



ULRICH VAN LOYEN

SHAMANISM AND THE CULTURE OF DEFEAT¹

ABSTRACT: The fact that shamanism, as described by Mircea Eliade or Carlos Castaneda, is an “invention of tradition” is considered a commonplace today. But to understand its historical location we need to follow the entanglements of science, art and politics. This essay argues that the concept of shamanism reveals itself as a response to a defeat that affected not so much the scattered communities of Siberia or the Himalayas, but above all their later interpreters. It describes shamanism as a figure of thought in which the defeated of the WWII attempted to act as advocates of indigenous communities in order to overcome their own involvement in fascism and war. Looking at and with Ernesto De Martino and Joseph Beuys, it shows how Shamanism turned fragility into strength.

KEYWORDS: Shamanism; Beuys; De Martino; Indigenization; Postwar culture.

Introduction

We know shamans today as a kind of revenant. They can be found in Vienna’s 9th district as “shamanic practitioners” who provide certain therapeutic services, or they can be encountered as shamans of the QAnon- movement in Washington’s Capitol, or you can read in the tabloids about an alleged shaman who Putin is said to have contacted before his invasion of Ukraine. Be it as it may, these figures have in common that they invoke a certain allochry, although their constellation may change from case to case: Are they outdated manifestations of late modernism or primitivism that are cited with the various masks of shamanism? And are they harmless, at best humorous references, or do they not evoke a sense of unease that deserves to be recognized? I argue that Shamanism is neither as old as its enthusiasts think, nor as new as its detractors believe. It was modernized in a certain historical situation, out of various interests that are by no means always congruent, and I would like to outline such a conjuncture a little below.

¹ The text is an expanded version of a lecture held at the IFK Vienna on 22 November 2022. The text as such is part of my book on “Nachkriegsschamanismus. Beiträge zu einer Kultur der Niederlage” (Turia + Kant, Vienna 2024) and has been slightly modified for the English translation.

The Tartar Desert

“I don't feel like a savior, but I would like to draw attention to the possibility of people being able to redeem themselves,” replied Joseph Beuys (to E. Pfister, quoted from Mennekes 1998, 124) when he was accused of modernizing a private revelation that was suspicious of the style of objectivity of the young German Federal Republic. What was meant was the legend of how Beuys had escaped from a burning dive bomber in the Crimean Tatar steppe in March 1944. Apologists and critics agree that this fall must be the beginning of the expanded concept of art coined by Beuys, which is actually an extended concept of men: “Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler – Every human being is an artist.”²

But does everyone fall from the sky? A thoroughly ambivalent cultural history of the post-war period is condensed in Joseph Beuys. In recent years, around the centenary of his birth, the question of “what remains of the shaman” has been addressed again with journalistic fervour (Ackermann 2008). It was as if his installations, sculptures, and manifestos were held together by the conversation with the hare, which was supposed to represent a ritual apology for the desperate consumption of the rabbit after the crash, by the fat corners evocating the embrocations by the Tartars, by the felt that protected the scorched scalp. The guilt of survival, the perpetrators as victims, the reconciliation between perpetrators and victims – these important motifs for German and Austrian post-war culture and their mimicry can be played through or deconstructed using these framings of Beuys' art. The deconstruction then only reveals the following: that it was not Tatar nomads, but employees of the German field hospital in the Crimea, who cared for the unlucky flier, or at most that the only tartar could have been the local vet, who had long since ceased to be a nomad. And, above all, that Beuys did not spend a two-week liminal phase between life and death, but just one day (for his biography, see Riegel 2013). This kind of demythologization does not conceal its disappointment. It would have been a grace if one could have believed this representative of the German soldier.

It is astonishing that mythologizers and demythologizers do their calculations without Beuys and without the knowledge which explicated the psychologist and art theorist Friedrich Wolfram Heubach. With regard to the personal-mythical connotations of Beuys' materials, he states that “it would, however, be completely absurd to recognize in them alone a sufficient condition for Beuys' choice of these materials and for their specific effect on the contemporary public” (Heubach 2008, 5). Rather, the historical context of these materials must be recognized, and thus ultimately Beuys' time-critical impetus. This historical context essentially includes the three-step process of 1) fascist romanticism of progress, of 2) the collapse following the enormous expansion of German rule after the initial war success, a collapse in which the technical-civilizational

² This formula, repeatedly taken up by Beuys, was finally clarified in a lecture at the Münchner Kammerspiele on 20 November 1985.

infrastructure largely cracked down, and finally 3) of the misery that lasted for several years, in which the monstrosity of the Third Reich was felt retrospectively, in such a way that, according to Heubach, “overcoming material hardship was synonymous with coming to terms with the past” (*ibid.*). In other words, the repression of the hardship caused by National Socialism, or rather: ultimately demanded by it, became one with the repression of National Socialism itself, and this meant that not only was the memory of National Socialism ward off in order not to remember the hardship, but that the defense against the memory of the hardship was also intended to ward off what it had to remind us of.

The semantic proximity of the “Persilschein” and the easily wipeable white tile, which characterized the construction of the 1950s, at least in the Rhineland (and to which Markus Krajewski has drawn attention), the heightened hygienic awareness in general, the concept of “mental hygiene” are all meaningful here. It is all the more striking which hygienically impure articles, which had still played a role in the immediate post-war period, now became impossible: jackets padded with newspaper wrappings, fabric remnants and rags processed into felts, felts used to make gauze, footmuffs and other warming materials. Such throwbacks to basic survival techniques and materials had fueled the civilizational disillusionment in which people identified with the evidence of their own and other colonial expansion, for example as the “Natives of Trizonesia” (Karl Berbuer's Cologne carnival song from 1948).

