



# **The Woman in the Shaman's Body**

Reclaiming the Feminine in  
Religion and Medicine

Barbara Tedlock, Ph.D.



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“Tedlock’s book should become the classic on... women’s place in the shaman’s world.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“In a time where we see so many women engaging in shamanic practice, Tedlock offers valuable insight into the long-standing role of women in this ancient path. I truly loved reading this book!”

—Sandra Ingerman, author of *Soul Retrieval* and *Medicine for the Earth*

“Wonderful, insightful, and compelling...Barbara Tedlock weaves a story that is both autobiography and persuasive argument for the importance of women as shaman, worldwide and throughout history.”

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“Meticulously researched yet delightfully absorbing... If Joseph Campbell or Mircea Eliade had been feminists, this is a book they could wish they had written.”

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“*The Woman in the Shaman’s Body* illuminates the oftentimes hidden, and sometimes openly suppressed, feminine spirit that is shamanism, that is healing, that is life.”

—Bonnie Horrigan, executive director, Society for Shamanic Practitioners

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# The Woman in the Shaman's Body

RECLAIMING THE FEMININE  
IN RELIGION AND MEDICINE

Barbara Tedlock, Ph.D.



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I dedicate this book to my shamanic partner, Dennis Tedlock, to my grandmother, Nokomis, and to my other shamanic teachers, Essie Parrish, Bayar Odun, Andrés Xiloj, and Talín Peruch.

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**PART ONE**

**Reclaiming History**





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# ONE

## Old Wisdom

HALF A CENTURY ago, as archaeologists worked in the wooded Pavlov Hills of the Czech Republic, they made a remarkable discovery. During the excavation of the Upper Paleolithic site known as Dolní Věstonice, they found a pair of shoulder blades from a mammoth. The bones had been placed so as to form the two sides of a pitched roof, one of them leaning against the other. Beneath them was a human skeleton, and in the earth that covered it and on the bones themselves were traces of red ochre. The body had been painted red before it was laid to rest.

If nothing more had been found in this grave, it would have added little to what was already known about Ice Age peoples and their customs. During the Upper Paleolithic, corresponding to the final years of the Ice Age, about sixty thousand years ago, people already had the same anatomy as modern human beings. In Eurasia, most of them lived not in caves but in the dark coniferous forests and wide-open steppes that lay beyond the reach of the glaciers.

This particular burial was of no ordinary person, though. A flint spearhead had been placed near the head of the deceased, and the body of a fox had been placed in one hand. For the archaeological team, led by Bohuslav Klíma, the fox was a clear indication that the person in the grave had been a shaman; the fox had a long history as a shamanic spirit guide, in Europe and all the way across Asia and into the Americas. It came as something of a shock, however, when skeletal analysis revealed that the shaman in question was a woman.

Why is this find so important? Before the discovery of this woman—and, though it's hard to believe, for a long time afterward—Ice Age shamans were imagined as members of an all-male religious community of mammoth hunters, a sort of *Flintstones* private club in which manhood was celebrated and the transcendental achieved by worshiping, then negating, the feminine. This excavation—which remains the oldest known of its kind—and further work at Dolní Věstonice prove that wasn't so.

A few years later, near the shaman's grave, Klíma discovered an earthen lodge containing a number of bone flutes and a large oven filled with nearly three thousand small pieces of baked clay. Some pieces had been molded in the shape of human feet, hands, and heads, while others were fragments of animal figurines. According to the archaeologist, "this baked oven is the predecessor of the potter's kiln, serving for the hardening and firing of the oldest known ceramic productions."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, not only do the oldest known skeletal remains of a shaman belong to a woman, but she is also the earliest known artisan who worked in clay and then hardened it with fire. She wasn't making early household utensils; no, she seems to have been making

talismans or figurines of some sort, perhaps for use in her rituals and spiritual healing.

How has it happened that we've lost sight of this ancient woman shaman and what she represents? For despite the proof of language and artifacts, despite pictorial representation, ethnographic narratives, and eyewitness accounts, the importance—no, the primacy—of women in shamanic traditions has been obscured and denied. That women's bodies and minds are particularly suited to tap into the power of the transcendental has been ignored. The roles that women have played in healing and prophecy throughout human history have been denigrated. All too often women who enter medicine or the ministry still believe they're stepping into a strictly men's field; in fact, these are historically women's fields that men have since entered. Women have been characterized as mere artisans or craftspeople—weavers and potters—instead of recognized for the creative, life-giving, cosmos-shaping powers these arts represent. Why? The reasons undoubtedly range from misreading of research to sexism pure and simple. But it's time to take another look at the evidence of millennia and of cultures around the globe. It's time to reclaim the woman in the shamanic body.

