

FRANCESCO BENOZZO
Lo sciamanesimo. Origini, tradizioni, prospettive
La Vela, Lucca, 2024, 125 pp.

La Vela Publisher has once again graced us with a new, condensed and original book by Francesco Benozzo, entitled *Lo sciamanesimo. Origini, tradizioni, prospettive* (Shamanism. Origins, Traditions, Perspectives). The book is intently prefaced by Bhola Nhat Banstola (pp. 9-21), an anthropologist and Jhankri Shaman from Nepal, with an extended family lineage history of more than twenty-seven generations of which he is custodian and torch-bearer.

As Director of the *ALL* book series (Forum Editrice Universitaria), which has published three of Francesco Benozzo's most significant and successful books¹, and as Director of the first and only Master Course on Partnership Studies and Shamanism (MaPS)², launched in 2020 amidst some controversy surrounding the concept – and even the very word – ‘Shamanism’, I am genuinely thrilled to witness the continued development of the many connections and collaborations that emerged throughout our MaPS journey. The friendships and professional relationships nurtured during our Master course have continued to bear fruit, underscoring the enduring relevance and vitality of this unique international academic endeavour. It is heartening to see the ways in which these ideas and partnerships continue to flourish, and I look forward to the new opportunities they will bring in the future. This happens also thanks to our long-term collaboration with the international association on Shamanism *Where the Eagles Fly*³, in the persons of Costanzo Allione, documentarist, film maker, writer, and Anna Saudin, researcher, historian, writer, interpreter, great travellers and cutting-edge world-wide facilitators of different forms of Shamanism⁴. Both Bhola Banstola, a participant in numerous initiatives of *Where the Eagles Fly* since 1999, and Francesco Benozzo, a member of the international scientific committee of the Master, have been invaluable professors in our programme. Their contributions have fostered an ongoing dialogue

¹ Benozzo Francesco, ed., *Poeti della marea. Canti bardici gallesi dal VI al X secolo*, Postfazione di Antonella Riem Natale, Udine, Forum, 2022, <https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/poeti-della-marea>; Benozzo Francesco, *The ridge and the song. Sailing the archipelago of poetry*, Preface by Antonella Riem Natale, Udine, Forum, 2022, <https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/the-ridge-and-the-song>; Benozzo Francesco, *Sciamanica. Poemi dai confini dei mondi / Poems from the Borders of the Worlds*, Traduzione di/ Translation by Gray Sutherland. Postfazione/ Afterword by Antonella Riem Natale, Udine, Forum, 2023, <https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/sciamanica>.

² See: <https://www.uniud.it/it/didattica/formazione-post-laurea/master/alta-formazione/Area-umanistica-comunicazione-formazione/partnership-sciamanesimo>.

³ See: <http://www.wtef.it/wordpress/>. In particular with the significant shared initiative focussing on Women of Peace: <http://www.wtef.it/wordpress/archivio/donne-di-pace/>.

⁴ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqphGqP-NIs>.

between various *(in)-disciplines*⁵, personal experiences, meaningful encounters, and scientific research and discoveries.

Lo Sciamanesimo: Origini, Tradizioni, Prospettive traces the journey of shamanism across millennia, offering a comprehensive exploration of its origins, traditions, and future directions. Interwoven with images of shamans and their instruments from various ages and cultures, the book consists of twenty epigrammatic and poetic chapters, an Epilogue, and a concise and comprehensive bibliography of key texts on the subject, including some of the author's own works. It tells the captivating story of both a personal and scholarly journey through inner and outer geographies, myths, experiences, encounters, meditations, and memories. This intricate and compelling exploration delves into the shamanic worldview, its profound connection to early human consciousness, and its enduring influence on poetic and linguistic traditions across cultures. The book covers a wide range of topics, including the role of shamanic songs, the therapeutic practices of shamans, the persistence of shamanic traces in modern dialects, the survival of shamanic healing in rural areas, the history of shamanism's suppression through religious and philosophical dominator approaches seeing shamanism as a form of superstition, which modern humanity supposedly has to leave behind, by entering the safe ports of rationality and 'science'. In many of his books Benozzo interestingly challenges this idea of 'science', and shares with the reader a deep and poignant reflection on the significance of the shamanic experience, both in its original context and in its enduring presence in contemporary culture. One of his most challenging and innovative ideas is that the first shaman was a woman, and this, according to his studies, was so for many millennia.