So, it is hardly surprising when Beuys is criticized in 1968 for not having given form to “a phenomenon of our century.” The belief in modernity can certainly gain something from its collateral damage and peripeties, but nothing from what Heubach has called the “traumatic clinging to a disturbing, shocking experience,” unless it appears in the form of a myth that can be read as a timeless existential metaphor. Beuys’ narrative is in any case, precisely because of its fixation on material, “so transparently a metaphor of his – and not only his – experience of the historical fall of this [...] Germany, which was soaring into a thousand years of flight, and of being thrown back into the primitive living conditions of the post-war period” (6), that the energy of the rationalist myth-busting undertaken by the critics appears first and foremost as a continuation of the aforementioned work of repression. The shaman, who has been gaining profile since the early 1960s as an ambiguous motif of self-appropriation through foreign experience, was not a problem for educated contemporaries and presumably represented a welcome “cover” for the repression process – probably also because of the temporal and spatial infinity of the references associated with him. The entanglement of shaman and “lumpen collector” (in the Benjaminian sense of the term), however, does, and the resistance to this entanglement proves its realistic side no less than the enduring fascination of Beuys’ phantasmagoria throughout his life. Ultimately, however, German cultural history as a history of repression – a repression as well as the repression of a repression – has ensured that the nexus of self-appropriation and experience of foreignness has fallen victim to

amnesia as a whole.³ Touching on the origins of this nexus could help to write a different, and particularly *global* cultural history of the German post-war period.

The way of the shaman

The concept of the shaman has accompanied Beuys' artistic endeavors and has also been used by him since 1960 at the latest. What is a shaman? In short, someone who flies. In an exemplary way, the ethnologist Thomas Hauschild in an exhibition at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt (2011), *The Dream of Flying*, demonstrated that the inner journey of the shaman and the outer flight of the pilot draw on the same prerequisite, the neurophysiological structure of which we are only beginning to recognize: the ability to design in advance, to imagine a flying body. This projection probably has something to do with human grasping, with reaching out and throwing, i.e. it has an evolutionary-biological meaning. At the same time, there is a surplus in it that goes beyond the "merely human," calling up fantasies of dissolution of boundaries, for example in the face of out-of-body and near-death experiences, in which the consciousness isolated from its environment enters the "ego tunnel," as the neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger calls it, in which all power is concentrated once again before possible extinction. The ethnologist Hans Peter Duerr builds his entire theory of religion on this shamanistic borderline moment.

The word "shaman" goes back to a Tungus word and means as much as "driven," but also "elevated," an eccentric sublimity, so to speak, that was first attributed to circumpolar healers – before the term was used synonymously for any (spiritual) healer.⁴ It was German and Dutch scholars who visited the Siberian parts of the Russian Tsarist Empire at the behest of Catherine the Great in the 18th century and provided the first shaman portraits. Until the end of the 1950s, these Tungus-speaking ethnic groups were subsumed under the term Tatars, as were the Turkic-speaking Crimean and Dobrujan Tatars, under whom Beuys claimed to have fallen. Probably the most detailed descriptions of shamanism were written by the Dane Knud Rasmussen, who carried out

³ The fact that this self-appropriation through foreign experience found its vanishing point in the transformation of the state of occupation into a state of obsession can easily be seen in the popular cultural and, above all, carnival testimonies of those years. The "natives of Trizonesia" allow their (post)-colonial self-attribution to flow together with the presumption of innocence to which the indigenous people are entitled as representatives of prehistory. Self-primitivisation is an opportunity to start from scratch; however, it is also the last option in the sense of an *ultima ratio* and is acted out – because otherwise it would only be embarrassing and shameful – as an element of the festive culture and at the limit of what is justifiable. Paradoxically, the need for festivities can harbour a great deal of misery. On carnival and post-war, see the ground-breaking study by Dreschke 2024 (forthcoming).

⁴ Cfr. Andrei A. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive. Shamanism and Western Imagination*, Oxford 2007, viii.

his Thule expeditions in Greenland between 1919 and 1923 with an interdisciplinary team and endeavored to depict the Inuit world view in its complexity and social location – the strict separation of winter and summer activities, which leads to two opposing social forms; proving oneself in a world of constant danger, which can be organised by taboo rules, but also the intimate contact with spirits, who occasionally felt so sorry for the shaman that they offered themselves to him as helping spirits.⁵

Drawing selectively on Rasmussen's research – which, in turn, led to a whole series of circumpolar studies and collections as one can best see in the Ethnological section of the Danish National Museum – a "Wesensschau" of the Shaman emerged in Germany, which in a sense represented the hyperborean counterpart to Nietzsche's Mediterranean obsession with Dionysus, and above all was intended to confirm the theory of the originality of the religion of reincarnation as advocated by Emil Rohde in his opus magnum *Psyche* (1899). For Rohde, ecstatic experiences had been conclusive proof of the existence of an independent soul (and, of less interest to his descendants, of the truth of Christianity). In the 1930s, Hans Findeisen, perhaps the only German expert on the USSR, developed a typology of "possession priests (shamans)." Findeisen drew up guidelines for the successful colonization of Eurasia with the help of small autochthonous groups, and he pulled out all the stops to prove that the Germans in the East would face their own longed-for early kinship – starting with the Crimean Goths, who were rediscovered as Crimean Tatars.⁶ In the study *Die Schamanen. Jagdhelfer und Ratgeber, Seelenfahrer, K nder und Heiler*, Findeisen concentrated his remarks on shamanism from the 1950s onwards and opened up the possibility for German-speaking readers to spiritualistically decontextualize shamanism (or rather their own historical entanglement with the question of shamans). Of course, this was also just another German attempt to find the archaic Greeks to whom Friedrich Nietzsche's and Erwin Rohde's search had already been directed. Or more precisely: the desire to map the encounter of Greeks and Germanic tribes, to find the missing link that would have created a people of the forehead and the fist that was invincible in its innermost essence. Joseph Beuys will have read the following summary from Findeisen: "The shaman [...] is by no means primarily a magician, but a priest and artist." His cultural form proves "that the creative spirit and its creations profoundly determined the character of a large cultural world province of ancient mankind (before European-American mechanization) that was otherwise always described as 'primitive' or even 'pathological'" (Findeisen 1957, 14, 194).

