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SHAMANISM IN THE
OLD NORSE TRADITION:
A THEORY BETWEEN
IDEOLOGICAL CAMPS

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the emergence of the term in the eighteenth century, “shamanism” has served as a kind of magic word.¹ The associations made with this concept, like magic, travels to a world beyond, contact with animal spirits, and healing, have either been vilified or glorified depending on the historical and discursive context. Today, the term “shamanism” operates in a number of ways: as a category in ethnology and religious studies, an artistic concept, and a form of religious practice. As I will argue in the following, this general discursive context should be kept in mind when dealing with the subject of shamanism. After sketching out the main facets of the Scandinavian debate about the existence of shamanic elements in the Old Icelandic tradition, I will focus on the ideological contexts of this debate and the cognitive interests of the main participants. I will then look at the mutual relationships between the academic treatment of shamanism and neopagan reactivations of shaman rituals and, on this basis, develop a critique of the concept of shamanism in general.

Translated from the German by Brian Currid.

¹ This point has been made by Gloria Flaherty. See her *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

II. THE SCHOLARLY DISCUSSION

A. SUPPORTERS OF THE SHAMANISM THEORY

The postulation of a link between shamanic practices among the Saami (the aboriginal people in Northern Scandinavia, derogatorily referred to as “Laps”) and Old Icelandic magical practices as described in the sagas and the Eddic literature seems to have first emerged in 1802 in the travel journal *Travels through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland, to the North Cape in the Years 1798 and 1799*, written by the Italian author Guiseppe Acerbi (1773–1846).² In 1877, Johan Fritzner was the first Nordacist to publish an essay on the link between “Lappish paganism” and the “beliefs and superstitions of other peoples, most importantly the Norwegians.”³ The first more extensive studies dealing with these links, however, only appeared in the 1920s and 1930s. In *Der Baum des Lebens* (The tree of life), Uno Holmberg draws on shamanic ceremonies, in this case those of the Altaic-Tartars, to interpret *Yggdrasil*, the mythic tree mentioned in the Eddas, as a shamanic tree.⁴ He proposes, for example, that the nine *íviðir* of *Yggdrasil* referred to in the second strophe of the Eddic *Völuspá* correspond to the nine levels of heaven; in his view, the nine levels correspond to the notches on the tree that shamans have to climb in their magical journeys to other worlds.⁵ Rolf Pipping picked up some of Holmberg’s ideas and explained in particular the myth of *Odin am Galgen* (Odin on the gallows—the title of the work) with the help of Finnish shaman ceremonies. Pipping suggested that Odin’s nine days of hanging on *Yggdrasil* represent a parallel to a shamanic ritual of initiation: this ritual often also lasts for nine days and is intended to give the shamans insight into the nine worlds.⁶

At the end of his comprehensive text critical study of the magical practice of *seiðr*, published in 1935, Dag Strömbäck takes the position that the ritual mentioned in a number of sagas and most extensively described in the *Eiríks saga rauða*, describes a shamanic practice that had been adopted by the Saami.⁷ On the basis of this saga, Strömbäck derives the most important aspects of the ritual called *seiðr*. He first mentions the *seiðhiallr*, a high frame on which the *Völva*, or seeress, sits, and identifies it

² See *ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

³ Johan Fritzner, “Lappernes hedenskab og trolddomskunst sammenholdt med andre folks, især nordmændenes, tro og overtro,” *Historisk Tidsskrift* 4 (1877): 135–217.

⁴ See Uno Holmberg, *Der Baum des Lebens* (Helsingfors, Finland: Litt.-Ges., 1922), pp. 27–28.

⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

⁶ Pipping introduces other evidence of such parallels: Vsp. 2, in which the *Völva* carries out a similar ceremony, and Háv. 34, where a *Pulr* is mentioned hanging alive among dead people and animals on a gallows. See Rolf Pipping, “Oden i galgen,” *Studier i nordisk filologi* 18, no. 2 (1928): 4.

⁷ Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd: Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria* (Stockholm: Geber, 1935).

with the shamanic tools characteristic of some northern Eurasian groups. The crowd surrounding the *Völva* and their accompanying song he considers analogous to a practice that can be found primarily among the Saami. He thus understands the term *Varðlok(k)ur* as referring to a shaman song directed at auxiliary spirits.⁸ Finally he interprets the *seiðstafr*, which is reported in numerous sources without mention of its function, as a magical shaman tool.⁹ Strömbäck also sees links between *seiðr* descriptions and the description of *hamskifte* (the change in form from man to animal) and considers these to be an allusion to ecstatic elements in the *seiðr*. He himself raises the difficulties posed by the late origins of the saga's written version (after 1236) and the clear context of a Christian legend which intends to illustrate the glorified bishop's mother Guðriður Þorbiarnardóttir's superiority over paganism. Nonetheless, he still claims to have arrived at secure conclusions using this and other evidence about a pagan-Germanic magic practice.¹⁰

These views on elements of shamanism were cited, adopted, and further developed by a number of other leading scholars of Old Norse in their own studies. These included, for example, Otto Höfler, who in *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Cultic secret associations of the Germanics) compared Odin's hanging on the tree in the Eddic poem *Hávamál* with the initiation of a Siberian Shaman, and saw Odin's eight-legged horse *Sleipnir*, as a shamanic horse.¹¹ Franz Rolf Schröder (who also reads *Yggdrasil* as a shamanic tree) interpreted Odin's "Sitting between the fires" in the *Grimmismál*, a thirteenth century Eddic poem, as the description of a similar technique that uses pain to bring about shamanic ecstasy.¹²

The most important elements still relevant today for the discussion about the "shamanism complex" in the Old Icelandic tradition were already present in the studies on *Yggdrasil*, Odin,¹³ and *seiðr* prior to 1945. The

⁸ See Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd och andra studier i nordisk själsuppfattning: Med bidrag av Bo Almqvist, Gertrud Gidlund, Hans Mebius*, ed. Gertrud Gidlund (Hedemora, Sweden: Gidlunds Förlag, 2000), p. 135.

⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰ For a present day view of Strömbäck's research on *seiðr*, see the essays in *Sejd och andra studier i nordisk själsuppfattning*.

¹¹ See Otto Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Frankfurt: Moritz Diesterweg, 1934), pp. 234 ff.

¹² See Franz Rolf Schröder, *Altgermanische Kulturprobleme* (Berlin, 1929), pp. 97 ff., and *Ingunar-Freyr*, ed. Franz Rolf Schröder, vol. 1, *Untersuchungen zur vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte*, ed. Franz Rolf Schröder (Tübingen: Mohr, 1941), pp. 13–15, as well as his "Grimmismál," *Paul Braunes Beiträge* 80 (1958): 341–78.

¹³ Loki is also repeatedly linked to shamanism. On Odin and Loki and their connection to *seiðr*, see the commentaries on Lokasenna Strophe 24 (Klaus von See, Beatrice LaFarge, Eve Picard, Ilona Priebe, and Katja Schulz, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 2, *Götterlieder* [Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997], pp. 430–35). Here it is discussed that the term *siða*, or "enchant," used in most editions, should really be *siða*, or

research during the postwar period then systematized these ideas, exploring individual elements and finally focusing the fundamental debate around the question of whether the shamanism concept is useful at all, and if so, which concept of shamanism is appropriate to illuminate certain characteristics of the Old Icelandic tradition. Here, one focus is on the question of whether the supposedly shamanic elements were really taken over from the Saami or are a truly autochthonous phenomenon of the Germanics or Indo-Germanics.

