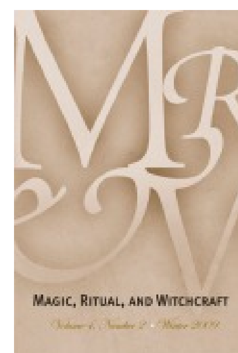
Project MUSE®
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Shamanism and Witchcraft

GÃ¡bor Klaniczay



Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 1, Number 2, Winter 2006, pp. 214-221 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/mrw.0.0036

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mrw/summary/v001/1.2.klaniczay.html

Access Provided by University of Queensland at 06/10/10 7:57AM GMT

Shamanism and Witchcraft

GÁBOR KLANICZAY
Central European University

As one of the first historians to have initiated discussion of the relationship between shamanism and witchcraft twenty-three years ago,[1] let me start my contribution to the present enquiry with a brief outline of the intellectual context in which the idea of the comparison of these two sets of beliefs emerged and come only subsequently to the issue this approach might represent today or in the future.

Around 1980 both historical/anthropological research on witchcraft and ethnographic/anthropological enquiries on shamanism represented a burgeoning field of scholarly discussion and research. As to the former, among many other inspiring new approaches (such as the "sociology of accusation" proposed by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane,[2] the problem of the distinction of a "popular" layer of witchcraft beliefs from the learned concepts of the diabolic witches' sabbath discussed by Norman Cohn and Richard Kieckhefer,[3] or the question of gender addressed in a new way by Christina Larner[4]) Carlo Ginzburg's dis-

1. Gábor Klaniczay, "Shamanistic Elements in Central European Witchcraft," in *Shamanism in Eurasia*, ed. Mihály Hoppál (Göttingen: Herodot, 1984), 404–22; repr. in *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, vol. 5, *Witchcraft, Healing, and Popular Diseases*, ed. Brian P. Levack (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 267–92; amplified version in Gábor Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformations of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 129–50; and Klaniczay, *Heilige, Hexen, Vampire: Vom Nutzen des Übernatürlichen* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1991), 29–50.

2. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study.* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

3. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons. The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

4. Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto, 1981).

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft (Winter 2006)
Copyright © 2006 University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

covery of documents pertaining to the *benandanti* directed the attention of researchers to the problem of how a number of archaic sorcerer-types got caught in the web of witchcraft persecutions, and how the archaic beliefs related to them made their imprint on the evolution of learned concepts of witchcraft.[5] This was the starting point for the discussion of the historical relationship between witchcraft and shamanism: the bold suggestion by Carlo Ginzburg, who perspicaciously observed that the traits of the *benandanti* (being born in a caul, undergoing initiation in dreams, participating in night battles during soul-journeys while their bodies lay at home in trance, communicating with the dead, etc.) "richiama immediatamente i culti dei sciamani."[6]

This was also the period when studies on shamanism became livelier as well. Following the grand synthetic effort of Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (published in French in 1951 and translated into English in 1964),[7] Ian Lewis reopened the theoretical-typological enquiry on shamanism and possession in 1971.[8] Anthropological fieldwork among the different peoples in Siberia was renewed by Vilmos Diószegi, Mihály Hoppál, and their Hungarian colleagues,[9] the circle of comparative examinations was very much broadened by the input of Scandinavian scholars such as Åke Hultkrantz, Lauri Honko, and Anna-Lena Siikala,[10] and general interest about these topics was stirred up by the controversial works of Carlos Castaneda[11]

5. Carlo Ginzburg, *I Benandanti: Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966); translated as *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

6. Ginzburg, *I Benandanti,* 52.

7. Mircea Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris: PUF, 1951); translated as *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Williard E. Trask (London: Routledge, 1964).

8. Ian M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

9. Vilmos Diószegi and Mihály Hoppál, eds., *Shamanism in Siberia* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1978); cf. also Diószegi, *Shamanism: Selected Writings of Vilmos Diószegi*, ed. Mihály Hoppál (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1998).

