

Healing and Trance Dancing in Grenada

Susan Grimaldi

While living in Grenada with my family for three months, I unexpectedly found myself participating in a traditional ceremony that the people of the area call "African." I later discovered that the information I had gathered at that event might be evidence that shamanistic journey practices exist in West African spiritual traditions.¹

Grenada is a hilly island in the Caribbean about 12 degrees north of the equator. It is about 20 miles long and 12 miles wide. The interior consists of mountains and rain forest rising to 2,750 feet, with evidence of former volcanic activity. The land is well suited to agriculture, but the rugged terrain discourages large-scale cultivation. Grenada, the "isle of spice," exports cocoa, nutmegs, mace, cloves, and cinnamon. Currently, more than 90% of the population is Black and Creole, with small numbers of Whites and East Indians.

We lived in a remote village on a road that was more like a walking lane, with many footpaths leading to clusters of small houses in the hills. Most houses had no electricity or refrigeration, and only five had indoor plumbing. The people cooked outside in fire pits, using locally-made charcoal. Their yards contained fruit trees such as mango, citrus, tamarind, papaya, and sappadilla. Some people kept fowl and goats. This neighborhood covered about two miles of the road. It included three small stores, which stocked a few canned goods, dried fish, and some staples.

Of the approximately 350 people who lived in the area, many were related, which gave the society a feeling of tribal unity, with much cooperation and exchange between households. The children were cared for by whomever was available.

A center of social activity was a communal water faucet beside the road. The women came here to fill their buckets, which they then carried home on their heads, while the men sat and talked among themselves and with the women. I spent considerable time there sitting on a log with my child, painting and sketching the people and the incredible variety of jungle vegetation. We quickly became a fixture and were soon accepted by local people. We had no car and I think this also helped us get acquainted. As we walked along, we met people and had the opportunity to talk with them.

One day I noticed that the woman who worked at our house was acting strangely preoccupied and excited. When I asked her about it, she told me that a special event was to occur, an event she called an

"African Dance." She said there would be dancing to drums and that the people were going to "feed the sea." When I showed increasing interest, she asked if I would like to go with her. I had no idea I was going to witness an ancient healing and sacrificial ceremony.

Expecting some sort of Mardi Gras dance, I walked with her down a familiar lane and up a hill into an unfamiliar event. This ceremony was scheduled to last three days; this was the morning of the second day. On this day there would be acts of sacrifice, when three chickens would be killed. On the ground I saw a cloth with food piled on it under a pole structure. Every available food seemed to be assembled there, e.g., pigeon peas, flour, dried corn, breadfruit, olive oil, soda, rum, yams, lentils, rice, split peas, a coconut, plantains, sugar, dried fish, a pumpkin, a pig's snout, an egg, onions, and spices. Every container was being opened and some of its contents placed into a box. I was told that in preparation for such a big ceremony, the sponsor spends a considerable amount of time collecting needed supplies. These include such things as candles, bottles of olive oil, animals to be sacrificed, and food to be served to the participants. Contributions of cash and food, solicited and unsolicited, are received by the grateful sponsor.

The sun was beating down as I was warmly greeted and given a comfortable place to sit in the shade. Boys were hollowing out calabashes. A woman grabbed a machete to open the coconut. Others were setting up benches as another woman nursed her baby. I felt the strong bonds between these people.

A woman crossed herself with four seeds and then cast them on the ground. The people there looked closely at them, reading them. The woman next held them up to the four directions and cast them again. This practice of divination, called *obi*, was done at crucial times during the three-day ceremony. They explained,

We are asking the four corners: East, West, North, and South. We are asking the question before we go on and that's where we get the answer from. We are asking the question if we should proceed right then.

They must be sure that they have done enough to proceed to the next step of the ritual.

