

ANNA S. KUZNETSOVA

## SHAMANISM AND THE ORPHIC TRADITION<sup>1</sup>

### I

Thanks to Mirca Eliade's excellent study (1964), people started to consider shamanism a widespread religious phenomenon. The hypotheses advanced by Eliade are supported by references to the works of the eminent scholars, including some Russian ethnologists, who made a profound investigation of Siberian shamanism. The basic notion, Eliade employs, is the concept of 'the technique of ecstasies'. Eliade, however, virtually ignores the crucial moment, to wit the social role shaman plays in the traditional society. Analyzing the religious practices of the peoples of Siberia, the Northern and Southern Americas, and Oceania, we will see that shaman is a central figure in performing religious ritual; he alone is able to master the religious activity; his songs and dance influence his behavior as well as this of the participants.<sup>2</sup> All this is very peculiar and I trust that one must be very cautious in drawing parallels between shamanism and other religions, especially when it is concerned the Greeks.

Why the Greeks? While studying the Pythagorean tradition, I have noticed that even serious scholars don't hesitate to say that 'Pythagoras was a great shaman!' They often believe that this statement is justified by the very fact that Orpheus, whose association with the Pythagorean tradition is undeniable, also was a great shaman. Participants of various Greek Mysteries are also considered to be shamans. I will argue that this claim is both anachronistic and wrong. Moreover, some authors discern certain shamanistic elements in the tales of Gods (Apollo, Demeter, Persephone, Zeus, Dionysus, etc.). I would also qualify this widespread view.

The book by Eliade, notorious for its theoretical generalization, but not exactness of ethnographic data interpreted, often serves as a principal reference for those authors who write on shamanistic elements in the Greek religion: for instance, Eric Dodds in his 'The Greeks and the Irrational' (1951) and Martin West in his 'The Orphic Poems' (1983). Russian ethnologists and folklorists, whose works I use in the present paper, have done a very serious job describing the religious practices of shamanism, but still, the majority of these studies lack a generalized theory. This work has yet to be done and I believe that the present paper is a contribution to this end.

---

<sup>1</sup> The study is supported by a Short-term grant of the American Council of Learned Societies (New York).

<sup>2</sup> For details cf., for instance: Smolyak, 1991.

Martin West believes that Orpheus entered the Greek world via Thrace where peoples were acquainted with the Northern shamanism. Eliade writes about alleged shamanism in the Steppe, saying that the Greeks must have learned about this new religious phenomenon from the Scythes. But this is simply not correct: according to contemporary archaeological studies, no traces of shamanism are visible in the Scythian religion.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that Scythian baths with hemp, mentioned by Herodotus, are attested by archaeological excavations in the region of Altay steppes and mountings (the finds are dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC). Herodotus also mentions the Scythian king Skyles, who was dethroned for his interest in ecstatic mysteries (IV, 79), as well as Anacharsis, who “celebrated the goddess’ ritual with exactness, carrying a small drum and hanging images about himself” and was killed for this activity (IV, 76). But all this is certainly not enough for a definite conclusion about the character of the cult. Therefore it is premature to say that the Greeks had acquainted with shamanism via the Scythians. Of course this does not exclude a possibility that the Greeks received shamanistic cult from the other quarters, for instance, as a result of direct or indirect contacts, via the Northern Greece, with authentic shamanism.

At any rate effective comparison is only possible if we have reliable criteria. I would emphasize the following four aspects:

1. **“Divine election” of a shaman.** Still a child, the future shaman usually sees various spirits in his dreams, who try to contact with him or hurt him, and various animals, who aid him. This child (almost exclusively a boy) is withdrawn into himself, sleepy, non sociable, likes to walk alone in the forest, and is noted for his ‘shamanistic illness’ (epilepsy and hallucinations). The elder shaman chooses him and starts to introduce him into the sacred tradition. He then prepares the neophyte to initiation (Novik, 1984:197).

2. **Initiation.** This period is difficult for the neophyte in physical and psychological terms and culminates in *overcoming* of the shamanistic illness (which is in some respects different from ordinary epilepsy). ‘Mastering’ his shamanistic illness, the future shaman is able to *control* the epileptic attacks. Visions which the neophyte sees are usually related with scenes of dismemberment of the initiate by the underworld spirits. They torture him and then cause his rebirth so that he comes back in a new body, already possessing unique abilities. These visions were not an exclusive privilege of shamans. Smiths among Siberian peoples, for instance, practiced a similar ritual of initiation.

