

Introduction

Our starting point is shamanism in the north and, more precisely, the expressions of shamanic materialities in contemporary Finland and Norway. Shamans interact with spiritual powers and beings, but their religious practices unfold in a material reality. Compared to textual studies – the study of dogmas and theology – the materiality of religions has been less examined.¹ In this Element, we begin with the materiality of shamanism and focus on how the drum, the sacrificial site, the power animal, and the mushroom bridge the gap between the profane and the divine and create networks and dynamics in a shamanic worldview as well as in the wider society. The shamanic objects in focus in this project are part of different networks that consist of human as well as nonhuman agents, or actants in Latour’s terminology. Our aim is to explore the agency of things and their relationships, movements, and transformations, as well as the values, feelings, and obsessions that inform shamans’ understanding and use of selected materialities (see Morgan 2009). In this context, shamanic materialities are viewed as active parts in various networks stretching over time and space. The materialities also point to the mobility of religion and the formations and circulation of religion in wider contexts, such as popular culture, tourism, and politics.

We study the circulations of shamanic materialities inspired by Thomas Tweed’s definition of religion as “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (Tweed 2006: 54). An equally important inspiration is David Chidester’s *Religion: Material Dynamics* (2018), which offers a timely focus on how circulations of “religious” materialities “require new ways of thinking about religious change and diffusion, religious mobility and plasticity, beyond the frameworks provided by religious institutions” (Chidester 2018: 9).

Shamanic materialities can be simultaneously commodities, spiritual rituals, and transformative political projects. These contexts are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor are they without occasional contradictions and tensions. The drum, sacrificial sites, power animals, and the mushroom are in this context messengers that enable a dialogue between the past and the present. As folklorist Jonas Frykman says about the role of objects in cultural production: “Things like this – and many more – have become something more than symbols. They

¹ In recent decades, the material aspect of religion has nevertheless gained more attention, which can be seen in books like *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (Morgan 2009); *Material Religion and Popular Culture* (King 2010); and *Stuff* (Miller 2010); in 2005, the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* was founded.

bear secrets and have to be induced to speak” (Frykman 2002: 49). An overall question explored in this Element is thus how different forms of materialities shape shamanism and, in contrast, how the materialities discussed in the following sections are formed by shamanism.

Our backgrounds in religious studies and cultural studies, in Trude Fonneland’s case, and in archaeology for Tiina Äikäs, enable us to approach the materialities of religion using interviews, participatory observations, and material culture. Archaeologists have been interested in the materiality of rituals for some time. Timothy Insoll states in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion* that “[a] ‘turn’ is also increasingly evident whereby serious consideration is beginning to be given to the materiality of ritual and religions” (Insoll 2011: 1). Simultaneously, there has also been increasing interest among archaeologists to document and study the material remains of contemporary times (e.g., Lucas & Buchli 2001; Harrison & Schofield 2010; Holtorf & Piccini 2011). In addition, the contemporary deposits at ritual sites have been studied from an archaeological perspective, for example, the New Age deposits in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (Finn 1997); Pagan groups’ uses of prehistoric sites in Britain (Blain & Wallis 2007; Houlbrook 2022), as well as in Finland, Norway, and Estonia (Äikäs & Spangen 2016; Jonuks & Äikäs 2019); and the use of coin-trees, where coins are pressed into trees and logs in exchange for a wish or luck (Houlbrook 2018, 2022). Archaeological studies are often concerned with offerings and deposits where the practices most often give birth to archaeological material. Here we study the contemporary material culture of offerings as well as of other kinds of spiritual practices.

Shamanism in General and Saami Shamanism in Particular²

The Western world’s fascination with shamanism is by no means a recent phenomenon. The historical background has been meticulously documented by, among others, Ronald Hutton (2001), Kocku von Stuckrad (2003), and Andrei Znamenski (2007). The highlighting of shamanism as a universal

² The Saami people are the Indigenous people inhabiting northern Fennoscandia, which today encompasses parts of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. In Norway, the Saami are recognized under the international conventions of Indigenous people and are the northernmost Indigenous people of Europe. Their livelihood has traditionally been based on different types of hunting, fishing, gathering, husbandry, and agriculture, with considerable variation between different Saami groups. When using Saami concepts such as *sieidi* and *noaidi*, we follow the North Saami orthography if not otherwise mentioned. The word Saami itself has been written in different forms, including Saami, Sami, and Sámi. We have chosen to use Saami but in direct citations Sami and Sámi are also used. Translations from Norwegian and Finnish are our own if not otherwise mentioned.

phenomenon was inspired by the English translation of *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, by Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1964). Eliade and his groundbreaking work have influenced not only the study but also the practice of shamanism (Wallis 2003). In addition, anthropologist Carlos Castaneda's experiential novel, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968), served as an inspiration for numerous spiritual seekers. In the 1960s the so-called New Age movement turned to shamanism as a major inspiration and source for its worldview, and in the early 1970s shamanism emerged as a global category and phenomenon, with shamans in many parts of the world sharing common practices, rituals, and a nature-oriented worldview and lifestyle. As Thomas Karl Alberts argues:

Since the 1970s, several constellations of interests and values have given a new prominence to shamanic religiosities, stimulated new proliferation and intensifications of shamanism discourse, and variously deepened and extended shamanism's entanglements in domains of knowledge and practice in which it was previously less prominent. (Alberts 2015: 2)

