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SĀMI SHAMANISM FROM A DIACHRONIC POINT OF VIEW

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Introduction

Sāmi shamanism enabled ritual communication with the supernatural in certain cases, in particular to overcome an unbalanced situation within the individual, the group or the world at large. It took place symbolically in the person of the shaman and within the framework of the shaman ceremony. The complex symbolism of the Sāmi shaman has been discussed elsewhere (Kasten 1987; n.d.). My understanding of it is that the ritually sanctioned "boundary transgression" was carried out by all the individual group members in the symbolic embodiment of the shaman, whereas the common view up to now that the Sāmi shaman acted as a "mediator" becomes questionable.

Despite their fundamental ideological congruence, there are clear differences between Sāmi shamanism as usually known and that of other circumpolar peoples. Some of the most important of these differences are: the Sāmi shaman did not necessarily carry out transference rites to cure epidemic diseases, undertake sacrificial ceremonies, nor prepare ritually for the hunt. In addition, he did not have a special costume.

The unique features of Sāmi shamanism, compared to that of other circumpolar peoples, have been explained as follows. Hultkrantz (1979:55) accounted for the differences between Sāmi and Siberian shamanism both by noting the lack of source material for the former and by pointing towards its culture-loss due to "eastern" as well as Scandinavian cultural influences. Bäckman (1978:72) assumed that the Sāmi shaman "had already played out his role as a religious expert" as early as the 17th century, due to centuries-long contact with neighbouring peoples and their religious concepts, Christian influence having been particularly important.

Such explanations are of little heuristic value. We know that the type of culture contact mentioned above can evoke diverse reactions within an existing belief system. There may be a retreat from existing concepts and the acceptance of foreign ones. Alternatively, there may be syncretism or even the strengthening of traditional concepts in a wake of revitalization. It is important, therefore, to consider an unique situation in all its complexity. Here I examine to what extent certain variations in the form and content of Sāmi shamanism can be explained as ongoing modifications of its basic conceptual theme in response to significant changes within the Sāmi ecosystem in its broadest sense. The specific features of Sāmi shamanism and its position within the existing belief system are seen in the light of how well it coped with the particular demands that were made upon it.

The available data are too limited to permit these questions to be answered de-

finitively. Clues are provided, however, which allow the problem of religious change among the Sāmi to be seen from a new angle. Two periods of significant physical and socio-economic stress in Sāmi history will be examined to ascertain the extent to which events were reflected by changes in the belief system. The first period covers the years preceding and following the Black Death, which occurred around 1350 and affected Sāmi living in what are today the Norwegian and Swedish parts of northern Scandinavia. In the second period, around the beginning of the 17th century, there were religious transformations brought about by the shift to reindeer pastoralism. Furthermore, alternative concepts such as magic and witchcraft, which came to the fore during the decline of Sāmi shamanism, are examined here in the light of the specific image of Sāmi religious practice created by outsiders.

The sources on Sāmi shamanism during the first period include prehistoric petroglyphs (Siikala 1984), archaeological finds of the so called Metal Deposit Tradition from the time between 1000 and 1350 A.D. (Zachrisson 1984), and some isolated descriptions by travellers and merchants from the first half of this millennium (above all those in *Historia Norvegiae*). From the 17th and 18th centuries, drum drawings (Monker 1938; 1950), court records (Fellman 1910:384; Bergman 1891) and missionaries' reports are important. The most valuable among the latter are those by Rheen (1897), Tornaeus (1900) and Lundius (1905) on the Swedish side, and those by Skanke (1945), Kildal (1945), Olsen (1910) and Randulf (1903) in the Norwegian area.¹ These accounts were made during or shortly after the period, when major socio-economic transformations, accompanying the transition from a hunting and fishing culture to one based on reindeer herding, took place among the Sāmi. The missionary reports are the most valuable source materials available; oral tradition should be used with caution as it can blur the actual content of shamanism (Kasten 1987).

