ASPECTS OF SAAMI (LAPP) SHAMANISM

By

Ake Hultkrantz

The following short paper aims at presenting a survey of the main features of Saami, or Lapp, shamanism. It is my conviction that even a cursory report like this one may serve a substantial function, since our knowledge of Saami shamanism has recently been revised and enlarged. Until a few years ago accounts of this shamanism were written in a more general and descriptive, less analytic perspective. Even modern writings on the subject avoided penetrating the field. Moreover, most of these works exist in Scandinavian or Finnish languages, and are thus inaccessible to a wider learned public. Only a few works — by Holmberg (Harva), Itkonen, Karsten and Manker — present their information in English or German. In 1978 however Dr. Louise Bäckman and the present author issued an analytical study of Saami shamanism in the English language. The study gives a close account of the varieties of Saami shamanism and presents a structural analysis of the network of functional relations that make up the Saami shamanistic system. The following survey is partly founded on the results reached in this study.

There is today a resurgence of interest in Saami shamanism in several quarters. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the Saamis are situated in an enclave, as it were, within the European cultural field. Their kind of shamanism has thus been developed in an area rather isolated from the North Eurasian shamanism. Nevertheless, recent studies enable us to see Saami shamanism in a wide ethnographical perspective (Hultkrantz 1979:45 ff.) Earlier the issue was raised if the old Scandinavian magic called seidr had not been borrowed from Saami shamanism; however, this assumption has not been proved true (Strömbäck 1935:121 ff., 136 ff., 147 ff., 161, 196 ff.; Buchholz 1968:15 f., 1971:9).

The Saamis have been known for their shamanism since the days of the Vikings. The more systematic observations of their shamanic art go back to the 17th, if not 16th, century. Few observations on northern shamanism have this remarkable age. On the other hand, Saami shamanism was on the wane already in the 18th century, and thus belongs to the historical past. In contradistinction to most other studies of shamanism Saami shamanic research must thus be eminently historical.

Our richest documents on Saami shamanism are the Swedish and Danish-Norwegian records composed by missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Swedish source writers acted at the request of the chancellor of the realm, Magnus Gabriel de la Gardie,
who wanted to gather all the 'antiquities' of the kingdom. The Danish-Norwegian clergy-
men were intent upon collecting all possible knowledge concerning the 'devil-worship' of
the people they have to convert. All these sources are of an uneven quality, some
acceptable and even fairly good, others rich in prejudices, misunderstandings, and
presenting confused accounts and incomplete descriptions. Almost all of them disregard
geoographical locations, and it is questionable if any of the authors ever watched a true
shamanistic ceremony. However, at least those recorders who were themselves Saamis
might have done so.

It stands to reason that only intense and careful field-work enables a scholar to
investigate a local shamanistic complex in fuller details. This is of course out of the
question in the present case. However, although the old Saami sources are both frag­
mentary and partly confused, they convey much information that seems reliable, and I
regard them as sufficient for an analysis of even some finer shades of Saami shamanism.
The scholar takes an obvious risk, of course, in puzzling together notes from different
sources, but the aim is worth this risk. If due attention is paid to the connections in which
a text appears I think the investigator is standing on a rather firm ground.

The folkloristic source-material on shamans that originates from both Saamis and
other Scandinavians is rich and varied. The dread of the devious capacities of the Saami
shamans was vivid for centuries among the Germanic-speaking population of Scandi­
navia (Tillhagen 1969:129 ff.). In particular it was their destructive powers that were
feared. Stories of their miraculous feats circulated widely. Most spread was the tale of
the shaman who, at the request of a bishop or another prominent person, made a
trance-journey to the latter's home to find out the state of his wife, and as a proof of
fulfilled mission brought back a ring or other object familiar to his client (Arbman 1968b:49
ff., Bäckman 1982:122 ff.).

The Saamis themselves know many stories of historical or legendary shamans who
displayed unusual feats. However, since all such traditions have been recorded long after
the extinction of actual shamanism, and thus may contain later migratory motifs, they
have not been used for the following exposition.

