

Afterword

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If we look back to the classical evolutionism of Spencer, Tylor, Frazer etc., and compare it with today's anthropology, the difference in time-depth is striking. To the early evolutionists, human culture was much younger than we know it to be today. Even still extant non-literate societies could be looked upon as reflecting preliminary stages in the history of mankind. This was a judgement made not just from the point of view of culture, but also from the point of view of cerebral development.

Proponents of the diffusionist trend in anthropology, folklore studies and historical philology believed that, when it came to chronology and geography, it was possible to reconstruct relatively correct maps of the historico-geographical distribution of different cultural phenomena. The exaggerated example of the Swedish folklorist Waldemar Liungman's *Traditionswanderungen Euphrat-Rhein* I and II and *Traditionswanderungen Rhein-Jennisei* I and II¹ comes to mind. After having read this extensive work, my conclusion is that it hardly concerns the migrations of general folk customs, but simply the migration of the art of writing and in particular the spread of printing. Even this is of course also an overstatement, because we have reasons to expect that the earliest testimonies have been lost. Still, the books have a tangible value in that they contain exhaustive descriptions of the presented folklore phenomena. What I consider "exaggerated" rather concerns the "Traditionswanderungen", i.e. the exact geographical mapping of the spread of the phenomena, in other words, the 'diffusionism'.

I should add that I do not believe that the spread of traditions in olden days can be reconstructed in "permanent migratory routes",

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i.e. as unilinear diffusion. Instead I propose that similar phenomena, for more or less similar reasons, have appeared over vast geographical areas and that every such place can be equated with a point of impact on water, with lots of rings created on the surface, and the observed running together in complicated and indescribable patterns within an even more extensive area.

If everything or at least most things have existed much earlier than was previously thought, it follows that phenomena in general are older than their earliest testimonies, but also that they were linked through much more complicated geographical relationships than can be proven today. To this can be added that conceptions considered to represent different periods in evolutionary terms are often seen to co-exist in the same societies, even to such an extent that it would have surprised a classical evolutionist. From the point of view of the history of ideas there is probably a certain reciprocity between evolutionism and diffusionism. Due to the accumulated knowledge of the difficulties surrounding ‘historico-geographical’ investigations – or what could almost be considered a synonym, ‘historico-philological’ investigations, since the sources are mostly written – interest for that kind of research has noticeably diminished. I am not proposing that historico-philological research should cease, but that one has to be aware of the whole world lying *beneath* the earliest testimonies. Absent proof of a phenomenon’s preexistence is not a proof of its earlier inexistence. This means that when the historico-philological method has brought us to the end of documentation, it should be combined with an anthropological approach, i.e. one that in its general phenomenological view also takes the non-literate cultures into account and consideration. One should not make oneself comfortable with merely describing what one scientifically knows, for in practice this easily leads to treating phenomena whose existence cannot be proven as if they *de facto* never existed. Negative knowledge – not to know – changes into illusory positive knowledge – to know on false premises. Here my reservations concern the detailed accounts of the paths of geographical *diffusion*, and not so much the general phenomenological surveys describing the geographical distribution of different phenomena.

That said, I have somewhat truistically declared a sceptic attitude to diffusionistic investigations. The scepticism is directed,

partly on different grounds, to both Bremmer, who in the question of shamanism attempts to deny a connection between Europe (predominantly Greece) and shamanism's so-called core area, and Ginzburg, who on the contrary seeks to confirm such a connection. The difference can be said to imply that Bremmer² is more excluding in his means to determine what really could be called shamanism than Ginzburg³ is. Both emphasize the word 'shaman', in Bremmer's case to such an extent that his investigation tends to be a question of word history.