The opening chapter, *'In origine fu la sciamana'* (In the Beginning there was the She-Shaman, pp. 25-27), draws on the theories presented in *The Paleolithic Continuity Paradigm for the Origins of Indo-European Languages* by Mario Alinei and Francesco Benozzo⁶, as well as *Speaking Australopithecus* by Francesco Benozzo and Marcel Otte⁷. These works propose a radically different view of human civilisation, pushing back its origins and emphasising the central role of a powerful feminine figure. This she-shaman is portrayed as a primordial force, perceiving all forms of life as self-generating from within her, unfolding in a continuous, spontaneous feminine 'arborescence'. She embodied and expressed this life force, becoming tree, elk, reindeer, deer, wolf, bear, crow and fish in a symbolic intersection and communion with nature. The she-shaman was at the same time a figure generation and regeneration of transition and transmutation in the spiralling vortex of the cosmos and life. She welcomes children into the world and guides the deceased into new forms of existence; she is a dreamer of visions – arboreal, rooted in the earth, connected to bones, skulls, clouds, and stars – representing an ancient and enduring connection to the cycles of life and death.

⁵ *In-discipline* is a favourite expression of Francesco Benozzo, signalling the necessity for the scholar and poet to be 'undisciplined', to plough new fields, to challenge established methodologies and go beyond all 'norms' to touch the heart and essence of things of Beauty and Truth.

⁶ See: <http://www.continuitas.org/intro.html>.

⁷ Benozzo Francesco and Marcel Otte, *Speaking Australopithecus*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2017. The book argues for a much greater antiquity of human language than has usually been presumed in recent research (according to which it was born with Homo Sapiens at the end of Middle Paleolithic – 50.000 years ago – or at the most with some Neandertal, 200.000 years ago), providing linguistic and archaeological evidence for seeing the appearance of Australopithecus, between 4 and 3 million years ago, as the stage of our evolution when the emergence of an articulated language took place.

As a philologist, or more accurately an *ethnophilologist* (a discipline he founded⁸), many of Benozzo's insights into shamanism begin with a linguistic analysis of terms, verbs and words. For example, in Chapter 2 (pp. 29-30), he presents several hypotheses about the etymology of the word *shamān*, examining its potential linguistic roots across various cultures and languages⁹. The word *shamān* is most commonly thought to derive from the Sanskrit term *śramāṇa* (meaning Buddhist monk), passing through a series of linguistic transformations from Pāli to Tungusic languages. However, Benozzo sees this connection as somewhat too modern and disconnected from the original, pre-religious essence of shamanism, which pre-dates Buddhist influence. This etymology, though widespread, does not fully capture the spirit of shamanic practices that existed long before Buddhism emerged. Alternately, Benozzo proposes several other linguistic roots, including the Turkish *qam* meaning 'diviner', the Tibetan *gšen* meaning 'master', and the Mongolian *sam* meaning 'to mix' or 'disturb'. These alternatives are all significant in their own right, offering insights into how different cultures may have interpreted the role of the shaman in their societies. In the Nivkh language and culture, *camn* (pronounced *shamn*) means 'eagle'. According to Benozzo, this linguistic connection, found in various Arctic and Siberian traditions, suggests a powerful symbolic relationship where shamans are often seen as descendants of the eagle, a celestial and solar bird. Eagles were believed to possess the ability to gaze directly at the sun, a trait that was also attributed to shamans.

