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SPEAKING SHAMANISTICALLY: SEIDR, ACADEMIA AND RATIONALITY

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ABSTRACT

Rooted in experiential research among shamanistic 'seidr' practitioners, this paper reflects not only on what 'insiders' do, but also on academia and its practices and discourses. It thus provides rich description of events and discourses within communities who construct identities and meanings in a variety of engagements. Methodological issues such as the delineation of appropriate behaviour and terminology are addressed, and the benefits of 'going native' explored.

INTRODUCTION <1>

A shamanistic practice known as seidr, described in the Icelandic sagas, is currently being reconstituted within North America and Europe as part of reconstructed religious tradition. Postmodernism gives an opportunity to present seidr experiences as participants' discursive understanding, embedded within gendered political practices, informed by the (equally gendered and political) discourse of 1000 years ago. Feminism and the 'critique of ethnography' have emphasized the situatedness of narrative and narrator. How, though, is such situating valued when practitioners' realities appear 'irrational', if the narrator positions herself within the multiple realities of the seidr seance?

My knowledge of seidr results from personal experience perceived/interpreted within the discourse of seidhworkers, and dialogues with these 'others'. At anthropological conferences I present and analyze other people's words rather

than what I 'know'. In discussing the seance here, I debate current moves towards intuitive/ experiential anthropology, before linking the 'otherworld' seidr experiences with the 'everyday' world of the author as academic, inquiring how I move from one to the other and how theorizing, within each, informs the other.

A DANCE FOR A WEDDING

'I'm an anthropologist', I said to the man at the customs desk in Boston. 'One of the people I'm studying is getting married. I'm going to dance at her wedding!'

His query had related to my business in the States - I'd checked both 'business' and 'pleasure'. He laughed and waved me on. As I walked, my mind mused on the meanings of the words I'd said, and what they might convey to the recipient. On the plane I'd been scribbling notes for a paper I had to write, and a future research proposal, and thinking about George Marcus' discussions of 'multi-sited ethnography'. Now here was I, caught in a maze of meanings, on my way to Winifred's wedding, and it was Walpurgisnacht: Beltane Eve.

Winifred was the first spae-worker - or seidworker, though she prefers the former term - that I ever saw in action, and I'd greatly enjoyed the discussions, in person and online, with her since, as we struggled to work out the disputed territory of seidr, sets of shamanistic practice of pre-Christian Northern Europe. Since I'd last seen her she'd talked of her friendship with another heathen, Rosten, and then the wedding invitation had arrived and I made the long trip from Nova Scotia to, indeed, dance at the wedding. But neither the 'wedding' nor the 'dancing' were likely to be quite as the customs officer envisaged. The wedding - indeed an exchange of marriage vows - was part of a weekend celebration of spring, with rituals and a maypole, and the dancing I had in mind would be that very night, before rather than after the exchange of vows. There would be drumming, and guests were encouraged to dance around the bonfire, to 'leap, spring and bound', in honour of the festival: and if they so chose, to dance to honour their animal spirits, taking on the movements of the animal, in a sense becoming the animal, strengthening spiritual links between the worlds, between human-kind and animal-kind, masked or unmasked, veiled or

unveiled, drawing on and adding to the energies of the night and the fire.

Winifred and others like her live between worlds – both the everyday and shamanic worlds (on this discourse the nine worlds of the tree Yggdrasill), and even within the 'everyday' worlds of people, the range of discursive constructions from the rationalism of (much) scientific/academic discourse to the rationalist tolerance of 'liberal' mainstream religion or agnosticism, and from the human-privileging, God-centred discourse of (much) Christian fundamentalism to the Earth-centred focus of (some) Aboriginal groups and the 'Earth is the Goddess' approach of (some) goddess spirituality. Because Winifred (and others like her) is emphatically part of North American society, with its tensions and contradictions, she is making her way, living her life, within sets of relations that link her to all these groups and more, at work, in community endeavours, in attempting to create alliances that further her goals and those of the Earth that she is sworn to protect. So much for Winifred, just now: what of the anthropologist?