The Impact of the Black Death

Around 1350 the Black Death reached the Sāmi by way of Norway (cf. Kasten 1983: 41, 71). The plague's devastating consequences, i.e., considerable demographic change, are especially evident on the Norwegian coast. Changes in demography are not as well documented for the Sāmi, but the disease left such obvious traces in their mythology that they must have been affected by it in a similar way, as at this time, even the Sāmi of the interior maintained close contact with coastal Norwegians through an intensive fur trade.

In all likelihood the Sāmi put a religious interpretation on the plague just as they did with other diseases, which, if they were conceived as soul-loss, required the shaman ceremony for treatment (Kildal 1945:139; Skanke 1945:194). The striking failure of the available means of combatting the plague must have severely shaken, or at least placed in doubt, the Sāmi's existing belief system. It may have been this situation in which the *Rota*-cult (Ränk 1981:24) originated. This cult continued in later times and is described in detail in missionary accounts from the 17th and 18th centuries as well as in Sāmi mythology.

It would have been the shaman's task to cure a serious illness like the Black Death but obviously he was unable to do so (Ränk 1981:11). Since the plague raged on and was seen to be incurable by traditional methods, the Sāmi may have concluded that the disease derived from a realm to which the shaman had no access, not even by means of a journey to the world beyond. It is possible that, at this point, the Sāmi came to believe in an additional realm of the dead, the *Rota-åjmuo*, which, unlike the *Sájva-åjmuo* was beyond the shaman's reach.² This new realm was the domain of *Rota*, the demon of pestilence. To this *Rota-åjmuo* the disease was to send back by means of a special transference rite, which was done by ceremonially burying a horse, acquired from Scandinavians (Mebius 1968).

Such transference rites to cure epidemics are found among other peoples of northern Eurasia (Ränk 1981:26). The people affected by the disease obviously thought it was derived from foreigners or from an unreachable other-worldly realm. Among other groups, however, it was usually the shaman who carried out the ritual (Ränk 1981:64), whereas among the Sāmi he is not mentioned in connection with the *Rota*-cult, even though it was practiced well into the 18th century when our sources are fairly complete. This indicates that the Sāmi came to doubt, at least temporarily, the authority of the shaman as he was unable to overcome an unusual crisis.

After the time of the plague, some of the shaman's regalia, the metal objects of the so called Metal Deposit Tradition no longer appeared in ritual. This objects have been found in various places in Swedish Lapland and the Sāmi acquired them through trade. They were mainly rings, bracelets (generally representing animals), belt ornaments, perforated coins, small axe-shaped objects and pendants. The finds are not dated beyond the mid-14th century. The artifacts have been variously interpreted as sacrificial objects (Serning 1956), trade-deposits of non-Sāmi (Fjellström 1962:243) or Sāmi metal deposits (Zachrisson 1984).³

Fjellström (1962:250) believes women's jewellery to be the only possible use that the Sāmi had for these metal objects, yet she says they hardly could be combined with the fur clothing that was worn at that time. But the meaning of these metal objects should not be explained in terms of concepts prevalent among the Sāmi 300 years later in quite different temporal and cultural contexts. Zachrisson (1984: 88) on the other hand, correctly emphasizes the presumably religious significance of these metal objects, but says that their use as sacrificial objects was secondary, i.e. that they were not initially manufactured and/or acquired for religious purposes (Zachrisson 1984:92).

The shape, re-working and cultural integration of these objects, however, indicate that even before their burial they appeared in a ritual context, most likely one performed by shamans. Zachrisson (1984:89) considers it inconceivable that shamans used them since in later centuries there are no indications of a special shaman's costume. But this does not exclude the possibility that the Sāmi shaman had such a costume at the time of the Metal Deposit Tradition, especially because there have been substantial religious reorientations since then (see below). Because of the obvious significance of these metal objects in ritual contexts, indeed in shamanism itself, the sudden disappearance of the Metal Deposit Tradition provides important clues to religious developments.