Mythological narratives often link shamans to eagles through the imagery of birth from an eagle's nest, frequently suggesting that shamans are born from eagle eggs, marking them as extraordinary beings with a deep connection to the divine or celestial realms. This symbolic bond with the eagle is not just a cultural curiosity; it is deeply embedded in the spiritual and ritual practices of these communities. Shamans were believed to have the ability to transform into eagles, allowing them to return to their celestial origins, symbolising their role as mediators between the earthly and divine realms. This imagery is further emphasised in their ceremonial attire, where eagle feathers are often worn as part of their headdresses and clothing and their title as 'daughters and sons of the eagle' underscores their mythical connection to this majestic bird. In Benozzo's analysis we are made aware of the complexity of the term *shamān*, which certainly has multiple layers of meaning, shaped by various cultural interpretations across different times and geographies. He argues that one of the most plausible etymology of *shamān* could be tied to the Nivkh word for eagle, reflecting a deeper, more ancient understanding of shamanism. This interpretation ties language, myth, and spiritual practice into a cohesive narrative that emphasises the eagle's role as both a symbol of power and transformation and as a conduit between the human and the divine realms. The synthesis of these theories demonstrates that shamanism, far from being merely a religious practice, is a multifaceted cultural and spiritual phenomenon deeply intertwined with the environment, mythology, and linguistic history of the peoples who practice it.

⁸ Benozzo, Francesco, *Etnofilologia*, Napoli, Liguori, 2010; *Breviario di Etnofilologia*, Lecce, Pensa, 2012.

⁹ See also: Benozzo, Francesco, *Shamanism in European Prehistory: An Ethnophilological Perspective*, in Mantellato, Mattia, Riem, Antonella (eds.), *MaPS: A Cartography of Partnership, Shamanism and Native Traditions*, pp. 47-52; "Sciamano": una nuova etimologia, "Quaderni di Semantica", 10, 2024, pp. 135-142.

The Shamanic Song: A Manifestation of the Cosmos

Structurally, shamanic songs are marked by key elements reflecting the shaman's role as an intermediary between the human world and the supernatural realms. These songs often evoke the protection of ancestors, recount ecstatic experiences, and invoke the elements of nature – earth, water, air, fire and ether. Furthermore, they reflect a personal, mantic self-awareness, an assertion of knowledge and insight shown in the frequent use of the first-person mode. This mode reveals the shaman's deep understanding of the cyclical nature of life, *dis-ease*, and transformation, revealing personal states of suffering and metamorphosis into animal, vegetal or mineral forms. The ancient roots of these themes are evident in early Western texts such as *Llyfr Taliesin* (The Book of Taliesin¹⁰) and *Vers de dreit nien* (Song of Pure Nothing)¹¹, which reflect a continuity between shamanic worldview and the poetic traditions of the Middle Ages.

The use of the first-person in shamanic songs not only reflects personal experience but also a profound connection to universal truths. Phrases like 'I know', 'I understand', 'I was', and 'I am' highlight the shaman's divinatory role, allowing him to perceive and interpret the forces shaping the world. This is reminiscent and analogous to the poetic traditions of ancient Celtic and Norse cultures, where figures like Taliesin and the poet-priests of early Irish tradition called upon both the natural and supernatural realms through their verse. The use of the first person in shamanic songs signifies not only a meaningful personal experience but also a deeper connection to universal truths. Through the use of phrases like 'I know,' 'I understand,' 'I was,' and 'I am,' shamans (and true poets) assert a divinatory role enabling them to perceive and interpret the forces at play in the cosmos.

Shamanism in Language and Dialect

The shamanic experience, with its focus on holistic healing and transformation, also permeates the linguistic structures of various European dialects. The language itself reflects the deeply intertwined relationship between sleep, dreams, healing, and song in traditional shamanic practices. Words that simultaneously mean 'to heal,' 'to dream,' and 'to compose poetry' point to an ancient worldview in which these activities were seen as part of the same continuum. The Occitan verb *ensongià*r, meaning both 'to dream' and 'to heal,' and the Welsh verb *bredwydd*, meaning both 'to dream' and 'to heal,' are examples of linguistic traces that preserve the profound connection between dreams, healing, and artistic creation. Similarly, verbs like *dromen* in Dutch and *unelma* in Finnish also reflect this interconnectedness, signalling an ancient understanding of the self as deeply integrated with the cosmos.