Mircea Eliade was certainly the author who after World War II pushed shamanism to the forefront of scholarly debate and at the same time universalized it with his study *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, which appeared in 1951 in French and 1957 in German.¹⁴ In his brief discussions of “Techniques of Ecstasy among the Germans” (pp. 362–69), he refers primarily to Höfler in order to show in particular Odin’s shaman qualities. Eliade also attributes the *seiðr* with characteristics that approach the “classical Shamanic seance,” but he concludes that this is not necessarily shamanism in the narrow sense but, rather, “sorcery” and “minor magic.”¹⁵

In his *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (History of old germanic religion) Jan de Vries makes reference to Eliade and rejects the hypothesis of the Saami influence, claiming that shamanism is an autochthonous phenomenon of the Germanic people.¹⁶ Already in the first edition of his history of religion from 1935–37, he had postulated “a primeval community” of Indo-Germanic and Uralic peoples and termed shamanism an “Indo-Germanic inheritance.”¹⁷ Now with Eliade he referred to shamanism as a “thoroughly religious experience” and came to the conclusion: “There

“sink.” The passage could then be read as a description of a state of trance or near death, which according to the *Historia Norvegiæ* is supposed to have taken place among Saami shamans. This could also explain a further dark spot in the strophe: the term *vétt*. Already Fritzner (“Lappernes hedenskab og trolddomskunst sammenholdt med andre folks. især nordmændenes, tro og overtro”) translates *vétt* as “cover of a box” and hypothesizes that it could be a kind of shaman drum that is being struck (n. 3 above, pp. 190–92). This suggestion is taken up by Nils Lid, “Til varulvens historia” (Saga och sed: *Kungliga Gustav Adolfs Akademiens Arsbok, 1937* [Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1938], pp. 3–25), and Magnus Olsen, *Edda- og skaldekvad: Forarbejder til kommentar*, vol. 2 (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1960), p. 19. An equally likely interpretation is also offered by the translation “you concerned yourself with magic like the seeresses,” so that no final conclusion about whether this is an indication of shamanism can be drawn.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Åke Hultkrantz, “Mircea Eliade: Schamanologe oder Zauberlehrling,” in *Sehnsucht nach dem Ursprung: Zu Mircea Eliade*, ed. Hans Peter Duerr (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1983), pp. 161–73.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), pp. 386–87.

¹⁶ See Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2d ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1956), sec. 237, 1:330–33, on *seiðr*.

¹⁷ See also on this Carl-Martin Edsman, “Återspeglar Voluspá 2:5–8 ett schamanistisk ritual eller en keltisk åldersvers?” *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 63 (1948): 8–9.

is . . . absolutely no reason to consider north Germanic shamanism an external adaptation; we find similar religious phenomena in other Indo-Germanic peoples, and the concretization in the shape of Odin establishes the autochthonous character of this form of manticism.”¹⁸

A further argument in the discussion on autochthony or influence was introduced by Åke Hultkrantz, who postulates that both the Saami as well as the Scandinavians belonged to a Germanic Northern-Arctic cultural type. Shamanism accordingly lies at the foundation of both religious systems; this of course would not exclude the possibility of mutual influences.¹⁹ Åke von Ström makes a similar argument, placing Germanic religion decidedly in the context of Indo-Germanic culture and religion; in so doing, he refers to Georges Dumézil as well as to Höfler’s theories on the *Männerbund* (all-male society) and sacral kingship.²⁰

The most comprehensive study on shamanic elements to date appeared in 1968: Peter Buchholz’s *Schamanistische Züge in der altisländischen Überlieferung* (Shamanic features in the Old Icelandic tradition). In this work, Buchholz systematically works through all available evidence based on a catalog of characteristics.²¹ On the basis of evidence ranging from tales about the *fylgja* to Holmberg’s and Pipping’s studies on *Yggdrasil*, he comes to the conclusion that “a level of belief relating to hunting elements, the notion of the soul, and the world image, exists in the Northern Germanic area that by all means could serve as the religious foundation of a type of shamanism.”²² However, he suggests that constitutive elements of shamanism are states of ecstasy as well as the social position of the ecstatic. Buchholz emphasizes in particular the already mentioned evidence for means of self-torture, which he sees as ecstasy-inducing techniques.²³ Finally, Buchholz also finds evidence in various places in the Old Icelandic tradition for initiation and reincarnation and a certain symbolism of the underworld, yawning as the beginning and end of

¹⁸ Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935–37), p. 332.

¹⁹ See Hans Mebius, “Dag Strömbäck och den fornnordiska sejden,” in Strömbäck, *Sejd och andra studier i nordisk själsuppfattning* (n. 8 above), pp. 298–301.

²⁰ See Åke v. Ström and Haralds Biezais, *Germanische und baltische Religion* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975). On Ström and his ideologically motivated assumptions, see also Stefan Arvidsson, *Ariska idoler: Den indoeuropeiska mytologin som ideologi och vetenskap* (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2000), pp. 122–23.

²¹ Peter Buchholz, “Schamanistische Züge in der altisländischen Überlieferung” (Ph.D. diss., Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, 1968); see also “Shamanism—the Testimony of Old Icelandic Literary Tradition,” *Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (1971): 7–20.

²² Buchholz, *Schamanistische Züge in der altisländischen Überlieferung*, pp. 33–34.

²³ Buchholz includes Odin’s hanging on the tree (*ibid.*, p. 36), as well as the tales about the *haugaeldr* as parallels to the heat of the ecstatic person (p. 37), and finally the Sitting-Between-the-Fires in the *Grimnismál* is also included (p. 38). He considers the *sitja úti* and the *sitja á haugi*, which are also linked to contacts with the dead, as further techniques for inducing ecstasy. Here Buchholz also sees a connection to sacred kingship (see p. 40).

ecstasy, journeys of the soul, and the ability of the shaman to transform into an animal. In addition, he sees the myth of Odin's acquisition of the poet's mead as evidence for the shaman as a poet, the tales about "berserks" as evidence for the shamans as warriors, and the tales about magically gifted blacksmiths as evidence for shamans as craftsmen. Here at issue are primarily the tales around Völund/Wieland, and he discusses shamanism as the one concept that is able to unify the northern and southern Germanic material on *Mimir*. *Mimir*, he argues, is in the southern Germanic associated with the blacksmith, and in the northern Germanic with "head magic," the relationship to the tree of the worlds and the mead that grants wisdom (ecstasy).²⁴ Buchholz ends his discussion with extensive comments on shamans as gods using the example of Odin, whose shamanic characteristics he terms "a well-proven element in the literature on the subject."²⁵

Finally, in 1980 Aage Kabell claimed to be able to show that skaldic poetry is originally based on "remainders of the shaman tradition."²⁶ He argues that the shield in the shield poetry refers to shaman drums decorated according to the Saami model, that the Hrungnir of the *Haustlög* and the Ullr or the *Ragnarsdraupa* were originally shamans, and that the shield song had been a shaman drum song.

Buchholz was also the first to discuss one element that would prove quite central in the later reception. He viewed the gender connotations of shamanism in connection to the concept of *ergi* (perversion, unmanliness) as positive.²⁷ Strömbäck had still claimed that the *seiðr* was originally a masculine technique, tied to the god Odin which only in later stages transferred to women and thus became subject to contempt.²⁸ Buchholz, in contrast, assumes that "sexual perverts" (*sexuell Abartige*) are more receptive to a state of ecstasy, since they unite the characteristics of man and woman. He notes further that due to the Old Icelandic literature's emphasis on masculine values and due also to the Christian influence these facts were shown in an exclusively negative light, that is, as

²⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Aage Kabell, *Skalden und Schamanen*, vol. 227, *Ff Communications* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1980), p. 30.

²⁷ See Buchholz, *Schamanistische Züge in der altisländischen Überlieferung*, pp. 42–46.

²⁸ Strömbäck considers the *völva* of the *Eiríks saga rauða*, e.g., a later creation of the Christian who produced the written version of the saga (*Seid: Textstudier* [n. 7 above], p. 55) and also rejects the gender switch as a feature of the *seiðr*, since this is unknown in Lappish Shamanism (pp. 195–96). To explain the fact that *seiðr* is considered *ergi*, he sees as sufficient the fact that the shaman goes into an ecstatic state. See also von See et al. (n. 13 above), which comments on Lokasenna 24, that the offense is only caused through the fact "that the appearance of a male god is compared to the role of a female figure" (p. 433). See Mebius, pp. 279 ff.

ergi. Consequently, traces of an original honored status can only be established in a functional sense.