As one of the elder men sprinkled holy water and corn around the grounds, the people recited the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed. A woman rang a bell, there was drumming, and a song was sung. The elder man led the song and the people repeated each line after him. He then went into a trance and began to quiver. The heads and feet of the sacrificial chick-

ens were washed and the seeds were cast again. Each fowl was held up to the four directions. The women holding them began to dance. They danced over to one side and cut off the chickens' heads. Water was sprinkled over the chickens' bodies as their life slowly ebbed. A special rattle, made from a dried calabash covered with buttons, netted together, was played until all three fowl were dead. They were then prepared for cooking, part of this sacrifice being added to the box of food that would be taken to the bay and fed to the "Mama of the sea" later that day. I asked about this ceremony and was told,

Now we feed the water. The water has mysteries just like the world we live in. We have a man to rule and a woman to rule, like a king and queen. On the earth and in the water there is a man and a woman. The woman is like you: she has plenty hair and she is just like you— good looking, nice people. [Then, pointing to my lower body she said,] This part fish. [Pointing to my upper body,] This is Christian. We put the food in the bay and

the waves take it and bring it to the woman as a gift; they bring it to nourish.

I was told that many people "journey" to this woman in the sea to learn. Over the three-day period while this ceremony was going on, the waves of the ocean lowered the beach sand three feet.

That evening my hosts asked me to take on a new role. They had expressed a desire to have their ceremony documented and I told them I had the necessary equipment and would be happy to make a film. I began to feel comfortable in documenting this ritual and I felt the people's appreciation.

The next afternoon a sheep was killed for a feast to feed the children. Greeted by the elders and given a prominent seat, I was in the midst of a tribal village scene. The men were talking about dumplings and iguana; women were cleaning pigeon peas and washing dishes. There were jokes and an argument about child rearing. A baby practiced his first steps. As the machete was sharpened, I heard the bleat of a sheep. The ritual continued: the ground was swept, a sheep

Susan Grimaldi

In this issue we are featuring three contributions by Susan Grimaldi, a member of the FSS team that traveled to China last summer (1995). Having three pieces of work from the same person in one issue of *Shamanism* is unusual. It was simply a factor of the kinds of work Susan has been doing and the foci of this issue. It does illustrate the versatility of this talented woman and her involvement in different kinds of shamanic activity.

On the expedition to China, she functioned as an acute observer of places, people, and events. Her field notes are copious. She also functioned, as did others in the group, as a healer, and was a pivotal member of the sacred circle we formed to conduct our work. It is fitting and in keeping with her personality that she presented the shamans we met in their own words.

Susan and her family lived on the island of Grenada for three months in 1990. In that short time she established rapport to the extent that she was invited to witness and record a complex ceremony that the Grenadians apparently brought with them from West Africa. Susan discovered that this ceremony contains elements of shamanic practice; a surprising find since the literature on West African peoples has overlooked this element of their spiritual practices. Her account of the ceremony is thus pioneering work. Just as important, her account is richly human, preserving the connection between ourselves and these African people.

Finally, Susan shared some healing stories with

me in China and after we returned. I felt it would be good to share one with the readers of *Shamanism*. It also would be in keeping with our editorial decision to feature healing stories in each issue, if possible. Her story of her work with a person in an allergic crisis illustrates how versatile the shamanic approach can be.

Susan Grimaldi has a B.A. in psychology and an M.Ed. in counseling, and has studied at the Jung Institute in Zurich. She has worked as a college psychotherapist and faculty member at several colleges and universities. She is currently in private practice in Vermont.

As impressive as these credentials are, Susan sees herself primarily as a mother and healer. When I asked her for a résumé, she at first did not mention the above information. Instead, she (characteristically) wrote:

I sing with the drum. I am a mother. I am Choctaw, raised in Oklahoma. I offer myself to spirit, the source of creation. I try. I listen. Spirit first spoke to me when I was nineteen. I met my teachers when I was in my thirties. I worked with Michael Harner and Sandra Ingerman in the first "Three-Year Advanced Training Program" and the FSS "Masters Program." MiKa Amuru, grandson of a Nanai shaman and trained by the Thlingcha-Dene, has been my teacher for nine years. People come to me, telling me of their sorrows. I feel their pain and seek a dream of their healing. This is my life. I do this again and again.

—the editor

washed, and the *obi* seeds were cast as the drummers began to play. The sheep was led in a circle around a house as rice was scattered before it. Again the seeds were held to the four directions and cast. Olive oil was placed on a platter that would receive the sheep's head, and the sheep was killed. The dancing intensified. A woman danced in a deep trance while the sheep's head and platter balanced on her head. Another dancing woman dropped to the ground in a deep trance as my eyes opened wide in amazement.