Only a few years after the end of the Second World War, the outcome of which was seen as determined by the combination of technology and combat organization, a projection surface was consolidated here from the swathes of the past in order to thematize one's own entanglement in false rationalism and to take the side of other

⁵ Knud A. Rasmussen's account of his endeavors among Greenlandic Shamans can be found in: *Across Arctic America. Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition*, London-New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927.

⁶ On Findeisen's role in National Socialism, see Mosen 1991, among others.

opponents who practiced the “rebirth from the spirit.” Findeisen’s success as a writer (rather than as a scholar), which extended into the 1960s and cut across the political camps, can be read against the backdrop of this entanglement and the longing for an unhistorical source for the reappropriation of agency. It can be associated more than just metaphorically with the terminology of those years, such as “re-education”, “rebirth” and, of course, “re-incarnation.”

This legitimized an aesthetic and political resistance to European-American mechanization. A famous example of this is Beuys' performance *I like America and America likes me* (1974), in which the former Wehrmacht fighter pilot had himself imprisoned with a coyote in New York and thus appropriated the perception of the coyote by the indigenous population.⁷ In a situation perceived as post-colonial, the shaman continued the German identification with North American natives that had already become a matter of course.⁸ The fact that the event took place opposite to the building of the Goldmann Sachs Bank also gave it an anti-Semitic flavour in the eyes of some commentators.

Another author whose texts inspired Beuys was the former propagandist of the Romanian Iron Guard, Mircea Eliade, whose “Schamanismus und archaische Ekstasetechnik” (“Shamanism and Archaic Ecstasy Technique”) was published in German translation in 1956. Eliade enables a decontextualization of shamanism by generalizing the steps through which one becomes a shaman: thus, instead of genealogical succession, he emphasizes the crisis, instead of continuity with cultural traditions, the break within them, as well as the distinction through increased intensity of experience, the unity of “crisis” with “tragic greatness and beauty” (Eliade 2012, 22). Eliade further developed this image of the shaman as the self-redeeming cultural hero from an adaptation of the motif of the shamanic journey to the afterlife, originally handed down by the Russian-German researcher Wilhelm Radloff (1837-1918): “On the occasion of a ritual horse sacrifice in the Altai region, which is intended to secure the herd and general well-being, the spirit of the shaman sung into a trance ascends into the sky in order to transfer the spirit of the sacrificial animal to the tribal deity.”⁹ Based on Radloff's description, ritual sacrifice and self-sacrifice, i.e. the shaman as the guarantor of all other sacrifices, have demonstrated their family-like potential with other religious practices and their interpretations - especially with Christianity. The missionaries of the Russian Orthodox Church already translated shamanism into a spiritual vehicle for their message.

⁷ Cfr. Raschzok 2015, 165ff. Being locked up in a cage and thus like an animal is reminiscent of American practices of keeping prisoners of war - and indeed before Abu Ghraib at the end of the Second World War in the liberated territories - such as that which was granted to the poet Ezra Pound in Pisa, who was well-disposed towards Mussolini. Cfr. Schivelbusch 2015, 67f.

⁸ On German Indian history, see Penny 2013.

⁹ Cfr. Radloff 1884. Znamenski points out that the first canonical entries on shamanism – for example in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* – are almost entirely from Radloff's work. Cfr. Znamenski 2007, 35ff., 172.

In comparison to his sources, in particular Sergei Shirokogoroff's *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* (1935), a study of indigenous Siberian religion written in English, which, in contrast to Eliade, insists on the affiliation of the "shamanism complex" to the "larger complex of cultural and social life" of hunters and gatherers, Eliade made an abstraction that should enable everyone to be a shaman, just as everyone is or can become an artist.¹⁰ The prerequisite for this was the fact that the real-life role models could no longer defend themselves: in China and Siberia, they were in re-education camps or became victims of police punitive actions. Their drums were silenced, some confiscated, others burned.¹¹

The culture of defeat

In Germany between 1959 and 1972, alternatives to modern technology, which were perceived as an expression of what Martin Heidegger called "forgetfulness of being" as well as a strategy of a hostile social alliance, were offered by *Antaios. Zeitschrift für eine freie Welt*,¹² whose title recurs in the name of the in-house publishing company of the German so-called "New Right," founded in 2000.¹³ Supported by his publisher, the World War II officer Ernst Klett, Ernst Jünger, somewhat skeptical at first, embarked on a project in which Mircea Eliade, another in-house author, was nominally to act as co-editor. The first issue was dedicated to the "Magical Flight," the shamanic expertise and preparation for what appeared to be a rather stale copy of technical flying. This flight before the flight was intended to help defend the earthly forces embodied by the eponym, the Greek demigod Antaios, who guarded the Libyan shores. Only Heracles defeated him by lifting him from the ground. The magazine saw itself as critical of the zeitgeist; in an age of planetary abstraction, in which people flew to the moon and wars were planned in the cosmos, it was intended, according to Friedrich Georg Jünger, to help "the other

¹⁰ A decontextualization in the service of the desire for one's own transformation and transgression can also be seen at work in the Paris *Collège de Sociologie*, whose members Georges Bataille dubbed "sorcerer's apprentices." In March 1939, at the time of the German invasion of Prague, Anatole Lewitzky gave his lecture on "Myths and Rites of Shamanism" at the Collège, although he only quoted Russian and German sources. Bataille later related Lewitzky's reflections to his own interpretations of the cave paintings in Lascaux. (Hollier 2012, 498ff).