SEIDR AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

For several years, now, I've been studying the shamanistic practices known as seidr, described in the Icelandic sagas, which are currently being reconstituted within North America and Europe both as part of reconstructed religious tradition, and coincidentally as part of the 'urban shaman' movement (see e.g. Lindquist 1997, for description of seidr as 're-embedded' shamanistic practice in Sweden). Describing seidr to an audience of academics is never easy, as the audience attempts to rationalize and explain the phenomena encountered (shifts in consciousness, journeying within the cosmology of the Nine Worlds and the World Tree, communication with spirits or other beings). The tendency is to treat seidr an exotic curiosity, to probe for ethnographic detail, observed by an outsider. 'Studying seidr', however, means more than that, as we shall see.

Seidr as shamanistic practice involves a change of consciousness: subtle on the part of audience members, who enter a light trance state, much more profound on the part of the seidworker who goes into ecstatic trance. The 'audience'

are therefore also participants. The word itself, as used in the Heathen community, has multiple meanings, and its use is contested in a number of ways (which I have addressed elsewhere, see e.g. Blain 1999, Blain and Wallis 1999, Blain 1998). In North America, the most obvious and public form of 'seidr' as community practice refers to oracular or divinatory seidr, modelled after an account in the Saga of Eirik the Red, where a seeress, coming to a farm undergoing hard times, sits on a specially-prepared high platform and goes into trance, accompanied by a song which calls on spirits (powers, 'naturur'), to let her see farther than she can unaided. She foretells the end of the famine, and futures for many of those present. It can be speculated that she not only 'sees', but also manipulates the future, with the help of her spirit guides, to create this good fortune (Borovsky, 1999).

In present-day oracular seidr, a room is prepared, with a 'high seat' or seidhjallr. The seidr leader may use ways of 'warding' this space, by singing a runerow or calling to the dwarf-guardians of the directions. She or he calls to the deities who themselves do seidr, Freyja and Odhinn. A song referring to various spirits or wights, and to Freyja and Odhinn, evokes an atmosphere in which people align their awareness with the cosmology of northern Europe: alternatively one could say that the song summons the spirits, and people become aware of them. Those who will 'seid' (the word is a verb as well as a noun, in Old Icelandic) ask their spirit or animal allies to assist them or lead them. After a guided meditation which leads all participants down from an initial 'safe place', through a tunnel of trees, to the World Tree Yggdrasill and beneath its roots to the lower world, participants reach the realm of Hela and the ancestors. The 'audience' are told that they now sit outside the gates: only the seeress or seer will enter Hela's realm, urged on by further singing and drumming, 'journeying' to seek answers to participants' questions. Now the guide invites questioners to step forward, and the seeress speaks to them. Usually she sits still, with a veil over her face. Sometimes she may sway, one (Raudhildr) leans forward, unveiled, and may take the participant's hands. When she tires, or when there are no more questions, the guide 'calls' her back from the ancestors' world, and she steps down from the high seat, often moving stiffly, cramped and dazed: another may take her place. Finally the guide narrates

the return journey meditation, so that all, seers, guide and audience/participants, return together to 'ordinary consciousness'.

This is the account an informed outsider might create, the kind of description one mostly finds of 'exotic' rituals. Here are two more, which refer to specific experiences of performance of seidr. First, a descriptions of 'what happens':

...the people that are doing the public oracular seidr go with me, they stop at the gate. We stress stay with the group don't go running off and stirring up the Jotnar, you can mess yourself up, this is real stuff ... Dealing with real beings can have real results, whether you believe it'll hurt you or not... I go down, I go through Hela's gate. I've got somebody watching me...to have a control, to check on me, ah, everything takes it's energy from somewhere and I've noticed sometimes when I get down there and I'm working with the dead and producing this reciprocal relationship, this conversation and stuff, it can be really cold, even in a warm room, in a hot linen robe, with a heavy shawl over my head, I'll start getting really cold, and I checked with someone else who works in another tradition, with similar techniques, and he does too, he's taken his temperature after some heavy trance work, it was 93. I don't think you're supposed to be able to do that...

