



An Interview with Arvick Baghramian

"A good shaman is a good story teller. They are poets, dancers and actors, who are very creative people. They express themselves in so many different ways, and not just with words."

These are some of Arvick Baghramian's first words to me, as I sit down in her home where I have been invited to discuss her latest book, *The Magic of Shamanism*. Although I am a complete novice in the practices of shamanism, glancing around the interior of Arvick's apartment, it is immediately apparent that there certainly lies a creative streak within her. Intricate and unique artefacts, paintings and photographs adorn each wall and surface, which strikes an impressively harmonious balance as the space feels far from cluttered. Instead, a sense of calm pervades the place.

"Everything you see here was given to me, as gifts, by my various students." The colourful and diverse mix of artwork that Arvick has acquired suitably reflects her international lifestyle as well as the many lives she has touched. She works as a Shamanic Counsellor across the world, leading classes and working individually with students.

But in order to fully appreciate Arvick's interesting path, I must begin at the beginning ...

How did your involvement with Shamanism develop into writing a book about it?

"I was at the lowest point in my life when I turned to shamanism. My spirit healers helped me, and I thought to myself, I have to do my PhD in this. But I never thought that I would then write an entire book on it (that would not be confined to an academic environment). A message that my guardian spirit later sent to me was that this wasn't about writing a PhD, it was about me being able to speak for them.

Did you find writing to be a therapeutic process, cathartic or difficult in any way?

Not at all, it was very pleasant; I really enjoyed it. Especially the personal parts, about my mother, my upbringing, my childhood and my introduction to this – all of my experiences – it just flowed naturally because I was speaking from my heart.

In the book you reference your mother and her work (she used to dream for other people) quite frequently, but you suggest that at the time you didn't really appreciate it.

I never appreciated anything my mother did, because I was embarrassed. It was so different and I was little; I just wanted everything to be normal. I didn't understand when people came to me and said 'she is a special woman'. Now I regret it, but she never forced anything on me. She just said, 'the healer is in all of us, and if it is your path, it will come to you in your own time.' I will never forget that, and so I guess learning to respect and honour the way other people work started with my mother.

So she had a gift. People would talk to her and then she would dream for them – yet I never connected that to shamanism. Until my teacher told me, much later, 'But Arvick, your mother was a shaman!' And I was so surprised, because I hadn't been aware of that or of the many different ways that you can shamanise.

The book, however, is dedicated to both your mother and your father, which suggests that the family unit is something that is very important to you?

Yes ... Although we weren't a complete family unit because my father was always away. Yet when he was around he had so much love. It was so beautiful that he just worked for us. He completely lived for us, which was a huge sacrifice ...

But then I went to go to university in the UK by myself. Before I left my mother made it clear that I had to see my own country. 'If you are going to go to Europe you need to know your own country before you go.' There are so many beautiful places that we miss. And I suppose in the same way you can say that there is so much beauty inside of us – yet we look outside and we do not see it in ourselves. It is something that we run away from, if you like, because we are afraid of what we might find. Let's face it, children are not told how wonderful they are. We are always ticking boxes and highlighting negative aspects of peoples' traits. We do not appreciate what we already have.

So, how old were you when you began to work shamanically?

Well that would be a problem, because I don't know my age! I am told I will be seventy on 18th December. When I was in Iran, we didn't have documents because we came from the Armenian ghetto. My parents didn't even have birth certificates until I was about eighteen! However, I do know that my mother said that I was born before Epiphany.

As for working with shamanism, I think it was about 1994 ... and I always say that I wish I had been introduced to this much earlier. But then I realise that maybe I wouldn't have appreciated it then.

Is a certain level of maturity required to work shamanically, then?

Not really, I am working with a twenty-three year old who is just flying with this work. I also have a fourteen year old who is journeying like a dream.

Can shamanism transcend linguistic boundaries?