The oldest account of Saami shamanism is contained in an ancient chronicle, Historia
Norwegiae (about 1180). It relates how a shaman set about to relieve a sick woman who
had been bewitched by another, malignant magician. His helping spirit (or, possibly, his
soul) was sent out during trance in the shape of a whale. Unfortunately it met the hostile
shaman's assistant spirit that had taken the form of some sharp poles standing up from
the bottom of the sea. The travelling spirit's stomach was out open, and the same thing
happened, reciprocally, to the shaman lying in a trance. Indeed, he was so severely hurt
that he died. A friend of the dead shaman, also a shaman, made a new ecstatic trip, and
was more successful. He saw what had happened in the depth of the sea, avoided the
danger and managed to restore the sick woman's health (Storm 1880:85 f.).

This is the oldest record we have of northern shamanism (unless the notices on the
above-mentioned seidr are included), and has therefore been rendered here in some
detail. It points out two dominant themes in Saami shamanism: the deep ecstasy which
approaches complete stupor and may result in physical death, and the close reciprocity
between the shaman and his assistant spirits. The main documents of Saami shamanism
which date from the 17th and 18th centuries mediate the same impression. We shall now
see what they have to tell.

The Saami shaman, or noaidi, was as far as we know almost always a male. There
are reports of women who could divine with the help of knives and belts and who could
practise black magic, but these reports stand rather isolated. In later times some women
could apparently appear as healers. However, as a rule they were not allowed to touch the magic drum and even had to avoid crossing a path where the drum had been carried. The male shaman was often initiated while still a very young man, and his powers lasted until he was in his fifties. According to one observer, "when he has lost his teeth he is good for nothing" (Skanke 1945:209; similar beliefs were recorded among the Samoyeds, see also Lehtisalo 1924:166). There were probably different kinds of shamans, and we hear of occasions when several shamans have been engaged in one and the same case. The designation noaidí seems to have covered them all, and it is indeed possible that anyone who handled a drum, and not just the true shamans, could be called by the same term.

Thus it may seem as if there was no proper boundary-line between the shamans and the laity. This impression is somewhat strengthened by the fact that not only shamans but also common people were supposed to have guardian spirits that they had inherited. It is impossible to say how widespread this ideology has been; so far we have information on it only among the Norwegian Saamis and the Skolt Saamis in northernmost Finland.8 The conceptions of the Skolt Saamis have been much discussed. Among them every family had a certain set of guardian spirits in animal guise, some good, some dangerous. As a rule they furthered their respective clients' interests. The father entrusted his guardian spirit (kaddz, 'companion') to his son just before he died, and similarly a mother gave her spirit to her daughter. The recipient must not be younger than twenty years. The spirit showed itself in a dream to its new owner and offered its services (Harva 1928:65 f.).

This information on the kaddz is exceptional since it dates from the present century. It has however its counterpart in the old Danish and Norwegian records which tell us of individual guardian spirits among the western Saamis during the high day of shamanism.

The Saami shaman had a similar array of auxiliary spirits which he had inherited from some relative — his father, his uncle, or some more distant relative. However, in comparison with other spirit owners he had more spirits, and two classes of spirits, and he had to undergo hardships and pains before taking them over from his predecessor (Hultkrantz 1987:110 ff.). Thus, the shaman's assistant spirits were of two kinds, guardian spirits in the strictest sense (saiva olmai) that gave their client counsels when he so demanded, and helping spirits (saiva animals) that executed the tasks he imposed upon them (Bäckman 1975:115). The former, human-like beings living in certain sacred mountains, were also the spirits that antagonized the shaman during his vocation period. The helping spirits appeared in animal form — as a bird, a fish or a reindeer bull — and went with the disembodied shaman on his journeys into the supernatural world. They were the servants of the shaman. Their appearances recalled the three ways of travelling in the three-levelled world of northern shamanism. In Siberia, but not in Lappland, these three levels were associated with the crown, trunk and roots of the world-tree.