Ginzburg is very aware of the need to combine a historical research attitude with a structural one, equal to a morphological, i.e. a phenomenological, attitude.⁴ However, an independent phenomenological research attitude can easily be reduced by the diffusionist outlook. I shall demonstrate this with Eliade's way of judging Old Norse *seiðr* (the Old Norse form of shamanism, in Swedish 'sejd') in his "Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy",⁵ a book which in many ways has received an almost normative function. Another book that, in my own and in many others' opinion, is very important was written in 1935 and in the same year was presented as a doctoral thesis: Dag Strömbäck's "Sejd. Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria" [*Seiðr*. Text studies in Nordic History of Religion].⁶ Strömbäck identifies *seiðr* with shamanism. The foremost practitioner of *seiðr* in Old Norse times was the god Óthin. Thus writes the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) in chapter 7 of the *Ynglinga saga*:

“Óthin could shift his appearance. When he did so his body would lie there as if he were asleep or dead; but he himself, in an instant, in the shape of a bird or animal, a fish or a serpent, went to distant countries on his or other men's errands.”⁷

Observe that Snorri's epic description of Óthin's skills is formulated nearly as if it were the modern and generally accepted definition of shamanism within the History of Religions.

The extensive work *Heimskringla; History of the Kings of Norway* consists of many parts, altogether making up 854 pages, beginning with the *Ynglinga saga* (the story of the royal lineage of the Ynglings). The entire work is considered to have been written sometimes between 1230 and 1240. This testimony of knowledge of

shamanism might supply one of the oldest evidences of shamanism, after Herodotos' description of Scythian shamanism (regardless of one's evaluation of Herodotos' accuracy as a witness): should the direction of diffusion from Asia to Europe be reversed? Or is it simply impossible to imagine that the Old Norse case could concern real shamanism, especially when taking into account the distance between Northern Europe and the so-called core areas of shamanism in central Asia? It is here that Eliade comes into the picture. As a Scandinavian philologist myself I can affirm that Eliade was well acquainted with Old Norse material, and also with Dag Strömbäck's "Sejd".⁸ In their basic outlook on the origin and diffusion of shamanism Ginzburg and Eliade stand rather close to each other. In his conclusion concerning the nature of Old Norse *seiðr*, Eliade maintains: "it is not shamanism in the strict sense but belongs to a horizon that is extremely close to it".⁹ In my opinion his dictum depends less on the detailed, nearly "scholastically" elaborated definition of shamanism which he uses here than on the Nordic countries' location at the very geographical end of the imagined long diffusional chain. It seems natural to think that the intensity of the original features of a phenomenon would abate during a long geographical wandering. Eliade's conclusion has probably contributed to the striking dissension between Nordic scholars concerning the question as to what extent *seiðr* should be viewed as a form of shamanism or not. Diffusionism influences the phenomenological judgement.

But here I will go one step further regarding Eliade. My apprehension is that Eliade, with his stylistic brilliance and exceptional learning, led the research on shamanism astray by taking the very word 'shaman' as point of departure and hence getting stuck in the opinion that the *phenomenon* shamanism should have had its beginning where the *word* 'shaman' was first to be found. According to the same logic, shamanism should then have wandered widely over the world in many directions, and this principally in a scale of falling intensity of its characteristics according to the distance to the starting point. Why assume such a stable connection between word and phenomenon? And why should the beginning from the point of view of development be a culmination without prehistory?¹⁰

The discussion between Ginzburg and Bremmer concerns the now so well known *benandanti*, ‘the good witches’,¹¹ who during nightly dreams (*in spirito*), but nevertheless in a real world (!), i.e. in a spatial sense,¹² gather together to fight against ‘the evil witches’ in order to ensure fertility of the fields. The circumstances that the *benandanti* claim to travel in in their dreams, on hares, cats or other animals but nevertheless in some way within the sphere of reality, induces Ginzburg to associate them, in my eyes convincingly, with shamanism and shamanistic trance. The shaman can, as is well known, travel in the form of his free-soul to the realm of death, during which travel his body lies “as dead” on the place of the *séance*. But Ginzburg, as far as I know, does not discuss the phenomenological difference between *benandanti* and the shamanism as we know it from the so-called Asian core areas. However, he tries to strengthen his claim that real shamanism is at stake by providing a comprehensive account of the diffusion between what is believed to be the Asiatic area of origin and Italy, using evidence that has since long been considered secured by facts.

