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Shamanhood in the Processes of Northern Ethnicity and Identity

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The paper will discuss the principal and conceptual problems of shamanhood (my English translation for the Russian word *shamanstvo*) in the processes of Northern ethnicity and identity. These processes are also illustrated in video materials collected by the author in his expeditions from 1990 onwards with docent Tatyana Boulgakova among the Nanay of the Lower Amur and among the Khanty of the tributaries of the river Ob with an interdisciplinary team consisting of Elena Glavatskaya, Docent, The Urals University, Russia; Ágnes Kerezsi, Researcher, The University of Budapest; Natalya Koskharova, Docent, The University of Novosibirsk, Russia; Regina Nazarenko, Researcher, The University of Novosirsk, Russia. Both teams have contributed to material collections of the repertoires of one prominent shaman: the late Lindza Beldy, a Nanay shamaness (ca. 1910–1998), and another joint in-depth study on “Khanty Shamanhood: The way of questioning and knowing.” The huge folklore repertoires of a Khanty shaman, known as “Dedushka” to his kin and his community, by name Ivan Stepanovich Sopochnin (ca. 1910–1993), was collected by the team in the 1980s and 1990s.

BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY OF SHAMANHOOD

Globalization and urbanization are worldwide processes that have caused people to migrate and to live together in new surroundings and with strange neighbours. When people leave their home bases to migrate, they often soon leave their old lifestyles, and change their religions and languages in their new milieus. How have these worldwide developments influenced the indigenous peoples around the world is one of the concerns in this paper. A decade ago, UNESCO launched a research programme to report on the endangered languages of the world and to propose measures to support them. Such reports as *Arctic Languages, An Awakening* (1990) and *Endangered Languages* (1991) particularly showed that the greatest threats concerned many small languages indigenous to the Arctic regions, due to the simultaneous ecological processes in the North, detailed by Juha Pentikäinen in articles published in *Shamanism and Culture* (1998).

Why one language dies while another survives are questions related to the ethnic/national processes that should be carefully studied by an international and interdisciplinary team. This kind of comparative contemporary research is needed since there is currently no comprehensive study on the special role of such Native religio-national leaders as shamans in these processes. Shamanic studies in different milieus reveal results already advanced in this kind of ethnographic-phenomenological research to produce

comparative research about contemporary shamans in Siberia, Sápmi (Sami territories) and among the American Indian and Inuit peoples in the New World.

Emphasis on fieldwork will produce comparative conclusions indicating the special knowledge of the indigenous people themselves on their contemporary issues and problems of survival/revival as individuals, cultures, minorities and nations. Native peoples themselves should be a part of the whole research process, from fieldwork to analysis, publications, follow-up and concluding seminars. This kind of approach, following the principle “deeper rather than broader” (H. Halpert’s metaphor) naturally leads research of shamanism or shamanic cultures and shamanhood from the generalizations typical of many studies on shamanism after Mircea Eliade’s classical work *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’écstase* in 1951, and criticized by Åke Hulkrantz, professor emeritus of the University of Stockholm (1973; 1993), among others, as speculations on shamanism as the “Urreligion of mankind,” towards research on shamans and their ecological and cultural milieus.

In order to understand the manifestations of shamanism in different geographical contexts, the voices of contemporary female and male shamans should be introduced and studied as original sources in written and oral documents based on the unique, so far unpublished fieldwork data. Shamans are too often regarded as medicine men and healers only. However, they are also oral singers and narrators with whom some scholars have been working since their youth, whose knowledge and friendship they very much appreciate. During the fieldwork in Siberia, some representatives of the persecuted shamans were met, who introduced the author to the most esoteric secrets of shamanic knowledge.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

How and why has such an archaic phenomenon as shamanism overcome the pressures of the great ideological, religious and ecological changes, which have taken place in the twentieth century in various territories and cultures, is an interesting subject of research, for example, the influence of Soviet ideology, the pressures of collectivization, the influence of the oil, military and other industries both in Siberia and in America, among indigenous peoples including the ethnic and ecological influences caused by them. The fieldwork carried out in these regions will, on the basis of archival and fresh ethnographical data, give evidence on the importance of the role of shamans in the ethnic revival and survival processes of indigenous peoples. Shamans were persecuted for ideological and religious reasons in respective countries. Some of those who survived have become remarkable national/ethnic leaders, with their strengthened traditional authority in the revitalization processes of these peoples.

