

Sami Shamanism

The Arctic Dimension

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*Nor uglier follow the night-hag, when, called
In secret, riding through the air she comes,
Lured with the smell of infant blood, to dance
With Lapland witches, while the labouring moon
Eclipses at their charms.*

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

In May 1627 a charge of witchcraft was brought against a man named Quiwe Baarsen living in the Norwegian part of Lapland. The judicial case was conducted over two days in a small fishing community called Hasvåg on the coast of the western part of Finnmark. Baarsen belonged to the indigenous people of northern Europe, the Sami (formerly known as Laps or Laplanders). The case turned out to be the first description of the use of a Sami drum (*runebomme*) in Scandinavian legal sources. During the court session Baarsen described and explained the purpose of his drum playing, which he had been practicing for years.

When they want to cast runic spells, they use a Sami drum. The drum is made of pine root and covered with reindeer hide or buckskin. They use a piece of wood, as a handle under the drum, and claws from every kind of animal native to this county are hung around the drum. Nine lines are painted on the drum with alder bark; this bark is also used to paint domestic pillows in the huts of the Sami. The first line on the drum represents their god, the second the sun, and the third the moon; these, in turn, symbolise the animals which can bring them luck or inflict harm on their enemies. And when two sorcerers (gandmen) want to test whose craft is the strongest, they paint two antler-butting reindeer on the drum. Whichever one turns out to be

the strongest will indicate which master is strongest and most cunning. And when they want to ask their apostle about something, they will take some small pieces of copper and hang them on the wings of a bird made of copper, which they then place on the drum. Striking the drum with a horn hammer, lined with beaver skin, the bird leaps around on the drum and finally stops on one of the lines. Then the master knows immediately what the apostle has answered. To protect the master, or whoever else may be in the hut, from accident, they beat the drum with the hammer. He whose bird falls from the drum will not live long.¹

Baarsen was also asked by the bailiff if he had studied this craft for some time. Such things were introduced to him when he was a mere boy, he replied. He was also asked how often he himself had been involved in beating such a drum. He answered that once many sorcerers came together to drum, to see whose craft was strongest. The Sami was also interrogated about who had taught him to raise the wind and make wind knots.

In the verdict, the local court made it clear that Quiwe Baarsen had made a free confession about the use of diabolic spells and that he had used witchcraft to drown five people by weather magic. The court sentenced him to death and to be burned at the stake.

Sixty-five years later, in 1692, a similar case of witchcraft was conducted against an old Sami called Anders Poulsen. The trial was held in Vadsø, a small fishing community near the Russian and Swedish borders in the very northeastern part of Norway. This particular case turned out to be the most important source of information on the magic drums of the Sami, and historians have singled out the case as the best source of information on Sami shamanism in northern Scandinavia. The Sami's confiscated magic drum has been preserved, and it is one of the few drums containing symbols and figures that actually have been described by the drum's owner.

DEMONSTRATING DRUM-PLAYING IN COURT

The court, the local authorities, and the local council must have followed with great interest and curiosity how Anders Poulsen picked up his confiscated drum from the courtroom table, and how he began to give his special instruction in magic drum-playing. Crossing himself and his instrument, he

1. Court Book (*Tingbok*) no. 2 for Finnmark, March 1627–August 1633, fols. 4a–5b, Sorenskriveren i Finnmark, kept at the National Archives of Tromsø. An English and German translation of the whole case against Quiwe Baarsen can be found on my site *The Shaman of Alta* at <http://www.ub.uit.no/fag/historie/shaman.html> (URL checked July 27, 2006).

quietly prayed in Finnish as he lovingly played upon it, allowing all to see the drum in use. He shed tears and appeared to be in a state of utmost devotion. The old man drummed with his hammer. The drum's palm danced up and down by the movement of his hand and his hard blows upon its surface, and he loudly implored his gods not to fear the Norwegians whom he now played for. He continued to play and was finally answered by his spirits.

Anders Poulsen was charged with possession and use of an instrument that was otherwise known as a *runebomme* (magic drum). With this instrument he had "practised his evil and ungodly sorcery," according to the indictment. The prosecution, represented by deputy bailiff Olle Andersen, from Vadsø, headed the case and led the cross-examination. According to his statements in court, he wished the verdict to be severe. Two whole days were spent attempting to record thoroughly all the details on the magic drum. In the deputy bailiff's concluding remarks, he pleaded for the judge to set an example of great severity in the face of such ungodliness and shameful devilry. The court documents show that the deputy bailiff had considered burning the accused at the stake. Poulsen, maintained Olle Andersen, was a sorcerer and a heathen who had forfeited his life. He should be "burned to a cinder upon the flames." Poulsen was said to have awakened demons by playing upon his drum: each beat supposedly echoed in the ears of Satan. Indeed, the Sami drums were gifts from the devil himself to the midnight peoples of the high north. It was the devil who was responsible for the magic drum and its symbols, according to the court minutes. Throughout the case we can see that it was very important for the local elites to emphasize this black variant of shamanistic magician. But they were less certain when it came to the exact nature of the crime. In the 1692 case, the judicial conclusions and grounds for judgment show how the Danish-Norwegian people at the top of the regional power structure interpreted what was said into easily understood cultural categories. Poulsen was not a benevolent healer but rather a diabolic sorcerer. To them, his strange tales could be more easily comprehended when interpreted from a demonological point of view.² Throughout the entire case,

