Shamanism and Witchcraft

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As one of the first historians to have initiated discussion of the relationship between shamanism and witchcraft twenty-three years ago,¹ let me start my contribution to the present enquiry with a brief outline of the intellectual context in which the idea of the comparison of these two sets of beliefs emerged and came only subsequently to the issue this approach might represent today or in the future.

Around 1980 both historical/anthropological research on witchcraft and ethnographic/anthropological enquiries on shamanism represented a burgeoning field of scholarly discussion and research. As to the former, among many other inspiring new approaches (such as the “sociology of accusation” proposed by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane,² the problem of the distinction of a “popular” layer of witchcraft beliefs from the learned concepts of the diabolic witches’ sabbath discussed by Norman Cohn and Richard Kieckhefer,³ or the question of gender addressed in a new way by Christina Larner⁴) Carlo Ginzburg’s dis-


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covery of documents pertaining to the *benandanti* directed the attention of researchers to the problem of how a number of archaic sorcerer-types got caught in the web of witchcraft persecutions, and how the archaic beliefs related to them made their imprint on the evolution of learned concepts of witchcraft. This was the starting point for the discussion of the historical relationship between witchcraft and shamanism: the bold suggestion by Carlo Ginzburg, who perspicaciously observed that the traits of the *benandanti* (being born in a caul, undergoing initiation in dreams, participating in night battles during soul-journeys while their bodies lay at home in trance, communicating with the dead, etc.) “richiama immediatamente i culti dei sciamani.”

This was also the period when studies on shamanism became livelier as well. Following the grand synthetic effort of Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (published in French in 1951 and translated into English in 1964), Ian Lewis reopened the theoretical-typological enquiry on shamanism and possession in 1971. Anthropological fieldwork among the different peoples in Siberia was renewed by Vilmos Diószegi, Mihály Hoppál, and their Hungarian colleagues, the circle of comparative examinations was very much broadened by the input of Scandinavian scholars such as Åke Hultkrantz, Lauri Honko, and Anna-Lena Siikala, and general interest about these topics was stirred up by the controversial works of Carlos Castaneda.

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and the neo-shaman movement initiated by Michael Harner. This was the context in which an ambitious international conference organized in 1983 by Mihály Hoppál in Sárospatak (Hungary) attempted no less than a reassessment of all these recent comparative enquiries on Eurasian shamanism in a broader anthropological, historical, psychological, and linguistic framework.

This is how I came to this theme, and analyzed for this conference the striking similarities between the Friulan benandanti and the Hungarian táltos, both their shamanistic traits and their involvement in witchcraft persecutions. The historical figure of the táltos, maybe the most authentic European descendant of Siberian shamanism, is known partly from nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographic and folkloric research and partly from the historic documentation of Hungarian witch trials. Like the benandanti, they are distinguished by a special sign at birth (they are born with teeth or surplus bones), they have initiatory visions as adolescents, and they fight the enemies of their community by going on a soul-journey (and, more like Siberian shamans, taking the form of an animal, a horse or a bull) while their bodies lie in trance. The comparison of the táltos and the benandanti prompted me to situate this pair in a network of similar positive or ambivalent sorcerer figures in East-Central and South-Eastern Europe, documented since early modern times, such as the Croatian kresnik or the Serbian zduhac. In my interpretation of these figures I also tried to take into consideration the writings of Roman Jakobson and Marc Szeftel on Slavic werewolf beliefs, which they considered a version of shamanism, similarly to the startling case of the Livonian werewolf Thiess fighting against witches for fertility described by Ginzburg.

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shamanistic traits of the *benandanti* were also acknowledged by Mircea Eliade, who compared them, in addition, to the Rumanian *strigoi*. On the basis of these parallel examples I tried to examine how the shamanistic traits of these East-Central European sorcerer-types could be related to the “original” model of Siberian shamanism, and how they could be accommodated within the dominant paradigm of magical aggression in early modern times, that of witchcraft.