## GRANDMOTHER'S WISDOM

My interest in women as healers and mystics goes back to my childhood. I well remember the late fall mornings I spent at my grandmother's place on the prairie of Saskatchewan. She was an Ojibwe, and her two-room home was built from hewn jack pine logs chinked with mud. The roof consisted of round poles covered with moss and mud. Outside there were tall grasses and wild berries everywhere, and I would accompany her into the woods to gather the special fruits, flowers, twigs, and roots she needed to make her strange and mysterious healing concoctions.

As we followed the narrow trails that only my grandmother knew, she pointed out each edible plant: chokecherries, cranberries, gooseberries, blackberries, raspberries, violet mints, chickweed, and all kinds of mushrooms. As we sat on boulders by the side of a stream she told me stories handed down by her people—tales about Old Lady Nokomis, the owner of herbs, and her grandson Nanabush the shape-shifter, who changed at will from a tree trunk to an entire willow tree, then into a beaver, a deer, or a fluffy white cloud; stories about witches called "bear-walkers" who traveled about at night inside glowing balls of light.

My grandmother—whose name was also Nokomis—was raised and practiced as an herbalist and a midwife among Anglo-Canadians as well as with Ojibwe and Cree peoples. Her first husband, like herself, was a member of the group of healing shamans known in English as the Great Medicine Lodge, or in Ojibwe as the Midewiwin, meaning "mystic drum doings." She bore him five children before he died; then to support herself she traveled around the provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba visiting schools, churches, and community centers and teaching herbal healing, storytelling, and massage to anyone who was interested.

For "selling" her traditional knowledge, and for healing whites as well as natives, her relatives disapproved of her. My cousins called her a witch and ran whenever they caught sight of her long braid dangling over her basket, which overflowed with peculiar roots and leaves.

Even though she often dressed in black—she wore a long-sleeved blouse, ankle-length skirt, and black shawl with purple fringe—I knew she was neither a witch nor a sorcerer. Her medicine was good, not evil.

But now I've come to think perhaps she *was* a witch—in beaded moccasins. After all, women healers long ago were known as “witches,” a word that came from Old English *wita* which meant “to know” or “to be wise.” Like my grandmother, witches were the wise women who had a special knack for revealing life's mysterious truths. I still remember her explaining that our thoughts and emotions overlap and intermingle, and that this mixing of head and heart connects us to future events hidden in the dark womb of time.

My grandmother was a nonconformist, and as her second husband she chose a Scots-Irish traveling salesman whose life she had saved after a moose-hunting accident. By treating his wound she earned not only his gratitude but also his deep affection, and together they had several children.

My mother was the youngest of them, and she had no interest in learning traditional ways. She left for college and afterward married my Irish-American father. A short time later I was born.

Despite my mother's attempt to distance herself from her heritage, I loved to spend summers with my grandmother. She greeted my curiosity about the spirit world with respect and encouraged my questions. And she asked me about my dreams.

## DREAM PROPHECY

One day when I was four I told her a dream in which a tiny spotted turtle swam across the pond toward me, slithered out of the water, and plopped down beside me on a log. My dream was lucky, she explained, for Turtle was a spiritual being, a healing *manito*. He had picked me out and brought me a message: One day I would follow him as a healer.

That winter my parents moved to Washington, DC, where I was stricken with poliomyelitis. When my mother called her, my grandmother already knew that I was seriously ill and was preparing to come to my bedside. As I lay paralyzed inside the iron lung she sat with me, singing songs and knitting socks and mittens for her other grandchildren.

She brought me a beautiful black and gold turtle amulet she had beaded, and hung it on the corner of the mirror suspended above my head. “Now, when you look into the mirror you will see your face with Turtle. And then you will know who you really are,” she whispered (figure 1).