¹¹ Cfr. Slezkine 1994, 226 ff. Soviet anthropologists tried in vain to ascribe to shamanism an egolitic, quasi "primordial communist" potential and thus to ennoble it. During the investiture of a new shaman, laypeople were also allowed to play his drum, but this moment only emphasized the strict distinction between "sacred" and "profane", which came about as soon as the new shaman had been "deployed" (cfr. Stépanoff 2019, 413).

¹² Cfr. van Loyen 2015, 223-225.

¹³ It is undoubtedly an omission of this essay to have ignored shamanism in the GDR. After all, two shamans, the Kyrgyz Tschinghis Aitmatov and the Mongolian Galsan Chinag, were among the most popular authors there, without the state specifically recognizing them as members of "socialist" brother nations."

side”¹⁴ to its right. This ‘reactionary’ perspective facilitated two intricate operations: the counterculture was able to be bourgeoisified, while at the same time a bourgeois audience interested in cultural studies participated in the counterculture. Essays on LSD (a first version of Ernst Jünger's *Annäherungen. Drogen und Rausch*) and tributes to the Hippie-movement – as a barb in a process of global acceleration – stand alongside essays on Rosicrucianism and various symbols and the decoding of the archetypes they invoke. “Symbol does well,” Aby Warburg once wrote, as it opens up the “Denkraum” for defense and appropriation.¹⁵ It is hardly surprising that the founders of the young German-language ethnomedicine and ethnobotany were to emerge from the circle of authors of this journal. As much as alleged anthropological invariants were normalized (e.g. human earth relatedness), new channels between practices and interpretations became visible.¹⁶

In 1959, Ernst Jünger had a correspondence with Ernst Klett about the future direction of the journal.¹⁷ “A new treasure of legitimacy” was to be amassed,¹⁸ Jünger whispered to the publisher, who was particularly keen on the descendants of the *Eranos*-circle,¹⁹ and he specified that it must first and foremost be about the revelation of the

¹⁴ Friedrich Georg Jünger: “This earth, the cradle and grave of man, no longer appears as goddess and mother, but as planet among planets, as sphere among spheres, and is understood as the substratum of planetary planning.” *Antaios*, 1(1959): S. 82.

¹⁵ Aby Warburg paradigmatically demonstrates the transformation of the cultic “devotional” space into the “thinking space” in his lecture later published under the title *Schlangenritual. A Travelogue*, which was held in Kreuzlingen (cfr. Warburg 1988, 59).

¹⁶ Ethnobotany and the associated psychopharmacology cannot be discussed in this context. However, both played just as important a role in the German ethno-boom of the 1970s and 1980s as they did internationally, as they were intended to make foreign experiences of self and other and the realm of extra sensorial perceptions accessible. Ethnobotany and Ethnopsychopharmacology took up the position between indigenous cultures and the European individual that had been assigned to parapsychology in the middle of the 20th century. However, this applied above all to those cultures in which the cultivation and processing of corresponding stimulants, narcotics and hallucinogens could be proven: in other words, above all to the two Americas. Against this background, it is not surprising that the mimetic figure of the shaman himself changes continents: from Siberia to the forests of Amazonia and the Andes. The conflicts between the colonial and indigenous world, which as the ‘global South’ represents an object of dispute in the Cold War, are negotiated primarily by US-American researchers and activists (although it is not always possible to distinguish between the two) using the Andean healer known as the shaman. Michael Taussig interprets the healing method in indigenous Colombia as a “healing through terror”: Healing as a mimetic taking up, mirroring, and Reinforcing of the experience of colonial violence (cfr. Taussig 1987). Against the background of psycho-pharmacological expertise, a historical phenomenology of shamanic activity emerges, whose approach is not dissimilar to that of Ernesto De Martino.

¹⁷ Correspondence between Ernst Jünger and Ernst Klett in the DLA Marbach, unpublished.

¹⁸ This passage in the letter is a quotation from *Auf den Marmorklippen* (Ernst Jünger, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 15, 319), whose perspectives sketched in “Inner Exile” are now to be realized.

¹⁹ The Eranos-Circle originally designated a group of professors from Heidelberg who were particularly interested in the history of religion. By 1933 it led to the Eranos conferences in Ascona, Switzerland.

“return of the same.” This is where Jünger met with “traditionalism,” in which primarily Neoplatonic schools of thought and religion were amalgamated into a *philosophia perennis*, which emerged in Europe or at West-Eastern interfaces and with corresponding authors: with René Guénon in Cairo, with Julius Evola in Rome and generally in the run-up to Italian neo-fascism (Sedgwick 2004, 188ff.), and of course with Mircea Eliade, who was now teaching in Chicago. Jünger had initially argued in favour of the title *Janus*, i.e. the god who looks in both directions, who is much more clearly associated with the shaman than Antaios, even where he embodies the reversal of direction. In comparison to the “Trickster,” a figure in which the reversal of relationships, the abolition of society in community takes shape and which essentially goes back to ethnographies by Paul Radin and Victor Turner,²⁰ the shaman was not a purely ethnographic figure, but the lingering reference to an abandoned, hidden, or simply not yet completely revealed order. As such, one can explain its greater success in Europe compared to the USA, especially the fact that it is based in “cultures of defeat” (Schivelbusch), which in turn is indicated by its thematisation in a magazine such as *Antaios* - in other words, where one has to claim that supposedly changing “time garments” (Jünger) merely conceal what is always true. The struggle for such an ethos is also demonstrated by other essays collected in *Antaios*, especially when they come from a nominally left-wing circle.