All these spirits could only be achieved during the utmost strain. Since they were inherited they forced themselves upon that member of the deceased shaman's family whom they thought most apt for shamanizing — in other words, that relative who had the necessary personal and nervous qualifications. Nils Lundius, an educated Saami from the years around 1700, tells us that the guardian spirits approach the designated shaman when he is alone in the woods. They sing a song which the shaman candidate has to repeat. Furthermore,

"when he is visited by the spirit the first time he behaves himself in affectation like a madman for half a year. He is then unable to stand his wife, his children or his servants, but moves lonely about in the wilderness imagining things. He eats little, and has little strength ..."

(Svenska Landsmål 1905, 17/5:7).
One of Nils' class-mates at the Saami school in Umeå, a sixteen-year old youth by
the name of Olof, was severely obsessed by the spirits. He described them as tongues
of fire, naked men and long shadows. Sometimes they were as many as nine, but none
but himself could see them. They caused him frightening headaches, and they made him
throw around books, quickly climb pines and behave strangely.

"He often wanted to be alone, could not stand other human beings and
ran so fast that a horse could not keep up with him. He spoke in the
woods to himself as if he had been accompanied by eighty persons"
(Svenska Landsmål 1905, 17/5:/25 f.).

As among other shamanic peoples, this agony did not end until the candidate had
surrendered himself to the spirits. We are not very well informed of what happened
thereafter. Some sources have it that he was now taught the secrets of his profession
from the same spirits that had pained him. Skanke mentions that the spirits (called by
this missionary 'the angry devil') exercise the candidate partly by giving instructions at
meetings they have together, partly by soul flights into the unseen world (Skanke
1945:205). This means probably that, by giving in, the shaman candidate releases his
own psychic resources to the extent that extracorporeal expeditions will be possible. The
actual instructions were imparted by experienced shamans who knew the traditions and
the techniques. This is often mentioned in our old sources. Indeed, one author (Isaac
Olsen) says that it was the noaidi's duty to give lessons in the art of shamanizing to
becoming shamans (Qvigstad 1910:49).

The above-mentioned Norwegian missionary, Hans Skanke, mentions an initiation rite
for the emerging shaman. At a meeting of shamans the young noaidi was placed together
with an older colleague in such a way that their feet were intertwined. The young man
started to beat his drum, and sing a song of magic. During his singing the guardian spirits
arrived and moved about over the feet. If the young man felt this, but the old man only
vaguely perceived the presence of the spirits, he was officially declared a noaidi (Skanke

There is no information that the shaman wore a specific shamans' dress. On the
contrary, during his exasperating trance séances he had the upper part of his body bare,
covered only by his own sweat. One author mentions a belt as the most distinctive feature
in his dress. When the shaman appeared as sacrificial priest he had a more elaborate
costume, but even so it does not seem to have broken off from the pattern used by other
Saamis.

The most important instrument of magic at the shaman's disposition was his drum. It
had an oval form and consisted mostly of a wooden frame and a membrane made of
reindeer shammy. The shaman drew figures on the drum-skin with the juice from the
alder-bark. They represented gods, spirits and Christian saints (in any case during the
period of our sources) but also familiar things in his neighbourhood, such as clergymen,
churches and district bailiffs. Usually these figures were arranged around a circle in the
centre, representing the sun, or in vertical sections over each other representing sky and
earth, or the sky, the air-space, the surface of the earth, the subterranean world close
under our feet and the underground deep down below.9 The back side of the drum had
various power objects attached with leather thongs, such as bear claws, bear penis bones
and bear teeth. The hammer that was used on the drum was made from reindeer horn
and had the shape of a Y or a T. About seventy drums have survived the witchcraft trials
and autodafés of the last days of shamanism (see Manker 1938-1950).