Yes – the spirits appear to us in the form that is familiar for us, that we feel comfortable with, because they are energies. They are lights – a bundle of lights – floating in the dark. But in the journey they vibrate down to our level and appear to us in the forms that are familiar to us to communicate with.

And which language do you use when you journey?

English, always English. I speak Armenian and Farsi, but English is now like my first language.

You obviously work internationally, and you have been living in Barcelona for 11 years ...

I am more and more at home here. I miss England, and I miss it when I need to call a plumber (and there are certain words I don't know!). But I feel very at home here; I am comfortable here.

So how important is a sense of place for you when you are working with shamanism?

It is not at all relevant. I can be in Montserrat and I can just lie down on the ground and connect with the spirits. It really doesn't matter because spirits are like god, they are everywhere. And whenever you are ready and you connect with them, they come to you.

Can shamanism exist alongside another religion?

Yes – shamanism is not a religion, obviously, as there is no worship involved. One of my advanced students is in fact very religious. But it just depends on how orthodox they are. Some Catholics, for example, will say that 'yes, Reiki works, but it is the work of the devil...'

But my mother prayed. And she went to church. But, again, she didn't force me to read the Bible or anything like that, she just taught me what the Bible says, its moral codes. And we followed those moral codes without me going to church. She said that the church is in your heart, wherever you go and you ask for help it is there. She probably didn't want to speak about spirits because she didn't want to seem weird. It is above anything that I can explain with words - it is above science.

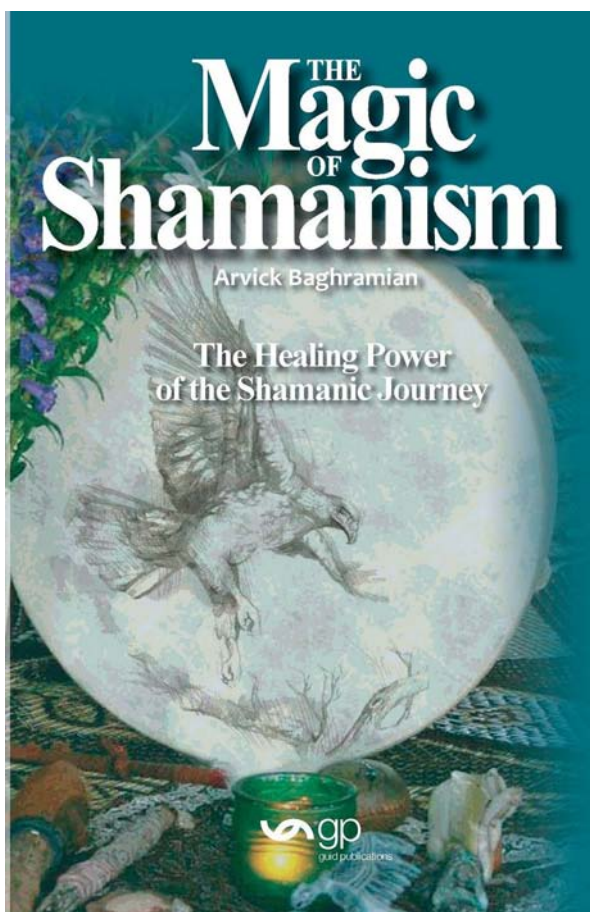
So do you think that everyone has the ability to journey?

Definitely, because we are all dreaming. If we are capable of dreaming, we are capable of going into an altered state. The role of the shamanic counsellor is to reassure and to create a safe environment for the person to be able to journey, and to help them to achieve that ..."

On leaving Arvick's apartment, I catch my reflection in the mirror, and I am suddenly aware that on my t-shirt is an illustration of an elephant, which is Arvick's spirit animal. I point it out to her – but, of course, she has already noted it. A mere coincidence that I threw it on this morning?

Perhaps.

Arvick Baghramian was interviewed by Alice Brooksbank



Read Yvonne Ryves' review of Arvick Baghramian's book *The Magic of Shamanism* on page 49 of this issue of Indie Shaman magazine.

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