The “original esteemed status” of gender deviance that Buchholz at first only suspects would later be seen as an established fact by a number of authors from the 1970s to the 1990s—not all of them Scandinavianists.²⁹ This can be traced back not least to the influence of Hans Peter Duerr. Despite its *habilitation* in ethnology, *Traumzeit* (Dream time), was denied academic recognition, it nonetheless quickly attracted a cult following in the media and, most important, in an academic counterculture.³⁰ Duerr here discusses the Germanic shaman tree *Yggdrasil* in the context of a chapter on the “Vagina of the Earth.”³¹ He sees the *seiðr* explicitly as a technique of magic women.³² These ideas were at first picked up in works in feminist religious studies.³³ In these studies, the *seiðr* performed by the *völva* was read as an originally female magic or shamanic technique that existed until the witchcraft of the Middle Ages.³⁴ Still later, scholars in queer studies would emphasize the originary character of gender deviance in the Germanic *seiðr*.³⁵

²⁹ Ronald Grambo, “Unmanliness and *Seiðr*: Problems Concerning the Change of Sex,” in *Shamanism Past and Present: Part I*, ed. Mihály Hoppál and Otto Sadovszky (Budapest: Ethnographic Institute Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1989). This work refers to Eliade (n. 15 above), pp. 257–58, where the existence of androgynous men in shamanism is traced back to the time of a supposed “matriarchy.” Referring to W. LaBarre, *The Ghost Dance: Origins of Religion* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp. 183–86, Grambo assumes the existence of shamanism across all of North Eurasia and considers ritual gender transformation a characteristic that was imported from Asia (Siberia) to Northern Europe. The linkage with *ergi* results from the fact that it was considered foreign and unknown and was never really integrated into Norse religion.

³⁰ On Duerr, see also Michael Hinz, *Der Zivilisationsprozess: Mythos oder Realität? Wissenschaftssoziologische Untersuchungen zur Elias-Duerr-Kontroverse*, ed. Annette Treibel, vol. 4, *Schriften zur Zivilisations- und Prozeßtheorie* (Opladen: Lesk & Budrich, 2002), pp. 153–60.

³¹ Hans Peter Duerr, *Traumzeit: Über die Grenze zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation*, 2d ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), p. 58.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

³³ See, e.g., Donat Pahnke, “Die Spur der weisen Frauen: Von der altgermanischen Zeit über die historischen Hexen bis hin zu den heutigen feministischen Hexen,” in *Aufbruch der Frauen: Herausforderungen und Perspektiven feministischer Theologie*, ed. Birgit Janetzky et al. (Münster: Ed. Liberación, 1989), and “‘Schweig nicht, Völva! Ich will dich fragen, bis ich alles weiß.’ Die altgermanische Sejdkona als Schamanin und Hexe,” *Schlangenbrut 57* (1997): 13–16; Silvia Kleineidam, “Das Sejd-Ritual: Die Darstellung schamanischer Frauen und Männer der altgermanischen Zeit in der Primär- und Sekundärliteratur,” in *Blickwechsel: Frauen in Religion und Wissenschaft*, ed. Donat Pahnke (Marburg: Diagonal, 1993): 105–42; Vera Zingsem, “‘Sie konnten fliegen’: Von Schwanfrauen, Walküren und Wahrsagerinnen,” *Schlangenbrut 57* (1997): 9–12.

³⁴ Zingsem also considers the Valkyries to be a kind of female shamans.

³⁵ Robert J. Wallis, “Waking Ancestor Spirits: Neo-Shamanic Engagements with Archeology,” in *The Archeology of Shamanism*, ed. Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 213–30. See also the critical discussion in Jane M. Atkinson, “Shamanisms Today,” *Annual Review of Anthropology 21* (1992): 307–30, quote on 318. In this perspective, transvestism becomes the appropriation of a disdained, but at the same time envied, feminine. At-

B. OPPONENTS OF THE "SHAMANISM THEORY"

Of course, other scholars have rejected the postulated existence of shamanic elements in the Scandinavian medieval literature. As early as 1939, Åke Ohlmarks criticized Strömbäck's claim that the *seiðr* was a shaman technique.³⁶ Ohlmarks distinguished between arctic and subarctic forms of trance. The first, which appears among the Saami, he considered a pathological phenomenon, a kind of hysteria genetically determined by the northern climate. In his view, only this can truly be called shamanism. In the second, in contrast—this includes the *seiðr*—the ecstasy is produced artificially, through drumming, song, dance, or drugs, and is thus not pathological but, rather, should be considered a religious phenomenon.³⁷ In an essay about the second strophe of the Eddic *Völuspá*, Carl-Martin Edsman at least in part dismisses the notion that this represents the reflection of shaman ritual.³⁸

In recent years, the theories of shamanism have most prominently been countered by Jere Fleck and Edgar Polomé. Fleck takes his starting point in a comment made by Schröder at the end of his study on the *Grímnismál*, where he interprets "Odin between the fires" as "the divine ur-image" of the shaman.³⁹ Polomé, in contrast, refers primarily to Buchholz's study, which he also tries extensively to disprove on the basis of Fleck's work. Both agree that the Odin tales contain elements that most authors attribute to shamans, like the ritual ecstasy, the existence of help gods and the soul's ability to travel. They argue, however, that this is not sufficient to term Odin a shaman: his ecstatic and magical practices, most prominently described in the *Grímnismál* and the *Hávamál*, are instead, they argue, ascetic exercises directed toward the acquisition of numinous knowledge.⁴⁰ Fleck further postulates that the written versions of mythological poetry served to preserve once esoteric knowledge in a mythological

kinson argues that "sex was fundamental to shamanism; that women in primitive societies were degraded but envied by men for having special power and mystery; and that shamanic transvestitism was a means whereby men attempted to tap these special female qualities."

³⁶ See Åke Ohlmarks, *Studien zum Problem des Schamanismus* (Lund: Gleerup, 1939).

³⁷ See also Mebius (n. 19 above), p. 288.

³⁸ See Edsman (n. 17 above).

³⁹ See Jere Fleck, "The 'Knowledge-Criterion' in the *Grímnismál*: The Case against 'Shamanism,'" *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 86 (1971): 49–65, quotes on 49. Edgar C. Polomé, "Schamanismus in der germanischen Religion?" in *Der historische Horizont der Götterbild-Amulette aus der Übergangsepoche von der Spätantike zum Frühmittelalter*, ed. Karl Hauck (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), pp. 403–20.

⁴⁰ See Fleck, p. 57; Polomé, p. 410. Fleck compares both the "sitting between the fires" in the *Grímnismál* as well as the tree hanging in the *Hávamál* with the Vedic tradition of *tapas*. He postulates furthermore that the accumulation of numinous knowledge played a central role in "primitive Germanic religion" (pp. 58–61), and he argues that it can be "explained as a further example of the 'knowledge-criterion' for succession to the Germanic sacred kingship," p. 65.

form.⁴¹ Furthermore, Polomé objects to the alleged shamanic quality of these “Odin rituals,” relying on François-Xavier Dillmann’s studies of Norse magic.⁴² He also criticizes the thesis that *seiðr* is one and the same as shamanic practice.⁴³ Finally, he criticizes Kabell’s claims about shamanic elements in skaldic poetry as methodologically weak.⁴⁴

C. THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

It is striking that the supporters and opponents in this discussion often only differ marginally in their results. Their ultimately contrary views on the existence of shamanism in the Old Icelandic tradition primarily result from their differing definitions of shamanism. Thus, Buchholz relies on the definition of the archaeologist Karl J. Narr, who only minimally delimits and modifies Eliade’s definition of shamanism as an “archaic technique of ecstasy,” terming shamanism a “complex of ecstatic practices in connection with ideologies of transformation and journey.”⁴⁵ Primarily on the basis of the same evidence, Fleck and Polomé, by contrast, arrive at negative findings; this results from the fact that the two use the same

⁴¹ See Fleck, p. 63.

⁴² François-Xavier Dillmann, “Seiður og shamanismi í Íslendingasögum,” *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992): 457–59. See also Mebius, p. 292.

⁴³ Polomé comments that even Eliade did not consider this practice particularly shamanic, since the journey to a different world is entirely missing. He also denies the shamanic character of the *völva* from the *Erik’s Saga*, since she by no means goes into ecstasy but remains fully conscious. Thus at issue in *seiðr* is a magical practice of oraculating, in which shamanism does not play a role. This was also argued by Dumézil in the 1950s, as cited by Polomé (p. 413).

