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# Sami Shamanism: Religions Variation in a Changing Ecosystem

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### Article abstract

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# Sami Shamanism : Religious Variation in a Changing Ecosystem

Erich Kasten

Shamanism, as defined in this paper, existed among the Sami only into the 19th century. Besides its relatively early dissolution it displays certain unique features, as well as basic ideological similarities, that distinguish it from circumpolar shamanism in general. These variations are studied here as indicators of religious change in two periods of Sami history : the period of the impact of the Black Death and the period of the transition to reindeer pastoralism.

*Le chamanisme, tel que défini dans cet article, n'a existé parmi les Sami que jusqu'au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. En plus de cette dissolution relativement précoce, il exhibe certaines caractéristiques uniques, aussi bien que des similarités idéologiques fondamentales, qui le distingue du chamanisme circumpolaire en général. Ces variations sont perçues ici comme des indicateurs de changements religieux dans deux moments de l'histoire Sami : la période de l'impact de la Mort Noire et la période de la transition au pastoralisme du renne.*

## *Introduction*

Ritual communication with the supernatural was made possible through Sami shamanism. This conceptual complex provided the means 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 Sami shaman has been discussed elsewhere (Kasten, 1987). My understanding of the symbolism is that the individual group members carry out ritually sanctioned "boundary transgression" in the symbolic embodiment of the shaman. Therefore, the view that the Sami shaman was a "mediator" (Hultkrantz, 1978:34) is questionable.

Despite their fundamental ideological congruence, there are clear differences between Sami shamanism as usually known and that of other circumpolar peoples. Some of the most important of these differences are: the Sami 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 Sami shamanism, compared to that of other circumpolar peoples, have been explained as follows. Hultkrantz (1979:55) accounted for the differences between Sami 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 and Hultkrantz (1978: 72) assumed that the Sami 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 a unique situation in all its complexity. Here I examine to what extent certain variations in the form and content of Sami shamanism can be explained as ongoing modifications of its basic conceptual theme in response to significant changes within the Sami ecosystem in its broadest sense. The specific features of Sami 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 definitively. Clues are provided, however, which allow the problem of religious change among the Sami to be seen from a new angle. Two periods of significant physical and socio-economic stress in Sami 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 Sami 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 a shift to reindeer pastoralism.

The sources on Sami 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 travelers and merchants from the first half of this millennium (above all those in *Historia Norvegiae* (Storm, 1880)). From the 17th and 18th centuries, drum drawings (Manker, 1938; 1950), court records (I. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Sami (see below and Kasten, 1983:66). The missionary reports are the most valuable source materials available; oral tradition should be used with caution as it seems to blur the actual content of shamanism (Kasten, 1987).

### *The Impact of the Black Death*

Around 1350 the Black Death reached the Sami by way of Norway (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 Sami, but the disease left such obvious traces in their mythology that it must have had similar effects. Furthermore, at this time the Sami of the interior maintained close contact with coastal Norwegians through an intensive fur trade.

In all likelihood the Sami put a religious interpretation on the plague. They treated it just as they did other diseases which, if they were believed to be due to 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 Sami'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. It is also described in Sami mythology.

It would have been the shaman's task to cure a serious illness like the Black Death but unfortunately he was unable to do so (Ränk, 1981:11). Since the plague raged on and was seen to be incurable by traditional methods, the Sami 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 the Sami came to believe in an additional realm of the dead, the Rota-ájmuo, which, unlike the older Sájva-ájmuo was beyond the shaman's reach.<sup>2</sup> This new realm was the domain of Rota, the demon of pestilence. The only thing that could be done was to send the disease back to Rota-ájmuo by means of a special transference rite. This was done by acquiring a horse from Scandinavians and ceremonially burying it (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 Sami 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 Sami came to doubt, at least temporarily, the authority of the shaman, who 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. These objects have been found in various places in Swedish Lapland and the Sami 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-Sami (Fjellström, 1962:243) or Sami metal deposits (Zachrisson, 1984).<sup>3</sup>

