

THE SNAKE AS A SPIRITUAL FORCE IN TRADITIONAL AND NORDIC CULTURE



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The spiritual life of the Siberian nomadic cultures is centered around the figure of the shaman. A shaman, man or woman, was someone who could communicate with the spirits and the forces of the natural world. In cases of misfortune, disease, infertility or other trouble that threatened the wellbeing of individual or community, the shaman would perform a ceremony to speak with the spirits. From the spirits, information could be obtained that pointed out what action to take, in order to help bring about healing and prosperity. Shamans needed help and protection to do their work, this was provided by their spirit helpers. Most often these helpers were animals.

The spirit helpers of traditional shamans were animals that shared the areas the tribe lived in. The natural behaviour of these animals was observed and known by all members of the tribe. Only the shamans knew and used the specific spiritual powers of animals, a shaman would be helpless without the support of the animal spirits.

All shamanic cultures have myths about the origin of their shamans and how they obtained the powers from the animal world. The first shaman of the Siberian Yakut people must have been a frightening sight: his body was made of a mass of snakes. This shaman was very powerful and in his pride refused to recognize the power of the Yakut's supreme God. This God wanted to burn the shaman to punish him, although the shaman himself was killed, his power survived. Out of the flames a toad emerged and out of the toad came

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the spirits that later became the Yakut shamans (Eliade 1951, 68). An image of a shaman's body made of a mass of snakes can be found with other Siberian tribes as well. Shamans performed their ceremonies in beautiful and elaborate ritual costumes. All the shaman's spirit helpers would be represented on it, and through these representations the costume served as a magical container for spiritual power. In museums shaman costumes have been preserved and on those of the Altaic peoples, especially of the Tofalar and the Tuva, one can see many snakes. Many bundles of ropes hang from the waist, each rope with a leather fringe at its end, representing bundles of snakes. Just one or two snakes carry heads and forked tails, sometimes three snakes share one head. On most shaman's costumes you



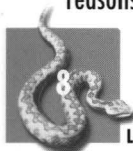
*Shamans dress, front side;
photo courtesy Daan van Kampenhout.*



*Shamans dress, back side;
photo courtesy Daan van Kampenhout.*

will find at least a few hundred of them, and 'it is said that a wealthy shaman should have 1070 snakes on his costume' (Eliade 1951, 152). All these snakes serve an important purpose for the shaman. The spirit world is a dangerous place, there are many spirits that have bad intentions and cause disease and misfortune. One of the reasons a shaman has to travel into this dange-

rous zone, is because he or she has to retrieve the souls of people who are ill. Most illness springs from soul-loss, a soul may wander away from a person's body during his sleep and it may get caught by a bad spirit. Then a shaman must travel the realms of the bad spirits to free the captured souls. During this trip the shaman needs all the protection he or she can get. The hundreds





of snakes that surround the shaman are protectors, they will aggressively attack every evil spirit that tries to hinder the shaman. Other spirit helpers, like the bear or the eagle, offer strength, wisdom and guidance but snakes offer their aggression and venom. They are the battalions that breach the stronghold of the evil spirits, so the shaman can move in and retrieve the lost souls of his people. When the Siberian shaman is dressed in his or her costume, he or she resembles the cosmic tree of life. Snakes crawl at the bottom of the tree, between the roots. High in the top an eagle lives. On the shamans dress there are snakes covering the legs, often they touch the earth like the roots of a tree. The body of the shaman's coat is decorated with representations of bones and ribs, in iron or in embroidery, which are like the branches of the tree. Finally, the headdress of the shaman is often made with eagle feathers. The tree of life symbolizes and embodies the balance that exists in the universe, the shaman represents this order and harmony when he or she counterbalances the forces of chaos, confusion and disease.

The image of the cosmic tree at the center of the universe is not limited to Siberia alone, a tree of life is mentioned in myths of cultures worldwide. The specific tree with the snakes at the bottom and the eagle in top however is typically only of Siberia and of the old Nordic people of western and northern Europe of pre-Christian times (Eliade 1951, 273).


