our interview with him in Sacred Hoop Issue 70, but at the end of the interview Eliot continued to talk on a new topic - the use and abuse of teacher plants...

Eliot: I'd like to talk a little about what are called 'teacher plant spirits' now. I think there are some things that need to be said.

Nick: are you talking about psychoactive plants here?

Eliot: Yes, but I maintain that all plants are sacred, and they are all teacher plants if we open ourselves to their teachings.

But there are certain plants that have a very special function as teachers because they open those special sacred doorways to worlds of sacred knowledge and wisdom.

Now, one of the things to notice about these plants, is that none of them are brought forth everywhere. They were brought forth in a particular place to benefit a particular people, because each of the different peoples were brought forth out of the land that was given to them. And each group of people were also given the way to remember and come back to living a life from the heart rather than from the head.

So all the original peoples were given these ways and practices to help them get brought back to the heart. And they all have the same purpose, they all deliver the same goods, but they are necessarily different, because it's like I said earlier, the Inuit and the Amazonian are different peoples, their souls are made of different stuff, and they live in different worlds. Therefore their needs are different, just like their physical diets has to be different - so their spiritual diet has to be different too. So some of the peoples were given very, very special sacred plant teachers to help them with this, and they are really quite specific.

Nick: Specific geographically so to speak?

Eliot: Yes - let's call it a 'homeland' - because just like the plants and

animals have a homeland, we are not separate from that.

These are very, very special teacher plant spirits, that were brought forth to help people who needed and could benefit from that particular kind of help.

In the old days it was very simple - let's say if you were a member of the group that had gone through countless cycles of living and dying in the upper Amazon, then you and ayahuasca were made for each other, and if you are from someplace else well ayahuasca wasn't for you.

But if ayahuasca was not for you, then there was something else that was, each land provided for the people there, gave them everything that they needed.

But these modern days, it's quite a lot more complex, the ancestral stuff we are made up of today tends to be quite mixed, and this has something to do with genealogy, but that's not the whole story anymore.

Nick: This is the cultural view?

Eliot: Well, yes it's cultural, but it also has a spiritual aspect to it. In the old days, the land and the ancestral soul of the people meant the same thing - and human beings are ancestral beings, minds bodies and souls are from the stuff of parents and grandparents and so forth.

It is true spiritually; and all the different peoples - since the beginning of time - had a great deal of appreciation for the perfection of this arrangement, where the peoples, the land and the various beings of the land, the plants, animals, rocks, waters and so on and so forth, were designed in such a perfect way that everything got everything that it needed.

So, people took a great deal of care to make sure that it continued that way.

For example all peoples had, until very recently, funeral rites - one of the main purposes of which was to see that the soul of the departed got escorted to the ancestral home where it belonged, so when it was time for a new life, a new human being got born into the same land, with the same people, the same tradition, the same plants, the same animals, etc.

But for sometime now, those practices have become partial or lost entirely, and therefore are not

effective anymore, and souls have a tendency to wander after death, and they end up in all sorts of unusual places.

So, even if you know the place of your birth and your genealogy, they are no longer reliable guides to what your soul is made of. So you get people who are born in a certain place with a certain ancestry finding a deep and compelling attraction to a spiritual tradition that is totally foreign to their geographical origin, and yet it provides for them. And that can't happen unless there is a resonance there between the soul of the person and the soul of the other homeland they feel drawn and connected to.

In order to engage a plant like ayahuasca - and have it be beneficial to you - the first thing you have to do is recognise that there are real dangers involved. These plants are sacred doorways, and they open into a vastness that an individual on their own can't navigate. The possibility of getting lost is almost a certainty, so in order for it to be not only ethical, but also safe and beneficial to work with these sacred plant teachers, there has to be a set of circumstances present.

The first circumstance is that a person has to have a soul connection to that plant, and as I said before, in the old days that was easy if you came from where the plant grew - that was it - you naturally had it.

But these days, it's not so simple. So now there are people who live someplace who through circumstances engage and benefit from sacred plants, even if they are not of the 'right' culture.

But there has to be that match, you have to be soulmates with the plant, otherwise it's not clear. It may give you a glimpse of something, but there is also the possibility of misfortune in the form of illness, accidents, financial problems; all kinds of things can manifest in different ways.

Without a soul match connection to the plant, working with sacred teacher plants is like playing Russian roulette.

And then there are a couple of other things that need to be in place too.

When those teacher plants were put into the world to benefit

people, as part of the presence of the plant, something else was also brought into the world - let's call it the 'path' or the sacred tradition.

This 'path' is what the plant requires in order for people to engage with it respectfully and fruitfully. It's as much a part of the plant as the roots and leaves, it can't really be separated out without risking some unpleasant consequences.

So one of the requirements of the path is that there is a properly initiated human guide - that's always part of the deal. Yes the plant itself is the primary teacher, but you need a human teacher who has walked the path themselves, who knows from a human perspective what the pitfalls are, and so on.

Having an engagement with the plant is not enough to actually be a guide of others, being a guide is another level of huge responsibility and is always taken very seriously within traditional societies.

And you want to be very sure that the guide has a good integrity and your interests at heart, and it's not about sexual or economic opportunity, etc.

I'd like to share with you about the Huichol tradition - which is my tradition - what it takes to become a guide to peyote for other people.

The first thing is that the person has identified for themselves - and this has been verified by a responsible shaman - that they have a calling to this particular medicine.

Then they have a minimum of five years of very difficult, gruelling, painful, grinding apprenticeship under a tricky, hardball playing shaman.

Now at the end of that time they have an opportunity to undertake an initiation ritual. If they make it through the initiation - which is not guaranteed - they are now a shaman - but they are still not a guide.

Now they have to work as a shaman for a minimum of another five years, and

demonstrate that they are an effective healer, that they help people, and also demonstrate that they have the devotion to the welfare of their community.

At the end of that second five-year period they can present themselves for a second initiation, which is much more dangerous than the first initiation.

Now, if they make it through that initiation - well they're still are not a guide.

Now the third stage, the peyote itself and the ancestors and the gods put them through a process and declare they're OK. Now they have what it takes to be a guide.

It's different in different cultures, but what is not unusual is the level of seriousness that people take these things with.

Nick: So, it is not just a weekend workshop then? [laughs]

Eliot: No, it's big time, a lifelong commitment.

Nick: it's like any spiritual commitment I guess, the more you do it the more you can't get out of it!

Eliot: Well actually, the way it seems to turn out, at least for Westerners, is they realise they have signed a contract sometime after they actually signed it, but in native society everybody's hip to this, and so that is why you don't find people in indigenous cultures who have ambitions to become shamans, they're trying to get out of it if possible, because they know what a huge pain in the arse it is.

Opposite page: Eliot makes an offering to the sacred fire before we start the interview

Inset: a peyote cactus - sacred teacher plant to the Huichol people of Mexico

Below: Huichol Mara'kame (shaman)

Eliot Cowan began his healing practice as an acupuncturist in 1976. He reintroduced the western world to the healing power of plant spirits with his book 'Plant Spirit Medicine' (Swan-Raven & Co., 1995) and founded Plant Spirit Medicine® in 1987. He is also a fully initiated elder shaman in the Huichol Indian tradition of Mexico.

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