The events occurred, according to the records of the Inquisition, around the area of Friuli in Italy from 1570 to around the middle of the 17th century. According to Ginzburg, it was through the Inquisition’s violent persecutions, whereby torture and bestial methods of killing were used, that confessions of putatively frightful satanic crimes were extorted. This was done in accordance with a then prevailing theological conceptual complex, which ultimately gave rise to the conception of the witches’ Sabbath. These records from the Inquisition, in so far as we pay heed to the aims and worldview of the Inquisitors, can thus be treated as anthropological documents of outstanding depth and richness of details.

The exciting discussion between Ginzburg and Bremmer opens up trains of thought that, as far as I know, have not been expressed earlier. The notion that the conceptions of the soul should have evolved through influence from shamanism (or in this case that such conceptions among the ancient Greeks should have emerged through influence from Scythian shamanism) is rightly rejected by Bremmer as unthinkable.¹³ The inverse course of events is generally seen as the more likely. Shamanism presupposes the conception of the free-soul. Dualistic pluralism seems in principle to

exist/have existed among all peoples who remained outside the influence of the so-called high religions and seems in that respect to be more or less universal. Of course, all peoples have not been investigated, but I do not know of any investigated people that would confute this. These conceptions of the soul seem, possibly from very early periods onwards, to have represented religious phenomenological *elementa* in the same way as conceptions of gods, spirits, magic etc. can be said to have done. As a matter of fact, conceptions of the soul express elementary reflections on the conditions of life: the difference between dreaming and being awake, and between life and death as well as the psychological apprehension that within one there is something (life souls) which with a certain automatism steers one. This means that within the great diffusional area which both Ginzburg and Bremmer intersect there should once upon a time have been peoples with such conceptions of the soul more or less everywhere – and not only within the great diffusional area.

If one perceives the dream as an expression of the free-soul travelling beyond the body to remote geographical places and to other worlds (which is very well documented), then the step to shamanism is not far. Compare with shamanism the following quotation from “The Night Battles”:

“These benandanti say that when their spirit leaves the body it has the appearance of a mouse, and also when it returns, and that if the body should be rolled over while it is without its spirit, it would remain dead, and the spirit could never return to it.”¹⁴

Shamanism means that by his own will the shaman, through a technique of ecstasy, tries to accomplish what is believed to take place in the dream, which means that shamanism could have developed everywhere where the conception of the free-soul has existed. Consequently, it is probable that in the era beyond documentation shamanism has flourished to a much larger extent than can be evidenced through historical or ethnographical modes of access. From this follows that what is now considered to be shamanism’s core area can scarcely be regarded as the source of shamanism, but rather as the space that has retained it through historical coincidences.

One further remark: the many interesting archaic “mythologems” and “motifs”, as one might metaphorically label this variety of narrative elements, which surface in Ginzburg’s *benandanti* records and get connected with the shamanoid features need not to be considered to form an original organic entity. If it was, this outlook would be equal to a student fairy-tale research maintaining that a certain fairy tale, built up by a number of specific “motifs”, constituted the original tale, an “Urmärchen” that always preserved the same components – a statement that would arouse surprise and sharp protests.¹⁵ This should in principle also apply to different cultic elements’ changing connections over the time axis. The shamanistic elements must, from the point of view of evolution, be considered independently of the other features, even if those features would seem to indicate the high age of the tale. On the other hand, such records of course have a special capacity to reflect the time and circumstances in which they were first written down.

I find the proposition that the *benandanti* really represent a form of shamanism highly convincing. It may be added that Eliade was fully convinced by this as well.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Ginzburg’s and Bremmer’s diffusionistic deductions seem to me in both cases unlikely, because they presuppose that the *benandanti* either should have had or verifiably should not have had their utmost origin in the Asiatic so-called core areas of shamanism, a connection that Ginzburg attempts to confirm by showing that it really is a matter of shamanism and that Bremmer opposes with the contrary assertion, i.e. that it does not concern shamanism, or at least that there is no evidence to prove that it would be shamanism. In my opinion, a more probable scenario would be to understand the *benandanti* as representatives of rudimentary shamanism, as inheritors of an archaic remnant of a type of conception, which once, as a cultural undercurrent, might have been spread over vast areas, and now rises to the surface again through the medium of Ginzburg’s investigations.

