Hunting spirituality

**INTRODUCTION TO**

**THE PAGAN PATH OF HUNTING SPIRITUALITY**

By Rev. Jeff Cash

**Introduction**

The Pagan Path of Hunting Spirituality is the ancient and modern practice and celebration of connection with Deity, with nature and with our higher selves through the honorable and respectful act of hunting.  Hunting itself has been a part of human history for as long as humans have walked the earth.  Its origins included many aspects of survival such as the securing of basic sustenance, of defense against other predatory species and as human sentience grew it took on a core element of spirituality as man came to understand some of his place on the earth and within the natural cycles of all living things and the universe itself.  The unique proteins contained within the meat of their prey is what scientists have determined to be the key to the development of the human mind that gradually bridged our development from our earliest and most basic form to the advanced intellectual state of the modern human.

Hunting spirituality contains within it several elements, which make it very different from sport or trophy hunting.   These key elements include a relationship of love, respect, and honor with the hunted, a nature based focus, an emphasis on “fair chase”, a goal of a quick and ethical kill, and an intimate connection to Deity and the earth.  Rather than focusing on killing the biggest trophy animal you can find, the path of the spiritual hunter involves respecting the natural barriers and relationship of the hunter and the hunted, the predator and the prey, and the cycle of life and death.  There typically is also an element of tribal structure to most spiritual hunters who see part of their role being provider for themselves, their family, and their community or tribe.

Spiritual hunters may also perform rituals or speak prayers before, during and/or after the hunt, expressing their intention and showing respect to the land, to the spirit of the animal they are hunting, and to the hunting deities that they may honor.

A common thread amongst the spiritual hunting beliefs of the various cultures has always been the gaining of the wisdom, strength, and spiritual energy of the animal hunted as the gift given by the hunted to the hunter.

A variety of deities and mythic heroes from various cultures have been associated with hunting.  Some of the most commonly recognized by pagans are Cernonnos, Artemis, Artio and Herne the Hunter; although nearly every culture throughout human history has at least one Deity or hero deemed the Lord or Lady of the Hunt to whom honor, praise and thanks were given to help ensure success and to preserve the relationship between the hunter and the hunted.

This course will give you a basic overview of some aspects of what it means to be a Pagan Hunter and some of the historical, cultural, spiritual and mythological elements of Hunting Spirituality.

**The History & Development of Hunting Spirituality**

Some of the earliest evidence of hunting comes from the Paleolithic or earliest portion of the time often referred to as the Stone Age, which began about 2.5 million years ago and ended about 10,000 years ago.    Evidence of hunter/gatherer style tools and weapons are first seen from this time period including clubs, harpoons, sharpened stone for axes, and scrapers to clean and prepare animal hides for clothing and shelter. During this era prehistoric man learned to make use of all of the parts of the animals they hunted to help ensure their survival. Evidence of tribal societies includes huts and caves utilized in nomadic or mobile lifestyles. This is believed to be due in part to seasonal changes, but may also be related to migratory animals and their travel patterns. Basically man followed his source of food, clothing and other essential needs.

Both in the Paleolithic and in the subsequent period known as the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age, bow and arrows were crafted and used to hunt and defend. Sustenance during these time periods was based entirely on hunting and gathering of food and material sources found in nature.

Beginning in the Neolithic or New Stone Age period, hunter/gatherer activities began to be subsidized by agricultural activities and the domestication of some wild animals species. The beginning of what we now call farming helped to alleviate some of the never ending work involved with hunting, although it could not replace it entirely in providing for the needs of the tribes and societal groups.

Throughout all three stages of the Stone Age, evidence demonstrates a belief in the afterlife, with spirituality and religion emerging as time went on. This evidence includes burial rituals, ancestor worship, and the emerging roles of priests or holy men.