The drums were of central importance. Three drummers were playing eighteen inch-high, double-headed drums. They were played on the top side with a bent stick and one hand. Every rhythm had two parts (in the polyphonic sense) and some had three, depending on whether two were played in unison. These patterns of disciplined, competent musicianship demanded respect.² The same pattern was repeated throughout the song without variation. One drum was tuned to a lower pitch than the other two. I spoke to my informants about the drums and was told,

It is the drum that's causing the African feeling, the feeling of the people. That does it. When the drum is beating, then you get a feeling. It makes your head feel in a different way...brings the vision of the mind, feeling of a dream.

When I asked them if they used any drugs, I was told, "No, we beat the drum, the African drums. We do not use drugs, no drugs!"

They use the drum in their homes when doing healing work to learn what to do for the person who is sick or hurt. They informed me that the drum is the doctor, because it has the power. By comparison, in Afro-Brazilian cults the "power of the drums is conferred upon them by rituals when the drums are fed. Their power is derived from tones they give out when played."³ Drums are beaten in Trinidad when a healer undertakes to cure a person who is seriously ill.⁴

Dreams play an essential role in these ceremonies; they always begin with a dream. The woman who sponsored this ceremony had seen it in a dream. She was told to beat the drum, cook the food, and dance. Another woman told me of a vision she had while sleeping.

I was sleeping. Then I heard the drum was beating. From sleep I get up. I sit down and I still listen and the drum is beating. And the song has been for me in this vision to go and cook and feed the water. And I have this song.

A person may also dream a cure to an illness. For

instance, a healer was carried to a tree while dreaming and told that by putting a leaf of that tree on the patient's shoulder the sprain would be cured.⁵

That night I arrived as things were starting to warm up. The children came out and danced to the drums as these people spread their cultural roots deeper into another generation. The lead drummer told me, "Our mothers and fathers were in it. We came up behind them and we continue doing it, just as our children will."

It was very dark. The crowd had grown to more than 100 people. I felt frightened and very out-of-place. One woman danced while brandishing a machete. As she came close, the crowd fell back from her in fear. I ran too. At that moment the woman who sponsored this ceremony noticed me and came to get me. She held my hand and led me to the front-center seat as the guest of honor. I was overwhelmed by their acceptance, and at the same time it was so dark, wild, and new! I was riveted with fear of the unknown. I was later told that the woman with the machete would not have hurt any of the people near her. She was having a vision and the machete was for her protection. Some young men came out mocking and teasing the dancers; roars of laughter broke out and I began to relax.

As the women danced, I noticed how their essence was revealed. There was no contrivance in their movements. The steps were solidly feminine and rooted in the earth. They would dance until the trance state would become so strong they could no longer stand. The older women were more experienced and could fall down without hurting themselves or others. Later, a young woman came out. She was in ecstasy, as I could tell by her glowing smile, closed eyes, and flowing movement. Having much less control, she had fallen several times, but had gotten back up. A woman was with her to protect her when she fell. A red scarf was tied onto this neophyte's head for power.

At one point during the night, coals were brought into the dance area and wood was gathered. A woman was preparing to fire dance. Because she was in a trance, another woman tied her skirt up so that the flames of the fire would not ignite it. The fire flared and she was ready. She danced in the fire barefooted on the coals. I later asked about this and was told,

Well, she can't feel the fire because of the trance she was in, so she don't feel the fire. The fire is there and she [is] dancing in the fire and she didn't feel it: no burn at all.

I wondered why she did fire dancing and it was explained to me that it was her dance vision. I asked one of the women with the most knowledge of these traditions what happens in the dancer's mind when

they fall to the ground. She told me, "Vision of the mind, feeling of dream. They are having visions." I asked if they remember their visions and I learned, "Yes, they remember, so when they come back they will tell." She told me of having visions to help someone.

They will show you this sick lady, and what you must do. When you are working on the person then you have the vision in you, working on you. You are strong. Teachers talk to me. In one vision I heard a song. It was clear talking, so I knew what to do.