Regarding the former question, the most important difference I found was that among these European sorcerers the ecstatic soul-journey is not such a public ritual as in classical shamanism. Even the identity of these shamanistic sorcerers remains hidden from most members of their community, they exercise their profession in secret, they go on soul-journeys while in dreams—all this reveals a disintegrated and fading shamanistic practice. In early modern times these sorcerers were already well on the way to becoming mere belief-figures as they would be in twentieth-century folk mythology. As for the relationship with witchcraft beliefs, one can observe that the *benandanti*, the *táltop*, and the *kresnik* all claimed to be opponents of witches and purported to act as diagnosticians or healers of the bewitched. Their involvement in witchcraft conflicts, however, caused *táltops* themselves to be accused of witchcraft very much as happened to the *benandanti* (although in fact the *táltops* typically received milder judgments). Thanks to these accusations we possess judicial data about twenty-six *táltops*.

The issue of “European shamanism” and the complex interrelationship of sorcerer-types and magical beings in the rich South-East-European mythology was picked up by Éva Póc, who made essential contributions to this issue as well as to the problem of the archaic roots of the witches’ sabbath. She provided a more scrupulous comparative analysis of Central and South-East European sorcerers, cunning people, and folk-mythological beings (*szép-asszony, vila, mora, zmej, nuslia*, etc.) than anyone before her. She also discovered another important domain of popular belief systems that played a major role in the formation of the concept of the witches’ sabbath: ambivalent fairy mythologies. (The inquisition trials against the Sicilian *donas de fuera* examined by Gustav Henningsen fit well into this picture.) Her comparative investigations also led to important new statements concerning the relation-

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ship of Hungarian táltos beliefs and Siberian shamanism. Instead of relying on a set of remote and far-reaching analogies, the approach suggested by Pócs lays a greater stress on more concrete historical contacts and borrowings, namely on the influences coming into Hungary from neighbouring Slavic peoples and from other peoples in the Balkan peninsula.19

Perhaps it was the richness of this response to his benandanti book that made Carlo Ginzburg return to the issue of the witches’ sabbath20 and write his acclaimed and controversial book Storia notturna (Ecstasies in English).21 Within a much broader spectrum of problems—ranging from late medieval scapegoat mechanisms, to forms of persecution closely connected to the emergence of the concept of diabolic witches’ sabbath, to the age-old worship of ambivalent goddesses, to a worldwide distribution of certain coinciding narrative patterns and beliefs—Ginzburg makes thorough use of the East-European comparative material on ambivalent popular sorcerers and their shamanistic background.22 He also explores the documentation on medieval Europe for more encompassing traces of shamanism. Analyzing accounts of the nocturnal journeys of women with the goddess of the night, and the practice of communicating with the dead, he refers to a “Celtic substratum” of European mythologies.23 Another shamanistic trait, the journeying soul’s metamorphosis into an animal, is exemplified, for instance, by Paul the Deacon’s Gunthram legend,24 by Odin’s metamorphosis in the Ynglingasaga,25 and by the werewolf concepts found in Slavic, Baltic, German,


25. Walter Baetke, *Yngvi und die Ynglinger: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung über
and Mediterranean cultures. He traces all these concepts back to the “shamanistic substratum” of European mythology. Ginzburg divides these shamanistic beliefs—presumably mediated by the Scythians, and reinforced, from time to time, by more direct eastern influences—into two types: the male variant characterized by ecstatic fertility battles, and the female variant centered on communication with the dead.

In the 1990s further aspects of these European shamanistic beliefs have been uncovered by historical research into European witchcraft documentation, such as Wolfgang Behringer’s fascinating analysis of the trial of a wise shepherd in Tyrol, Conrad Stoeckhlin, already referred to in Ginzburg’s I Benandanti. Relying upon Ginzburg’s Ecstasies, Éva Pócs also made a renewed attempt and set up a new typology of “dual shamanism” present in the Baltic, Old Slavic, Central European, and Balkan regions. Relying on analysis by Roman Jakobson, V. V. Ivanov, and V. N. Toporov, she suggested comparing the struggle between Perun and Volos in Slavic and Baltic mythologies to the shamanistic antagonism of a fiery/heavenly monster and a watery/netherworldly one. She documented a number of forms reflecting this antagonism in the folk mythologies of Eastern Europe. These motifs seem to provide a meaningful explanation for the two classes of shamanistic sorcerers observed by Carlo Ginzburg: male sorcerers fighting for fertility and female seers assuring communication with the world of the dead. In addition, Pócs’s research offered rich new documentation as to how these mythological elements could have merged into early modern witchcraft beliefs in Hungary and in South-Eastern Europe. More recent research by Ronald Grambo...
and Rune Hagen has uncovered a similar mixture of shamanistic beliefs and witchcraft accusations among the Sami of Lapland, whose shamanistic sorcerers, the noaide, could not avoid suffering the same fate as the benandanti and the táltos, and were caught in a web of witchcraft accusations.\textsuperscript{31}