The drum was used as a means of excitation by the shaman, or as an oracle by any
head of family. The beating on the drum, singing and incantations brought on that twilight
of the soul when the unseen world became real to the shaman. The pictures symbolized
the spirits and persons and places he was going to see, but had scarcely any important
function to fulfil. When, however, the drum served as an instrument of divination the
pictures gallery had a most practical function, for the figures represented the gods,
persons, game, sacrificial animals etc. that had to be pointed out through the divination
procedure. The diviner drummed so that a small object, called *arpa*, moved over the
drum-skin. The figure where it stopped was the answer to the question that had been
posed: Where can I find the wild game? What spirit has caused the disease? Which
animal should be sacrificed? etc. The drum divination may have had a rapid growth under
the impact of Scandinavian magic during mediaeval times, but as such it is certainly a
heritage of northern shamanism.

In critical situations, such as delivery and disease, shamans undertook drum divination
as part of their general shamanistic practices. However, this was probably an insignificant
part of their activities. Their main tasks were to give aid on occasions where a direct
contact with the supernatural world in ecstasy was necessary.

The foremost tasks of the shaman were healing, divination, hiring of ghosts as
herdsmen and, possibly, hunting magic. In all of these operations he was often forced
to resort to ecstatic (or trance). As a consequence of his trance performances the shaman
also engaged himself, secondarily, in drum divination and sacrificing. A negative aspect
of shamanism is that some shamans obviously turned into evil magicians, using their
powers against instead of for society.

The *noaidi* took on healing in severe cases where no herbal medicines or other
remedies were sufficient (Hultkrantz 1988:290 ff.). When a person was critically ill his
soul was supposed to have wandered off to the realm of the dead, or to have been
snatched by the dead and brought to this gloomy place. The realm of the dead was
situated in the underground and was ruled over by the sullen mistress of the dead,
*Jabmiecakka*. By going into trance, or 'diving' as he expressed it, the shaman was able
to send his own free-soul and his animal spirit helpers to the other world to fetch the sick
man's soul. Only the shaman had the capacity to visit, in his soul, that world and return
again. This is how an informant from about 1700 describes such an undertaking.

"[...] the noaidi makes magic, drinks aquavite, and is affected; he walks
violently around on his knees, takes glowing fire in his hands, cuts his
hands with a knife, and takes hold of the magic drum in order to beat
it. After having behaved this way with great eagerness for a long while
he falls down dead to the ground and remains lying there breathless
for three quarters of an hour. During this time he undertakes a journey
down into the realm of the dead in the guise of his sacred mountain
fish* in order to negotiate with the mistress of the dead about sacrifices
to her in return for the patient's soul, so that he may bring the latter
with him up from the realm of the dead and back to the sick person.
[...] Sometimes it depends on the speed of the noaidi that, with the aid
of his sacred mountain fish, he may catch the soul from the dead without
their noticing it. [...] When the sacred mountain fish has brought the
noaidi unharmed up from the realm of the dead and back into his own
body he begins to draw breath and to move. Then he relates how his
journey was and how big a sacrifice he had to promise the mistress of
the dead before he, with the help of his sacred mountain fish, received
from her the sick person's soul that he carried with him back again*
(Kildal 1945:139 ff.).
It strikes us immediately how violent and how deep this ecstasy was, a truly cataleptic state. Another interesting feature is the role of the helping spirit, which is a fish in this case – or perhaps a snake since the same word may be used for both creatures.

In the same way as just described the shaman brought up a dead person from the underground to guard the reindeer herds. It is said that the ghost was a relative of the shaman.

More important was however the shaman's involvement with ecstatic divination. Mostly this kind of divination was associated with mild ecstasy, that is, the guardian spirits were called upon by the shaman and imparted their information to him while he was in a light trance. Thus, divination aiming at the revelation of the nature of diseases, divination for hunting and about future events took place in such a trance. While the shaman was sitting there singing and drumming the spirits appeared to him and informed him. When, however, the shaman was asked to report on conditions in distant places he had to make an ecstatic trip to these places, unless he had such a clairvoyant capacity that he could see what was going on there. There is testimony that this capacity was acquired through much shamanizing (Bäckman – Hultkrantz 1978:48).