The conceptual history of shamanism will show how the word “shamanism” was created under the influence of the Christian worldview. Shaman(ism) was identified as the “old form of paganism,” and shamanic peoples as “heathens” to be converted by Christian missions. It is necessary for shamanic terminology to be expanded and redefined. An alternative concept to shamanism is proposed to emphasize the importance of the non-dogmatic and symbolic aspects of shamanic mythical worldviews. “Shamanhood,” synonymous with “samanstvo,” the Russian term preceding shamanism in older sources, is closer to the self-perception of

the shamans themselves, since they do not see shamanism as a “religion” in the Western sense of the word. Shamanism as the dominant type of religion in the circumpolar-subarctic region, may be characterized by features such as: (1) it is practiced by relatively small and isolated populations; (2) it is an oral tradition, since it lacks any kind of holy scripts or books; (3) instead of having a separate class of religious specialists (priests), it has a scale of the initiated, beginning with the simple member of the clan and ending with a shaman of the highest qualifications; (4) contrary to Church (Party) hierarchy, the society of shamanistic believers is based on collaboration and partnership rather than subjugation. This nature of shamanism is revealed not only at societal level, but also in its worldview: sacred and profane are a correlated pair so that sacredness saturates everything, language, society and nature, for someone practicing shamanism.

This is the background required to view and study shamanism. The student of shamanism these days is also some kind of bridge maker between prehistory and our present-day civilization. The interdisciplinary work will break down some borders between the various disciplines. A repeated distinction has been made between two types of scholars: fieldworkers and philologists. The borderline between the two types of scholars is anything but clear: since the classical starts of scientific expeditions in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, there is no fieldworker without a training in philology and there is no philologist without a taste of fieldwork.

Within the study of ethnic religions, the main emphases of religious approaches will be on religio-historical, religio-phenomenological, religio-ethnographic and religio-ecological questions. Shamanism should be studied in the regional context as well as universally on the basis of data from various situations on all continents. Following the principles of the research traditions known as “the ethnography of the north,” the aim is not only to describe, but also to understand the significant role the shamans play in shamanic cultures. Special consideration will be given to language, mythology, ecology and folklore as manifestations of shamanic cultures and behaviours. The Tungusic and Nivkh concept of “*saman*,” thoroughly dealt with by Robert Austerlitz (1986) and Juha Janhunen (1986), literally means someone who knows. Since the old bearers of shamanic traditions quite often were, and even today are, illiterate, the study of shamanic folklore—epic songs, laments and narratives—will be emphasized as a new approach for shamanistic research.

The ecology of religions is another field that is often neglected in shamanistic studies. This criticism is particularly applicable to religious studies in North America, in spite of the fact that ecological values are nowadays widely recognized in American society. Shamanism could be emphasized as a traditional tool to understand these universal human values. This approach is found in such new ecologically orientated research traditions, as the eco-philosophy of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962; 1968) and the eco-psychology of David Abrams (1996).

These interdisciplinary studies stress the importance of experiencing our forgotten contacts with the multiple nonhuman shapes that surround us in nature as “self.” Since they have recognized the immaterial aspects of non-verbal shamanic cultures, their approaches can be discussed in relation to the work of important new contributors to Scandinavian, Finnish and Japanese studies on the ecology of religion (Hultkrantz, Honko, Irimoto, Yamada, etc.).

The importance of a new ethno-linguistic approach in shamanistic research is also related to the fact that many shamanic peoples today speak languages which have been globally defined as endangered. Interestingly enough, the last speakers of many dying languages are the shamans of the Northern indigenous peoples. This also explains the important role shamans are playing in the revival of indigenous cultures worldwide.

SHAMANS IN NORTHERN TERRITORIES AND LANGUAGES

Special attention is given to Siberia as the “cradle of shamanism,” and within it to languages which include the Native concepts related to it. Besides “*saman*,” many Siberian languages have various words to classify their religious specialists (including special terms for female shamans), as well as expressions for “shamanizing,” for the drum, for the hammer, and for other shamanic instruments and tools.

The concept of “shamanism,” first used in English at the end of the eighteenth century is problematic. Siberian peoples did not have a concept of shamanism as an abstract category; they spoke about their “*samans*” only. The first written account about Siberian “*samans*” was made in the seventeenth century by Protopop Avvakum, the leader of the Russian Old Believers. During his exile in the depths of Central Siberian taiga, persecuted by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Czar since 1651, he wrote in his diary about healing ceremonies he had witnessed among the Tungusic Evenks. Typically enough, he wrote about their “shamanizing” only, without calling diviners “shamans” or the phenomenon “*saman*(ism).”