Moreover, words that mean both 'poet' and 'healer' are found in several European dialects, such as *bernardòun* or *bernardòn* in Emilia-Romagna, meaning both 'poet' and 'traditional healer', and *cerddedd* in Welsh, where the verb 'to heal' is derived from the noun for 'poetry.' This linguistic overlap suggests that the roles of the poet, the healer, and the shaman were historically inseparable. In many cases, the act of healing was also an act

¹⁰ See: Benozzo Francesco ed., *Poeti della marea. Canti bardici gallesi dal VI al X secolo*, Postfazione di Antonella Riem Natale, Udine, Forum, 2022, pp. 36-93, with a commentary, pp.95-96.

¹¹ See: Benozzo, Francesco, *Guglielmo IX e le fate. Il 'Vers de dreit nien' e gli archetipi celtici della poesia dei trovatori*, in "Medioevo romanzo", 21, 1997, pp. 69-87.

of artistic creation, as the shaman or healer would use song, verse, or incantation to restore balance and harmony to the body and spirit.

These linguistic traces, many of which have faded in our contemporary usage, speak to an ancient and holistic worldview where the distinctions between body, mind, and spirit did not exist. The healing practices of traditional shamans were not confined to physical treatment but also engaged with the soul, the dreams, and the unseen forces of nature.

At the heart of the shamanic experience is the *song* (Ch. 17, pp. 77-83), an essential tool connecting the shaman with the natural world, the divine, and cosmic order. In shamanic practice the song serves as a conduit for a total immersion into the forces of nature, facilitating transmutation and spiritual transformation. This practice involves a deep tuning into the sounds of the natural world – imitating animals, the elements, and the primal forces that shape existence. Through song, the shaman embodies the energies of the cosmos, becoming both a vessel and a voice for the larger, interconnected whole.

Shamanic Healers in Rural Areas

Luckily, even in the present day, shamanic healing traditions continue to survive in rural areas, often preserved through the practices of traditional healers. In the Emilia region of Italy, for example, healers known as *stariòune* or *vòtre* still perform rituals that are deeply connected to ancient shamanic traditions. These practitioners often work with specific ailments, such as sciatica, sprains, fever, insomnia, using techniques that combine touch, chant, and symbolic gestures to bring about healing¹².

The act of healing often involves a ritualistic element, with healers performing specific chants or incantations while making symbolic gestures, such as ‘signing’ the afflicted area with their hands. The healer’s chant may invoke animal spirits or natural forces, as seen in the case of a chant recited to treat persistent fever, where the hare – an animal associated with transformation – flies over to the moon bringing back healing. This invocation of animal spirits, the use of sound and gesture to channel healing energy mirrors the practices of shamans in other parts of the world, where animals serve as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms.

Healing in this context is not merely a physical intervention but a deeply symbolic act that engages with the metaphysical forces that govern health and illness. The healer’s role is not only to treat the body but to restore harmony between the individual and the larger cosmic order, which has been disrupted by illness.

Shamanism’s Suppression and Persistence

While shamanic practices have persisted in isolated rural areas, they have also been systematically suppressed throughout history, particularly with the rise of religious and philosophical thought. The advent of dualistic systems, such as those found in Western philosophy and the Abrahamic religions, marked a decisive break from the holistic, animistic worldview of hunter-gatherer societies. Religious and philosophical traditions

¹² See: Benozzo, Francesco, *Etnofilologia*, “Ottavo esempio. Lessico e gesti delle guaritrici tradizionali (etnotesti e rituali in un contesto preistorico)”, pp. 163-179.

sought to distance themselves from the shamanic practices that were seen as dangerous, irrational, and ‘untamed’.