In addition to the Jünger brothers, Julius Evola, or former members of Romania's Iron Guard, there were also papers published by Ernesto De Martino, the new founder of Italian ethnology of religion and one of the most important references of Italian post-war culture, which had taken up the cause of paying off the debt of the wealthy North to the exploited South. In 1961, probably mediated by Mircea Eliade,²¹ his fifteen-page summary of *La terra del rimorso* (“Land of remorse”), a book that skillfully combines the ethnography and religious history of the Apulian Tarantula obsession with philosophical reflection and is still a cultural studies bestseller in Italy today. The ritual of regeneration associated with the individual crises of the *tarantati* at the annual zero point of peasant

²⁰ Cfr. Radin 1956, with contributions by Karl Kérenyi and C.G. Jung, as well as Turner 1967, in which Turner interprets the liminal space of status reversal as belonging to an “interstructural phase in social dynamics” (98), which is particularly illustrated as the site of action of African Trickster figures. In this “liminal period [...] the symbolism of both androgyny and sexlessness immediately becomes intelligible” (*ibid.*), an aspect that is missing in Eliade's male-coded scenes.

²¹ The relationship between De Martino and Eliade is complex and ultimately leads to an alternative that is clearly named, at least by the Italian: the historically conscious “etnocentrismo critico” on the one hand, and the historically oblivious combination of irrationalism and cultural relativism on the other. However, they were both students of Vittorio Macchioro, whose work on *Zagreus* (cfr. Macchioro 1920) had a decisive influence on Eliade's concept of religion. Cfr. Cesare Cases, “Introduzione”. In E. De Martino 1997.

society allows one person to enter into an ecstatic state with and for the group as a whole, in which the tarantula takes possession of them, and, to use Warburg's words, is “appropriated” and acted out (De Martino 1962). The choreutically and musically induced transformation of people into animals, the contact with otherworldly powers, the dangerous situation and the subsequent transfer of salvation from the individual to the group are characteristics of shamanistic processes as understood by Boas, Rasmussen and Eliade.

For many of the – almost exclusively male – authors of *Antaios*, fascism had been an experience of entanglement, disappointment or even alienation, which had to be distanced, appropriated and integrated in the form of ethnological enlightenment, and therefore suggested the path of the shaman. Looking back on his intellectual biography, De Martino concedes as an example, that the “primitive, archaic and savage” were not “merely around me,” but that “it sometimes happened that I also heard archaic voices within me [...] a kind of chaos and confusion that yearned for order and light” (De Martino 1975, 56). This retrospection concerns two things: the precondition for fascism – the call for order and clarity – and fascism itself, which harboured its own disappointment. It is therefore hardly surprising that the book that heralded the shamanistic renaissance in Italy was published in 1948 as a kind of academic counterpart to Carlo Levi's account of his exile in Basilicata in Southern Italy: *Il mondo magico*. *Prolegomeni a una storia di magismo* is the name of Ernesto De Martino's basic work, in which he moulds magical and parapsychological explanations for the astonishing and unsettling powers of the indigenous people with his theory of the “crisi della presenza” (“crisis of presence”), which could not be compensated for other than by adapting the entire situation (De Martino calls this “riscatto,” cfr. 2007 [1948], 92). Was this also his apology to the recent past?

To a certain extent, the “riscatto” requires a sacrifice – an intellectual and existential one – that those affected can learn from a ritual specialist, i.e. the shaman, as De Martino points out. This shaman is then the “Cristo magico,” Christ understood as a “magician.” In these steps – or in this leap from the footsteps of one mythologem to the next – De Martino accomplishes acultural translation feat for which Erwin Rohde would probably have congratulated him: from the circumpolar shaman to Dionysus and the Christian religion. It forms the basis for Carlo Ginzburg's thesis of shamanism as the Indo-European proto-religion, which has been made plausible by archival research since the late 1960s and can still be analysed at the end of the witchcraft trials in Friuli in northern Italy (Ginzburg 2020, 281-300; especially 294-296). With De Martino and Ginzburg, shamanism now takes on an emancipatory aspect that is directed against oppression (or against standardized rule in general): shamans form secret or coercive societies, they are crystallization nuclei of marginalized communities. De Martino's student Vittorio

Lanternari will describe them as carriers of the energies that are mobilized against the occupiers in late and postcolonialism.²²

The experience of foreignness is not least characterized by the androcentric conception of the shaman, which is ventilated by Eliade and which ignores a large part of contemporary research. After all, in relation to Siberia, it was already stated in 1914: “the position [...] of a female shaman is sometimes even more important than that occupied by the male.”²³ It is true that in the wake of Ernesto De Martino's work on the Mediterranean obsession with tarantulas, published in *Antaios* in 1962, which was intended to affect socially marginalized women in particular, Wilhelm E. Mühlmann, the most renowned national socialist among German ethnologists, took up shamanism as a genuinely female ecstasy technique in his *Metamorphosis of Women* (1981), apostrophizing Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, for example, as a German shamanistic poet, in a row with Korean and Japanese authors. But you don't have to read in a particularly hallucinatory way to realize that this is again about coming to terms with Germany's darkest twelve years, an attempt which expresses itself in the sign of an embodied otherness. Mühlmann observes a persistent initiation sickness in Droste, which is reflected in recurring “Gesichten” (visions) and ultimately in the preview of undatable doom. The author interprets even her most famous text *Die Judenbuch* as a vision in which, however, contrary to the Jews' alleged longing for perdition, “the Teuton” is judged by his own deed. Almost forty years after the so-called “Final Solution” (the Nazi's project to annihilate all Jewish life), the end of the German megalomania is thus transferred as a tragic fate into the eyes of a woman, in whom all the favorite German motifs merge anyway: “The Maenadic wandering [...] of the Thracian Dionysus worshippers [...] with the Vodanist rapture motif, the shamanic 'soul journey'” (Mühlmann 1981, 206).