I wanted to know about the visions of a woman I had seen undulating and picking at some potted plants while trance dancing. "She was cleaning out. She was cleaning the place— cleaning it. That is what her vision showed her to do, so she was picking it out and cleaning." I was told that sometimes someone gets a vision that a woman is pregnant before she herself knows. "You lie down and then you see this person coming and sometimes you see the child— they hold a child. Then you can tell them."

I asked my informant to describe the experiences of a person in a trance. She said,

When they in trance, it is different. So it is like you traveling, to see, you seek. If I seek, I could see ...something definitely I could not know...up like I was flying [as she held her arms upward] and flying under the world, yes.

I asked her what it looks like under the world. She explained as she pointed at everything around us where we were talking, "Well, do you see this place, so much dishes and life and design? Different things I see, it all depends." I asked her if she sees landscapes like trees and water. She said, "Yes, yes, we have trees, we have trees, we have trees." I asked if she sees animals and was told there are fish.

Healing is an inseparable part of the "African" work. Herskovits mentions two types of healers in West Africa: "those who deal in herbs, roots, and other curatives" and "those whose cures for illness and other less mundane evils come from supernatural powers."⁶ In Grenada, the healer who dispenses teas also deals with cases where help from powers is used. A diagnosis is made and the remedy discovered while the healer is in a trance. These leaders engage in healing on a part-time basis. As in all matters related to healing, the practitioners seek direct help from supernatural agencies. When I spoke to a healer about what she does, she told me,

If you have the people around and if the people are sick, you see where the people are sick, you could heal them people right there. You could pray, you can get the vision and then have eyes and they tell you, they learn you how. You can mash them, push out their sickness.

She showed me, squeezing and pushing something out of her arm. What she was describing is a classical shamanic technique called an "extraction." She also told me that sometimes in her visions she learns what herbs to give for a cure. She said, "Boil it, and give them to drink, and they come back strong."

In talking to the leaders, I learned they believe themselves to be from the "Akantic" people of Africa. Akantic may refer to "Akan," which is currently called Ghana. The people of Carriacou, which is a separate island of the country, Grenada, were also of Akan origin.⁷ The mythology I discovered while in Grenada concerning *Anancy (Anansi)*, the spider, is also of Akan origin.⁸

The current language used by Black people in Grenada is an English dialect with a French influence called *Patois*. It was quite difficult for me to understand until I became accustomed to the accent and rhythm. Some songs used in the ceremonies are new and came from dreams and visions. Some have been passed down through many generations and are sung in an unidentified African language.

I think it is important to mention that throughout my stay in Grenada, I never revealed my background or training in shamanic techniques. I never talked about any of my experiences or knowledge. What I report came directly from my informants.

Upon my return, I learned I had discovered possible new evidence for shamanistic practices existing in West Africa. I returned with evidence that suggests that people of a West African tradition, when going into trance states, are, at least sometimes, also engaging in shamanic journeying. The literature I have reviewed since my return to the United States has viewed these altered states only as periods of possession, i.e., the gods entering a person and possessing their body, the person embodying the god. The African leaders I interviewed in Grenada talked of traveling after they fell at the end of the possession dances. They described going in an upward direction or flying under the world to learn from entities how to heal a person, seeking some knowledge they do not know. They spoke of the drum, the power of the drum that changes the state of the mind, and of having visions in that state.

In support of this interpretation, I found that in African rituals in Trinidad it is said that, "A person's 'spirit' wanders to distant lands such as Egypt or

India seeking spiritual knowledge and 'gifts' (spiritual talents). During these 'travels,' one discovers what one's 'work' [position and duties] is in cult life."⁹

Based on what I have found in Grenada and report here, I want to encourage field anthropologists to look for possible shamanic journey practices in West Africa. The ceremonies I observed in Grenada included elements of classical shamanic practice that play a deep and central part in the lives of Grenadian people. Having these elements illuminated for the Grenadian homeland would be extremely interesting.

NOTES

1. I want to acknowledge the encouragement and advice given me during this research by Dr. Michael Harner.
2. Herskovits 1966: 196.
3. Herskovits 1966: 87-191.
4. Simpson 1965: 110.
5. Simpson 1965:27.
6. Herskovits 1958: 240-241.
7. Smith 1962: 10, 373.
8. Smith 1962: 155
9. Simpson 1965:35

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