



Around the **SACRED FIRE**

Attending the recent conference
of the Society For Shamanic
Practitioners held in the UK

by Karen Kelly

Above: Nepalese shaman Bhola Nath Banstola drums while in trance

I am just home from the first residential conference of the Society for Shamanic Practitioners held in the UK, and the experience has left me tired but deeply healed and touched by how much we, as shamanic practitioners, can and do share.

The Society was born in the USA from a group of medical doctors who deeply believed that shamanism had something to offer conventional medicine in terms of heartfulness and a deep feeling of connection between healer and patient. However the Society has now become more than that. Its focus is now on bringing a sense of community to shamanic practitioners all over the world, who sometimes feel alone and isolated in Western societies that do not acknowledge the reality of Spirit, never mind the existence of spirits.

Below left: Leo Rutherford shares Medicine Wheel teachings with a group

Below right: the conference gathers outside for a ceremony



Elsa, Howard and Alan the organisers.

One of the few tenets we probably all share as shamanic practitioners is that we see we are 'all connected' - all of

the time. Yet sometimes, listening to the followers of one flavour of shamanism or another, one would think that we are all following separate paths with little in common and are certainly not 'all connected.'

This feeling of connection between people and paths was for me the strongest experience of the conference. It offered the opportunity to try out lots of different kinds of practice from a Native American pipe ceremony, to Nepalese shamanic practices and from shamanic journeying work, to medicine wheel teachings.

Each offering was facilitated by a leading - mostly British - teacher, including Leo Rutherford, Sacred Hoop Magazine's own Nick Breeze Wood, Annie Spencer, and Howard

and Elsa Malpas (who worked very hard organising the conference, as well as running some of the sessions).

In addition to this more local talent, we were very fortunate to also have present Bhola Nath Banstola a traditional Nepalese shaman who led us in two Nepalese ceremonies.

On arrival at Earthspirit, a residential workshop centre near Glastonbury in England, I was met by Howard and Elsa and a few people who had been helping them with the practicalities of organising the conference. I felt welcomed to the circle and was immediately asked which of the mini workshops, run during the conference, I thought I might want to sign up for.

The structure of the days was busy and full. We all gathered together in the morning for a session led by Howard and Elsa, then split into two or three smaller groups for the morning 'mini' workshops; after lunch we split again for the afternoon sessions. In the evenings we gathered all together once again to share a larger circle and participate in a ceremony.

Choosing which mini workshops to attend was not easy. The one I was leading myself, on the Viking shamanic tradition of *seidr* was at the same time as a session on shamanic ethics that I very much wanted to attend. Perhaps next year I will get the chance.

On the first day, I led my workshop on *seidr*, which with a circle of about thirty singers, whose singing fuelled the *volva's* journey [the Viking name for the person who goes into trance and gets messages from the spirits]. It was a powerful session - *seidr* is a pretty ecstatic practice, very connected to the spirit of Nature - and the spirits spoke through the *volva* loud and clear.



In the afternoon I attended a session with Leo Rutherford on the teachings of the medicine wheel. These teachings are not at the centre of my own practice, but I do think they offer an interesting mental structure, a sort of map of the energetic world which gave me much food for thought. It was good to hear these teachings from one of the UK's elders, who has been teaching these traditions for over a quarter-century, although for me the simpler wheels I have heard from native people with just the four directions, above and below are more easier to grasp.

Another contrast was the traditional Nepalese healing ceremony offered by Bhola in the evening. This was an extraordinarily powerful ceremony in which we asked for healing and thanked our own spirit helpers and teachers. Like most Native ceremonies, it had its own timetable - we ran over time, as it took longer than anticipated for the almost seventy people attending the conference to complete it! However, I felt something shift in my own heart about halfway through this ceremony and by the end I was almost weeping with that strange mixture of joy and sorrow that marks many effective healings.

Looking back at the end of that first day, it had brought together many different practices. At first sight *seidr*, medicine wheel teachings and a Nepalese healing ceremony may seem to have little in common. However all of them circle around a single sacred fire, that represents what we have in common as practitioners.

After a major personal healing on the morning of the second day, during a journey led by Elsa Malpas, I sat out the morning and afternoon workshop sessions. I felt

full and somewhat over-sensitive.

However I heard fine things about both of the sessions, particularly the healing ceremony lead by John-Luke Edwards from Canada. This was high ritual of the best sort, creating a strong container in which participants could work with their own wounds in a sacred way.

That evening we took part in a fire ceremony from the Huichol people of Mexico, which was full of story and laughter. A real community sharing [see next article].

One of the real delights of the conference for me was the ability to witness how the teachers stepped into the centre to offer their workshops, and then stepped back and became part of the circle once again. It was great to sit in circle with some of our leading shamanic practitioners and they certainly seemed to enjoy being part of the circle rather than always leading it. I know I did.

Alan Davis MD summed it up in his keynote speech on the third and last day. "We all work with the spirits. The spirits are like a council fire we can all sit around. Through the spirits we know that we are all connected, all one." And the spirits were certainly present during the conference.

I have been involved in several similar shamanic gatherings held in the USA and they have been wonderful too. It is always good to have the chance to sit round the council fire with our peers and the spirits, and breathe in inspiration or simply stick a toe in the water of some traditions you may have wondered about.

For me this whole UK event felt like a real reflection of the broader shamanic community in Britain today and a chance to meet with

people who follow a path that is both similar and different to my own. I came away feeling that we are all connected and deeply honoring those who had put the conference together.

Next year's UK conference 4-7th September 2008. For more information contact Howard and Elsa Malpas warriorintheheart@tiscali.co.uk (020) 8758 9950

For information about the Society for Shamanic Practitioners and to find out about conferences in the US visit www.shamansociety.org

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Top: Bhola Nath Banstola assisted by Alan Davis prepare for a ceremony.

Below: people gather around Grandfather Fire during the Huichol Fire Ceremony

Bottom left: Elsa flicks water at circle members to bless them during a ceremony

Bottom right: teaching in the tipi

