

IDEAS ABOUT THE PAST AND TRADITION IN THE DISCOURSE ABOUT NEO-SHAMANISM IN A NORWEGIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: This paper concerns the idea of neo-shamanism within modern popular religion. Within new religious movements, new religiosity or New Age, the interest in what has been perceived of as old religions is growing steadily. One of these old religions is shamanism, often called neo-shamanism in its modern shaping. This interest in shamanism has been met with considerable criticism from without, using arguments that says that new shamanism has nothing to do with “real” shamanism, it is being misunderstood, distorted, etc. This criticism has been met with the “tradition” as an argument, and the “new” shamanism is from “within” being understood in terms of unbroken traditions in certain places in the world. The value of tradition and traditional thoughts are being highlighted in these arguments.

Keywords: shamanism, neo-shamanism, neo-paganism, tradition, New Age, modern popular religions

In this paper I will discuss expressions, or utterances, about modern shamanism, often referred to as neo-shamanism. The utterances are arguments in a discourse about modern shamanism, a discourse that also relates to different narratives of the past.

By using the term “utterance” I indicate that these expressions are not seen as narratives, as representations of experiences or occurrences in the “real” world, but rather as representations of other narratives about similar things. The utterances enter in relation with past utterances that had the same object, and with those of the future, which it foresees as answers.¹

MODERN POPULAR RELIGION

Neo-shamanism can be seen as part of modern popular religion, that which is defined as *New Age*. New Age is neither a specific religion nor a distinct movement, but rather a loose designation for certain clusters of ideas, values, and activities. It is an umbrella term, covering modern Western developments in for instance occultism, shamanism, Eastern spirituality, reincarnation, healing, astrology, tarot, crystals, channeling, strategies for personal transformation, thoughts about a new age, etc.

¹ M. BAKHTIN in: TODOROV 1984: 53.

Contemporary interest in New Age ideas indicates important religious changes in modern society, a change that implies a decline of institutionally specialized religion, the dominant social form of religion in the Western world for many centuries, and historically a particularly important social form of religion which has been established in the Christian West and which was represented by churches, sects and denominations. It was marked by monopolies in the production, distribution and maintenance of sacralized, transcendent universes. The New Age represents a new, institutionally less visible social form of religion which seems to become dominant at the expense of the older form.² To the extent that New Age appears as unorganized, non-authoritarian and non-dogmatic, it can be perceived as modern popular religion. The Swedish historian of religions, Olaf HAMMER, in his book about New Age, even asks if New Age is the new folk belief.³

One of the consequences of the diminished influence of religious institutions is that religious expressions appear in new and unexpected contexts – in markets or cafés, in the mass media, bookshops, book clubs or weekly magazines. The expressions discussed in this paper are drawn from different contexts, perhaps more profane than religious, which also demonstrates another underlying aspect within New Age; it is to be found in intersections between the religious and the profane.

One of the traits of New Age is that major subjects of interest seem to vary from time to time, New Age is steadily changing. Particularly characteristic of the seventies was the prominence of Eastern spiritual teachers; the eighties was characterized by an emphasis on channeled entities; and now in the nineties the interest in channeling seems to be waning and the new emphasis is on shamanism, Native American spirituality or neo-paganism.⁴ Neo-paganism implies a religion based on the worship of nature and of ancient indigenous traditions, and it has been claimed to be the new religion fast developing as *The* new religion of the twenty-first century.⁵ Neo-paganism covers all those modern movements based on the conviction that firstly all that Christianity has traditionally denounced as idolatry and superstition actually represents a profound and meaningful religious worldview, and secondly that a religious practice based on this worldview can and should be revitalized in our modern world.⁶

DETRADITIONALIZATION AND TRADITIONALIZATION

Within New Age, current ideas are not necessarily considered as *new*, but rather as revitalizations of old wisdom traditions. However, various religious traditions and ideas are being used in new and unexpected ways, rather than with faithfulness to-

² LUCKMANN 1996.

³ HAMMER 1997.

⁴ LEWIS-MELTON 1992.