I go through Hela's gate. I always nod respectful to Queen Hela, I'm in her living room, but I see, other people see different things, I see a lake, it's night and torchlight and all that, it lights up and the big torch, the lake, will light up the area enough so I can see the dead people, and I walk down there and say okay, time to gather round, and I'll say would those who need to speak with me, or who need to speak with the people I'm here representing please come forward. They look different... I have never seen anything scary, um, they look like people, and there, the ones that have been there or passing on, I guess, to another life or whatever they want to do, sometimes they're just like shadows, some look like living men and women, some are somewhere in between, of course there's many, many, many of them. They'll ask questions, sometimes they'll speak, sometimes I'll be in a trance where I'm answering the questioner and the voice that's coming out of my mouth, the

intonation's different, the accent's a little different, ... the words coming out of me is me and it's not me, sometimes it's the strangest feeling. I remember what I say, fairly well. I'm never possessed, I'm never off somewhere while somebody else runs the equipment, but ah, I speak to them like I speak to you. Sometimes I hear voices, sometimes I see pictures, impressions, feelings, ah, I have my eyes closed physically, and I'm in trance, and I've got a shawl over my head, sometimes it's almost like pictures on the back of my eyelids, I don't know if that makes any sense or not, and I'm competent at this.

This is obviously a practitioner's account. Its description is embodied: a physical body remains seated on the seid platform, eyes closed, and becomes cold. From this we start to see the seidr journey, for the seidworker, as embedded within cosmology, and with its own layers of meaning. This is an account as told to the ethnographer: 'emic' knowledge, participant's understanding. It is a generalized description of experiences, a meta-description of usual proceedings and practices, rather than a particular event. The speaker, Jordsvin, is describing his practice to someone who has expressed interest and who has seen enough seid to relate his telling to the general flow of ritual and process.

Here is the second.

The almost formulaic ritual was a performance, which led to its own state of altered consciousness, different from that of the solitary or facilitated journey. I would go through the gates, wait to be sung onto a path, and see first many people, then a tree, and by the tree I could find answers, though they came slowly when people asked, and speaking, requiring to withdraw sufficiently from the deep trance state to be able to articulate with physical tongue, throat and lips, was hard, and has since become still more hard.

Then came a journey that was different from the start. As I did the narration to the gates, it seemed increasingly that this was for the others, I was facilitating their journey, but though I felt myself moving into a light trance I did not see the gates. Sitting on the high seat with the veil over my head, I was in a mound, at once seeing the one who dwelled there and being myself the dweller in the mound, one buried there long before. As people asked questions, answers came

from within the mound, from the glitter of flecks of gemstones in the soil, from images projected onto walls of stone or earth, from patterns formed by stacked stones before me. At times my awareness seemed to incorporate a large hall of feasting people, who yet formed part of the mound - howe, barrow or cairn, I did not inquire at this time. When Thorgerd, a craftswoman, asked of her work, I heard the ringing of hammer on anvil, and saw the dwarf-smith who laughed when I passed on the question to him. My friend had asked this question before, which was why he laughed. In the mythology, dwarves crafted the finest objects, and forged precious metals.

The first part of this is meta-description: 'what usually happens', told with attention to different levels of observation. Then there's the account of a specific journey, a turning point in the speaker's experience. It's written as an impressionistic account, designed to draw the reader or listener in to the speaker's awareness, to create understanding through 'suspension of belief' and use of words. I should know this: It's my own experience, part of an account I gave at a recent conference. Like all accounts, it's designed for an audience, designed to create an effect. It comes from a much longer experiential account, written as a book chapter, but only two people have read it to date.