A cross-check

If one follows the trajectories of the shaman as they lead from and into the “culture of defeat” cited here, it is hardly surprising to see Elias Canetti writing in Zurich in 1985: “You used to be able to say ‘shaman’. Now the word has become unpronounceable.”²⁴ Certainly, one can think of the eighty-year-old Nobel Prize winner, who is simply too old for magical flights, who no longer knows how to live up to the inspirational semantic

²² Lanternari accompanies this complex from *Movimenti religiosi di libertà e salvezza dei popoli oppressi* (1960) to *Ecoantropologia. Dall'ingerenza ecologica alla svolta etico-culturale* (2003).

²³ Cfr. Czaplicka 1914, 242. A first systematic “attempt [...] to identify homosexuality or institutionalized transvestition within the framework of shamanism as belonging to the structural type of the 'possession shaman'” can be found in Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg 1970, 190.

²⁴ Canetti, unpublished, estate in the Zurich Central Library.

associated with it – “in the evening on the Helikon”, as it is said about poets.²⁵ On the other hand, Canetti's almost fifty years of thinking about the shaman must also be considered.

Between 1939 and 1960, Elias Canetti wrote his reciprocal justification of *Crowds and power* (1960), largely in the British Library, in the heart of the English Empire that was just dissolving. In it, Canetti entrusted the shaman with a decidedly ambivalent position: on the one hand, as the one who possesses the knowledge of transformation that is indispensable for human survival, who knows the ways and interests of animals and plants and makes agreements with them; on the other hand, as the one to whom the dead appear as masses and who uses this knowledge to keep the living in check.²⁶ His cultural techniques do indeed form a resource, as the contributors to *Antaios* might have desired; and thus, the shaman is a symbol of freedom, even if this freedom is constantly threatened by the turn into megalomania and psychopathology – memorably illustrated by Daniel Paul Schreber (“as if he were a shaman”) in the second half of *Crowds and Power*. In his *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* (1903), the Dresden court president had explained how he was in contact with the entire world through the physically conceived extensions of his mind, a world directed exclusively at him (in an exact inversion of Kafka's countryman, who does not want to admit that the door “before the law” exists only for him). Canetti characterizes Schreber's “as if” shamanism as a power-political fantasy: for Schreber, everything becomes one, as if nothing existed for itself, while the ideal-typical shaman distinguishes his spirits (those of the dead and the living), however many there may be (Canetti 2010 [1960], 411 f.). He knows their names, and his transformation into a being that knows how to communicate with them is more an adaptation to them than the incorporation of an alien possibility. In a record that later migrated into the *Province of man*, Canetti contrasts the ruler and the shaman in an idealized way: “The power of killing disappears before the power of summoning. What is the greatest and most terrible slayer compared to a man who summons a single dead man to life? The ridiculous efforts of those in power to avoid death.”

The marvelous efforts of the shamans to summon the dead. As long as they believe it, as long as they don't just pretend to, they deserve all veneration.” (Canetti 2011, 218) Canetti characterizes the shaman as a “Master transformer,” as the one who assumes other forms by means of trance and self-loss techniques in order to communicate with

²⁵ In another essay (cfr. van Loven 2019), I have tried to outline the authorship model that was characterized by the shamanistic references of the avant-gardes. In addition to the intertwining of palpable time-boundedness (keyword: ragpickers) and the suspension of time (through flight, dealing with souls), in which marginality and ‘chosenness’ shine through in equal measure, the primitivist appropriation of the shaman makes it possible to run literally ‘out of competition’.

²⁶ Canetti recognizes in the shaman the archetype of the ability to transform; at the same time, he identifies in the shamanistic trance technique a manic trait, the “paroxysm of preying”. (Cfr. Canetti 2010, 410).

the spirits. These spirits also include the unpacified dead or - a transfer from Celtic mythology - the protagonists of the 'Wild Hunt'. In *Crowds and Power*, the "souls of the fallen [...] always appear as fully armoured warriors." (Canetti 2010, 48) In the summoning of this army, which shows itself to the shaman, there could be a temptation to power, or at least to disorder (the shaman "sees" the army, he does not command it) – as it takes shape in Canetti's concept of "shamanisation," which he associates with Hitler in his notes of the 1970s for a second volume of *Crowds and Power*.²⁷

Another dangerous tendency of the shaman stems from his ability to transform. As a master transformer the shaman is also the "Most transformer." Canetti contrasts this in *Crowds and Power* with the sacral king as the one who always remains the same, who in the most extreme case, as described by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890), is subject to a total ban on contact (it is about the transformation of the king in comparison to the environment, whereby it is irrelevant whether the environment or the king is changed in its essence). However, the static nature of power and the highly fluid nature of the shaman threaten to converge in an excess of transformation – the "Most-transformation" would thus itself become a characteristic of isolation and untouchability rather than of transformation. Has this also rendered the "shaman" inexpressible?