Until recently the end of the Metal Deposit Tradition was explained as resulting from the interruption, due to the plague, of trade ties with Norwegians (Zachrisson 1984:96). The actual cause, however, may have been different, because at this time Sāmi trade already had a definite easternly orientation and they could have continued to obtain these metal objects from that direction. Therefore, it is more likely that they suddenly ceased to be acquired due to their reinterpretation by Sāmi. In the course of such a dramatic event as the plague, these metal objects might have lost their previous meaning in Sāmi ritual context. In addition, Sāmi oral tradition (Fellman 1906:131) tells us the plague was associated with foreign trade goods, including the metal objects. In all probability the Sāmi came to view these objects, like the entire shaman ceremony in which they played an important part, as a failure. Both the loss of religious power of the shaman's regalia and the establishment of a new "crisis cult", in which the shaman was no longer involved, indicate significant modifications of the Sāmi's concept of shamanism and its symbolism. This is likely to have occurred under the direct impact of the Black Death.

The Shift to Reindeer Pastoralism

During the 17th century the Sámi's hunting and fishing culture was transformed to one based on reindeer herding. For centuries the Sámi had used reindeer as a means of transportation when migrating between seasonal hunting and fishing grounds. Culture contact with Scandinavians, however, triggered more sophisticated methods of managing the reindeer as a resource for milk and meat production. Although the Sámi had tended livestock for Norwegian farmers on the northern Atlantic coast since the middle of the first millennium A.D., and later kept reindeer on a larger scale for the Swedish Crown, such a critical step in cultural evolution as a shift to reindeer pastoralism was so complex that adjustments had to be made when existing social and religious patterns were no longer adequate, or actually conflicted with the new economic developments.

New adaptive strategies of reindeer pastoralism evolved when the Sami ecosystem came under severe stress towards the end of the 16th century. Once flour products had begun to enter the Sámi economy, periods of seasonal scarcity during the late winter could be bridged, thus creating a different population/resource ratio than before. This process accelerated over time. The Sámi became increasingly dependent on the fur trade for their physical survival as the population began to outgrow the carrying capacity of its area. This was followed by the rapid depletion of natural resources through overhunting, especially when the once wild reindeer and fish had to replace the no longer available furs as trade goods and tax payments (Kasten 1983).

The dramatic reduction of game reached long-lasting crisis proportions and must have nourished doubts about the shaman's assumed hunting magic along with other questions about related ideological concepts. This may explain why in Sámi accounts, unlike those of other peoples of the circumpolar area, the shaman seldom appears during the ritual preparation for the hunt. Alternatively, this could be explained by the fact that with the development of reindeer herding, the failure to find sufficient game was no longer such an existential threat. Among northern hunters and fishermen, this kind of occasional crisis was usually solved by means of shamanistic ritual. Contrary to Bäckman (1978:83) it is not surprising, however, that the shaman is not mentioned in connection with the reconciliation rites after the hunt, especially the bear ritual. As with other circumpolar peoples, these were not conducted on the ideological basis of shamanism (in its stricter sense) to overcome a crisis situation, as these rites do not give rise to the shamanistic symbolism of the visionary journey to the world beyond.

In an economy based on hunting and fishing the keepers of the game had to be approached by the shaman in times of stress. This idea conflicts with the individual ownership concepts towards the animals of the herd among pastoralists. It is interesting, however, to see how the Sámi transformed the concept of the keeper of the game. For example, the shaman could make the journey to the world beyond to procure, from among the dead who resided there together with important keepers of the game and natural sites (Arbman 1960:123), "reindeer herdsman" (Skanke 1945:194), i.e., guardian spirits for the reindeer herds. As in the case of the recapture of the souls of the sick referred to above, this was done either by combat or promise of a later sacrifice. The shaman ordered these mythical herdsmen to live in certain mountains, from where they exercised a guardian function over the reindeer herds for several years or for as long as they received the appropriate offerings.

Another new idea based on changing concepts of property was that certain helping or guardian spirits could be acquired by Sámi shamans through purchase (Skanke 1945:192). This is in sharp contrast to the usual way of becoming a shaman when, as among other circumpolar peoples, the Sámi shaman candidate received his vocation from the spirits of dead shamans among the *Sájva-olmak* (Lundius 1905:5;

Skanke 1945:205; Olsen 1910:50), who forced themselves upon the chosen one, who would resist and be plagued by illness and mental confusion until he finally accepted his vocation (Lundius 1905:7; Olsen 1910:51).