⁴⁴ See Polomé, pp. 415–17. An intermediate position has been taken recently by Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 128. He sees the *seiðr* as a relatively late cultural adaptation from the Saami; however, he confirms that there are decisive distinctions between Saami shamanism and *seiðr*, which can be explained particularly in terms of contact with Balto-Finnish shamans. Thus healing played no role at all in *seiðr*, and whereas women held a central function in *seiðr*, shamans in the Saami and Balto-Finns were men. This would conform to the association of women and divination among the Germanics, already mentioned in Tacitus. From this, DuBois concludes that at issue in *seiðr* is a cultural adaptation from Saami and Balto-Finnic shamanism, which changed along with the role of women in Medieval Scandinavia: “*Seiðr* thus demonstrates a dynamic process of religious exchange operating in the Viking Age in which individual ritual elements—and sometimes even practitioners—crossed cultural and economic lines, becoming re-inscribed within the worldview of the recipient community. *Seiðr* replicated strongly shamanic rituals among Sámi and Balto-Finns, but it also became assimilated into the preexisting repertoire of religious practices and mythology operating among Scandinavian pagans. This assimilation effected its own substantive changes on the tradition, rendering it a new entity, the product of religious synthesis” (p. 137). And in an essay about a historical understanding of the God Odin, John Lindow (“Myth Read as History: Odin in Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglinga Saga*,” in *Myth: A New Symposium*, ed. Gregory Schrepp and William Hansen [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002]) makes the interesting suggestion that Snorri, “the greatest historian and mythographer of medieval Scandinavia, used Sami shamanism to help create a historical Odin” (p. 121).

⁴⁵ See Buchholz, *Schamanistische Züge in der altisländischen Überlieferung* (n. 21 above), p. 11.

definition of shamanism as their basis, that is, that of Lasz l Vajda, who seeks to limit the concept of shamanism strictly to the region where shamanism was originally “discovered”: Siberia.⁴⁶

The problem of the various definitions presents itself in the context of the question of the existence of shamanic elements in the Old Norse tradition, but it is also true of shaman research in general.⁴⁷ Research in religious studies and ethnology was confronted from the very beginning with the “watered-down” and “imprecise” character of the concept of “shamanism,” one whose application is “vague” and “dangerous,” and which, though “once a technical term in ethnology, has now become a fashionable academic term.”⁴⁸

This variation in definition and the resulting confusion drove Gloria Flaherty to study historically the scientific and cultural genesis of the concept of shamanism in the eighteenth century. In her *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, she offers a comprehensive critique of the fact that in both the definition of shamanism itself as well as in the interpretation of individual cases, fact and fiction have been inseparably mixed with one another. She complains that the mythologization that has lain at the foundation of the concept of shamanism since its popularization in the eighteenth century has hardly been researched. She also considers its historical foundations to be insufficient. Even today, she argues, authors confirm their theories on the basis of travel and mission reports from the

⁴⁶ See Lasz l Vajda, “Zur phaseologischen Stellung des Schamanismus,” in *Religions-Ethnologie*, ed. Carl August Schmitz (Frankfurt: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, 1964), pp. 265–95, 436–43.

⁴⁷ Harald Motzki (*Schamanismus als Problem religionswissenschaftlicher Terminologie*, ed. Hans-Joachim Kleineidam, Arbeitsmaterialien zur Religionsgeschichte, vol. 8 [K ln: Brill, 1977], pp. 17–18), e.g., cites one of the “old champions of the ethnology of religion,” Arnold van Gennep, who already considers the concept “vague” and “dangerous” and later comes to the conclusion that up until now the concept has not been clarified or made more precise—a circumstance however that he would like to change with his own systematization and definition (see p. 109).

⁴⁸ See Vajda, p. 266. He turns in particular against Eliade’s concept when he argues that “the certainly universal psychological state of ecstasy is not sufficient as a definition of shamanism” (p. 268). In the following he attempts to trace the phenomenon of shamanism back to its roots in Siberia and to distinguish a series of attributes that, according to him, are characteristic of shamanism. He deduces from the various ages of the individual characteristics that they emerged independently of one another and only later merged in Siberian cultures to form one complex. Vajda thus rejects the thesis of the universal existence of shamanism but also allows for the possibility that there may be parallels between individual elements of the Siberian shamanism and the Old Norse tradition. On the critique of the category of shamanism, e.g., by Clifford Geertz and Michael Taussig, see Atkinson (n. 35 above). Hartmut Zinser (“Zur Faszination Des Schamanismus,” in *Hungrige Geister und rastlose Seelen: Texte zur Schamanismusforschung*, ed. Michael Kuper [Berlin: Reimer, 1991], pp. 17–27) also argues that shamanism should only be used as a comprehensive concept for a number of phenomena in northern and central Asia. Recently, Ronald Hutton (*Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination* [London: Hambledon, 2001]) also studied the research on Siberian shamanism and critiqued the concept as a product of the “Western imagination.”

eighteenth century, without considering their scientific validity. Finally, she criticizes the neglect of historical processes in shamanism research, which still considers shamanism a pure, archaic phenomenon instead of one that developed within different cultures and in processes of cultural contact. At the end of her study, she challenges the field to look at the history of research and Western reactions to “shamanism” more closely.⁴⁹

If we take Flaherty’s challenge seriously, the question of whether “shamanism” exists in the Old Norse tradition no longer seems primarily relevant. Instead, our attention should be focused on what cognitive interests the concept of shamanism can serve and which agendas it can represent, both internal and, in particular, external to scholarly debate.

D. CONTEXTS AND COGNITIVE INTERESTS

It should first of all be said that both the supporters and the opponents of shamanism theories share one basic foundation: they are interested in the remains lying beneath Christian Medieval “distortions” of pagan religion and ritual, and in magical practice and social reality, and they are less interested in the medieval literary contexts in which their source texts emerged. For research focusing on Old Icelandic texts in the context of European literary history, in contrast, the question seems mostly irrelevant. To generalize somewhat, we can say that the main difference lies in the cultural importance that is attributed to shamanism. Here we can distinguish between four main tendencies.

1. Authors like Fritzner, Strömbäck, Kabell, as well as DuBois postulate a direct influence of pagan-Germanic magical practices through the techniques of the Saami or Finno-Ugrics, which can be explained by way of direct cultural contact in the Scandinavian countries. In general, one might say that these authors are interested in the reconstruction of magic and ritual of pre-Christian Scandinavians and in evidence of lively cultural transfer.⁵⁰

2. Authors like de Vries and Schröder, who argue that shamanism is an autochthonous phenomenon of pagan Germanic societies, go far back beyond the Middle Ages. They see in the shamanic quality of the *seiðr* evidence for the fundamental shared feature between the Germanic and other Indo-European religions and cultures. These theses rest on the concept of a shared Indo-Germanic ur-culture, as developed by Dumézil. That such cultural-theoretical constructions are by no means value neutral and ideology free, but often have the goal of distinguishing the Indo-Germanics (or Indo-Europeans) from the implicitly or explicitly devalued “Semites,” has recently been impressively shown by Stefan Arvidsson.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Flaherty (n. 1 above), pp. 3–17, 208–15.

⁵⁰ Also see on this Mebius (n. 19 above), p. 283.

⁵¹ Ibid.

3. Opponents of the shamanism theory agree with the notion of a shared Indo-European heritage, but at the basis of their hypotheses—in contrast, for example to de Vries—lies a basic skepticism about shamanism. For writers like Ohlmarks, shamanism appears “primitive” and thus foreign to the “superior” Indo-European culture.⁵² Fleck, for example, assumes the existence of an Indo-Iranian complex that is superior to those north-central Asian or Siberian cultures that practice shamanism. The culturally “inferior” Siberians, he argues, had taken over elements of the “Aryan religion” in degenerate form. This makes it possible for Fleck to reject a direct relationship between the obviously “primitive shamanic Siberians” and the Germanics. The parallels between shamanic and Germanic elements can now be explained directly on the basis of correspondences between the culturally “superior” Indo-Iranians and the Germanics.⁵³ Polomé’s argument moves in a similar direction. He postulates the existence of a “settled Indo-Germanic population in North-West Europe” since 3 B.C., which even at this point knew no shamanism and certainly could not have adopted it from the pre-Indo-Germanic peoples with whom they mixed.⁵⁴ Ultimately, behind this sort of Indo-Germanic theory lurks the assumption that religion is the untransformable expression of a cultural, “*völkisch*,” or even “racial” entity; according to this view, religion is thus best explained on the basis of these kinds of linkages, and not on the basis of cultural contact, historical development, or migration.