10. Lauri Honko, "Role-taking of the Shaman," *Temenos* 4 (1969): 26–55; Åke Hultkrantz, "A Definition of Shamanism," *Temenos* 9 (1973): 25–37; Hultkrantz, *The Religion of the American Indians*, trans. Monica Setterwell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979); Anna-Lena Siikala, *The Rite Technique of the Siberian Shaman*, FF Communications 220 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1978).

11. On the reception of Carlos Castaneda's ethnographic fictions see Mary Douglas, "The Authenticity of Castaneda," in Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 193–200; Richard de Mille, *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1980).

and the neo-shaman movement initiated by Michael Harner.[12] This was the context in which an ambitious international conference organized in 1983 by Mihály Hoppál in Sárospatak (Hungary) attempted no less than a reassessment of all these recent comparative enquiries on Eurasian shamanism in a broader anthropological, historical, psychological, and linguistic framework.[13]

This is how I came to this theme, and analyzed for this conference the striking similarities between the Friulan *benandanti* and the Hungarian *táltos*, both their shamanistic traits and their involvement in witchcraft persecutions. The historical figure of the *táltos*, maybe the most authentic European descendant of Siberian shamanism, is known partly from nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographic and folkloric research and partly from the historic documentation of Hungarian witch trials.[14] Like the *benandanti*, they are distinguished by a special sign at birth (they are born with teeth or surplus bones), they have initiatory visions as adolescents, and they fight the enemies of their community by going on a soul-journey (and, more like Siberian shamans, taking the form of an animal, a horse or a bull) while their bodies lie in trance. The comparison of the *táltos* and the *benandanti* prompted me to situate this pair in a network of similar positive or ambivalent sorcerer figures in East-Central and South-Eastern Europe, documented since early modern times, such as the Croatian *kresnik* or the Serbian *zduhač*.[15] In my interpretation of these figures I also tried to take into consideration the writings of Roman Jakobson and Marc Szeftel on Slavic werewolf beliefs, which they considered a version of shamanism, similarly to the startling case of the Livonian werewolf Thiess fighting against witches for fertility described by Ginzburg.[16] The

12. Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

13. Hoppál, ed., *Shamanism in Eurasia.*

14. Vilmos Diószegi, *A sámánhit emlékei a magyar népi műveltségben* [Traces of Shamanism in Hungarian Folk Culture] (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1958); Géza Róheim, "Hungarian Shamanism," in *Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences*, 5 vols., ed. Róheim (New York: International University Press, 1947–58), 3:131–69; Tekla Dömötör, "The Hungarian Female *Táltos*," in *Shamanism in Eurasia,* 423–30; Mihály Hoppál, "Traces of Shamanism in Hungarian Folk Beliefs," in *Shamanism in Eurasia*, 430–49.

15. Gábor Klaniczay, "Benandante-kresnik-zduhač-táltos: Samanizmus és boszorkányhit érintkezési pontjai Közép-Európában," *Ethnographia* 94 (1983): 116–34 (longer Hungarian version of the study cited above n. 1); Maja Bošković-Stulli, "Kresnik—Krsnik, ein Wesen aus der kroatischen und slovenischen Volksüberlieferung," *Fabula* 3 (1960): 275–98.

16. Roman Jakobson and Marc Szeftel, "The Vseslav Epos," in Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings,* vol. 4, *Slavic Epic Studies* (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1966), 27–58; Ginzburg, *I Benandanti*, 47–51.

shamanistic traits of the *benandanti* were also acknowledged by Mircea Eliade, who compared them, in addition, to the Rumanian *strigoi*.[17] On the basis of these parallel examples I tried to examine how the shamanistic traits of these East-Central European sorcerer-types could be related to the "original" model of Siberian shamanism, and how they could be accommodated within the dominant paradigm of magical aggression in early modern times, that of witchcraft.