The question therefore becomes, how far is this account acceptable? It is comprehensible to insiders: it's also easily dismissed as non-objective, imaginal, even resulting in a 'sense of shock and disbelief' (Goulet, 1994:20) and until recently I relied on interview accounts to give similar information. That was safer, it didn't expose me to the charge of having 'gone native'. In an article for a book on research methods (Blain, 1998a), I raised some questions about this. Why did I use other people's words to convey knowledge, impressions, that were my own? There are of course many reasons: the phenomenon I describe is not experienced identically by all who engage with it. Jordsvin's account (the earlier one) is of his own specific engagement with the journey, situated geographically and temporarily, and written as a gay man who participates in a community practice that is associated with women and gay men. Some of his standpoint becomes more obvious when other quotes are considered:

I occasionally get bigoted rants via email, usually from young males high on testosterone and bravado, usually with blatant homophobic content. Large sections of the Heathen community really need some education on this matter.
(Jordsvin)

Each seidworker has her or his own descriptions: different processes become important, sensations, visions, the sense of the community for which one 'sees' and that gives the energy required for the seid-journey. Seid is not one event or sensation. A need for multiple, situated narratives becomes evident. Each is a representation of perceptions and situatedness. Rather than striving for a single, syncretic description that captures the event, postmodernism gives an opportunity to present seidr experiences as participants' discursive understanding, embedded within social and community processes, for instance embedded within gendered political practices, informed by the (equally gendered and political) discourse of 1000 years ago (Blain and Wallis, 1999). Jordsvin's comment, quoted above, shocks us into an understanding that seid and seidhworkers are disputed within the community that is called 'heathen', indeed that there may be more than one 'community' to be considered.

As I continue to discover the seidr community, and describe this while locating myself within it, two linked questions are coming to the fore in my awareness. Feminism and the 'critique of ethnography' have emphasized the situatedness of narrative and narrator. How, though, is such situating valued when practitioners' realities appear 'irrational', if the narrator positions herself within the multiple realities of the seidr seance? And if seid is 'shamanistic', what is shamanism, and what is its relevance for today's western society?

SHAMANS AND ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Some researchers have described a curious 'double standard' - 'native informants', but not academics, can speak and theorize from within 'irrational' discourses of magic or spirit-helpers (Blain, 1998a, Wilson 1994). Others mention 'shamanophobia' (Dowson, 1996) within academia: a reluctance to consider 'shamanic' constructions for human events or ideas. To speak of the human political situating of seidr is

acceptable; to describe the politics internal to the seid-journey, as a form of 'truth' that can aid analysis (rather than a phenomenon to be analyzed) is often not. 'Spirit-helpers' thus become culturally-defined aspects of one's own personality, not external agents: part of the individualization and psychologizing of perception that is part of western academic discourses of the rational, unitary self (Venn, 1984). In the western neo-shamanic movement, it's common for practitioners to speak of Jungian theories, and to individuate spirit guardians and higher selves, entities that are attached to an individual person and may be explained as forming part of that individual's psyche, consciousness or subconscious. Similar discourses are used to explain academic understandings of the imaginal. (Is it 'real', or is it all in my head?) Some academics attempting to explain the 'otherworldness' of shamanic ecstasy, and the images that appear, have had recourse to descriptions of neurological activity promoted by hallucinogens or by the stimulation of repeated sound (drumming, chanting) and movement, exhaustion, fasting and so forth: processes which are internal to the individual concerned. Other explanations also relying on neurological or neurophysiological phenomena are possible - see, for example, the work of Felicitas Goodman (1991, 1999) on body posture, sound stimulation and reported trance images.

But those who study shamanisms within context point out that the images are not the same in all cultures: not only the meaning, but what is seen or heard, changes. Perception and meaning are embedded within specific cultural and historic community interpretations. These shamanisms rely on similar possibilities (abilities of humans to remember dreams, to interpret images, to shift awareness in response to stimuli, and so forth) but the 'shamanic complex' differs in what is done and how this is interpreted (Hoppal, 1987). But there is more. In shamanic cultures, shamanism is not one part or aspect of culture that can be examined or not, as the ethnographer chooses. Describing her experiences as an ethnographer among the Dene, Guedon says that 'Shamanism permeates all of Nabesna culture: the worldview, the subsistence patterns, and the life cycles' (Guedon, 1994).