With the development of reindeer herding and fertility cults to further the growth of the herds and encourage favorable grazing conditions (Mebius 1968), cosmic deities such as *Veralden-ráden* began to play a more important role for the Sámi. Ritual communication with them was conducted in a different, less direct way, by means of animal sacrifice. It is hard to determine exactly what role the Sámi shaman played in these sacrificial ceremonies. Although the person conducting the sacrifice is usually referred to as a shaman, it is possible that the observers did not distinguish carefully among those in charge of various ceremonies. Certain statements indicate that there may have been different persons involved, one ascertaining the nature of the appropriate sacrifice and the other actually carrying it out (Skanke 1945:202). Performing the sacrifice may not have been reserved for the shaman or tied to the shaman's authority, even if individual shamans acted in this capacity at times (cf. Mebius 1968:47).

In any case, the Sámi shaman's journey to the world beyond was limited to the underworld, while in earlier sources there is no reference to heavenly journeys or contact with cosmic beings in the shamanistic ritual. Only in the late oral tradition do isolated statements (Fellman 1906:214) indicate that the shaman went not only to the underworld but to heaven as well. Bäckman (1978:81) believes that the idea of heavenly journeys was common among circumpolar peoples but that over time the Sámi lost interest in this concept.

It appears more likely, on the other hand, that visionary heavenly journeys entered Sámi shamanism later, if at all, as a complementary element. Even though the Sámi believed in a world-pillar (Harva 1922:16), it was not used by the shaman as a route on his journey to the world beyond. In written sources and Sámi oral tradition there is a frequent mention of the shaman's special relationship with a particular tree which served him as a place of refuge (Johansson 1975:23; Lundmark 1982:123) and the wood of which he used for his drum (Lundius 1905:8; Rheen 1897:29). But the symbolism of the climbing of the world-tree, which is so pronounced in other areas (Harva 1938:50; Karjalainen 1922:42, 264, 318; Bogoras 1907:331), is unknown in Sámi shamanistic ritual. It is clear that an overall systemic integration of the two conceptually distinct complexes, shamanism and animal sacrifice to heavenly deities, did not occur among the Sámi as it did in many agrarian and/or pastoral cultures, especially those in Central Asia (cf. Radloff 1884:20; Czaplicka 1914:191; Harva 1938:483).

It may be worth asking how one symbol of group-membership among Sámi reindeer-herders correlates with an unique feature in Sámi shamanism. One can conclude from missionary accounts of the time that Sámi children were usually not yet seen as full members of the human community until the first tooth appeared. This event was the occasion for a ritualized property transfer, the tooth-giving-ceremony (Rheen 1897:10; Tornæus 1900:44). It is important to note that the Sámi shaman could only carry out his duty as long as he had all his teeth (Skanke 1945:209). It is conceivable, therefore, that in Sámi shamanism teeth, like bones for other circumpolar peoples, symbolized the individual group members. In both cases, the completeness of the set was critical if the shaman was to undertake the journey to the world beyond as the embodiment of the group (cf. Kortt 1984).

The Sámi shaman lacked that so indicative skeleton representation on his costume and almost any idea of the skeletonization theme,⁵ which plays a crucial role in the shamanism of most other circumpolar peoples (Kortt 1984:291, 297; Rasmussen 1929:114). Bäckman (1978:79) sees the absence of the costume as an indication that as early as the 17th century the Sámi shaman "had lost importance as a religious leader and had been degraded to a common soothsayer".

This statement is questionable, however, because shamanistic concepts which

other circumpolar peoples related to the skeleton/skeletonization theme could have been expressed by the Sāmi in a symbolism of a different kind, as we have seen above. And even though, with the shift to reindeer-herding, the use of shamanistic concepts became more restricted to healing aspects, the sources of the 17th and 18th centuries demonstrate that the shaman was still the symbolic embodiment of the group (Kasten n.d.).