Regarding the former question, the most important difference I found was that among these European sorcerers the ecstatic soul-journey is not such a public ritual as in classical shamanism. Even the identity of these shamanistic sorcerers remains hidden from most members of their community, they exercise their profession in secret, they go on soul-journeys while in dreams—all this reveals a disintegrated and fading shamanistic practice. In early modern times these sorcerers were already well on the way to becoming mere belief-figures as they would be in twentieth-century folk mythology. As for the relationship with witchcraft beliefs, one can observe that the *benandanti*, the *táltos*, and the *kresnik* all claimed to be opponents of witches and purported to act as diagnosticians or healers of the bewitched. Their involvement in witchcraft conflicts, however, caused *táltoses* themselves to be accused of witchcraft very much as happened to the *benandanti* (although in fact the *táltoses* typically received milder judgments). Thanks to these accusations we possess judicial data about twenty-six *táltoses*.

The issue of "European shamanism" and the complex interrelationship of sorcerer-types and magical beings in the rich South-East-European mythology was picked up by Éva Pócs, who made essential contributions to this issue as well as to the problem of the archaic roots of the witches' sabbath. She provided a more scrupulous comparative analysis of Central and South-East European sorcerers, cunning people, and folk-mythological beings (*szépasszony, vila, mora, zmej, rusalia*, etc.) than anyone before her. She also discovered another important domain of popular belief systems that played a major role in the formation of the concept of the witches' sabbath: ambivalent fairy mythologies. (The inquisition trials against the Sicilian *donas de fuera* examined by Gustav Henningsen fit well into this picture.[18]) Her comparative investigations also led to important new statements concerning the relation-

17. Mircea Eliade, "Some Observations on European Witchcraft," *History of Religions* 14 (1975): 149–72.

18. Gustav Henningsen, "Die Frauen von Ausserhalb: Der Zusammenhang von Feenkult, Hexenwahn und Armut um 16. und 17. Jahrhundert auf Sizilien," in *Die Mitte der Welt: Aufsätze zu Mircea Eliade,* ed. H. P. Duerr (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984).

ship of Hungarian *táltos* beliefs and Siberian shamanism. Instead of relying on a set of remote and far-reaching analogies, the approach suggested by Pócs lays a greater stress on more concrete historical contacts and borrowings, namely on the influences coming into Hungary from neighbouring Slavic peoples and from other peoples in the Balkan peninsula.[19]

Perhaps it was the richness of this response to his *benandanti* book that made Carlo Ginzburg return to the issue of the witches' sabbath[20] and write his acclaimed and controversial book *Storia notturna* (*Ecstasies* in English).[21] Within a much broader spectrum of problems—ranging from late medieval scapegoat mechanisms, to forms of persecution closely connected to the emergence of the concept of diabolic witches' sabbath, to the age-old worship of ambivalent goddesses, to a worldwide distribution of certain coinciding narrative patterns and beliefs—Ginzburg makes thorough use of the East-European comparative material on ambivalent popular sorcerers and their shamanistic background.[22] He also explores the documentation on medieval Europe for more encompassing traces of shamanism. Analyzing accounts of the nocturnal journeys of women with the goddess of the night, and the practice of communicating with the dead, he refers to a "Celtic substratum" of European mythologies.[23] Another shamanistic trait, the journeying soul's metamorphosis into an animal, is exemplified, for instance, by Paul the Deacon's Gunthram legend,[24] by Odin's metamorphosis in the *Ynglingasaga*,[25] and by the werewolf concepts found in Slavic, Baltic, German,

---

19. Éva Pócs, *Fairies and Witches at the Boundary of South-Eastern and Central Europe,* FF Communications 243 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1989); Éva Pócs, "Hungarian Táltos and His European Parallels," in *Uralic Mythology and Folklore*, ed. Mihály Hoppál and Juha Pentikäinen (Budapest: Ethnographic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1989), 251–76.

20. Carlo Ginzburg, "Présomptions sur le sabbat," *Annales E.S.C.* 39 (1984): 341–54; Ginzburg, "Deciphering the Sabbath," in *Early Modern European Witchcraft. Centres and Peripheries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 121–35.

21. Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia notturna: Una decifrazione del sabba* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989); translated as *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1991)

22. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 153–204.

23. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 106–7.

24. Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, trans. William Dudley Foulke, ed. Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), 147–48; Hannjost Lixfeld, "Die Guntramsage (AT 1645 A): Volkserzählungen und Alter Ego in Tiergestalt und ihre schamanistische Herkunft," *Fabula* 13 (1972): 60–107; cf. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 151–52.

25. Walter Baetke, *Yngvi und die Ynglinger: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung über*

and Mediterranean cultures.[26] He traces all these concepts back to the "shamanistic substratum" of European mythology. Ginzburg divides these shamanistic beliefs—presumably mediated by the Scythians, and reinforced, from time to time, by more direct eastern influences—into two types: the male variant characterized by ecstatic fertility battles, and the female variant centered on communication with the dead.[27]

In the 1990s further aspects of these European shamanistic beliefs have been uncovered by historical research into European witchcraft documentation, such as Wolfgang Behringer's fascinating analysis of the trial of a wise shepherd in Tyrol, Conrad Stoeckhlin, already referred to in Ginzburg's *I Benandanti*.[28] Relying upon Ginzburg's *Ecstasies*, Éva Pócs also made a renewed attempt and set up a new typology of "dual shamanism" present in the Baltic, Old Slavic, Central European, and Balkan regions. Relying on analysis by Roman Jakobson, V. V. Ivanov, and V. N. Toporov,[29] she suggested comparing the struggle between Perun and Volos in Slavic and Baltic mythologies to the shamanistic antagonism of a fiery/heavenly monster and a watery/netherworldly one. She documented a number of forms reflecting this antagonism in the folk mythologies of Eastern Europe. These motifs seem to provide a meaningful explanation for the two classes of shamanistic sorcerers observed by Carlo Ginzburg: male sorcerers fighting for fertility and female seers assuring communication with the world of the dead. In addition, Pócs's research offered rich new documentation as to how these mythological elements could have merged into early modern witchcraft beliefs in Hungary and in South-Eastern Europe.[30] More recent research by Ronald Grambo

---

das nordische "Sakralkönigtum," Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-hitorische Klasse 109 no. 3 (Berlin: Akademie, 1964).

26. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 138–39, 153–54.

27. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 243, 257.

28. Wolfgang Behringer, *Chonrad Stoeckhlin und die Nachtschar: Eine Geschichte aus der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich: Piper, 1994); translated as *Shaman of Oberstdorf: Chonrad Stoeckhlin and the Phantoms of the Night*, trans. Erik Midelfort (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Ginzburg, *I Benandanti,* 82–84.

29. Roman Jakobson, "The Slavic God 'Veles' and His Indo-European Cognates," *Studi linguistici in onore di Vittore Pisani*, 2 vols. (Brescia: Paideia, 1969), 2:579–99; V. V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov, "Le mythe indo-européen du dieu de l'orage poursuivant le serpent: Reconstruction du schema," in *Échanges et communications: Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss à l'occasion de son 60ème anniversaire,* ed. Jean Pouillou and Pierre Maranda, 2 vols. (Paris and La Haye: Mouton, 1970), 2:1180–1206.

30. Éva Pócs, "Le sabbat et les mythologies indo-européennes," in *Le sabbat des sorciers XVe–XVIIIe siècles*, ed. Nicole Jacques-Chaquin and Maxime Préaud (Gre-

and Rune Hagen has uncovered a similar mixture of shamanistic beliefs and witchcraft accusations among the Sami of Lapland, whose shamanistic sorcerers, the *noaide*, could not avoid suffering the same fate as the *benandanti* and the *táltos*, and were caught in a web of witchcraft accusations.[31]

Looking back to the merits and the shortcomings of this research in the 1980s and 1990s, my primary assessment would be that it considerably enriched our understanding of the mythology of the witches' sabbath. Sabbath accounts were long considered merely learned inventions coming from inquisitors and demonologists, and refined in desperate improvisations in the torture chamber. To scholars confronting the mythological, anthropological, and ethnographic material on shamanism and other types of ambivalent sorcery, it became clear that many of these archaic components did indeed influence the multiple varieties of the mythology of the witches' sabbath. Moreover, some of the traits of these sorcerers, such as their election to this profession by special birth, combat in trance for fertility, ecstatic soul-journey, animal metamorphosis, and communication with the dead clearly require an analysis that takes into account the influence of shamanism.