⁵ HARDMAN 1995.

⁶ HANEGRAAFF 1998.

wards the right dogma, a trait that has been met with considerable criticism. Many people react towards the New Age interpretations of the differing ideas, postulating that reincarnation or shamanism for instance, are being both misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The English historian of religions Paul HEELAS uses the concept *detraditionalization* when describing New Age; because New Age is, in his words, “rejecting voices of authority associated with established orders.”⁷ Detraditionalization is in his apprehension connected to the anti-authoritarian aspect of the New Age. *A religious market*, is also a description of New Age, a market, where the individual is given the freedom – and authority – to choose from a variety of sacred universes.⁸

In his article *Tradition in the post-traditional world*, Zygmunt BAUMAN argues that one should not conceive of modern society as one where “tradition is losing its authority, or us losing our respect for it, or our demand for ‘heritage’ and ‘historical memory’ running short, or us no more believing ‘the old’ to be ‘beautiful’. [...] The idea of the ‘post-traditional society’ is better understood as referring to the *surplus* of traditions ... too many competitive traditions for any one of them to secure a monopolistic authority.”⁹ The idea of a religious market is a depiction of such a surplus of traditions.

At the same time as New Age can be seen as a detraditionalized religion, the idea of tradition and the past play an important role in discussions, interpretations, choices and legitimations within, and connected to, New Age. In the utterances that will be discussed here, the past and tradition are present in various ways, not as context, but rather as interpretation and argument to stress certain points. Traditionalization – by which I mean tying present ideas and values to the past in meaningful ways, is an important point in these four expressions. The choices made in the religious market – among the surplus of traditions – are given authority by tying personal choices to chosen pasts. The utterances are articulations from different positions in a discourse about whether neo-shamanism is genuine or spurious.

New Age is a controversial religion. Many critical voices have risen against this fast developing popular religion. The first utterance to be discussed is an extract from a critical book about New Age called *Spiritual Tourism*, by the Norwegian journalist Bjørg VINDSETMO. The second story was told to me in an interview with a female shaman and relates about how and why the woman interviewed chose the way of the shaman. The third story is taken from a Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* about a female shaman in a small Sami village in Finnmark; the most Northern part of Norway.

⁷ HEELAS 1996: 22.

⁸ LUCKMANN 1996: 73.

⁹ BAUMANN 1998: 14.

THE BREAK WITH TRADITION

In the book *Spiritual tourism*, with the subtitle: *About religion, therapy and magic*, the writer Bjørg VINDSETMO throws critical light on the innumerable forms of worldviews and therapies we find within modern religious movements. The writer's position is catholic and culture-critical, and her style is ironical. Her opinion about the new religious movements is that they represent a mixture of religion and therapy, of which she is very critical, and writes about in an ironical way. "Most typical of the new religiosity of our times is its *therapeutic* essence. Therapy has become a religion, and even worse, religion has become therapy. Therapy does no longer imply the healing of illness. Therapy has become a way of life, an attitude towards life"¹⁰, she states. Her way of characterizing the New Age religion implies ideas of spiritual decline.

One chapter in the book relates neo-shamanism, in the writer's view one of the four most important therapies within modern "alternative therapies". The title of the chapter asks: "Are shamanistic journeys therapy"? It starts with a description of a female Swedish shaman whom she nick-names "*Little Hiawatha*". *Little Hiawatha* is a figure from the Disney universe, a cartoon figure. By using a name referring to the Disney universe she uses a word filled with a voice that invokes ideas about a superficial, trivial, commercial and not genuine world.

Little Hiawatha – the shaman, not the Disney figure, is described as super elegant – as a "wandering fashion show for indigenous people" as she ironically puts it, and we are being told that *little Hiawatha* is teaching modern businessmen creativity and self development besides her praxis as shaman. At a lunch-break at the meeting where she met "little Hiawatha" the writer was sitting at the same table as two women in their forties and she tells: "Little Hiawatha had invited people on a shamanistic journey the same evening. One of the women at the table asks, a bit confused: 'Are shamanistic journeys therapy'? No, the other woman answers: 'It comes from India'. An atmosphere of insecurity spread round the table", the writer tells us.