4. In contrast, Buchholz’ ideas can be seen as an expression of a growing countercultural interest in the 1960s and 1970s in “primitive” cultures and states beyond everyday consciousness.⁵⁵ Such an interest is

⁵² See Ohlmarks (n. 36 above); Gustav Ränk (“Shamanism as a Research Subject: Some Methodological Viewpoints,” in *Studies in Shamanism: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium in Shamanism Held at Åbo on the 6th–8th of September, 1962*, ed. Carl-Martin Edsman [Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967]) indicates that in Western research, which puts ecstasy on center stage, “black” and “white” shamanism are distinguished from one another. According to Edsman, Ohlmarks shares with Wilhelm Schmidt the notion that shamanism is an Arctic phenomenon that is maintained in black shamanism, while white shamanism is not a primary element of the proto-Indo-European herding culture. The white shaman is, he argues, not really a shaman at all but a kind of “heaven’s servant,” who maintains contact with the upper regions of the world. Eliade, in contrast, makes a similar distinction but takes precisely the white shaman for the true shaman (Ränk, p. 20). On Schmidt and Wilhelm Koppers’ theory of the “*Kulturkreis*,” see Arvidsson (n. 20 above), pp. 265–66. Arvidsson interprets Schmidt’s theories as the expression of an Austro-Fascist Catholic ideology that shared key features with National Socialism, such as the corporatist, patriarchal social ideal, anti-Semitism, and antisocialism. Because of the political opposition of these scholars to National Socialism, however, their ideas were seen as untainted and were allowed to continue to play a dominant role in postwar research.

⁵³ Fleck (n. 39 above), pp. 57–58.

⁵⁴ See Polomé (n. 39 above), p. 406.

⁵⁵ Buchholz (“Schamanistische Züge in der altisländischen Überlieferung”) uses for example the concept of “nagualism” in order to characterize the *fylgja*. This is a term introduced by Carlos Castaneda, one of the most important popularizers of the countercultural concept of shamanism (see below). Narr, on whose definition Buchholz relies, is influenced for his part

based not least on Hans Peter Duerr's cultural-critical view of history, as he argued in *Traumzeit*.⁵⁶ Based on the findings of the archaeologist Narr, Buchholz moves the origins of Nordic Shamanism to the Mesolithic Age.⁵⁷ In contrast to the idealization of a Germanic cultural superiority, he seems to be interested in a Romantic primitivism, which makes the (Germanic) shamans into a kind of "noble savages."

Both the feminist attempts to identify a female shamanism in the *seiðr*,⁵⁸ as well as the idealization of shamanic gender deviance in queer studies are to be seen as parts of these countercultural approaches. Donata Pahnke and Sylvia Kleineidam, for example, reconstruct an unbroken line of tradition from the "old-Germanic ritual" through the historic witches to the "new witches" (or Wicca) of the present.⁵⁹ The "perversities" of which *seiðr* is accused here become "annual rites still untouched by Christian sexual morality," the practices described in "*Hexenhammer*" are read as *seiðr* rituals in connection with the "old seasonal feasts," the flying witches on the Blocksberg are the soul-migrations of the *Völvas*, and so on.⁶⁰

These countercultural proponents of the shamanic theory can surely be seen as more or less part of the left-alternative spectrum, whereas the opponents that argue in terms of the Indo-Germanics seem to belong more in the political camp of the "New Right." Nevertheless, the multiple historical and contemporary lines of reception result in partially unconscious or unintended links between these two political camps, which at first seem so disparate.

The notion of the continuing existence of pagan Germanic elements of shamanism in witchcraft, for example, should not only be criticized as a romanticized idealization of our present; it also makes possible modes of reception that are ideologically quite problematic. In addition to drawing on the works of Duerr and Eliade, Pahnke also uses the work of Scandinavianists that were decidedly *völkisch* or closely tied to the National Socialists, like Bernhard Kummer, Höfler, and Wilhelm Mannhardt, without

by Eliade and Duerr (see Karl J. Narr, "Felsbild und Weltbild: Zu Magie und Schamanismus im jungpaläolithischen Jägertum," in Duerr, ed. (n. 14 above), pp. 118–36.

⁵⁶ Not unlike Eliade, Duerr was primarily interested in a division of the world into civilization and wilderness, rational and irrational, and in phenomena that tie these two realms together again. Duerr finds this connection in the image of fence riding that has a clear female connotation. In contrast to Eliade, Duerr's "dream time" does not lie in the past but exists without a place in the continuum of time. See Duerr (n. 31 above), p. 192.

⁵⁷ See Mebius, p. 289; Buchholz, *Schamanistische Züge in der altisländischen Überlieferung* (n. 21 above), p. 9.

⁵⁸ Critical of this is Marie-Theres Wacker, "Schamaninnen in der Welt der Bibel? Ein kulturvergleichendes Experiment," *Schlangenbrut* 57 (1997): 19.

⁵⁹ Kleineidam; Pahnke, "Die Spur der weisen Frauen" (n. 33 above).

⁶⁰ See Pahnke, "Die Spur der weisen Frauen," p. 142.

thematizing their “cognitive interests” and ideological points of departure.⁶¹ Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen relies on the ethnologist Lily Weiser in order to prove that shamans and witches were primarily female in gender, and on Wilhelm Mühlmann, who considers the *Veleda*, a Germanic female oracle, to be a female shaman.

Mühlmann seems to have played the role of an important middleman in the countercultural discourse on shamanism. An ethnologist, he was already active during the Nazi period, and a great deal of evidence indicates that especially in his monograph *Rassen und Völkerkunde* (1936; Races and ethnology) he “consciously promoted National Socialist/racist ideas in the framework of his ethnological publications.”⁶² After World War II, he became one of the most influential ethnologists in the German-speaking world. For our purposes, a later monograph, which appeared in 1984 under the title *Die Metamorphose der Frau: Weiblicher Schamanismus und Dichtung* (The metamorphosis of woman: Female shamanism and poetry), is of particular importance. In this work, Mühlmann clearly replaced a biologism based on the category of “race” with one based on the category of “sex.” He thus traced shamanism back to a primeval “female power,” “that is formed in women’s experience with a biological nature that overcomes the reality of death: their ability to give birth.”⁶³ It is this figure of thought, that is, for example, picked up by Meyer-Renschhausen when she attributes women’s religious abilities to their greater proximity to cosmic connections because of monthly menstruation.⁶⁴

Cultural pessimism, primitivism, and in extreme cases biologicistic patterns of thought are thus clearly linked to all three streams of shamanism discourse, that is, the Indo-Germanic opponents as well as both the “countercultural” and the “Indo-Germanic” proponents of the shamanism concept. They are in the end inspired by a shared source: Eliade, the most prominent proponent of the shaman theory. In the preface to his book on shamanism, Eliade took the romantic position that the shaman is a kind of archetypical hierophant.⁶⁵ In the moment of ecstasy, the shaman supersedes the “radical separation between the profane and the sacred.”⁶⁶ Shamanism, “at once mysticism, magic, and ‘religion’ in the broadest sense,”

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Hinz (n. 30 above), p. 144. An extensive discussion of this question can be found in Hinz, pp. 144 ff.

⁶³ Thomas Hauschild, “‘Weiblicher Schamanismus’ und ‘wilde Frauen’: Bemerkungen zu Mühlmann und Devereux,” *Curare* 5 (1982): 75.

⁶⁴ Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen, “Weiblicher Schamanismus oder *Veleda* und die Angst vor den schwarzen Künsten des anderen Geschlechts,” *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* 83 (1993): 108–14.