3. **Singing and Tambourine.** Playing tambourine and singing are indispensable in shamanistic practices. Some (younger) shamans however can possess no tambourine and this fact

---

<sup>3</sup> Archeological materials show that the Scythian religion resembles the rites of Asia Minor and India. Important new findings are described in Rudoj 2000.

usually is considered a sign of limitation in their duties: they are ‘weaker’ than those with tambourine. Striking tambourine shaman invites spirits, which lead him to heaven, the ‘centre of the world’. Therefore the tambourine often symbolizes a horse (cf. the figure). Clapping the tambourine shaman reaches the state of ecstasy. Eliade notes that Kyrgyz *baks* use a stringed instrument *kobuz* (1964). The dance, performed by the shaman, symbolizes his ecstatic traveling to the heavens. Observers note the importance of singing during the ritual. Russian ethnologist E.S. Novik (2003:144) observes that among Siberian peoples everybody has an individual song with a unique melody. “Singing a song of another man” is considered a stealing: the person is disturbed and called without need. One should remember, that narrators and public performers of various kind of epos, etc. constitute a different group of peoples, which should not be confused with shamans. One must be careful about this especially because, for external observer, there is a good reason for such confusion: they are also considered to be chosen or ‘possessed’ by the spirits; their gift is also a great burden; in order to pass initiation they have to withdraw from society in order to meet their spirit, etc. (Novik, 1984:195). Apparently Orpheus is much closer to this type of peoples, rather than shamans in the proper sense of the word.

*Figure: The tambourine of an Altay shaman.*

*Photo by the author made during an ethnographical expedition to Kumandin’s peoples (Nemtsev–Kuznetsova 2004)*



4. **Social status of a shaman.** This important criterion is often overlooked. It is important to realize that shamanism is possible only in a certain type of societies, and it plays a very distinctive role in the traditional culture of these societies. For one thing: shaman, a man chosen by the spirits, performs all the rituals, while nothing similar to priesthood, usual for many 'civilized' cultures, exists. But his role is not limited to these obvious duties. He also heals peoples and animals, foretells fortunes (although in some societies there are another soothsayers), returns souls, lost or stolen by the spirits, etc. He combines these difficult and time-consuming duties with everyday activities, since a small consideration he receives is usually not enough for supporting himself and his family. Quite often he is also a keeper of the sacred history, communicated in the form of ritual dance and singing. He initiates only those, already 'chosen' by the spirits and never organizes a closed religious brotherhood. If we neglect these facts, no serious talk about shamanism would be possible. Shamanism is a traditional system in which the roles of actors are strictly determined by the social structure and unique within it.

## II

Now we have criteria for determining whether a given religious phenomenon has something in common with shamanistic practices. Let us look at our evidence about Orpheus and the Orphic tradition through the prism of the ethnographic data about Siberian shamanism and decide whether it passes the test.

1. **"Divine election"**. The biography of Orpheus is virtually unknown. The later sources are more detailed, but less reliable (as usually the case). Still, the Ancient authors say nothing concerning selection of Orpheus by the spirits or gods. A son of Egeus, he was a descendant of Atlas in the fifth generation (according to the *Suda*). Ephorus (ap. Diodorus Sic. [FGrHist 70 F 104]) informs us that he was initiated in the mysteries of Samothrace. His unique gift as a musician was given a new explanation only in the Hellenistic period, when he was made an offspring of Apollo.

This in several respects differs from what we know of the divine election in shamanism. Some authors go further and say that, since Orpheus is related to Apollo and his name is mentioned along with this of Dionysus on the plates from Olbia, he must have something in common with shamanistic practices of Thrace and the Pontus. Dionysus was a Thracian or Lydian deity, who entered the Greek mythology as a son of the mortal woman Semele and Zeus. Chased by Hera, Dionysus in his wanderings suffered from the divine madness, but Cybele (Rhea) healed him and initiated in the orgiastic mysteries. Dionysus then descended to the Hades, saved his mother, and later ascended with her to the heavens (Apollodorus III 5, 1–5). This mythological Dionysus looks like a shaman. But shaman is a mediator between spirits and men, while Dionysus is a god.

One can certainly say that once upon a time Dionysus was a shaman, only later deified by the Greeks. But this hypothesis remains unsupported by the sources.

Apollo is a more controversial figure. Shamanistic elements in his cult are often linked to his alleged Northern origin ('Apollo Hyperborean'), his flying on an arrow, turning into a swan, a wolf or a mouse, his healing abilities, as well as foreseeing future and musical gift. Plutarch says that, in order to expiate his guilt for killing Python, he had to undergo purifications in the Hades, with effect of receiving new powers: he became the 'radiant one' (*The obsolescence of oracles*, 21). All this works in favor of the hypothesis of shamanistic origin of Apollo, but still, he was a god, not man.

2. **Initiation.** Orpheus did not undergo anything similar to a shamanistic ritual of initiation. The story about dismembering and rebirth of Dionysus looks more 'shamanistic' (Plutarch, *De esu carniū*, 1). Stories told about Orpheus' extraordinary abilities to move stones and stop rivers by his songs reminds us of the similar tales about Siberian shamans. But, again, extraordinary musical gift is typical not only to shamans, but also to narrators of the traditional epos. Epic performance produced in listeners a feeling of participation in the story, and they experienced a kind of catharsis (Shmidt, 1990:38). Narrators of this kind could be productively compared with Orpheus, while shamans are not.

3. **Singing and Tambourine.** Orpheus plays kithara, not tambourine! It is true that Kyrgyz *baks* also play a stringed instrument, *kobuz*, but this simple device, as observers note, produces a rhythmic noise rather than a melody.