The following vision is inspired by this episode: "Before me, I could see them, well educated, seemingly successful women sitting in a circle on the floor the same evening. Little Hiawatha's drumming, echoing dense jungle or barren tundra, were accompanying them on a shamanistic journey – before they each, at the end of the evening, went home to their urban, rather lonely women's lives."¹¹

In this description New Age is being perceived as a religion for frustrated, lonely women at a certain period of their life, ignorant women, easy to fool. This vision, confirms certain wide-spread ideas – perhaps prejudices – about New Age. VINDSETMO's description and partly ridicule express resistance against new spiritualism and neo-shamanism. The way she contextualizes her story provides the reader

¹⁰ VINDSETMO 1995: 15.

¹¹ VINDSETMO 1995: 18–19.

with certain associations. We get the impression that shamanism is for exhibitionistic, frustrated and ignorant women of a certain age.

After this introduction Bjørg VINDSETMO discusses “real” shamanism. She refers to shamanism as the world’s oldest religion and asks: “how can our earliest forefathers’ religious life become something that in a modern woman’s worldview is a new form of therapy she perhaps might be trying? And what makes Little Hiawatha believe that *she* is a shaman?”

VINDSETMO’s perception of shamanism as our earliest forefathers’ religion is being used to create distance between the shamans of to-day and our forefathers. She is of the opinion that parts of the shamanistic universe are falling out in the modern version. In her opinion neo-shamanism is not a genuine form of shamanism. VINDSETMO describes the neo-shamanism as a *break with tradition*; a remnant or a bleak shade of the authentic version. In her opinion this is an argument that neo-shamanism is spurious religion. By referring to shamans of the past, she creates a picture of shamanism of the past as genuine and modern shamanism as a bleak forgery.

One of the traits of postmodern culture is the disembedding of ideas, images and signs, which means that ideas and meanings have been disconnected from their original context, old collective standards or constraints, and are free to be connected to any new context. Within New Age this means among other things, that religious elements from older, or culturally strange religious traditions are being interpreted in, and related to new and unorthodox ways.¹²

The “free use” of religious traditions, so to speak, is in critical interpretations of New Age described in concepts of genuine and spurious. Religious traditions are said to be distorted, misrepresented or corrupted, a view implying the idea about a religious tradition being coherent, where the scriptures, ideas and rituals constitute united entities. If components are broken away or detached from the original tradition, the elements are said to lose its authenticity.

A PERSONAL CONNECTION TO THE PAST

Let me now introduce one female shaman I interviewed some years ago. Her name is *Anne Lise*, and I will let her tell the story about how and why she became a shaman.

When I met her she had started on the long, hard way of the shaman, she told me. And why was she – a journalist and mother of a five-year-old son – on this way? “I just fell over a course in shamanism”, she said and went on: “And during the course, it appeared that I already *knew* about the things we were being taught. And I could not understand where I had learned this. So it appeared that I also knew how to go further and to do things we had not yet talked about. I became more and more

¹² FEATHERSTONE 1995: 4.

conscious that I knew and remembered many things, but that I did not know from where I had this knowledge.”

After a while *Anne Lise* understood why she already knew things they were to learn at the course, that she was advanced in the shamanistic learnings so to speak. She understood that she had been a shaman in native Indian tribes in several of her earlier lives. She had lived many earlier lives as an indigenous human or native Indian, and one of the first lives she can remember is a shaman in Siberia. Her duty in her life here and now is to collect the knowledge from her shamanistic lives, things related to indigenous people, to nature and to food. Collecting knowledge from earlier lives, imply to do things and live one’s life in ways resembling your former lives, was her explanation.

Anne Lise went to Arizona because she wanted to be in touch with native American Indians, first of all the Hopi tribe, because they are, as she said, the cultural source of neo-shamanism. She also feels sure that she has been Hopi in earlier lives. The Hopi are the last authentic Native Indians in the sense that they have kept their old religion, she said. Anne Lise feels a strong attraction to the Hopi, and in her opinion she looks like a Hopi, to her a further proof of her former lives. She also got a message that it was her duty to go to Arizona. One morning when she woke she just *knew* that she had to go. This was her first real message, she tells.