Looking back to the merits and the shortcomings of this research in the 1980s and 1990s, my primary assessment would be that it considerably enriched our understanding of the mythology of the witches’ sabbath. Sabbath accounts were long considered merely learned inventions coming from inquisitors and demonologists, and refined in desperate improvisations in the torture chamber. To scholars confronting the mythological, anthropological, and ethnographic material on shamanism and other types of ambivalent sorcery, it became clear that many of these archaic components did indeed influence the multiple varieties of the mythology of the witches’ sabbath. Moreover, some of the traits of these sorcerers, such as their election to this profession by special birth, combat in trance for fertility, ecstatic soul-journey, animal metamorphosis, and communication with the dead clearly require an analysis that takes into account the influence of shamanism.

The theme of the mixture of shamanism (or rather archaic sorcerer figures and related beliefs bearing some traits of shamanism) and witchcraft in early modern Europe is also interesting from a broader typological point of view. Witchcraft and shamanism represent two different visions of misfortune and magical aggression. While in shamanism threats come from the outside into a community that is defended by its shaman, a protector of supernatural standing, the witch is “the enemy within,”\textsuperscript{32} representing a significantly dif-


\textsuperscript{32} Witches are described as “traitors within the gates” by Philip Mayer, “Witches,” in Witchcraft and Sorcery: Selected Readings, ed. Max Marwick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 45–64.
different vision of human communities and theodicy. In places where there is a mixture or contamination of these two sets of beliefs, the shamanistic sorcerers such as the benandanti or the táltos take up the role of cunning folk, healers, and opponents of witches that is a reinterpretation of their original function. This witch-finding and healing activity, however, has its dangers: shamanistic sorcerers can quickly be associated with witchcraft themselves.

The importance of the problem Carlo Ginzburg exposed in his 1966 book, namely, the gradual assimilation of an archaic belief system (shamanistic or other) to learned concepts of witches’ sabbaths under the constraints of inquisitorial interrogation, cannot be underestimated. Well-focused longue durée microhistorical investigations could reveal other similar series—the táltos cases happen to be too dispersed for assessing whether a similar transformation occurred in Hungary, but they, too, present several interesting instances where shamanistic beliefs and witchcraft beliefs merged.

The belief-system of witchcraft behaved in such situations as a kind of “melting pot,” imposing its paradigm on a number of archaic beliefs, homogenizing many different kinds of archaic popular healers and their mythologies. The unwitching role assumed by various types of cunning folk and archaic sorcerers (the shamanistic benandanti, táltoses, and werewolves among them) inevitably framed them in the ambivalent function of the witch-healer. According to the witchcraft paradigm, however much these healers claim to be the opponents of witches, ultimately they resort to the same reprehensible magical techniques, implying cooperation with evil, demonic powers. This process, in the long run, leads to the disintegration of the remains of the older paradigm of shamanism. Flourishing witchcraft research in the past decades has unearthed a considerable amount of new source material.33 This might also allow a renewed examination of the long-term historical transformation of local variants of witchcraft beliefs and other rival magical belief systems, among them the archaic vestiges of a positive or at least ambivalent sorcery that we have labeled—rightly or wrongly—“European shamanism.”

33. Referring only to Hungary, in the past two decades the number of published witch trials has doubled from around two thousand to more than four thousand; six volumes of original source material have appeared in this field since 1989.