⁶⁵ On parallels between Jung’s theory of archetypes and Eliade’s “symbolic method” as presented in his book on shamanism, see Hultkrantz (n. 14 above), p. 162; Eliade (n. 15 above), p. xii.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. xix.

could return history—for Eliade always a kind of “fall from grace”—to the mystical experience and thus uncover the true situation of man in the cosmos.⁶⁷

It is surely this idealizing notion of the eruption of the “entirely other,” removed from rational human history, that has made Eliade’s concept attractive since the 1960s to those who take countercultural approaches, such as Mühlmann and, most important, Duerr. With his romanticizing concept of religion, however, Eliade is also of interest to those at the opposite ideological pole, not only de Vries, but in the end also Polomé and Fleck, who, despite all their criticism of a concept of shamanism that is too broad, also refer to passages from Eliade, for example, when they compare the fire ordeals of Odin with the Indian *Tapas* Ritual.⁶⁸

These examples are intended to show first of all the following: the question of elements of shamanism in the medieval Icelandic sources is influenced by quite particular ideological presumptions, regardless of whether the ultimate answer is positive or negative—and in every case an idealization of an imagined Germanic past lies at the foundation. For this reason as well we need fundamentally to interrogate the concept of shamanism itself and its usefulness for scholarly work. Perhaps “shamanism” is in fact a category of very limited use to religious studies, and more a concept that is projected onto “archaic” societies, revealing more about our own deficits, desires, and longings than the societies supposedly in question.⁶⁹

III. SCHOLARSHIP AND NEOSHAMANISM

The discussion of the ideological backgrounds or cognitive interests provides a broader perspective, that is, the question of the amazing influence that shamanism theories have won in nonacademic circles and, ultimately, the question of the mutual influence between the academic and popular reception of this concept.

A. SCHOLARS’ ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY

In the case of Eliade, a question already emerges about the extent to which his political activities in Rumanian fascism are implicated in his notion of religion and society, which was developed after World War II; likewise, we need to ask to what extent Höfler’s involvement with the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) during the Nazi period is related to his vision of the ecstatic Germanics, a notion that was also

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 412–14.

⁶⁸ On Indian *tapas*, see *ibid.*, pp. 392–94.

⁶⁹ This is suggested by Flaherty (n. 1 above) and Zinser, “Zur Faszination des Schamanismus” (n. 48 above). See also Atkinson (n. 35 above), who summarizes Michael T. Taussig’s thesis that “shamanism” must be read as an expression of colonial fears and fantasies (p. 315).

supported by Eliade. But this complicated discussion would require a separate study; here I will only go into a few more recent nonacademic activities of the scholars discussed above that might have had an influence on their cognitive interests.⁷⁰

The distinction between the “superior” Indo-Europeans or Aryans and the “primitive” shamans that lies at the foundation of the arguments of Polomé and Fleck can be seen in the context of their other political and cultural interests. Polomé, who died in 2000, was coeditor of the *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, together with the infamous American right-wing extremist Roger Pearson, and also editor of the openly racist journal *Mankind Quarterly*.⁷¹ For a while, Fleck lived out his interest in Germanic prehistory in a very concrete way: as an active member of the Society for Creative Anachronism and Marklandia, two U.S. organizations dedicated to reenacting medieval culture.⁷² These facts seem to confirm the suspicion expressed above that the academic positions of Polomé and perhaps Fleck as well correspond to positions of the international new right.

On the “countercultural side,” in particular in the feminist reception of shamanism, similar bridges have been built between scholarship and popular culture. Pahnke, for example, not only understands herself as a religious studies scholar but also practices her own version of shamanism in women’s groups as a “witch” or a *Ritualfrau* (ritual woman).⁷³

⁷⁰ Approaches to Höfler can be found in Klaus von See, *Barbar Germane Arier: Die Suche nach der Identität der Deutschen* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1994), in particular chaps. 7, 8, and 12; Stefanie v. Schnurbein, “Geheime kultische Männerbünde bei den Germanen—eine Theorie im Spannungsfeld zwischen Wissenschaft und Ideologien,” in *Männerbünde, Männerbünde: Zur Rolle des Mannes im Kulturvergleich*, ed. Gisela Völger and Karin v. Welck (Cologne: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde, 1990), 2:97–102. On Eliade, see Adriana Berger, “Mircea Eliade: Romanian Fascism and the History of Religions in the United States,” in *Tainted Greatness: Antisemitism and Cultural Heroes*, ed. Nancy Harowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), pp. 51–74; Norman Manea, “Happy Guilt: Mircea Eliade, Fascism, and the Unhappy Fate of Romania,” *New Republic* (August 5, 1991), pp. 27–36, and “The Incompatibilities,” *New Republic* (April 20, 1998), pp. 32–37; Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁷¹ On *Mankind Quarterly*, see, e.g., Michael Billig, “A Dead Idea That Will Not Lie Down,” *Searchlight* (July 1998), available at <http://www.searchlightmagazine.com/stories/genewar02.htm> (last accessed December 6, 2003).

⁷² Under the name Geirr Bassi Haraldsson, Fleck published the short text *The Old Norse Name*, which appeared in the series *Studia Marklandica*, and which provides options for finding historically and philologically correct Old Norse names for current usage. See also <http://merryrose.atlantia.sca.org/archive/1998-02feb/msg00381.html>, <http://www.markland.org>, http://www.ucsf.edu/~andrew/sca/onomastic_bib, and <http://www.sca.org> (last accessed December 6, 2003).

⁷³ See Donat Pahnke, “Being a Good Pagan: Magische Lehrjahre bei Starhawk,” *Schlangebrut* 67 (1999): 20–22, and “‘Schweig Nicht, Völva! Ich will dich fragen, bis ich alles weiß’” (n. 33 above), pp. 13–16.

B. NEOSHAMANISM

Shamanism has since the 1970s spread in numerous publications, in particular in self-help books as well as in seminars and lectures on achieving extraordinary states of consciousness, as a practice of meditation and healing.⁷⁴ In her overview of the research literature, Jane Atkinson comes to the following conclusion: “By far the most significant recent development for the field is the blossoming of a new shamanism in the United States and Europe, spawned by the drug culture of the 1960s and 1970s, the human potential movement, environmentalism, interests in non-Western religions, and by popular anthropology, especially the Castaneda books.”⁷⁵

Furthermore, shamanism has become a buzzword in other cultural contexts, for example, in art, theater, and literature. Here, the shaman is an artist whose performative acts are attributed a power that mediates between the social and the transcendental. The most prominent example here is surely Joseph Beuys. But to do justice to these complex interrelations would also require a separate study.⁷⁶

Direct influences of academic studies on religious and social practices can be found already at the beginning of the neoshamanism movement in the United States. This is particularly true of the two ethnologists who introduced the successful advance of the “urban shamans.” Carlos Castaneda, with his reports of experiences with the Mexican *brujo* Don Juan (later revealed to be fictive), and Michael Harner, who since around 1980 has been teaching in shamanism seminars and publications a “core-shamanism,” or an “urban shamanism,” in the United States and Europe. His *The Way of the Shaman* appeared for the first time in 1980 and is based on his field research in South America at the end of the 1950s.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Wallis (n. 35 above) gives the following definition from the perspective of the shamanic practitioner: “Neo-shamanism is a spiritual path among Westerners that utilizes aspects of indigenous shamanism and representations of shamanism in the past, for personal and communal spiritual empowerment” (p. 213). Hartmut Hartmut Zinser (“Schamanismus im ‘New Age’: Zur Wiederkehr schamanistischer Praktiken und Seancen in Europa,” in *Zwischen den Zeiten: Das New Age in der Diskussion*, ed. Matthias Pilger and Steffen Rink [Marburg: Diagonal, 1989], p. 63) shows that at the basis of the search for extraordinary states of consciousness lies a “technique of abstraction” similar to that of Eliade’s method “of ignoring social and historical relations of groups and tribes in which shamans appear in Siberia.” Similar as well is the emphasis on “but a few elements of Siberian shamanism, especially the journey to heaven enabled by ecstasy, and the contact with the sacred made possible by this journey, as Eliade sees it.” Eliade’s text did indeed—via a number of mediating steps—have a significant influence on the neoshamanic movement. This is already shown by the bibliographies in the books mentioned, which almost without exception refer to Eliade.