Technological advances through the Bronze and Iron ages resulted in weapon and tool advances through the centuries. These advances transitioned from weapons and tools of wood, stone and bone to bronze, iron, and eventually steel.    The development of gunpowder and firearms made it possible to hunt and defend from a greater distance with increased efficiency and effectiveness. For the hunter this meant many things including a quicker and cleaner kill of their prey, a greater distance between the hunter and the hunted making it easier to stalk their prey, and also increasing the degree of safety when hunting or protecting against dangerous animals or predators.

In spite of the many advancements in hunting weaponry through the years, many hunters choose to utilize more primitive weapons like archery or black powder muzzleloaders rather than modern firearms. Many feel this brings them closer to the original Paleolithic hunter, or that their use of these archaic tools increases the difficulty of the hunt by limiting the range available to the hunter. Others choose to use modern firearms to ensure a quick kill in order to minimize any suffering of the animals they hunt. Both methods are used by spiritual hunters and are simply a matter of choice for the individual. Both require training, experience, and developed skill in order to learn safe handling practices and to become proficient in their use.

**Gods, Goddesses and Heroes of the Hunt**

Gods, Goddesses and Heroes from pre-Christian cultures existed around the world.  The following is an incomplete list, but a good overview of some of those deities.

**Artio**: Gaulish Goddess of the Bear worshipped in Berne.  Often called upon by hunters for her blessing prior to hunting.

**Andartra**: Another Gaulish Goddess also related to the Bear.

**Arnakuagsak**: An Inuit Hunting Goddess primarily worshipped in Greenland.

**Artemis**: The Greek Goddess of the Hunt, of the Wild and of the Moon.   Sister of Apollo.

**Banka-Mundi**: A Hindu Goddess of the Hunt.

**Camaxtli**: A God of War and Hunting from Aztec mythology.

**Camma**: Another Celtic Goddess of the Hunt.

**Cernunnos**: Celtic Lord of the Forest, of Wild things and of the Hunt.  Widespread throughout the Celtic world.  Perhaps the most widely known pagan God of Hunting.

**Cocidius**: Celtic God of Northern Britain associated with Hunting War and Forests.

**Diana**: The Roman equivalent of Artemis.

**Hinkon**: Siberian God of Hunting and Animals.

**Kamui**: Ainu gods or spirits of hunting and the mountains.

**Mielikki**: A Finnish Goddess of the Hunt and of the Forest.

**Moccus**: Celtic God of Gaul associated with Hunting.

**Neith**: An Egyptian Goddess of the Hunt and of War.

**Nyyrikki**: A Finnish God of Hunting.

**Nodens**: Another Celtic God of the Hunt primarily from Britain.

**Odin**: Norse God associated with the Hunt.

**Ogun**: A West African hunter-warrior mythological figure.

**Rundas**: A Hittite God of the Hunt.

**Sedna**: An Inuit Goddess of animals often called upon to bless hunts for seals and other mammals of the sea.

**Skadhi**: A Norse God associated with Hunting and the bow.

**Tapio:** A Finnish God often prayed to by Hunters.  Husband of Mielikki and Father of Nyyrikki.

**Ullr**: Another Norse God connected to Archery Hunting.

This list is by no means complete, but should serve to demonstrate the widespread recognition of hunting within the spiritual realm of the various pagan and heathen cultures of our world prior to Christianity.

**Respect, Rituals & Prayers**

Pagan, native and earth focused cultures have always utilized some form of expressing respect or ritualistic actions to help ensure success and to preserve the strong and honorable relationship with the spirit of the animals they hunted and with their deities.

In December of 2008, CNN published an article\* reporting that archaeologists with the  Institute of Archeology of the  Russian Academy of Sciences had just unearthed what they described as “extraordinary” stone age artworks that they believe were used as part of a hunting ritual.  Some of the artwork portrays three overlapping mammoths engraved upon a mammoth rib bone.  They go on to say the engravings:

*"show an extraordinary repertoire of incised carving on mammoth ivory plaques and carving in the round, including representations of women and large mammals, and geometric decoration on bone utensils,"*

Additionally were found two female figures.  All of these items were buried in pits and covered with colored sand and mammoth bones.  These artifacts are estimated to be 21,000 to 22,000 years old.