In connection with shamanizing the shaman occasionally functioned as a sacrificial priest. If the dead or their mistress demanded a sacrifice in return for the health of a sick human being it fell upon the shaman to lead the sacrificial animal – usually a domestic animal – to the place of sacrifice. There he slaughtered the animal and followed the rules pertaining to such acts of worship.

These were the more prominent tasks of the Saami shaman. There are reports on his activity as an enchanter of the wild game, but they are debatable or of very late origin (and could thus be part of migratory tales). The transition to an intense pastoral economy which occurred during the centuries just before the time of our sources would have made hunting magic superfluous.

There is no need here to look deeper into the antisocial side of some Saami shamans. They were, of course, antisocial only when their actions were directed against their own group – not when they afflicted other groups. In their mutual relations they often counter-acted each other, presumably if they represented different groups. We know, for instance, that they could fight each other by sinking into ecstasy and sending out their strongest helping spirit, the reindeer bull, against each other. Was the spirit reindeer killed, so was its owner. This reciprocity reminds us of the ideas of the so-called mother-animal in Yakuts shamanism (Harva 1938:476 ff.).

The Saami shaman who did not commit himself to antisocial behaviour was highly respected. Titles like 'the ruler of the mountains' or 'the king of the mountains' give evidence of his social position. There are records of how the shaman was greeted with praiseworthy words and bare heads by people who had called upon him, and how he was offered the nicest reindeer-skin to sit on and the choicest food to eat. As a remuneration for his services he received money or other compensation, such reindeer, clothes and silver-work. The size of the remuneration depended on what kind of services he had rendered, whether curing a sick person, performing divination or sacrificing (Qvigstad 1910:89 ff., Holmberg 1927:282).

This short summary of Saami shamanism should have revealed that it was in many respects basically similar to Siberian shamanism and generally of the same intense type as the latter. Indeed, the torpor of the Saami shaman seems occasionally to have been deeper than that of his Siberian colleague. There is every reason to see Saami shamanism as a western offshoot of the shamanism found among more eastern Finno-Ugrian peoples.
NOTES

1. In this article I have adopted the term by which the Lapps designate themselves. It has been transcribed in different ways in authors writing in English. In an earlier article I used the form Same(s) at the instigation of the editor, Harald Hvarfner, see Hultkrantz (1965), Graburn and Strong (1973) prefer the form Samek. Bäckman (1978: 25 ff.) suggests the form Saami(t). My own preference is to follow the recent recommendations of the Nordic Sami Institute of Kautokeino concerning word endings, but to redouble the first vowel. That is, I am going to use the forms Saami (sing.), Saamis (plur.).

2. Earlier international readers were informed on Saami shamanism through the description in Johannes Schefferus’ work Laponia (Francofurti 1673), the Latin version of which was soon followed by editions in the English, German, French, and Dutch languages. A modern Swedish translation, with commentaries by experts, was published by E. Manker (1956).


5. There were shamans still in the last century, and possibly even longer. Up to the present time the legendary traditions about shamans have been quite substantial. One author asserts that shamans were still active in the 1930s (Therman 1940).

6. On the sources of Saami religion, see Hultkrantz (1955: 81 ff.). More penetrating discussions of the old sources and their value will be found in two dissertations published in Swedish: Mebius (1968: 9 ff.) and Bäckman (1975: 25 ff.).

7. The necessity of this approach is obvious, for the authors did not only refer to other sources, but also copied each other’s writings, disregarding the geographical provenance of their information.

8. The same ideology is as we know predominating among the North American Indians, see Benedict (1923).

9. There could be two, three or five levels. This type of drum was found among some northern Saamis, whereas the drum with the sun in the centre, by far the most common type, was particularly popular among the southern Saamis. Cf. the fine survey in Kjellström and Rydving (1988: 8 ff.).

10. The supernatural helper in the shape of a fish mentioned above.

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