Eventually she convinced my parents that warm water, herbs, and gentle massage were a better treatment for my nonfunctioning muscles than immobilization in an iron lung. They finally agreed, demanded my release from my iron carapace, and brought me home to a regimen of daily swims, sweat baths, and my grandmother's herbal compresses and therapeutic massage, which sent bolts of electricity through my paralyzed limbs. In a few months I had recovered enough strength and flexibility to go to school, albeit with metal leg braces.

By the time I was a freshman at the University of California at Berkeley, my leg muscles

had recovered so thoroughly that I had only the tiniest limp. I studied and enjoyed myself like any other college student, and tried not to think about my grandmother's lessons—until one night she appeared to me in a dream.



*1 Turtle manito. A totemic spirit being that symbolizes healing through proper communication among all living beings. Turtle is the most important icon for Ojibwe shamans who are initiated into the Great Medicine Lodge, also known as the Midewiwin, or “Mystic Drum Doings.”*

I was in a misty wood where long silken tendrils hung from the branches and hid my grandmother's figure. Suddenly she said, “Step where I step.” And, although I could not see her clearly, I followed her purple-fringed shawl up and up into the chilly night sky. At dawn we arrived at a large, messy nest filled with serpent bones and bits of broken eggshell. She stirred the debris with a cedar stick till she found what she was looking for—an unbroken light blue speckled egg—and handed it to me, saying, “Here, take this egg; it will be your medicine power when I am gone.”

The shimmering egg stunned me. My grandmother's image slowly faded into a fog line with flickering green and purple lightning. As the mist lifted and the sun streaked across the morning sky, I awoke knowing that she had died. But she had passed on to me some of her energy, her medicine power.

That morning I stayed home from classes, waiting for the phone to ring. When the call came, announcing her death, I cried uncontrollably for hours. As a remembrance, I folded and cut out a paper loon, her clan totem and one of her most powerful guardian spirits, and placed it next to her picture on my desk. In the lonely months that followed, my grandmother often visited me in nighttime dreams and daytime visions. Sometimes she appeared as herself; at other times she appeared as a loon diving into a lake. Once she was a purple coneflower beckoning me to taste her.

A year later, she came to me in a dream as herself. Her long white hair was unbound. She was wrapped in a plaid Pendleton blanket over the shabby housedress she often had worn in the cabin when she wasn't expecting visitors. Smiling, she reached out and almost touched me.

hand. Then she looked at me and said, “You, my child, must always be *minobimaa tisiw* [seeking the good life] and never allow the wisdom of old Indian women to die out. Now you are free to walk the medicine path.”

Yet it would be many more years before I set foot in that direction again.

## MAYAN SHAMANIC APPRENTICESHIP

Ten years after my grandmother’s death I found myself in the Guatemalan highlands, a doctoral student in anthropology, married to another anthropologist. It was there that I once again entered the world of healers and shamans. I arrived with academic intentions. Like the good scientist I was trying hard to become, I spent my days studying the exterior layers of the K’iche’ Maya, photographing and tape-recording as people burned incense at outdoor shrines and danced to the music of flutes and marimbas. In an attempt to understand a group of spirit seekers, I attended a midnight séance, warning the medium in advance that I intended to watch and not participate. That night during the unexpectedly impressive ceremony I smelled a mysterious rancid odor and saw translucent blue-green balls of lightning circle the room. I felt something like electricity enter my stomach and even heard what sounded like the voice of my own dead father. But I was determined to record the event with the distant coolness of a scientific observer.

Not long afterward, however, I came down with the flu. A long way from conventional Western medical help, and giving in to a documentary urge, I hired a local Mayan healer. Don Andrés arrived wearing a wrinkled blue serge suit that hung loosely on his slender frame. His delicate aquiline nose and rose-brown face gave him an air of gentle strength, and I knew he’d recently served as mayor of his town. He set about work at once, dispensing advice about herbs and grasses, and touching my cheeks and neck with his hot hands in order to break my fever. Then he used divining crystals to uncover the source of my illness, taking on another persona as he did so. Giggling strangely and speaking in two voices—one feminine and compassionate and another masculine and stern—he said it was my rude behavior at the shrines that had brought down the wrath of the Holy World. For that transgression I would die and so would my husband, Dennis.