Classical *shamanstvo* is found among Manchu-Tungusic and Uralic speaking peoples on Siberian tundra (Arctic bare steppe regions) and taigas (deep forest zones). The school known as “the ethnography of the North,” initiated by such scholars of the Finno-Ugric languages and cultures as M.A. Castrén in Finland, Lars Levi Laestadius among the Sami in Sweden and Antal Reguly in Hungary, in fact started fieldwork, based on research in the 1830s. This happened more than half a century before Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown—who are considered the pioneers of anthropological fieldwork—decided to lead British and American anthropology from an armchair discipline and “to breathe fresh life into the anthropological field.”

Religio-ethnographical orientation is strongly based on observations related to language, “shamanic language” in particular. If we look upon the west-east axis in the northern hemisphere from the vertical, we have the following language-families in the circumpolar—sub-arctic region of the globe: Uralic (Finno-Ugric, Samoyedic), Ket, Altaic, Turkic, Mongolic, Manchu-Tungusic, Yukagir, Giliyak, Ainu, Chukotko-Kamchatkan, Eskimo-Aleut, Athabaskan-eyk-Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshianic (Austerlitz 1974; Krauss 1997: 32–34.).

The eleven language-families and language-isolates of the northern circumpolar region cover more than 100 languages. In spite of the fact that the Native concept of “*saman*” is lacking from most of their vocabularies, the basic manifestations of religions are expressed by shamanic beliefs and behaviours. The simplified assumption is that “shamanism” is a common term for all kinds of popular belief that preceded the appearance of universal religion in Northern Eurasia (and also the rest of the globe as well) during the greater part of

the Holocene (i.e., the last ten thousand years) and, in all probability, before.

As for Northern Eurasia, the gradual retreat of the ice opened the way for human habitation and a simultaneous conquest by universal civilizations and universal religions of the Mediterranean. For the sake of brevity, we consider only two simultaneous processes, the gradual progress of Christian religion and its various Churches northward, on the one hand, and the retreat of shamanism in the same direction, on the other, in two periods: (1) Christianization of Eastern Europe between the seventh and tenth centuries A.D., when a wide area of Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Adriatic sea, including Western and Eastern Slavic peoples and also Hungarians, embraced Christianity; (2) the period beginning with the discovery of America and the Reformation between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, continuing with the formations of three universal states: the Scandinavian kingdom (1527), the British Empire (1588) and Russia (1552), when the three empires conquered vast territories and forcefully subjugated natives living in those faraway lands of the North. This period lasted until recently, when the inheritor of the Russian empire, the Soviet State fell apart in 1992. The conquest, perhaps not unexpectedly, was not only a military-economical process, but also and even more so, a kind of religious crusade with the purpose of converting the pagan natives to Christianity. The most heated and cruellest events of these crusades took place in Russia during the twentieth century, in the name of Communism, the last of the universal religions for the time being, which are detailed in Glavatskaya's studies (Glavatskaya 1999; 2001; 2003).

No matter how cruel these crusades sometimes were, they strengthened *nolens-volens* the prestige of shamanism by awaking defensive reactions in its devoted followers. What is said about popular beliefs, i.e., shamanism, is true also for Native languages. The more so, we have to take into consideration "the outstanding role played by poetic (shamanic, sacral) narrative in the ancient Uralic society—as Eugene Helimski emphasized (1995: 44).

The centuries-long harassment and persecution did not do as much harm to shamanism and its followers as did the recent exploitation of oil reserves, with devastating consequences to the nature, flora, fauna and, consequently, also to the society and the genre de vie of Native peoples. The oil industry drew workers in large numbers who needed housing, so modern cities of concrete were built in the middle of the West Siberian marshland (and elsewhere in the region) in the second half of the twentieth century, driving out Native peoples from their ancient settlements, pasture lands, game preserves and fishing-places. In spite of the fact that oil companies show more restraint nowadays, and pay relatively generously for the land acquired from natives, the money they offer and the goods the natives can buy with it leads to a practice of consumption that destroys all that remained of the traditional way of life, without applying force and mostly with the willing compliance of the natives.

Although there is some momentum from those past policies still at work in the policies of all Northern countries, during the past decade or two, policy has shifted markedly toward tolerance and support for indigenous minority languages. Further, it must be emphasized that that momentum has been internalized by the people themselves, who might still be able to speak their traditional languages to their children but do not do so. Although these people may or may not be aware of the consequences of this inaction, they may later regret.

