

INTRODUCTION

The otherness of the shamanic world-view has fascinated — and appalled — researchers and missionaries for centuries, just as it now fascinates modern urban Westerners. The increase in the number of shamanic courses over the last few years is just one indication of how much interest exists in the role of the shaman. I have chosen to focus on the concepts of mastery of spirits and healing from a shamanic perspective among the Greenlandic people, with a few examples from other Eskimo¹ peoples, and the New Age version of shamanism called neo-shamanism, core-shamanism or urban shamanism.

The reasons for choosing the Greenlandic *angakkoq* as an example of a shaman in a traditional society are manifold. First, most works, including those on Eskimo shamanism, do not make use of several interesting sources as these have only appeared in Danish; the chapter on the Greenlandic *angakkoq*² therefore includes many of these. Secondly, the East Greenlandic population was more or less untouched by Christianity until the end of the last century, and there exists a rich corpus of material dealing with this part of Greenland and their *angakku*³ which describes the early stages of a recent colonisation. Thirdly, as this is a more ‘pure’ form of shamanism untouched by other religions until very late, it leaves us with a possible indication of what shamanism might have been in other parts of the Northern Hemisphere before Christianity or Buddhism were introduced.

It is, however, important to keep in mind the fact that shamanism is a very flexible configuration of behaviour patterns, including magical flight, trance and, first and foremost, mastery of spirits. This flexibility has meant that shamanism adapted itself to the religions it encountered and it can be difficult to determine what is

of Buddhist or shamanic origin among the shamans in Central Asia, as indeed shamanism influenced Buddhism in its turn. Shamanism as it appears in Greenland, and especially East Greenland, therefore serves as a credible example of traditional shamanism.

The second part of the book deals with New Age shamanism examined from the perspective of traditional shamanism. What is described as neo-shamanism or core-shamanism is a form of shamanism that has been created at the end of this century to re-establish a link for modern man to his spiritual roots, to re-introduce shamanic behaviour into the lives of Westerners in search of spirituality and, thereby, renew contact with Nature. The chapter on neo-shamanism also deals with the general spread of urban shamanism and briefly touches on the role of modern healers in traditional societies.

Although I have decided not to include the theories of C.G. Jung, even if they are easily applicable to neo-shamanism, the description of Western man as presented by Jolande Jacobi in her preface to Jung's *Psychological Reflections* serves well as an introduction to the aim of this book in explaining the growing interest in shamanism at present:

Western man today, engaged in a mighty struggle outwardly and inwardly for a new and universally binding order of life, stands at a point where two worlds meet, amid an almost inconceivable devastation of traditional values. No clear orientation is possible, nothing can yet point to a way in this whirlwind of spiritual forces striving for form. Human existence itself in all its inadequacy and insecurity must submit to a new revision. (1953: xxiii)

Written in the shadow of the Second World War, it posits the view that modern Western people are continuously striving to establish a value system according to which their life experiences make sense. One of the questions this book asks is whether shamanism with its roots in traditional societies can be the 'new revision' and fill the spiritual void which seems to be the price of modernity.

The reason, however, for not including Jung's theories directly is that they would apply a 'prefabricated' explanation to encounters with non-ordinary reality, experienced both in traditional and modern societies, and thereby become a screen which may narrow important anthropological aspects. As difficult as it can be to extract 'the voice of the people' from accounts of traditional belief

systems made by outsiders, adding a psychological explanation is not the aim of this book. Seen from a modern point of view, it is tempting to call the power-animal a symbolic representation of specific emotions and describe it as an archetype which has lain dormant in the subconscious of the super-ego driven Westerner and which is now released through shamanic courses, but it serves no immediate purpose in the understanding of the actual first-hand experience of individuals with the spirit world. My intention is to present the patterns of behaviour both in traditional and modern societies vis-à-vis the spirit world, not to query whether the spirits are projections of internal structures. The book is, therefore, concerned with the structure of the belief systems and their cultural implications, not the structure of the mind. It is, however, important to acknowledge the role of the shaman as the keeper of a psychomental balance in his society as well as the fact that many apprentices have started their work in a condition that has several elements in common with mental disease.

The social role of the courses in shamanism can be explained by using the theories of another intellectual of this century, Pierre Bourdieu. The network established by New Age adherents could be determined as a *field* in which each individual experiences certain *habitus* which might leave the individual participants in a double role: the one he or she experiences in the larger society, where there is little recognition of magical skills, and the one established within the *field* where the values, positions and hierarchy differ and where the individual can achieve a new status and thereby also gain financially by taking on an active organising and healing role. The change of status is achieved by creating a new view of spiritual values, and thereby of Nature, which ultimately leads to the creation of a new mythology of the universe in which we live. The interesting aspect of this, however, is that not only is there a *field* in ordinary reality; non-ordinary reality can, to a certain degree, be seen as a *field* in its own right. The role of the shaman in traditional society is to move between those *fields* on behalf of society and in the interest of his fellow human beings. The role of the course participants is to establish contact with a source of wisdom and guidance available in non-ordinary reality which ultimately can guide them in their daily undertakings in ordinary reality.