Perhaps some of the most known hunting rituals are those of native tribes not only from North America but from around the world.

One ceremony known as the **iyomante** is performed by the Ainu who are the aboriginal people of Hokkaido which is the northernmost island of Japan.  This very complex show of respect involves the capture of a bear cub which is then honored, pampered and treated as a member of the tribe for a year.  During this time the cub is even suckled by the women of the Ainu.  Upon the completion of the year long show of respect to the bear it is ceremonially killed in a ritual manner that is designed to ensure a quick death.  A celebration follows during which the bear is considered to be a guest of honor.  The entire ritual is believed to be guided and watched by the bear **kamui** or hunting spirit-god of the bear.  Great lengths are taken to ensure the bear kamui is pleased with the respect shown to the bear in the hope of receiving the blessing of the bear kamui.

\*<http://www.cnn.com/2008/TECH/science/12/03/stoneage.art/index.html?eref=rss_topstories>

In my own hunting spirituality I take several steps to ensure my hunt is as pure and respectful as possible to all the gods, goddesses, the various spirits involved and to the earth.  This involves a series of spiritually based tasks.

These include:

* Purifying by smoke (sage smudge stick) all clothing, weapons and equipment that I will use in my hunt.

* Washing of all clothing with scent eliminating laundry detergents to minimize any human contamination of the natural environment I will be entering in my hunt.

* Use of scent eliminating soaps and shampoos the morning of the hunt.

* Use of scent eliminating sprays on each layer of clothing as I dress in preparation for the hunt and of the interior of my vehicle before driving to my sacred hunting grounds.

* When I leave my vehicle in the pre-dawn hours of the morning I speak prayers to my Patron Deities Cernunnos and Artio.

*When I arrive at my hunting location where I sit and watch for my prey I speak more prayers.  I say a prayer of thanks to the land, the spirit of the deer and to deity for allowing me the opportunity to participate as a hunter in the natural cycle of life and death.  I pledge to shoot a deer that chooses to present itself to me only if I feel reasonably sure of a clean shot and a quick kill.  I pledge to honor the spirit and energy of the deer if it chooses to present itself to me and not to waste its gift.  I pledge to make every effort to track down a deer if my shot wounds it.  I end by again expressing thanks for the opportunity, regardless of the day's outcome, to perform my part in the eternal relationship between the hunter and the hunted.*

*Upon shooting a deer I actually openly speak to it before and after the final shot which kills it.  Immediately after it dies I lay my hand upon its head and thank it for the tremendous gift it has given to me and promise to not waste that gift.  I apologize for any suffering that it experienced and pledge to do what I can to further reduce any suffering in my future hunts and thank it for the lessons it taught me that day.  This year, immediately after completing this very act it began to snow, covering the forest and everything in it with a beautiful coating of sparkling white.  It was truly a magical moment.*

Some Spiritual Hunting traditions make a point to not chase the hunted.  Some look for a member of the species being hunted that will face the hunter and not run away when it sees him or her.  Many believe that the animal communicates with the hunter through its eyes and by not running away actually offers itself to the hunter as a willing gift.

The Huichol tribe of Mexico is known amongst the anthropological community for their ceremonies and spiritual observances incorporated into their hunting practices.   One which I recently became aware of stood out to me as something I could and should do myself to honor the spirit and energy of the deer which presented itself to me this year and whose gift I accepted.   This ceremony involves returning the remains of the deer not used by the tribe to the forest from which it came to bury those remains there where they symbolically are reborn again.

To complete the cycle of honoring the spirit of the deer about one week later I drove the hour and a half drive, returning to the forest in which I hunt every season and in which the deer spirit blessed me this year.  I had envisioned the general area that I wanted to bury the deer and went to that spot.  The area I had envisioned was far from any motorized traffic and within the tree line of the forest off of an old trail.  Just a few yards away a stream flows by which, fed from a nearby swampy area, snakes throughout this woodland region.