⁷⁵ Atkinson, p. 322.

⁷⁶ The beginnings of this artistic-aesthetic concept of shamanism are discussed in the second part of Flaherty.

⁷⁷ See Merete Demant Jakobsen, *Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 160. Harner’s method is a conglomerate of various shamanic methods from various cultures. On Harner,

It did not take long until theories about elements of shamanism in the medieval Norse tradition found their way into the neoshamanic movement. This first took place in Sweden. As far as I have been able to reconstruct this development, the connection between the practices of the itinerant neoshamans and the Norse practice of *Seid* was first established by members of the network *Yggdrasil*, founded in 1982, dedicated to the cultivation and rediscovery of shamanic techniques in general, in particular the Norse shaman tradition. One of the founders of *Yggdrasil*, Jörgen I. Eriksson, was challenged by Native Americans who “attempt to live in a traditional way” not to search for orientation in the Native American heritage but, rather, in his own pre-Christian tradition.⁷⁸ Relying in particular on Strömbäck’s study as well as Folks Ström’s 1967 history of Norse religions, *Nordisk hedendom* (Norse paganism), Eriksson began to develop a modern version of the *Seid* from medieval sources.⁷⁹ According to the practitioner himself, the reconstruction was based on “research,” that is, the study of sources and scholarly treatments as well as “empirical testing.” Galina Lindquist comes to the following conclusion: “*Seid* became accepted by the neo-shamans when it proved to be experientially rewarding, and was transformed into a local tradition when it was shown ‘to work.’”⁸⁰ This new form of the *seiðr* has been firmly established in the Swedish group *Yggdrasil* since the 1990s: there is a ritual site with *sejdhjälle* on a meadow in Hanstaskog outside Stockholm, and “*Seid* became the key organizing symbol for the Nordic variety of shamanism people were striving to construct.”⁸¹

At around the same time, a similar attempt to establish *Seid* as a shamanic practice emerged in the U.S. neo-Germanic pagan group *Ring of Troth*. It can be assumed that the founder of the group, Edred Thorsson,

see also Mihály Hoppál, “Urban Shamans: A Cultural Revival,” in *Studies on Shamanism*, ed. Anna-Leena Siikala and Mihály Hoppál (Helsinki: Finnish Anthropological Society, 1992), p. 200.

⁷⁸ These are Eriksson’s own words in a newspaper article (Jörgen I. Eriksson, “Oden Som Revolutionär,” *Frihetlig Socialistisk Tidskrift* 44 [January, 1982]: 18–22). See also Galina Lindquist, *Shamanic Performances on the Urban Scene: Neo-Shamanism in Contemporary Sweden*, Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, no. 39 (Stockholm: Department of Social Anthropology, 1997), pp. 28–29; Stefanie v. Schnurbein, *Religion als Kulturkritik: Neugermanisches Heidentum im 20. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1992), pp. 200–201. Lindquist did a comprehensive ethnological study of *Yggdrasil*, in which she also points to the significance of Michael Harner for the foundation of today’s “network for shamanism” (pp. 29 ff.).

⁷⁹ Lindquist describes the history of *Yggdrasil*’s *Seid*-ritual from its beginning among a small circle of friends (see pp. 133 ff.). She analyzes this development of a modern form of *Seid* as a strategy of authentication. According to her, the material and research on *seiðr* while on one hand authentic, nevertheless due to the sparseness of the material leave enough space for the fantasy and improvisation necessary for the creation of a ritual appropriate to the present time and one’s own needs.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

aka Stephen Flowers, a key figure in the international movement of Neo-Germanic paganism, gave the impetus after a stay in Europe, in which he also had contact with *Yggdrasil*.⁸² In Germany, “Norse” shamanic techniques have also spread since the 1980s in neo-Germanic pagan groups such as the *Armanen-Orden* and another group named *Yggdrasil* (not related to the Swedish one) that practices a “Germanic-Celtic shamanism.”⁸³

The revival of *Seid* as a technique of Germanic shamanism is thus an international phenomenon, which was and is spread through personal contacts, networks of groups, and publications. What, then, are the ideological leanings of the proponents of a Norse neoshamanism? So-called Asatru groups or neo-Germanic pagan groups that have taken up the revival of a Germanic pre-Christian religion show mostly *völkisch*, extreme right-wing, or quite openly neo-Nazi tendencies.⁸⁴ However, for our purposes it is more interesting that precisely those groups that most seek to distance themselves from these right-wing extremist, racist, and *völkisch* traditions in neo-Germanic paganism identify most intensively with “Norse shamanism.” This is true of the Swedish group *Yggdrasil*, which according to my own research is the group with the least-right-wing tendencies; the American group *Hrafnar*, which is associated with the *Ring of Troth*; and the German *Rabenclan*.⁸⁵ Lindquist points out that the political understanding of neoshamanism is decidedly democratic; they claim to live a democratic spirituality without dogmas, gurus, and priests, and with simple practices open to all.⁸⁶ In addition, on the basis of the parallels to witch-

⁸² Ibid. Lindquist assumes that this (re)invention of *Seid* in the United States developed independently from its predecessors in Sweden. This seems unlikely, considering that Flowers, before introducing the shamanic techniques of *Seid* in the U.S. *Ring of Troth* was in contact with members of *Yggdrasil*. Lindquist herself mentions that after the founding of *Yggdrasil* congratulations were sent from a Center for Runic Studies in Texas (p. 32). Lindquist writes further: “The head of the Center, a rune expert, occultist and esoteric, was enthusiastic about *Yggdrasil* and *Gimle*, and even asked for permission to translate selected articles from *Gimle* for their own magazine in the US” (p. 32). The head of this center was Flowers, who in addition to the center, in 1987 founded the U.S. Asatru group *The Ring of Troth*. Flowers/Thorsson spent a year in Europe when the founding of *Yggdrasil* took place and had contacts with the German *Armanen-Orden* as well as the Swedish neo-Germanic group *Breidablikk-Gilde*. From the latter group, in turn, a number of members joined *Yggdrasil* (see on this Schnurbein, *Religion als Kulturkritik*, p. 138). One group affiliated with the *Ring of Troth*, Diana Paxson’s *Hrafnar*, is today the most prominent group that practices *Seid* in the United States. It does not seem unlikely to assume mutual influences between U.S. and Swedish *Seid* practices. On *Hrafnar* and *Seid* see also Wallis, p. 218.

⁸³ See <http://www.yggdrasil-kreis.org> (last accessed December 6, 2003).

⁸⁴ See Schnurbein, *Religion als Kulturkritik*.

⁸⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 134–35, 205. *Rabenclan—Arbeitskreis der Heiden in Deutschland e.V.* is a kind of umbrella association for neopagans, which makes great efforts to distance itself from extreme right-wing tendencies and, especially in its “Ariosophie-Projekt,” also actively studied, uncovered, and criticized right-wing tendencies. See <http://www.rabenclan.de> (last accessed December 6, 2003).

⁸⁶ Lindquist. See on this Atkinson, “Shamanisms Today” (n. 35 above), p. 322. Elitist concepts within shamanism, to which Lindquist also refers, show that this self-conception of individual members of the group does not necessarily reflect the real situation.

craft, shamanism is conceived as a woman-friendly or woman-centered practice. (For Norse shamanism, the *Völvas* here play a central role.) Furthermore, the evidence of gender switching and deviance make neoshamanic techniques also attractive for the “queer community.”⁸⁷ And finally, the ecological components, the supposed mediating function of the shamans between nature and culture, further underscore their attractiveness across the entire alternative scene, while the focus on supposedly holistic techniques of healing make the shaman an identificatory figure for alternative psychotherapy.⁸⁸

Robert Wallis correctly points out that the countercultural and primitivist Germanic neoshamans are eyed with great skepticism by the more traditionally *völkisch* or even neo-Nazi Neo-Germanic pagans.⁸⁹ Thus, a similar political opposition can be established for the neopagan movement as for the above-mentioned scholarly debate. In both cases, however, this also means that the countercultural reference to something supposedly originally Germanic always has the inherent danger of consciously or unconsciously spreading *völkisch* neopagan thought, thus building a bridge between the political far right and a perhaps politically naive counterculture of whatever kind.⁹⁰

But even neoshamanics can argue in directly *völkisch* ways. Already in the Swedish *Yggdrasil* there is at least a fraction that expressly seeks to maintain shaman practices because they allegedly correspond to their own quasi-natural tradition. This is a figure of thought that ties religion to the soil and, with the emphasis on the importance of “ancestors,” to heritage, to “blood.” In his introduction to *Seid: En vägledning i nordlig shamanism* (*Seid: A guide in northern shamanism*), for example, Eriksson explains that the goal is to develop a shamanism appropriate to our times, but “well-anchored in our own landscape, light, climate, and culture.”⁹¹ Flowers/Thorsson takes this figure of thought much further, linking Norse shamanism directly to the genetic heritage of the Germanics,

⁸⁷ See Wallis (n. 35 above), pp. 223–24.