This book has drawn its major theoretical orientation from the work of one of the most important specialists within shamanism,

S. M. Shirokogoroff, whose *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, formed the basis of my approach to the role of the shaman as mediator between the visible and invisible world and as master of spirits. Mastery is crucial to the shaman's function in society. If he loses control over the spirits he simultaneously loses the respect of his fellow human beings. Mastery should therefore be understood in its broadest sense: an *angakkoq* masters his spirits insofar as he is able to use their power.

My role in the shamanic courses was that of participant observer. I have used my own journey experiences as examples as they were typical in their structure — and individuality — and not taken down other participants' journeys out of respect for their privacy. My information about individual experiences derives from the interviews I carried out and for which I am very grateful for the trust I was shown. My double role as participant and observer was clear from the beginning of the courses and did not seem to create any problems.

The source material used for the chapter on Greenland is comprised of the writings of a variety of authors who were either missionaries, explorers, scientists or ethnographers. I have tried to make it clear in the text when it was necessary to take the author's background into account. Missionaries like the Egede family were, in their descriptions of the Greenlanders, simultaneously interested in presenting a picture of Eskimo culture and in ridiculing the work of the *angakku*t. The Inspector of South Greenland, Heinrich Rink, on the other hand, tried to let 'the voice of the people' speak through their own stories which he collected, and blamed the missionaries for many of the social mistakes committed against the Greenlanders — partly because of a lack of respect for the role of the *angakku*t. Knud Rasmussen saw himself as the advocate of the Eskimo people and in his writings 'the voice of the people' is expressed very elaborately. Gustav Holm, a scientist, and William Thalbitzer, a philologist, again had different approaches. Thalbitzer attempted a scientifically based presentation of the people in his detailed description of the culture, which would give 'a more realistic assessment of the Eskimos' intellectual and cultural achievements' (Sonne 1986: 203). Undoubtedly it has been difficult not to be carried away by a fascination with the otherness of Eskimo culture and reading through the material I have, therefore, presented *approaches* to, if not the ultimate truth about the *angakkoq*. I hope, however, that an image has formed which gives

a deeper insight into the relationship between the *angakkoq* and his helping spirits that is the main focus of my investigation.

The texts which form the basis for the Greenlandic part have mostly been written by outsiders to the culture. The material used for the New Age part is presented by participants not only in the culture but in the shamanic world-view. As several of the texts are manuals of instruction on how to become a shaman, they are to be seen as promoters of shamanism. The course organiser is a teacher in shamanic techniques. He might have been inspired by other cultures but he is predominantly representing his own. The core-shamanism taught by Michael Harner is a conglomerate of the approaches of different cultures to shamanism but ultimately it is meant to be universal, it is a neo-shamanism, an urban shamanism applicable to the life of modern people living worldwide under urban conditions. My role may be compared to that of the earlier writers on Eskimo culture, apart from the fact that I am part of the larger culture in which these shamanic courses take place. As much as the séance had an impact on Holm or Rasmussen, they were first and foremost messengers between cultures and, as far as my role as a course participant is concerned, this is to a certain degree true for me too.

NOTES

1. I use the word 'Eskimo' throughout the thesis instead of 'Inuit' as this is the common term in both old and recent publications.
2. The spelling of Greenlandic terms varies from writer to writer. In quotations I keep to the spelling of the author; in my own writing, however, I attempt mostly to use the new West Greenlandic spelling. This applies to *angakkoq* sing., *angakkuq* plur., *ilisiitsoq* sing., *ilisiitsut* plur., *toornaarsuk*. Names of persons also vary in spelling: Avko/Avvgo, Kaakaaq/Kâkâq, Maratsi/Maratse, Migsuarnianga/Mitsuarnianga/ Missuarniánga, and names of places such as Angmagssalik/Ammassalik.
3. Thalbitzer in his notes to Christian Rosing, *Østgrønlanderne*, writes that 'some interpret the Eskimo word *angákoq* as "one of the mother's brother's family" (from *angak*, "mother's brother"), others as a "visionary and dreamer" (from the verb. *angavoq* "roaming about"), because the spirits show themselves to him in his visions during his ecstatic experiences' (1906: 126 [my translation]). The Danish translation of *angakkoq* is 'åndemåner', spirit-invoker. I have referred to the *angakkoq* with the masculine pronoun 'he' as they were mostly male.