For the Nordic peoples the tree of life was a giant ash, the Yggdrasil. Just as on the shaman's costume, under the Nordic tree of life there are just one or two big snakes that stand out in detail beside uncountable snakes that have no individual face, 'At the root of the tree lay a great ser-



*Stones with runic inscriptions. Sjusta, Skokloster, Uppland.
From David. M. Wilson, The Vikings and their Origins.
London, 1991, page 111.*

pent, with many scores of lesser snakes' (Davidson, 27). The snakes that live in the earth, on which the Yggdrasil stands are gnawing at the trees' roots. Not only are snakes constantly attacking the tree, also goats and deer jump at it from all sides to eat its shoots and leaves. Death is linked with life, all that is born must die, if the tree of life is to represent all aspects of life, then it is logical that death is represented too.

In Siberian shamanism the snake became an impersonal protector who made sure the shaman could travel the realms of evil spirits, By retrieving lost souls, the shaman could prolong the life of the ill. In Nordic spirituality the snake also ser-

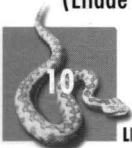


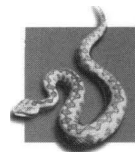
ved life but through death and rebirth. One of the Nordic names for the snake is Nidhogr: 'corpse tearer'. Here the snake has become a flying dragon that bore the dead away. Representations of snakes and dragons are interchangeable and were found on objects that were connected with the dead. On the lids of wooden coffins serpent-dragons were carved. On standing stones with inscriptions about the lives and deeds of the dead, the runes were often carved on the bodies of lengthy snakes. 'The snake as a symbol of the world of the dead is as recurrent in the art of the north as in its literature' (Davidson, 162). The snake as a symbol represents the energy of the earth, both in its inert and in its fertile aspects. All comes forth from the earth and after death returns to her, and new things comes forth again, then die and again come forth in endless succession. The snake represents all this and so becomes a perfect gatekeeper at the door between life and death.

When the dead have become part of the earth, a new cycle may begin. The dark and cold earth may come to life again when the conditions are right: when rain and sunlight make sure that seeds will sprout. Rain is connected to thunder: thunderstorms accompany the fall of heavy rain. In many shamanic cultures you find a relationship between thunder and the snake. The Hopi, in Arizona, USA, perform a snake dance in which they dance for and with rattlesnakes. After two weeks of dances the snakes are released in the wild and are expected to communicate to the thunder powers that they were treated well. When the thunder spirits hear this, they will bring rain so the crops will grow. Eliade mentions the connection between snake and lightning as symbols of cyclic fertility in nature in ancient Siberia (Eliade 1958, 154).

Also in the Nordic myths there exists a connection between thunder and the snake. In two myths, Thor, the God of Thunder, is the only power that is able to stir the enormous Midgard snake that encircles the world. In one story he is asked to lift a big grey cat, but that is so heavy he can barely lift one of its legs. Later the audience tells him they were terrified because the cat was in fact the Midgard snake in disguise. In the second myth, Thor deliberately seeks a confrontation with the Midgard snake. He lifts the snakes head from the bottom of the sea, but the two just stare at each other for some time, then Thor releases the snake again (Davidson, 34-35). Besides the rain, the earth also needs fire to bring forth life, sunlight. The snake, embodying the cold earth, is a coldblooded reptile that needs warmth in order to come back to life. Hibernating snakes wake up only when the temperatures start to rise, and will bask in the sunlight every day. In mythological sense, the snake that lives under the tree of life may also be reborn. It can do so by becoming the root of a new tree. In the carvings on original wooden beams, benches and chairs in old churches many pre-Christian symbols can be found. Among them there are representations of serpent-dragons that sprout trees from their mouth. The great snake, the eater of the dead, brings forth the tree of life (Bord, 90-92).

In both Siberian and old Nordic cultures the snake was known as a powerful and dualistic spiritual force. In the world of the shaman the snake attacks but by attacking it protects. It eats and kills but it will also give life. Where other animal spirits befriend people and have individual identities, the snake stays aloof. Since ancient times the snake has stood at the portal between death and life. Silently reminding us of the archaic forces that lie at the very foundations of our existence.





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