The Image of Sāmi Religious Practice among Neighbouring Peoples

The very concept of Sāmi shamanism may easily be confused if it is not differentiated from Sāmi magic and other forms of traditional healing, which often are more in line with nordic folk beliefs (Alver et al. 1980). Nevertheless, these aspects of the Sāmi belief system have become more pronounced over the last centuries. The question here is, to what degree culture contact has given rise to these developments, which, with more emphasis on an individual than a communal approach to the supernatural, might have contributed to the decline of Sāmi shamanism.

During the 17th century, when witchcraft was still a widely accepted reality all over Europe, Sāmi people were seen among the most capable in these arts (Kunze 1971). The widespread myth of Sāmi's magic powers not only stimulated a considerable academic interest in Sāmi religion on the continent, where Schefferus' "Lapponia" (1673) became eagerly accepted and soon translated into various languages. Among the neighbouring Scandinavian peoples this mysticized picture of the Sāmi (Campbell 1954:256) at times had a direct impact on relations between them. For a long time, already, the deep respect for Sāmi magic had led those Scandinavians who wanted to learn more about it to approach Sāmi experts for guidance (Olaus Magnus 1555:121; Fritznér 1877:160). On the other hand, Scandinavians occasionally refrained from homesteading in Sāmi territory because they feared their malevolent magic powers (Kasten 1983:84).

It is not unlikely that Sāmi people must have become aware of the role ascribed to them by outsiders as they were trying to turn this image of themselves to their advantage in particular situations of culture contact. In doing so, those elements of their belief system might have been emphasized, which, eventually, became more prevalent as magic or witchcraft.

Conclusions

The Sāmi drastically revised their existing belief system in times of stress. This occurred under the impact of the Black Death and during a time of severe environmental stress which led to the shift to reindeer pastoralism. Generalizations which attempt to explain the variation of shamanic concepts among the Sāmi as culture-loss and degeneration due to Christian influences are therefore inadequate. The decisive transformations within Sāmi shamanism cannot be understood in terms of diffusionism, i.e., simply as the spread and acceptance of alien ideas. They are better viewed as religious reactions to profound changes or disruptions within the ecosystem in its broadest sense. Certainly, foreign cultural influences provided the Sāmi with an additional conceptual potential,⁵ but that was only activated, i.e., adopted and/or integrated, in particular situations. This occurred when traditional concepts either failed to solve concrete problems for the individual or the group as a whole or when traditional concepts conflicted with new socio-economic developments. In addition to this, the existing belief system was gradually modified when certain elements could be turned into adaptive strategies during culture contact and, thereby, became more pronounced. In sum, it is clear that among

the Sāmi there was an on-going reinterpretation of religious concepts, which had to prove their validity in the light of reality (cf. Thurenus 1910:396).

What is significant in the Sāmi case is that these transformations did not modify shamanism, as they did among other pastoralist peoples of Central Asia, but instead brought about its relatively early dissolution. Traditional concepts persisted and were modified or extended by new ideas when need arose, but eventually became too scattered and systemically too loosely integrated to continue to exist in such a distinctive and coherent conceptual complex as shamanism. Close culture contact with Scandinavian culture made the Sāmi aware of alternative ideas and concepts. But it was times of physical and socio-economic stress that were particularly decisive in producing changes in Sāmi religion.

Notes

1. The editors of these works have also provided detailed information on the authors. In addition see Mebius (1968:16) and Bäckman (1975:25, 151).
2. Regarding the Sāmi concept of the different worlds beyond see: Pettersson (1957), Arbman (1960), Bäckman (1975).
3. The extent to which other burial objects (Manker 1961; Nordevi 1853:44; Solberg 1909:108) were used in a shamanistic context remains unclear.
4. Randulf (1903:44), however, was told that the shaman candidat could be threatened to be torn apart into many pieces.
5. The impact of Norse and Christian concepts upon the Sāmi belief system and the limited effects of missionary activities have been discussed elsewhere (Kasten 1983:102).

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