In ancient cultures such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism, elements of shamanic thought were incorporated into religious rituals and cosmologies, yet these systems often positioned shamanic practices as inferior or primitive. In Hinduism, for example, the divine couple Purusha and Prakriti were said to undergo animal metamorphoses, but these transformations were framed within a larger philosophical narrative that emphasised the transcendence of the material world. Similarly, figures like Zarathustra and Siddhartha Gautama, who exhibited shamanic qualities such as ecstatic experiences and encounters with animals, were incorporated into religious traditions that distanced themselves from the shamanic practices of earlier societies.

Christianity and Islam, too, absorbed elements of shamanic ritual, such as the symbolic death and resurrection of Christ and the mystical experiences of the Prophet Muhammad. However, these religions also sought to suppress the indigenous shamanic practices that preceded them, branding them as heretical or demonic. This suppression, which has been particularly intense in regions such as Siberia and Korea, has been a significant factor in the decline of traditional shamanism.

Despite these efforts to eradicate shamanism, traces of the ancient worldview remain embedded in the cultural fabric of many societies. The shamanic impulse, the desire to connect with nature, to transcend the boundaries of the self, and to heal through song, ritual, and symbolic transformation continue to resonate in contemporary culture. The works of poets, musicians, and artists who channel the voices of the natural world, the animal kingdom, and the unconscious mind are a testament to the enduring power of the shamanic vision.

The Shaman as a Universal Figure

Ultimately, the figure of the shaman represents an essential aspect of human consciousness – a deep, intuitive connection with the world that pre-dates the rigid structures of organised religion and philosophy. The shaman embodies a way of seeing and being in the world that is grounded in wonder, spontaneity, and a sense of unity with the forces of nature. In this sense, the shaman is not a relic of the past but a timeless archetype that continues to speak to our deepest yearnings for connection, healing, love and transformation.

The shaman’s ability to move between worlds, to speak the language of animals, to channel the energies of the cosmos, and to heal both body and spirit reflects a fundamental aspect of human nature that is often obscured by the demands of modern life. The loss of this intimate relationship of partnership – brought about by the rise of dualistic thought and the dominance of materialism – has left many individuals feeling *dis-eased* and *dis-connected* from their truest life.

Benozzo’s work unfolds like a timeless harmonious melody, beautifully capturing the eternal pulse of shamanic wisdom. It eloquently weaves together the song that binds the shaman to the very cosmos and the delicate threads of language that connect dreams, gestures, healing, music, verse, and song. The survival of these ancient practices in the quiet corners of rural lands stands in soft defiance against the relentless march of religious and philosophical systems, revealing the clash between an ancient harmonious vision of the world and the cold logic of the modern age. Yet, even amid this tension, shamanism remains a vibrant force in contemporary life, offering a path toward healing, self-

discovery, and a profound union with Nature. The shaman/poet is not merely a figure of the past. S/he is a living beacon of transformation and healing, ever-present and waiting to be rediscovered in moments of wonder. In the rustling of leaves, in the hum of music and song, in the quiet reverie of poetry, the shamanic undercurrent surges as an invisible force – a timeless wellspring of beauty and truth. It is in these sacred moments that we are gently pulled back into the embrace of our ancestral roots, where the energies of life's healing partnership offer us their quiet strength and eternal wisdom.

*Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.*

*He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all¹³.*

Farewell, Francesco, beloved Friend, Poet and Bard¹⁴.

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¹³ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", ll. 610-617, *Coleridge Poetical Works*, Coleridge, Ernest Hartley, ed. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1912, p. 209.

¹⁴ Sadly, on 22 March 2025, academic, intellectual, poet, bardic harpist and singer, Candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Francesco Benozzo passed away, due to a sudden heart attack. Here you can find some of the many mementos of his passage into our world: https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/?page_id=1361&lang=it; <https://gala.network/members/rebeccams/buddyblog/my-posts/6051/>; <https://lingue.unibo.it/it/notizie/unricordo-di-francesco-benozzo>.

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