Anne Lise relates about her choice to become a shaman in terms of experiences, certain knowledge and messages. She *experienced* that she knew shamanism – she suddenly received a message that it was her duty to go to Arizona. These occurrences led her on the way of the shaman. Anne Lise’s history illustrates that experiences of intuition, alignment or an inner voice – serve to inform religious judgments, decisions and choices.

Re-incarnation – in Anne Lise’s interpretation and use of these ideas – creates for her a personal connection to the past. This past is above all related to the wisdom of indigenous people, a wisdom that it is her duty in her present life to collect and share with others. When Anne Lise identifies herself with the Hopi, it connects her to a past that in some ways seems better. At the same time, in Anne Lise’s universe, this past is possible to reach in the here and now, because it in fact exists in another place, in this case in Arizona USA. “The model of human excellence and happiness can thus be sought in the present, in the mode of life of existing primitive, or so-called ‘savage’ peoples”, Marion BOWMAN says in her article *The Noble Savage and the Global village*.¹³

Anne Lise’s choice of both a past and a future as an Indian shaman is individual and personal, but can also be seen as part of a narrative about wisdoms from the past, and our common roots in pre-Christian tradition. The book *The wisdom of the Native Indians*, for instance is promoted by the headline: “The ecological way of life”, and the text states: “What was the source for the Indians’ wisdom and respect for the unity of all things? Where did they collect their well informed overall view

¹³ BOWMAN 1995.

from? Why was it that natives from different areas of the American continent all followed the way of peace and walked it in beauty? Only a civilized, consuming fool would ask such questions, and if you are interested in the answers, we warmly recommend the books about the Hopi-Navaho and Lakota-Indians. In these books their history, their philosophy of life, their words of wisdom, the rituals, the customs, and the people – a colourful and magical texture so unlike the Hollywood myth we are being told. The rich traditions and culture of the Indians, the myth and the magic appeal to us all”.¹⁴ By using words and concepts like wisdom, rituals, rich traditions, myth and magic, words and concepts with an attractive flavour, attractive pasts are also created about Indian native cultures, pasts modern man wants to relate himself to.

Anne Lise connects parts of particular value in her present life, to a chosen past, far away in time and in space, but still possible to experience. By traditionalizing her new life she creates continuity, and emphasizes certain aspects of her identity.

HIDDEN TRADITIONS

The Norwegian national newspaper, *Dagbladet*, published a year ago a story about a female shaman. Her name is Biret Maret Kallio. She lives in a small village in Finnmark, the traditional Sami area in Norway. Besides her work as a shaman she also works as a teacher. The background for the newspaper’s interest in Biret was the fact that her shamanistic work had caused a lot of antagonism in the village. She had followers, but also enemies, and the enemies were mostly represented by the very pietistic Christians in the village. The headline in the newspaper states: “Fight over drums in the Sami village.” The introduction to the story goes: “She believes in the drum’s power and is accused of being the Devil’s delegate. – But Biret states: ‘It was the Christian people who brought God and the Devil to the Sami people. Not me’.”

The theme in this newspaper story is the antagonism between the Christian Church and alternative religions. The Christian people in the village accused Biret of being the Devil’s delegate, but Biret turns the Christian redemption towards her Christian enemies when stating that the Devil was of Christian origin, and belongs to a Christian universe brought to the Sami from outside. By this statement, she refers to the past, and demonstrates that *her* religion represents the religious tradition of the Sami people.

The newspaper relates how Biret’s actions as shaman together with a group calling themselves *Noaide*, the old Sami name for shaman, invoke the Christians’ anger. It is stated in the story: “They are fighting about the souls in the Sami village. Therefore it is highly controversial when Biret now gathers her group and sacrifices to the old gods.”

¹⁴ *Energica* 1996/3.