2. All citations and the whole examination of the case are based on the legal documents from the court sessions in 1692: Court Book (*Tingbok*) no. 21 (1692–95) for Finnmark, fols. 1a–15b, Sorenskriveren i Finnmark, kept at the National Archive of Tromsø. Poulsen's well-used *runebomme* ended up in Copenhagen in 1694. Today we can find the several-centuries-old magic drum where it naturally belongs: in the Karasjok Sami Collections (Sámiid Vuorká Dávvirat), Finnmark. The drum came to be left in the consignment of the Sami Collections in 1979 by the National Museum of Copenhagen. A reconstruction of Poulsen's drum can be seen at <http://www.ub.uit.no/utstilling/hekser/utst3.htm> (from an exhibition at the University Library of Tromsø on early modern images of the far north). And there is also a photo of the

we can witness a typical example of how Christian attitudes can demonize non-Christian religions that are overtly pantheistic. The Samis' belief in magic as benevolent knowledge was systematically transformed into notions of diabolic witchcraft. The language of elaborated demonology played an important part in the authorities' discourses of the case.

WITCH TRIALS IN THE EXTREME NORTH OF EUROPE

In the three counties that together make up Arctic Norway, the civil courts persecuted thirty-seven Sami individuals from 1593 to 1692. Of these, twenty men and eight women were burned at the stake for practicing witchcraft. Between 1639 and 1749, in the regions of Swedish and Finnish Lapland, at least seventy-three Sami males and three Sami females were prosecuted on charges of using drums and practicing sacrificial rituals. Few of them received death penalties, however.³

While investigating the belief in sorcery, it is interesting to note that mostly men were accused of witchcraft among the Sami. The notion of witchcraft, with few exceptions, was primarily a male phenomenon in Sami society. This differs from small northern Norwegian coastal villages where witchcraft was basically a crime committed by Norwegian women. In other words, legal

**Table 1 Witch Trials in Northern Norway (Arctic Norway)
1593–1692**

<i>Gender and ethnicity</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Death sentences</i>
Female, Sami	11	8
Male, Sami	26	20
Female, Norwegian	120	87
Male, Norwegian	14	5
Unknown	6	6
Total	177	126

original drum with some further information about witch trials against the native people of the high north at <http://www.ub.uit.no/fag/historie/shaman.html> (URLs checked on July 27, 2006).

3. For the cases from the northern part of Finland and Sweden, see the article by Karin Granqvist, “‘Thou Shalt Have no other Gods Before Me (Exodus 20:3)’: Witchcraft and Superstition Trials in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Swedish Lapland,” in *Kulturkonfrontation i Lappmarken*, ed. P. Sköld and K. Kram (Umeå: Kutlurgräns norr, 1998), 13–29. For the northern part of Norway, see Table 1.

sources emphasize that Sami men were the main cultural bearers of traditional ritual magic. In a European context, the witch trials of the very far north are distinctive because of the involvement of Lapland witches, mostly men, and their magic.

SHAMANISTIC FEATURES

In their statements regarding the drums' figures, both Baarsen and Poulsen highlighted some areas of use. These had to do with healing, fortune telling, finding lost objects, the absolution of sins, and weather magic. In relation to weather magic, they mentioned that they were able to predict the weather, and that they could produce fair weather by playing on the drum or by using other kinds of ritual magic. It is noteworthy that neither in the interpretation of these figures, nor in other proceedings of the cases, was anything mentioned that ties this drum-playing directly to shamanistic ecstasy and trance-like conditions.⁴ On the other hand, Baarsen and Poulsen possessed certain qualities necessary for communication with the other world. But did their magical techniques make them shamans in service to their communities? According to the German historian Wolfgang Behringer, "The separation of the soul from its body and its trip to certain places is the constitutive element for any great shaman."⁵ And most scholars of shamanism consider the state of trance, in which the soul temporarily leaves the body, to be the most important feature of the shaman. Shamanism is very often identified and defined with techniques of ecstasy.

If the very heart of shamanism is connected to ecstasy, trance, and travel to the underworld, the two Sami from Finnmark cannot be labeled typical shamans. Their divination, as related to foretelling future events and news of daily events, is not connected to trance-like conditions anywhere in the sources. Their forms of communication with their spirits are quite different from the system of ecstasy and trance. None of the Sami involved in the persecution of witches in northern Scandinavia received information from

4. Further discussion and examination of the Poulsen case can be found in Rune Blix Hagen, "Traces of Shamanism in the Witch Trials of Norway," in *Dämonische Besessenheit: Zur Interpretation eines kulturhistorischen Phänomens*, ed. Hans de Waardt, Jürgen Schmidt, H. C. Erik Midelfort, Sönke Lorenz, and Dieter R. Bauer (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2005), 307–25. See also my entries on "Lapland" and "Shamanism" in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition*, ed. Richard M. Golden, 4 vols. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio, 2006), 3:625–27, 4:1029–31.