Elsewhere I've described the construction of the seidr trance, from material in the Eddas and sagas (Blain, 1999a). It's important to note that in the old material seidr is not

described as central to the community, but that in the sagas the possibility of magical action, of altered consciousness, of involvement with the community through seidr is there, present, non-remarkable when it arises. The society was not shamanic in the sense that Guedon's Nabesna community is shamanic, but from descriptions it appears that some groups or communities may have been. The relations constructed between people of the community include those that involve other beings, spirits, powers, deities, and this appears from time to time in the old material.

However, the communities I'm studying today are deliberately-constructed, rather self-consciously: groups of people who come together here and there, to link themselves with the deities of the Eddas, the AEsir and Vanir of Northern Europe and to 'worship' in what they consider to be 'old ways'. Some have based their practice initially on ritual worship believed to parallel that of the Viking age. Others associate themselves chiefly with spirits of land and sea, and only secondarily with the deities of Asgard (this is particularly the case where people have grown up knowing something of the mythology, as in the seid-workers that Lindquist (1997) describes). In North America, oracular seidr arose initially to be 'something that the women could do' while male Asatruars were toasting the gods and drinking beer, and engaging in 'viking games'. The community at that time was more involved with reconstruction and reenactment than it now is. But however it arose, seidr is now becoming central to community practice and understanding of how to relate to deities and wights. Relations constituted through seidr position the seidworker with respect to others, her clients, and with respect to the spirits she contacts. The seidworker becomes a mediator between people and spirits, and one who is active in the creation of both community and knowledge. I'll let Winifred give an example:

one of the most interesting seeings that I had was for a young man, and Heimdallr came for him, and it was wonderful and they made him set, they set up this whole thing where they went into a sauna together and had this man-to-man talk about how to be a man and follow the man's path, and the interesting thing was that I wasn't allowed to hear what they were saying to one another, but just to understand that Heimdallr had this knowledge for him and that I had to pass it on to him, he should go to him. But you know, sweat lodge

and the whole, the whole deal and it was like, these are male mysteries and they're not for me, only the message was, it's my right to carry. But it was very warming to see a young man being taken in hand by Heimdallr and set upon his man's path.

The example given earlier, from Jordsvin, indicates that seidr and its practitioners are not viewed with favour by all heathens, and indeed the status of seidr is contested, but seems to be changing so that the community is becoming more 'shamanic'.

In this, then, I'm dealing with approaches to seidr and shamanism that look beyond the concept of technique (see e.g. Eliade 1964 for definition that relies on technique) to seeing the shaman within the community. In doing this the focus is on relations, and these include not only relations between seidworker and clients, but those relations that are part-constituted by other beings, whether 'spirits', animals, or deities. (Marie-Francoise Guedon, personal communication, finds the popular translation of 'spirits' to be misleading and at times misplaced. The beings contacted by the shaman are likewise culturally specific.)

Narratives of 'the spirits' and of the shaman as entering into socially-constitutive relation with them, however, are what become most problematic for a Western rationalist audience, for whom non-belief in 'spirits' is axiomatic. I have seen an entire conference returning, time after time, to the question of 'do the spirits exist?' And in presenting any material that relates to personal experience, I have to deal with the challenge of whether I have 'belief' in 'the spirits': a belief that would seem to discredit my credentials to do 'impartial' or 'unbiased' ethnography. (That non-belief also constitutes 'bias' would be seen as likewise irrational by adherents of the non-belief discourse.)

My response is to return to the critique of ethnography. I could say that to my respondents, the 'belief in spirits' is real, and therefore it becomes part of the way in which they shape their world, create their realities, manipulate their consciousnesses: the ethnographer, however, standing outside, can see how the belief functions within the community. This is the approach taken by many researchers. It isn't that simple, though. In the 1998 research methods article, I

included an extract from an article prepared by Diana Paxson, author, and initial researcher, within the community, of oracular seidr. She moves back and forth between the discourse of 'spirits' and the discourse of 'rationality'. She, and Winifred, and Jordsvin, like myself, are part of present-day post-industrial society, immersed in its dialogues, products of its education system, bombarded with information that supports the rational individual self and denies 'spirits'. And yet, from the many discourses available (and Winifred, for one, assiduously researched spiritualities before committing herself to heathenism), they chose one which is contested even within their community of choice.