In the newspaper it is said: “Most people think that Christianity gained victory over paganism once and for all.” But what the story is indicating is that an unbroken tradition has been kept alive in the shadow of Christian religion. Biret herself invokes an unbroken tradition when she got the last word in the story saying: “My work has nothing to do with New Age, this is *Old Age*. The drum is a vehicle for contact with one’s inner self, with nature, with the forefathers, and the spirits.”

When Biret dissociates herself from the term New Age and elegantly says that her beliefs and doings are about Old Age, she refers to her own activity as being from the olden times, and indicates that her own religion is older than Christianity. She traditionalizes her shamanistic activity by tying her activities to the past, a past that is more in accordance with the Sami culture.

The story about Biret invokes ideas about an old tradition, that has continuously been kept alive in the hidden, in the shadow of a dominant ideology. Two years ago, a book by a Russian psychiatrist Olga Kharitidi was published in Norwegian and was book of the month in a book club called Energica aimed at people with spiritual interests. The book is a personal narrative about the writer’s experiences when meeting a Siberian shaman and her initiation to shamanism. She collected the material for the book in a far away and isolated area – the Altaj mountains in Siberia which the indigenous people up to modern times have dominated alone, it is stated in the book review. The writer is initiated to shamanism, and this knowledge becomes of great use to her in her work as psychiatrist.

Both the newspaper story about Biret and Olga’s story from Siberia indicate that ancient traditions have been preserved in remote places in the world, more or less under-ground. In communities, untouched by modern times, wisdom and knowledge are being preserved that exceeds modern knowledge.

MODERN MAN’S RELATION TO THE PAST

The narratives discussed here tell about modern man’s relation to Shamanism, often described as man’s oldest religion. Various positions in a discourse about modern shamanism are being expressed. The question discussed in the narratives is whether neo-shamanism is genuine or spurious, the arguments used are related to various ideas about tradition and the past.

In VINDSETMO’s story neo-shamanism represents a break with the shamanism of the past, and is described as a bleak echo of the real and genuine tradition. By referring to the past, she regards present religious ideas as a spiritual decline.

The story about the shaman in a Sami village in Norway, or the book about the Russian psychiatrist’s encounter with Siberian shamanism, invoke ideas about a religious tradition kept alive in the hidden, and Biret in the Sami village seems to represent a continuation of this tradition. The Altaj mountains in Siberia represent surroundings untouched by modern conditions, where wisdom from a more or less mythical past has been concealed and kept alive in an unbroken continuity. The stories communicate that revelation of this tradition and with that the wisdoms of

the past can help modern people to a better life. Also Anne Lise talks about her choice of the shamanistic road in this way. Important to her is that the knowledge she has brought with her from her past lives as shaman, is a knowledge our own society needs.

VINDSETMO describes contemporary ideas about shamanism as spiritual decline, the other narratives describe ways of using the ideas from the past to the best for the present. Common in the stories is the idea that the past represents more consistent traditions and greater wisdoms. Common in the stories is also that the past is not a context for the matters told about, but is interwoven in the stories as interpretation and argument. The various voices take different positions demanding their own interpretation of reality, about what is true or false.

The idea that the unity and continuity of the world is lost can be seen as part of modern mentality. The Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland ERIKSEN talks about *the fight over the past* as an important part of modern societies all over the world.¹⁵ His opinion is that everybody uses the past to create collective identities. The past is vague and versatile, he says, it can be described in selective and subjective ways, whether the description comes from a history book or from oral tradition.

What I have discussed here is how the past is being used in popular interpretation within a New Age context. The past and tradition are *arguments* for the signification and value of various beliefs and ideas, and are being sacralized when seen as containing wisdom and spirituality that are of much larger dimensions than that of contemporary society. When the past is tied to the here and now the symbolic power of the past creates an enchantment which will affect the present.

The use of the past within New Age is one example on how modern man establishes continuities, authenticizes the past, and authorizes particular representations in images and stories.¹⁶ The past and tradition are being used to legitimize, authenticate and control ideologies and cultural identities both in a New Age discourse and in contemporary society in general.

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