⁸⁸ This figure of thought is rooted in part in C. G. Jung and his interest in the figure of the shaman. See Atkinson, p. 313.

⁸⁹ See Wallis, p. 223.

⁹⁰ Edred Thorsson, *Northern Magic: Rune Mysteries and Shamanism* (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn, 1998), uses the popularity of the shamanism concept in order to market his own, quite *völkisch*-racist understanding of Northern magic. From the first to the second edition, he changed the title of his *Northern Magic from Mysteries of the Norse, Germans and English* (1998) to *Rune Mysteries and Shamanism*, adding, with the words “rune” and “shamanism,” two buzzwords that clearly make the book interesting to a wider audience.

⁹¹ Jörgen I. Eriksson, Marie Ericsson, Mikael W. Gejel, and Mikael Hedlund, *Sejd—En vägledning i nordlig shamanism*, 2d ed. (Stockholm: Vattumannen, 1988), p. 9. Lindquist indicates, however, that this “quest for national purity, to which Jörgen appealed” was never really taken up by *Yggdrasil* (p. 47).

or the “Aryans,” and as a consequence suggesting that Norse shamanism should be practiced as an expression of an “ancestral path.”⁹²

We can conclude that the theories discussed above on elements of shamanism in Germanic mythology have almost all been taken up and practiced in neoshamanic or neo-Germanic pagan groups. In some cases, it can be shown quite directly that sources and research literature are used for the creation of new shamanic rituals, like the Swedish group *Yggdrasil* using Strömbäck’s work. In other contexts, the sources are not so openly exposed. It is, however, clear that almost all the details that Buchholz mentions in his study turn up in some way in the practice or theory of the “Norse” neoshamans. It seems also important here that the rituals created by the new pagans and their mythological ideas are spread beyond neopagan groups. One important way in which this takes place is through works of fantasy literature. Two key figures of the U.S. neopagan, neoshamanic scene are also well-known fantasy authors. Diana Paxson, the leader of *Hrafnar* and the sister-in-law of Marion Zimmer Bradley (the author of the bestseller *The Mists of Avalon*), in her Nibelungen trilogy makes the Valkyries into a sort of order of female shamans.⁹³ Stephan Grundy, a prominent member of the *Ring of Troth* and author of works on neo-Germanic paganism, is also an author, under the name Kveldulf Gundarsson, of guides to neopaganism and, using his own name, of two Nibelungen novels that are especially successful in Germany, *Rhinegold* and *Attila’s Treasure*.⁹⁴

C. EFFECTS OF NEOSHAMANISM ON SCHOLARSHIP

The examples of Fleck and Polomé have already shown that nonacademic political and cultural activities could certainly play a role in scholarly research. But the link between religious neopaganism and scholarly activities can also be shown quite directly. It already begins at the very start of “Norse” shamanism. The above-mentioned Thorsson, for example, is not only a prominent neopagan, propagandist of neoshamanism, and occultist but, under the name Stephen Flowers, also a Scandinavianist and Indo-Europeanist. He studied in Texas with Polomé and also used his stay in Europe to study in Göttingen with Klaus Düwel. Flowers is additionally an author in the above-mentioned extreme right-wing journal

⁹² See Thorsson, pp. xii, 4.

⁹³ Diana Paxson, *The Wolf and the Raven* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), *The Dragons of the Rhine* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), and *The Lord of the Horses* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

⁹⁴ Kveldulf Gundarsson, *Teutonic Magic: The Magical and Spiritual Practices of the Germanic People*, Llewellyn’s Teutonic Magic Series (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn, 1990), and *Teutonic Religion: Folk Beliefs and Practices of the Northern Tradition*, Llewellyn’s Teutonic Magic Series (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn, 1993). Stephan Grundy, *Attila’s Treasure* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), and *Rhinegold* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994).

Mankind Quarterly and, by contrast, the author of the article on magic in the encyclopedia *Medieval Scandinavia* edited by Phillip Pulsiano.⁹⁵

A similar case is the above-mentioned fantasy author Grundy, who received his doctorate from Cambridge University with a dissertation, *The Cult of Óðinn*. Grundy was active under the name Kveldulf Gundarsson in the Asatru group *Ring of Troth* and had under this name written a spiritual guide to Norse religion and magic. Grundy practices a shamanic Odin's magic in neo-Germanic pagan groups, which also finds expression in his notion of ritual, magic, and religion in his novels. It is thus not surprising that such authors' descriptions of magic and rituals bring together all the elements of shamanism that Buchholz describes in his study.

The following examples of direct mutual influences between the academic world and neoshamanism go beyond the narrow realm of Scandinavian and German Studies. A further member of the *Ring of Troth* and a practitioner of *Seid* is Jenny Blain, an ethnologist who teaches at Sheffield Hallam University in England. She has dedicated herself to the study of neoshamanic groups that practice *Seid*, and one of her books recently appeared with the title *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism*. Her university lists her under the rubric "Chaplains and Religious Advisers" as responsible for "pagans."⁹⁶ Finally, the archaeologist Wallis, who has published together with Blain, is a professed neoshaman, and, from the point of view of the gay movement and queer studies, researches both the current as well as the prehistorical forms of *Seid*.⁹⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

Wallis urgently pleads that we take the experiences and the influence of the neoshamanic movement on scholarship seriously. This surely cannot be supported if this is understood as meaning that the extraordinary experiences of neoshamans could provide valid knowledge about Scandinavian medieval magical practices. My discussion was, however, intended to show that ideological, political, cultural, or religious activities can certainly have an influence on academic interrogations. From this perspective, we can draw the conclusion that ultimately both the academic discussion about elements of shamanism in the Old Icelandic literature as well as the neopagan variant of Norse neoshamanism belong to the same large discursive environment in which the romanticization of a Germanic past

⁹⁵ See Stephen Flowers, "Magic," in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 399–400.

⁹⁶ See <http://www.shu.ac.uk/services/ssc/chaplaincy/chaplains.html> (last accessed December 6, 2003). See also Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁹⁷ See Wallis (n. 35 above).

is at issue, and in which in the end inspiration and impulses for present-day life are searched for. This mixing of research and personal orientation is not only found in the area of Nordic studies but in shamanism research as a whole. This is well illustrated by the example of Mihály Hoppál, undoubtedly one of the most important present-day shamanism researchers, who also has a positive interest in neoshamanism and sees in it a redeeming factor in our materialist present, because it represents “an overtly altruistic ideology which, in our egoistic and materialistic times, contains a decisively positive program for life.” In addition, he argues that it contributes just as much as traditional shamanism to the preservation of collective and ethnic identity.⁹⁸

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⁹⁸ Mihály Hoppál, “Urban Shamans: A Cultural Revival” (n. 76 above), p. 209; see also “Shamanism: An Archaic and/or Recent System of Beliefs,” in Siikala and Hoppál, eds. (n. 76 above), pp. 117–31. An early example of such mutual influences is Edsman, ed. (n. 51 above). This collection was based on a conference sponsored by an anthroposophical couple. Wacker (n. 57 above), indicates that there are also clear continuities of research to be found here with the German school of the history of religions (n. 13).

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