Before attempting to answer this question, it is perhaps worth taking a look at the ways in which the figure of the Siberian "master transformer" could stand in for the "guardian of transformation," as Canetti understood the poet that he himself was (1995, 364). For if it had previously been a question of mobilizing the Shamanism as a northern European invention of tradition, which was not least intended to exemplify the archaic Greeks – as a combination of antiquarianism and ethnology – which therefore posed itself precisely for cultures that were cut off from the source of revelation or had to reach it secondarily (the center of Europe is "out there": the Bible, the book religions, none originated in Europe), through possession and trance, the situation was different for a central European Jew. In Jewish thought, shamanism is not really a big issue. On the other hand – and irrespective of a more precise definition of what was "Jewish" about Canetti, who was born in Rousse in Bulgaria and socialized in Central European Vienna – one can observe how the preoccupation with a possibly primordial belief in reincarnation, usually associated with ontologies that are ultimately fundamental to shamanistic beliefs, steadily increased in the course of a growing awareness of one's own Jewishness. Canetti's most important cultural-theoretical sparring partner for a time was the Prague lyricist and

²⁷ In retrospect, Ernesto De Martino also recalls the foreign experience in the face of the "Führer" as a reason for his awakening interest in ethnology. He possibly regarded him as a magician and necromancer: "Erano quelli gli anni in cui Hitler sciamanizzava in Germania e in Europa" ("These were the years when Hitler shamanized in Germany and in Europe"), it says in *Promesse e minacce dell'etnologia* (De Martino 2002, 85).

later Oxford social anthropologist Franz Baermann Steiner (1909-1952), who turned his attention to the testimonies of the “belief in reincarnation” during his time in Vienna in the mid-1930s and analyzed them for birth rituals from a comparative cultural perspective, for example the “labour confession.”²⁸ This research brought Steiner into the circle of survivors from Knud Rasmussen's team, who even invited him to give Lectures in Paris and Scandinavia. It can be seen as an attempt to bring together his own cultural particularity as a heir of “non-Western” culture with that of other cultures that were more on the fringes of the hegemonic European powers, and to establish a counter-history that leads before the Christian ecumene as well as it contradicts the division into Latin-Roman and Germanic worlds. This attempt also appears to be at work in Carlo Ginzburg's fragmentary reconstruction of shamanism as an Indo-European proto-religion, which also takes an ethnological approach by referring to practices and their transmission rather than to evidence in artefacts (and which is deliberately reconstructed from court records whose original purpose was to expose the accused). This sort of “Jewish” shamanism would then, at least to a certain extent, represent the counter-example to “shamanism as a culture of defeat,” even though it draws on similar sources and interpretations (in Canetti's and Ginzburg's case it would be the Germanic primal mythology of the “wild army,” on which Otto Höfler or Georges Dumézil shed light – whose traces remained indelible in Ginzburg's mind, however much he resisted them).

But back to 1985, the year in which Mikhail Gorbachev became chairman of the CPSU. It was the beginning of the end of the (last) Cold War. The “theft of souls” feared by the small communities on the fringes of the great empires, the “division” of the world, subsequently posed minor dangers for the foreseeable future. The function of preserving the cosmic balance on a small scale, as Michael Oppitz also stated for the shamans and as Elias Canetti was well aware of, lost its urgency for a while. In 1980, the American Michael Harner in his book *The Way of the Shaman. A Guide to Power and Healing* (New York 1980) began propagating his model of “core shamanism,” which builds a trance and healing career that can be taught at the Institute for Shamanic Studies from the intersections of numerous well-known shamanisms. The ex-post “cultural appropriation” of shamanism has thus reached its peak. And the invocation of the dead becomes a moment of personal empowerment, not an expression of responsibility for the collective.

This hegemonic appropriation, which ultimately also includes the dispossession of those who recognize shamanism as a “culture of defeat” – and thus as an anti-Americanism which, as Harner proved, could be “Americanized” – ultimately includes the potential for resistance that was inherent in historical shamanism and is still expressed in local contexts today. In a fundamental essay, Ulla Johannsen has argued that

²⁸ The studies mentioned are unfinished and unpublished; they can be found in Steiner's estate in the German Literature Archive in Marbach.

shamanism represents a residual figure of state and court augury after the end of empires or at their borders (Johannsen 1999). This fits in with what Michael Oppitz explained in *Shamans in the Blind Land* from 1980 as well as in several essays: namely that shamanism in social groups on the edge of China, in the Himalayas, is linked to legends of the “lost script,” i.e. to a theory of self-inflicted and self-chosen orality, which limits the reach and assertiveness of political power, its hegemonic capacity, from the outset. Contrary to what the right – Findeisen, Eliade, but also De Martino – believed, the shaman was not a “cultural hero,” and certainly not an a- or pre-historic figure, but, as can be observed in the Rhineland in view of the carnival, the proverbial remnant of the shooting festival (“Der Rest vom Schützenfest”), when he was not working for his clients.²⁹ The silly or ridiculed *persona*, which ethnological field research has reported on, is the shaman’s shield, so to speak. Canetti stood on this shield.

La rivoluzione siamo noi

I began this text with Joseph Beuys, and I want to end it with him. With his mimicry, which contains a lot of megalomania. You can see that no less today than back then: Just take the figure of the shaman as a “seer,” as a “world sage,” connotations that cannot be discarded and which are once again on the rise in view of the growing Anthropocene consciousness and Gaia religiosity, if one thinks of the success of “shamans” such as the Yanomami seer Davi Kopenawa, but also of the performances by Michael Taussig, who describes the return of shamanism in his latest book with the mimetic excess, in other words: the animistic re-enchantment of the world in “this our global meltdown.”³⁰ Is it perhaps not so much megalomania, but rather someone else’s folly that becomes his own? In any case, Beuys also embodies the other, the comical, the rag-collector side in his mimicry. On the one hand, thanks to his Lower Rhine roots, but on the other hand also thanks to the ever more rapidly circulating images due to their technical reproducibility. In the Rhineland, Beuys may have come across the “Hun clubs,” which emerged from the carnival and later organized independently their various summer camps, or he could have met the “Mongol hordes,”³¹ in which the Trizonesian natives

²⁹ However, De Martino’s christological characterisation of the shaman implies that shamanic service requires a sacrifice. This sacrifice is the “crisi della presenza,” which can be increased to the guilt of the world. Both the figures of the *Mondo magico* of 1948 and the healers in Basilicata in Southern Italy or the Tarantel-obsessed Apulians are called upon to deny themselves. The agency they give to their communities, the renewal of their collective optimism, is not possible without the sacrifice of these people, who are marginalised precisely because they are lonely and individual.