We may consider it to constitute a kind of pre- or protoshamanism. Shamanism ought also to have a developmental history, and to derive the “rudimentary” from the so-called core areas, which apparently contain the most elaborate forms of shamanism

in terms of culture and thought, would imply that the benandanti represent a degenerated form of shamanism. This seems to me much more far-fetched than the opposite point of view. Looked upon from the “Stockholm perspective”, the discovery of the benandanti appears even more epoch-making.

Finally, I want to emphasize that Ginzburg’s benandanti research, beyond the discussion of the origin of shamanism, contains very important material that will certainly keep scholars busy for a long time. For instance, it throws new light on the enigmatic cult societies that Lily Weiser-Aall¹⁷ and Otto Höfler¹⁸ have written about. This is a fascinating topic that the former Docent (associate professor) at our Department, Andrejs Johansons (1922–1983), also treated.¹⁹

There is a picture – let us hope that it mostly is a distorted one – of anthropological field-work portraying the field-worker as someone who, in an imperialistic and cynically exploitive manner, makes an academic career at the expense of the native persons who he or she has interviewed and with whom the field-worker then cuts all ties as soon as possible. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer presents a remarkably contrasting picture to this stereotype. In her field research she really shows human understanding and social engagement in an exemplary way. If the negative attitude of the field-worker is described as taking without giving anything back, then our Department’s first field-worker, Åke Hultkrantz, must also be seen as exemplary. During the latter part of the 1940s and into the 1950s Hultkrantz carried out extensive field research among the Shoshone Indians in Wyoming, USA, where he amassed a wealth of material on their religion and culture, which was much more intact in those days. Around twelve years ago a delegation from the Shoshone and a film team spent several days at his home in Lidingö, outside Stockholm, to express their appreciation of his lifelong research and to make a film. Hultkrantz handed over his entire photo collection from his years of research from 1948 onwards and gave the delegation and team glimpses of his unpublished field-work, which they knew contained many traditional events and phenomena that have now disappeared and are mostly forgotten. Much of the material has been translated to English and edited and compiled by his wife Geraldine. It was published in Wyoming under the title “Stories of Eastern Shoshone”.²⁰

In conclusion I should like to restate what Carlo Ginzburg mentions at the very beginning of his chapter that he has never met a shaman. This probably also applies to Jan Bremmer, as it does to me. Consequently, it is all the more important that one of the participants in the discussion has the experience that the others lack. We at the Department of the History of Religions are therefore very grateful that Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer was able to take up our invitation.

Notes

1. Liungman 1937; 1938; 1941; 1945.
2. Bremmer maintains, for example, that Herodotos' description of the Scythians' burial practices should not, as has been thought earlier for many years, be taken to show any evidence of shamanism. Bremmer 1983:25 ff. Compare Ginzburg 2004:207–225.
3. Carlo Ginzburg 2004. See Part Three, chap. 1: Eurasian Conjectures, pages 207–225.
4. Ginzburg 1993.
5. Eliade 1964.
6. Strömbäck 2000.
7. Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Lee M. Hollander. 1964:10. In original language: Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*. Íslenzk fornrit. XXVI. Bindi. Reykjavík. MCMLXXIX. Chapter 7, page 1.
8. Mircea Eliade (as above), chapter eleven: Shamanic Ideologies and Techniques among the Indo-Europeans. Preliminary Remarks, Pages 375–387.
9. Mircea Eliade (as above), pages 386 f.
10. For a concise summary of Eliade's concept of shamanism, see Eliade 1987.
11. See Foreword, note 16.

12. A psychologist by profession would perhaps today try to use terms such as ‘hypnopompic’ and ‘hypnagogic hallucinations’ as an explanation.

13. Bremmer’s lecture, page 12.

14. Ginzburg 2013c:18.

15. Thompson 1961; 1987; 1955–1958: 6 Vol.

16. Eliade 1978:78 ff.

17. Weiser 1927.

18. Höfler 1934; 1973.

19. Johansons 1973–1974:149–157. Ginzburg has read this article.

20. Hultkrantz 2009.