Throughout the North there is at the same time a very rapidly growing desire on the part of the peoples themselves to revitalize (if not always to maintain!) their language. In fact, greatly adding to the uncertainty of the above dire predictions of language loss in the North, the great majority of those languages are no longer spoken by children. To counter this, there are rapidly developing school and community efforts, now beginning to include "total immersion" programs. Thanks to this work, we now hope that the North may yet keep at least its share of mankind's languages (Krauss 1997: 30).

SHAMANHOOD: THE WAY OF QUESTIONING AND KNOWING

One of the new features of contemporary research is the participatory approach calling for interaction with local people. One new research hypothesis to be tested is, in C. Taksami's words, that shamans are "the main carriers" of their cultural traditions, keeping them in their oral memory and in their secret shamanic language spoken, and known only by them, and also in the "mother tongue" (understood by their closest relatives only, maybe 20 to 50 in number). Methodologically this kind of approach is mainly ethnographical and biographic-phenomenological so that scholars necessarily feel that they are part of their research, sharing the existential and ethical issues in their fields.

An example of this kind of research is introduced in "Shamanhood; The Way of Questioning and Knowing," which is written on the basis of the total shamanic folklore repertoire of Ivan Stepanovich Sopochin, an illiterate Khanty shaman. All the members of the team have had an opportunity to do fieldwork with him, either together or alone in the 1980s and 1990s. On the basis of the exceptionally rich folklore material, jointly gathered by the team with the co-operation of the family of a Khanty shaman, it is now possible to write an in-depth study of the oral repertoire of one competent shaman. The working methods have been developed as a part of shared fieldwork experiences and consultations along the lines of religio-anthropological and phenomenological methods rather than the (traditional) methodology of anthropology.

Our fieldwork suggests the need to redefine the traditional concept of shamanism. "Shamanhood" is a special way of questioning and knowing. Every shaman seems to have his or her own language, or cultural mother tongue, understood by his nearest kin only; hence his family is part of the project (e.g., F.I. Smirnova, his daughter, his sons Yeremei and Josif Sopochin, shamans-to-be); Yeremei Aipin, a Khanty poet and member of the Russian Duma and Agrafena Sopochina, interpreters of Khanty shamanic songs, laments and narratives. Our experience has shown that it is most effective if the members of the team can work both jointly and individually with the members of the Sopochin family as their interpreters so that special problems related to the exclusively oral language spoken by the shaman and his family, and any ethical and other considerations, can be dealt with most effectively.

A STUDY OF SHAMANHOOD TOWARD UNDERSTANDING NORTHERN IDENTITY

The research project will highlight the UNESCO Endangered Languages project, on the basis of its explanation of how a dying language often breathes last in the oral memory of shamans, in the shamanic stories told by them and in the rituals led and enacted by them. Their authority is related to their traditional roles and rituals supporting the maintenance of the cultural/national/ethnic identity of the indigenous peoples around the world, the so-called Fourth World.

One unique aim of our research is to publish scientific editions of the total repertoires of some shamans (one Khanty, one Nanay) in English, and also in their mother tongues based on the work of an interdisciplinary team consisting of scholars of religion, ethnographers, historians, linguists, ethnomusicologists and the members of the families of the shamans, who have agreed upon the scientific and ethical principles of their work. This kind of comprehensive research will show the significance and multiplicity of the roles of shamans in respective societies and the richness of their cultural and religious repertoires.

The results of this kind of research will be also of great interdisciplinary significance and applicability for the understanding Northern identity. Some important objectives are related to the future of the indigenous peoples themselves. Fieldwork research in each territory contains interaction with shamanic cultures, e.g., employing the children of shamans as interpreters of the “knowledge” of their parents, whose narratives they know and remember from their childhood. In some cases, they themselves are just now undergoing the painful process of shamanic initiation in their societies.

Moreover, interesting comparisons with shamans in western/southern and eastern/northern hemispheres in the very “cradle of shamanism” will give valuable new insights into aspects of shamanism for global comparisons and syntheses. A recent study showed the relation between the sacral octo-syllabic shamanic singing of the Siberian shamans and the trochaic Kalevala meter. The study of this unique ethno-musicology on sacred shamanic songs results in a new understanding of the transmission of epical singing in Northern and Eastern Europe and in Russian Siberia.

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