The theme of the mixture of shamanism (or rather archaic sorcerer figures and related beliefs bearing some traits of shamanism) and witchcraft in early modern Europe is also interesting from a broader typological point of view. Witchcraft and shamanism represent two different visions of misfortune and magical aggression. While in shamanism threats come from the outside into a community that is defended by its shaman, a protector of supernatural standing, the witch is "the enemy within,"[32] representing a significantly dif-

---

noble: Jérôme Millon, 1993), 23–31; Pócs, "A kígyó, a mennykő és a tehenek: Kettős samanizmus és boszorkányság Közép-DK-Európában" [The Snake, the Thunder and the Cows: Dual Shamanism and Witchcraft in Central and South Eastern Europe], in *A tradicionális műveltség továbbélése*, Az V. magyar-jugoszláv folklórkonferencia előadásai. Bp. 1991. nov. 1–3. Folklór és tradíció VII. (Budapest: MTA, Néprajzi Kutatóintézet, 1994), 89–101; Pócs, "Traces of Indo-European Shamanism in South-East-Europe," in *Folk Belief Today,* ed. Mare Kolva and Kai Vassiljevna (Tartu: Institute of the Estonian Language and Estonian Museum of Literature, 1995), 313–20; Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1998); Pócs, "Shamanism, Witchcraft and Christianity in Early Modern Europe," *Studies in Folklore and Popular Religion* 3 (1999): 111–35.

31. Ronald Grambo, "Shamanism in Norwegian Popular Legends," in Hoppál, *Shamanism in Eurasia,* 391–403; Rune Hagen, "The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Finnmark," *Acta Borealia* 16 (1999): 43–62.

32. Witches are described as "traitors within the gates" by Philip Mayer, "Witches," in *Witchcraft and Sorcery: Selected Readings*, ed. Max Marwick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 45–64.

ferent vision of human communities and theodicy. In places where there is a mixture or contamination of these two sets of beliefs, the shamanistic sorcerers such as the *benandanti* or the *táltos* take up the role of cunning folk, healers, and opponents of witches that is a reinterpretation of their original function. This witch-finding and healing activity, however, has its dangers: shamanistic sorcerers can quickly be associated with witchcraft themselves.

The importance of the problem Carlo Ginzburg exposed in his 1966 book, namely, the gradual assimilation of an archaic belief system (shamanistic or other) to learned concepts of witches' sabbaths under the constraints of inquisitorial interrogation, cannot be underestimated. Well-focused *longue durée* microhistorical investigations could reveal other similar series—the *táltos* cases happen to be too dispersed for assessing whether a similar transformation occurred in Hungary, but they, too, present several interesting instances where shamanistic beliefs and witchcraft beliefs merged.

The belief-system of witchcraft behaved in such situations as a kind of "melting pot," imposing its paradigm on a number of archaic beliefs, homogenizing many different kinds of archaic popular healers and their mythologies. The unwitching role assumed by various types of cunning folk and archaic sorcerers (the shamanistic *benandanti, táltoses,* and werewolves among them) inevitably framed them in the ambivalent function of the witch-healer. According to the witchcraft paradigm, however much these healers claim to be the opponents of witches, ultimately they resort to the same reprehensible magical techniques, implying cooperation with evil, demonic powers. This process, in the long run, leads to the disintegration of the remains of the older paradigm of shamanism. Flourishing witchcraft research in the past decades has unearthed a considerable amount of new source material.[33] This might also allow a renewed examination of the long-term historical transformation of local variants of witchcraft beliefs and other rival magical belief systems, among them the archaic vestiges of a positive or at least ambivalent sorcery that we have labeled—rightly or wrongly—"European shamanism."

---

33. Referring only to Hungary, in the past two decades the number of published witch trials has doubled from around two thousand to more than four thousand; six volumes of original source material have appeared in this field since 1989.