At the very spot, which I had envisioned, I found a depression with a number of rocks strewn roughly around its edges.  It appeared to resemble a century old well site long since abandoned and filled by the workings of time.  I pondered the possibility of a pioneering family having staked their homestead in this spot at some point in the 200 plus year modern history of this land.

Pulling some of the rocks and leaves from the depression I found it was indeed earthen based and began digging until I had completed a rough oval approximately 3 feet long and maybe 2 feet deep in what was already a depression of perhaps 2 feet below the local level.

I arranged the bones of the deer in this earthen hole and then draped them completely in the hide of the animal.   Pleased with the arrangement of the deer I began to cover it again with the removed earth.  When this was done I arranged some of the stones in a rough circle around the spot in which the remains were buried.   Finally, within this circle I stacked a number of stones in a conical pile over the burial site to serve as a natural memorial to the deer which lay beneath them.

Upon completion of the burial, I thanked the land for allowing me to return to show my respects to the spirit of the deer in this way.  I thanked the spirit of the deer for its gift as I had done when it presented itself to me only a week ago.   I spoke of the meaning of this ritual and my hope that the remains of the deer will feed the forest and help to give life to the plants and animals that inhabit it.  I pledged to return next year to again take part in the sacred hunt in the same respectful and spiritually enriching manner in order to honor the spirit and energy of the deer, the earth, and to preserve the eternal bond between the hunter and the hunted.

I laid upon the top of the stone pile a large Life-saver which I had brought along as an offering.  I mentioned that the circle of the Life-saver was representative of the sacred circle of the hunt being completed by the ritual observance I was conducting.   I then cupped a handful of water from the flowing stream and sprinkled it upon the rocks.  I indicated that with the earth, water, air and the fire of my spirit, I hoped to honor all that aided me in the hunt and this burial.

I then simply spoke the words “thank you” three times and quietly left the area as I had found it with the exception of the new pile of stones.

Thus ended my deer season and my spiritual observance of this year's hunt.  May the sacred circle forever continue!

**Conclusion**

This course is an attempt to provide you the student with a very brief example and basic familiarization with what Pagan Hunting Spirituality has been for many of our pagan and native ancestors and what it can be for the modern pagan.  I have shared some of my own personal path in the process and hope that you have found it helpful in further identifying your understanding of your own unique path.

**References For Further Study and/or Research:**

**Heartsblood: Hunting Spirituality and Wildness In America**,

Written by David Petersen, Published by Island Press 2000

**The Sacred Hunt - Hunting As A Sacred Path**

Written by Randall L. Eaton, Ph.D, Published by Sacred Press 1998

**In Defense Of Hunting**

Written by James A. Swan, Ph.D, Published by Harper Collins 1996

**Meditations On Hunting**

Written by Jose Ortega Gasset, Published by Wilderness Adventure Press 1995

**A History Of Pagan Europe**

Written by Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, Published by Routledge 1995

**Coming Home To The Pleistocene**

Written by Paul Shepard, Published by Island Press 2004

**The Maine Order of the Sacred Hunt**

[http://www.sacredhunt.com](http://www.sacredhunt.com/)

**The Maine Order of the Sacred Hunt Journal**

[**http://rev\_cash.bravejournal.com/**](http://rev_cash.bravejournal.com/)

**The Founder of the Maine Order of the Sacred Hunt is Jeff Cash. While employed by a State Protective Services Agency, Jeff is also an ordained Reverend of the Correllian Nativist Tradition and the Universal Life Church. Jeff lives in Maine where he was born and raised in what is a very special and primarily rural woodland environment. Jeff has enjoyed a growing spiritual connection to Deity through hunting and other outdoor activities in Maine for over 30 years dedicating the last several to a calling to Hunting Spirituality and a goal to be a positive element in the spiritual growth of others through the hunt.**