³⁰ Cfr. Taussig 2020.

³¹ Anja Dreschke notes that “the early Mongol hobbyist societies did not differ from the Hun societies, who’s already established ‘Hun’ style of clothing made of leather, fur and metal was adapted.” (Dreschke

appropriated and mimetically acted out the foreign attribution of the English (“the Germans, the huns”), and later became the “Huns.”

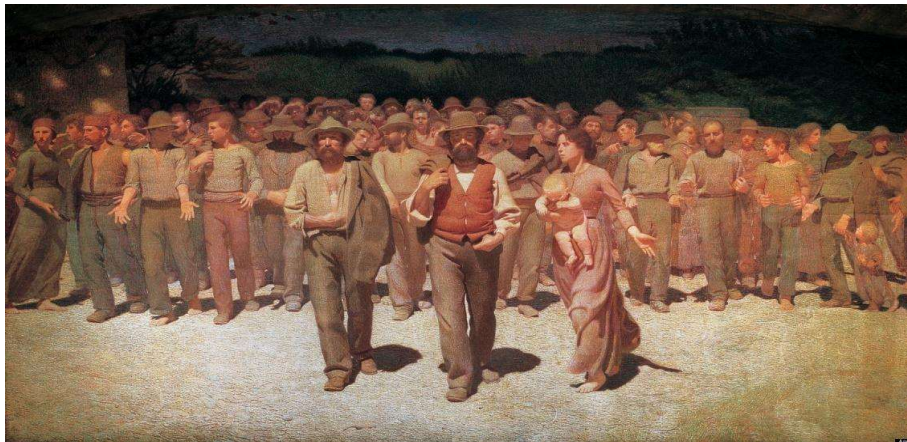


Fig. 1. Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, *Il Quarto Stato*, 1898-1901.

Presumably not for fun: the ruined cities and the 800-kcal daily ration allotted by the Allies will hardly have permitted a good mood. I suspect this is also the reason why Beuys emerged after the Second World War with pictures of “Peace in the Time of Khan” (with crashing planes) or “Genghis Khan's Tomb,” a kind of Eurasian Kyffhäuser variation, in the centre of which, if you look closely, one can see the Shaman. The German exculpation of war guilt, at least that much has to be conceded to the Rhineland, takes the form of self-mockery as a caveman. And I would not have been able to recognise the second, comical dimension of Beuys’ mimicry without Thomas Macho: namely the way in which Beuys literally transformed the iconic image of the man striding from the past into the future, as the German emerging from the darkness into the light, who at the same time quotes an image dear to the Italian liberation movements (*Il quarto stato* di Polizza da Volpedo) (Fig. 1), before he arrives on the cover of the first German printing of Carlos Castaneda's *Teachings of Don Juan* in 1972 (Fig. 2).³² Castaneda's book had just been accepted as an ethnological dissertation at Columbia University in New York. In it, the researcher ego questions an idealized “shaman” who, as we know today, at least did not exist as represented, but nevertheless became a prophet of “inner journeys” under the influence of Ayahuasca and LSD. This shamanic affinity with Beuys can be traced back to the März publishing house and presumably also to the Castaneda translator couple Heiner and Céline Bastian. Shamanism, that much is certain, seems to have been contagious. However, its “internalization” is less due to Beuys’ general concept of the

2024, 155) The Central Asian pastoral peoples have some characteristics in common – such as the use of felt yurts – even if historical filiations cannot be precisely proven. However, a study carried out in 2018 concluded that ‘Hunnid’ bones found in Hungary have a genome that is very similar to that of modern-day Kazakhs and Mongols.

³² Cfr. also Macho 2008, 338 f.

artist than to the psychedelic “province of man.” In it, the feet detach themselves from the ground, they do not work on a fixed, resistive terrain. And what, on the poster print of *La rivoluzione siamo noi* (Fig. 3), began as a step of the century ends with twitching limbs in the outer space where cosmonauts suspended in weightlessness have no other choice but to dance.

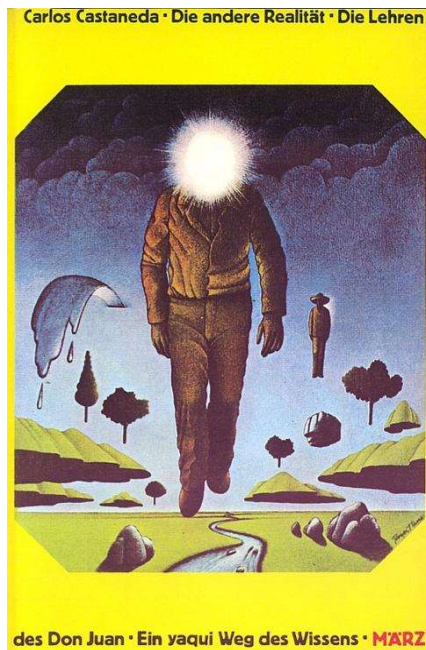


Fig. 2. Cover of Carlos Castaneda's *Teachings of Don Juan*, by Hannes Jähn



Fig. 3. Joseph Beuys, *La rivoluzione siamo noi*, 1972

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