5. Wolfgang Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstorf: Chonrad Stoecklin and the Phantoms of the Night*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 143.

remote places in a state of deep trance. The rhythmic sound of their drums is not known to have induced altered states of consciousness. They do not appear as flying magicians going on a shamanistic journey through the underworld.

In relation to witch trials against the Sami of the north, we have to question whether the whole concept of the Sami shaman as a sort of go-between between two worlds is more or less a fabrication of some eighteenth-century missionaries. Nearly all of the early reports we have about drum-playing related to trance were written by foreign travelers or priests who told us about this evil art with great pathos and for a long time. Their stories about evil drum beating under the feet of naked mountain cliffs and about devils that penetrated the minds of the Sami shamans (*Ecstasi Diabolica*) are numerous. And ancient sagas and prose stories based on oral transmission were also written down by clerics. Too often this myth has been received uncritically by modern historians and incorporated into their work. Scholars who choose to view the topic in a religious-historical light have inadvertently followed in the footsteps of missionaries who, with great bias, focused on the state of ecstasy as a fundamental characteristic of shamanism. Ecstasy was probably nothing more than the most eccentric of the Sami shaman's repertory. We have to ask ourselves about the usefulness of keeping the category alive.

The concepts of "trance" and "ecstasy" carry with them a long tradition of negative associations. During the early modern period, European Christians used the concept of the trance to condemn shamanistic practices as heathen, devilish, and blasphemous. During the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the word was used to describe shamans as primitive savages and uncivilized individuals. And finally, during the colonial period, the concepts were used to brand shamanistic societies as underdeveloped and their religious practices as partly insane. Rather than talk about heathen devil rituals, in the late nineteenth century there appeared theories about a kind of correspondence in temperament among many native peoples. Shamanism could be exposed as hysterical fits (ecstasy) alternating with periods of complete exhaustion, and short-temperedness—their temperament marked their religious conceptual worlds. Their form of shamanism was diagnosed as Arctic hysteria and winter depression.

IN NEED OF A RECONSTRUCTION OF SHAMANISM

There is certainly a need for a deconstruction of the category of shamanism, and a comparative historical dimension will be of fundamental importance to this reconsideration. Based on his own studies, the Danish folklore researcher Gustav Henningsen has declared that in most parts of Europe professional

magicians did not travel into the spirit world. With references to the study of shamanism he calls for a redefinition of its concepts and terminology, and an abandonment of trance theory.⁶

We might still call Baarsen's and Poulsen's drumming and skills a kind of shamanism, but this is a shamanism without any sign of deep trance. When they communicated with their spirits, the two men could work as healers, prophets, and wind magicians. For them ecstasy and trance seem not to have been a necessary technical condition of communicating with the other world. To the Sami the drum was a compass and a divinatory instrument, which they banged to achieve desired ends. The two Sami men did not travel to their spirits, but instead summoned and were filled with them.

The assessment of the two court cases from 1627 and 1692 upholds the findings that criticize ecstasy and trance as central characteristics when trying to determine what exactly constitutes the shaman worldview. Having studied the use of the terms trance and ecstasy, the French anthropologist Roberte Nicole Hamayon questions whether these designations are beneficial when examining shamanism. She concludes thus: "The shaman's behavior, called 'trance' by observers, is qualified by shamanistic societies with reference not to a specific physical or psychic state, but to the shamans being in direct contact with the spirits."⁷ If Hamayon's observations are accurate, we can still regard Baarsen's and Poulsen's skills as belonging to the shamanistic phenomena.

6. Gustav Henningsen, "The White Sabbat and Other Archaic Patterns of Witchcraft," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 37 (1991–92): 302.

7. Roberte Nicole Hamayon, "Are 'Trance', 'Ecstasy' and Similar Concepts Appropriate in the Study of Shamanism?" *Shaman* 1, no. 2 (1993): 7. See also her contributions to the discussion in Hamayon, "'Ecstasy' or the West-Dreamt Siberian Shaman," in *Tribal Epistemologies: Essays in the Philosophy of Anthropology*, ed. Helmut Wautischer (Aldershot, England: Ashgate 1998), 175–87; Hamayon, "Ecstasy and the Self or the West-Dreamt Shaman: From Socrates to New Age Postmodernism," <http://www.hku.hk/sociodep/events/sem103100.htm> (October 2000, URL checked July 24, 2006); and Roberte N. Hamayon and Henri-Paul Francfort, with Paul G. Bahn, eds., *The Concept of Shamanism: Uses and Abuses* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2001).

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