Fjellström (1962:250) believes women's jewelry to be the only possible use that the Sami 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 significance of these metal objects should not be explained in terms of concepts prevalent among the Sami 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 Sami 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 the Norwegians (Zachrisson, 1984:96). The actual cause, however, must have been different, because at this time Sami trade already had a definite easterly 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 Sami reinterpretation of their significance. In the light of such a dramatic event as the plague, these metal objects might easily have lost their previous meaning in Sami ritual context. In addition, Sami oral tradition (J. Fellman 1906:131) tells us the plague was associated with foreign trade goods, including the metal objects. In all probability the Sami 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 Sami'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 Sami's hunting and fishing culture was transformed to one based on reindeer herding. For centuries the Sami 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 Sami 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 (Kasten, 1983), 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 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 Sami 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 Sami 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 wild reindeer and fish had to replace the no longer available furs as trade goods and tax payments.<sup>4</sup>

The dramatic reduction of game reached 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 Sami 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 crisis was usually solved by means of shamanistic ritual. 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 an unbalanced 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 is not often found among pastoralists, where individual ownership concepts prevail. It is interesting, however, to see how the Sami transformed the concept of the keeper of the game. The idea developed that the shaman could make the journey to the world beyond to procure, from among the dead who resided there together with important keepers of game and natural sites (Arbman, 1960:123), "reindeer herdsmen" (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 the mountains, 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 Sami 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 Sami candidate received his vocation from the spirits of dead shamans, the *Sájva-olmak* (Lundius, 1905:5; Skanke, 1945:205; Olsen, 1910:50; Randulf, 1903:44). These spirits 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). A period of training by the *Sájva-olmak* in the *Sájva-ájmuo* followed (Olsen, 1910:26; Skanke, 1945:191).

With the development of reindeer herding and fertility cults to further the growth of the herds and encourage favourable grazing conditions (Mebius, 1968), cosmic dieties such as *Veralden-radien* began to play a more important role for the Sami. 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 Sami 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 (Mebius, 1968:47).

In any case, the Sami 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 (J. 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 Sami lost interest in the concept.

It appears more likely, on the other hand, that visionary heavenly journeys entered Sami shamanism later, if at all, as a complementary element. Even though the Sami 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 Sami oral tradition there is 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 Sami 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 Sami as it did in many agrarian and/or pastoral cultures, especially

those in Central Asia (Radloff, 1884:20; Czaplicka, 1914:191; Harva, 1938:483).

It may be worth asking how one symbol of group-membership among Sami reindeer-herders correlates with a unique feature in Sami shamanism. Missionary accounts of the time explain that Sami 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; Tornaeus, 1900:44). It is important to note that the Sami shaman could only carry out his duty as long as he had all his teeth (Skanke, 1945:209). It is conceivable, therefore, that in Sami 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.

In contrast to most other circumpolar peoples (Gračeva, 1981:78; Ksenofontov in Friedrich and Buddruss, 1955:137; Rasmussen, 1929:114; Kortt, 1984:298) the Sami shaman lacked a special costume with a skeleton representation; indeed the skeletonization theme does not appear at all. Bäckman (1978:79) sees the absence of the costume as an indication that as early as the 17th century the Sami 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 Sami in a symbolism of a different kind. 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, 1987).

### *Conclusions*

The Sami 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 shamanistic concepts among the Sami as culture-loss and degeneration due to Christian influences are therefore inadequate. The decisive transformations within Sami 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 changes or disruptions within the ecosystem in its broadest sense. Certainly, foreign cultural influences

provided the Sami with an additional conceptual potential,<sup>5</sup> 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. It is clear that among the Sami there was an on-going reinterpretation of religious concepts, which had to prove their validity in the light of reality (Thurenus, 1910:396).

What is significant in the Sami case is that 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 the need arose, but eventually became too scattered and systematically 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 Sami aware of alternative ideas and concepts. But it was times of physical and socio-economic stress that were particularly decisive in producing changes in Sami 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 Sami 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. The fiscal needs of Swedish expansionism under Karl IX led to a stricter enforcement of prior taxation policies towards the Sami. According to the tax-reform of 1602, Sami people had to pay one tenth of the fish and game procured to the Crown (I. Fellman, 1915:90).

5. The impact of Norse and Christian concepts upon the Sami belief system and the limited effects of missionary activities have been discussed elsewhere (Kasten, 1983:102).

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