Ecstasy is considered the most important element of any shamanistic practices. But Orpheus never entered the state of trance, typical to Bacchants and Corybanthes, who played on tympana. And even in regard to the latter, Greek ecstatic practices were public actions, a kind of collective madness (inspired by gods)<sup>4</sup>, while shamanistic trance is completely different in its nature, since the shaman is able to *control* his mind, and *alone* consciously enter in the contact with the spirits in order to follow their guidance with their permission and for a particular purpose.

Orpheus' abilities to subjugate animals and plants are often compared with shamanistic practices, but already in Antiquity this was given a different interpretation. According to Themistius (*Orationes*, 30; II, 183, 7 Downey–Normann) this elucidates in a poetic manner the process of socialization of peoples, when they started to domesticate animals and grow plants.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, this implies that Orpheus changed the religious rites in the way quite opposite to the ecstatic practices. I think that this points in another direction and the divine gift of Orpheus and ecstasy, associated with it, is better understood in Platonic sense: as a higher ecstasy, quite

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Apollodorus, III 5, 1–3, where a collective psychosis is vividly described.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Papyr. Berolin. (the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), fr. 49 Kern.

different from the divine madness of the Bacchantes.<sup>6</sup> After all poets are also 'possessed' by Muses. Why don't we call them shamans?

Orpheus' attempt to rescue his wife Eurydice is certainly reminiscent of shamanistic practices of rescuing souls. He casts spells over guards,<sup>7</sup> – also a shamanistic feature. But firstly, he descended into the Hades as a thief, while shamans in certain occasions are invited to do so, secondly, he failed to save his wife, while shamans usually succeed in their adventure; thirdly, he was punished by gods for his boldness, because, as Plato notes,<sup>8</sup> he should not enter the underworld alive, while shamans are allowed to do so. Orpheus failed in his adventure: apparently he did not have enough experience. The story about Orpheus' death is also a telling one: should this be a part of shamanistic initiation, he would experience a rebirth, like Dionysus. But this was not true: he died while his head, already cut off, still continued singing a song.

4. **Social status of a shaman.** As explained above, religious experience of a shaman, though strictly individual, plays a specific role in the traditional society and could be properly understood in this context only. Orpheus had never been a central figure of a social activity, although the Greek religion is practiced in a form of mysteries, collective rites, even if the number of participants is limited to a group of initiated.

As I have mentioned in the outset some authors also try to isolate the elements of shamanism in the Pythagorean teachings. I think that now we can safely stop looking for any shamanistic features in his doctrines and practices. Eric Dodds' (1951, chapter 5) bold attempt to find the concept of reincarnation in Siberian religion remains unsupported by the sources. Indeed, some peoples believed that the soul of shaman inhabits a new body after his death. But this is a unique privilege, and the new owner of the 'shamanistic soul' is hardly happy with this. 'Reincarnation' of this sort was considered a great burden and those who were unable to carry it, were predestined to perish.

Thus, an association of Orpheus with shamanism appears to be quite problematic in many respects. Those elements in the Orphica which are similar to certain typically shamanistic features remain unsupported in view of the others, equally important, criteria. Apollo and Dionysus, who occupied a distinctive place in the Greek mythology and were linked to specific religious cults, admit certain parallels with shamanistic rites, but I would warn against an easy connection of the other Greek religious practices with shamanism.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ion*, 636 b.

<sup>7</sup> Euripides, *Alcestyda*, 357.

<sup>8</sup> *Symp.* 179d.

## Bibliography

- Dodds E., *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley, 1951.
- Eliade M., *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, London, 1964.
- Nemtsev M.Yu., Kuznetsova A. S., "Towards a new evaluation of the patrimonial relations in Kumandinty's Culture," *Centralnoaziatskiy istoricheskiy server, 2004 [Central-Asiatic Historical Server, 2004]*, <http://www.kyrgyz.ru/?page=224> (in Russian).
- Novik E. S., "The voice in the folklore of Siberian peoples", *Evrazijskoe prostranstvo [Eurasian Space]*, Moscow, 2003.
- Novik E. S., *Obryad i folklor v sibirskom shamanisme [Rites and Folklore in Siberian Shamanism]*, Moscow, 1984.
- Rudoj A. et. al., *Ukok: Proshloje, nastoyashchee, budushee [Ukok: Past, Present, Future]*, Barnaul, 2000.
- Shmidt E. in: *Mify, predaniya, skazki khantov i mansi [Myths, Tales and Fairytales of Khanti and Mansi]*, Moscow, 1990.
- Smolyak A. V., *Shaman: lichnost', funktsii, mirovozzrenie [A Shaman: Personality, Social Roles, World Attitudes]*, Moscow, 1991.
- West M., *The Orphic Poems*, Oxford, 1983.

Anna S. Kuznetsova  
Centre for Ancient philosophy and  
the Classical Tradition,  
Novosibirsk State University,  
Russia, [www.nsu.ru/classics/](http://www.nsu.ru/classics/)  
[ana\\_ehe@gorodok.net](mailto:ana_ehe@gorodok.net)