Another problem with taking the view that 'they believe it, so I'll accept it as emic description' is that it posits the researcher as having access to a 'truth' outside, and at odds with that of her participants. It is, to say the least, patronizing. It may also, in the final resort, actively deny access to the 'realities' of participants (see, e.g. Edith Turner, 1994). And in distancing the ethnographer from this 'belief', it starts to reify 'emic knowledge' as fixed, static and unchanging, as generally shared, rather than as the specific construction of interpretations that each person, ethnographer included, engages in and with.

My choice is to refuse to adjudicate belief, at least in my written work. 'Belief' is, in my view, not a good description for the relation of shamanists and other beings that share the worlds of their lives. Rather it seems that these beings are part of the relationships, partial creators of community endeavours. They are simply there: and in an ethnography of encounters with a spirit-world, the spirit-beings surely must communicate their part. While shamanism may involve mimesis, performance, dialogue is part of the process, and in interpreting 'extraordinary experience' I am required to take seriously not merely the human participants' belief, but the 'spirits' themselves.

I see Winifred and the others moving between the worlds, as I said at the start of the paper, constructing meaning from discourse, relationships, surroundings: Two images come to mind. Marie Françoise Guedon talks of Dene concept of place, location, without boundaries: the hunter moves from a 'home' point, out and back, out and back, creating a known territory that may be used and known also by others, from their own

points of reference. Similarly, the seidworker or shaman moves from the safe place, out into the unknown and returns, to trace a different journey next time, and journeys intersect, mapping the territory in a way that is without boundaries. To me, the shaman becomes a metaphor for the ethnographer of postmodern societies, moving through the worlds, moving between levels of analysis, in an attempt to re-construct something in her own understandings, her own life, that approaches wholeness, an understanding of living that is complete, not fragmented, returning in her journeys to a pole of being, the world tree.

I cannot create ethnography by appropriating local knowledges. (This was the old image of ethnography, that the anthropologist would go 'elsewhere' and come back with pure description, informants' stories and 'objective' observation. It never, of course, worked like that: the ethnographer's gathering of local knowledge being always partial, and observations always situated.) My choice is to enter the world of the seidworker, as a native-speaker: but simply 'going native', total cultural immersion, in itself is not enough. My understandings of seidr include understandings of its links to the 'outside' world, and my own locations within these; and how 'the spirits' see these links. I seek to understand the construction of seidr and its community, the contradictions and contestations therein, by understanding my 'self' as part/not part of that community, as situated within its relations, with my own knowledges that are not totally shared with others, though specific others have parts therein. Critical awareness and reflexivity are constructed in the intersections of the worlds, in the journeys: in the experience of ecstasy, and my attempts to communicate it in prose or poetry; in the embarrassment I feel when dealing with those who will accept only 'rationality'; and in all the feelings of doubt about the ability to publish without sacrificing a career. It is no accident that my most complete account, to date, has been read by only two people: in two countries, on two continents, each with their own connections to seidr and to academia; and even that account is not fully complete, nor is it likely ever to be.

And so: 'I'm an anthropologist', I said to the man at the customs desk in Boston. 'One of the people I'm studying is getting married. I'm going to dance at her wedding!' But though the dance may be unexpected, a journey with its own

layers of meaning, the ethnographer is a part of it, and a part of these layers. My rather flippant comment, examined, holds its own meaning. The reality of the customs officer is to me more alien than that of the dancers, but both act to shape my own construction of reality, with its own central axis, and its own reaching out for knowledge of what lies outside, and within.

NOTE

<1> An earlier version of this paper was given at the conference on 'Going Native', Folklore Center, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, May 21, 1999.

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