Stunned and scared at this pronouncement, we fled to the capital the next day. After a couple of days of intense coughing I slowly improved, and we decided to return to the village. Perhaps there was something Don Andrés could do to counteract our apparent fate. Indeed, he and his wife, Doña Talín, who was also a shaman, agreed to help us. We would spend the next nine months meeting with them every day, coming to understand the way they saw their world. They started by having us recount a dream; then, heeding their own dreams and intuitions, they went on to suggest that Dennis and I might learn to practice as healers. Don Andrés and Doña Talín had to ask permission of their ancestors, and Dennis and I had to wrestle with our doubts, but in the days and weeks that followed we did indeed cross the invisible line between scholars learning about a culture and apprentices learning how to perform within it. We were no longer ethnographers interviewing subjects; they made us their students. We stopped asking questions and put aside our translating, and they began to pass along little teaching lessons.

Gradually, we learned to enter and control our dreams in a kind of alert sleeping, and to share, interpret, and complete those dreams together. We studied astronomy, hands-on healing, and herbalism. Don Andrés helped us recognize different types of shrines and to pray correctly. He and Doña Talín sent us off to gather flowers and incense and taught us to calculate the Mayan calendar, which was crucial for divination. He showed us how to embrace casual but meaningful coincidences of inner and outer events, thus transcending and improving our emotional and intuitive selves. Finally, Don Andrés taught us about the vital energy that suffuses the material universe; he trained us in bodily awareness and emotional attunement—how to recognize the lightning in the body and the “speaking of blood” manifestations of our connection with the cosmos. In this way we would be able to increase our energy and use it to heal others and ourselves. Our teachers took us to other communities and sent us to other shamans for examinations and to see if they agreed that we had the potential to join their ranks.

Our training ended with a final sharing of dreams that culminated in a gorgeous three-day initiation ceremony, during which Dennis and I joined a large group of other celebrants who had undergone similar training and were either receiving initiation as shamans or else renewing their commitment to the shamanic path. A huge feast followed this.

The true “graduation” test for Dennis and me came a few days later. The son of our teachers had recently married, and his father-in-law mysteriously had become paralyzed and mute. Doctors’ tests and treatments had had no effect. And Don Andrés and Doña Talín were similarly powerless; they were too close to the victim. Would we try to heal him? This would be the culmination of months of training in calendrical divination, visualization, the speaking of the blood, and the laying on of hands.

In a small room Dennis and I sat next to each other, opposite the sick man, with our new shaman’s bundles laid out in front of us. Dennis sensed immediately that the sickness did not come from an animal or from the cosmos but was human work; it was a kind of witchcraft. As he voiced this aloud, the paralyzed man seemed to smile, the first sign of movement anyone had noticed.

Dennis got up and put his hands on the man’s temples. He could feel the asymmetric energy, how out of balance it was. Then I too stood up and described the energy I sensed. Suddenly the man began to speak, telling how Don Andrés and Doña Talín had deceived him about being Catholic, which they had never been. In a psycho-dynamic reaction his anger had gone deep into his body, freezing it. When he forgave the people who’d tricked him, his paralysis melted away. And our initiation was complete.

## **FEMININE TRADITIONS**

What is the relevance of these stories to a lost feminine tradition in shamanism? How do my personal history help reclaim shamanic ministry and healing as legitimately feminine endeavors? I believe that after years of combining my shamanic training with my academic research I have emerged, in nearly equal measure, as an initiated shaman and a scientific expert. For the rest of this book I will rely on the skills of both those callings—argumentative intellectual reasoning and intuitive emotional reasoning—to make my case.

Over the next few hundred pages, I will present the evidence for the existence, importance, and power of women shamans. I will begin by summarizing what shamans do, then look back to their prehistoric beginnings as well as subsequent historical development. I will explain why women's particular physiology and biochemistry exquisitely equip them for the shamanic role. I will describe their transcendent shamanic roles as midwives, warriors, and prophets and the importance of gender shifting, the ability to embrace both masculine and feminine paths in shamanic healing. And I'll assess the revitalization of feminine shamanism around the globe today.

The pathway through this material is neither straightforward nor simple. But perhaps that is as it should be, for shamanic experience itself is neither straightforward nor simple. It is complex, mystical, and awe-inspiring, as befits the integration of the physical and spiritual worlds—two diverse and powerful realms where the shaman practices her calling.





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