Michael Harner must be addressed as a major player when it comes to developing Eliadean shamanism into a spiritual path for everyone and creating mystical states that are achievable in a suburban living room or a New Age workshop (Harvey 2010; Sidky 2010). In 1979, Harner founded the Center for Shamanic Studies, a nonprofit organization that he renamed in 1987 as the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS). Here he developed core shamanism, a system designed for Westerners to apply shamanism and shamanic healing successfully to their daily lives.³ The FSS has three primary aims: preservation of shamanic cultures and wisdom around the world; study of the original shamanic peoples and their traditions; and teaching shamanic knowledge for the benefit of the planet. Several critics claim that Harner and his followers' use of the term shamanism is a cultural appropriation of non-Western practices by middle class "white" people who have distanced themselves from their own history (see Kehoe 2000: 3; Hutton 2001; Znamenski 2007). Even though Harner's theory of core shamanism claims that shamanism is not bound to any specific cultural group or perspective but is particularly "intended for Westerners to reacquire access to their rightful spiritual heritage,"⁴ Harner's concept at the same time contributes to the construction of shamanism as "something out there," with Indigenous practitioners being the authentic shamans.

Contemporary shamanism has, more or less due to Harner's teaching, emerged as diverse religious practices used by a variety of actors all over the

³ www.shamanism.org/fssinfo/index.html.

⁴ See www.shamanism.org/workshops/coreshamanism.html.

world for various reasons and from different points of departure (Alberts 2018; Fonneland 2017; Kraft 2022). Within this global shamanic fellowship, diversity is the most prominent feature, and shamanism is therefore not describable as a uniform tendency on a global scale. Diversity is displayed in terms of the various traditions that the practitioners choose to follow and revive, in terms of practices, politics, values, and where it is all taking place. What this means is that studies of the dynamics of shamanic entrepreneurs and materialities in one particular place are not necessarily directly transferable to other local contexts. Although the United States can be described as the cradle of modern shamanism, the spread of shamanic religious practices and ideas to other habitats is not a uniform process but rather involves adaptations to local cultural and political climates.

In previous studies, Fonneland traced the history of the process of giving shamanism an Indigenous Saami flavor to Saami author and journalist Ailo Gaup (1944–2014), who is considered the first Saami shaman in Norway (see Fonneland 2010, 2017a). Gaup’s story reveals both a strong influence from Harner’s core shamanism and a strong desire to bring forth Saami religious traditions as a basis for religious practice in contemporary society (see Gaup 2005). In a memorial to Ailo Gaup at the FSS website the strong bond between Gaup and Harner is emphasized:

Ailo had been a student of Michael Harner and played an important role in the restoration of Sami shamanism in Norway. He was a renowned poet, author, and a nephew of the famous Sami shaman, Mikkel Gaup. Just before Ailo became ill, he published Michael’s *Cave and Cosmos* in Norwegian. Those who participated in Foundation courses with him will fondly remember his laughter and humor.⁵

While Harner’s seminal *The Way of the Shaman*, published in 1980, does not mention Indigenous people, his FSS establishes a strong bond between core shamanism and Indigenous people. It pursues the idea that Indigenous forms of nature spirituality can be adapted to the inclinations and needs of those seeking alternative forms of enlightenment (see Alberts 2015: 131). This shift towards indigenism, and in particular towards Saami Indigenous traditions, is strongly reflected in the development of shamanism in Nordic countries.⁶

⁵ <https://shamanism.org/news/2014/page/2/>.

⁶ A rune-singer and an instructor of traditions, Eero Peltonen (2021) describes in the article “Rumpuystäväni” (My drum friend) how the new wave of shamanism arrived in Finland in the early 1980s as Michael Harner and anthropologist Heimo Lappalainen taught a course on shamanism at the University of Helsinki. According to Peltonen, a wider interest was raised by a play, *Eeli, shamaani* (Eeli, a shaman), performed at the Kajaani City theater in 1985, which offered a recounting of Elias Lönnrot, collector of the Finnish national epoch *Kalevala*. Hence,

Harner-style shamanism reached the Nordic region during the 1970s, along with New Age and occult impulses. During the first ten years, the shamanic movement was more or less a copy of the system developed by Harner in the United States. Similarly, the broader New Age scene differed little from its equivalent in the United States (Andreassen & Fonneland 2002). However, over the course of the first five years of the new millennium, the situation gradually changed (Fonneland & Kraft 2013). From this period forward, professional shamans were depicted as representing an ancient Saami shamanic tradition (Christensen 2005), while the Nordic New Age scene was increasingly filled with Saami shamans, symbols, and traditions, along with a new focus on local- and place-specific characteristics unique to the northern region, particularly in terms of domestic geography (Fonneland 2010). Contemporary Saami shamanism has become a core subject within the wider field of shamanism in Nordic countries.

In Nordic countries, the term shaman has also become an umbrella term for the Saami *noaidi* (a north Saami term for a Saami Indigenous religious specialist), similar to cases of religious specialists among people referred to as “Indigenous,” more or less regardless of their particular expertise and practices. However, the *noaidi* has not always been perceived as a shaman. As David Chidester points out, the shaman is a religious specialist initially identified in Siberia, then colonized by Russia, and later adopted by a global arena (Chidester 2018: xi). In other words, the term shaman started its journey in European conceptualizations of Evenki practices in the late seventeenth century before extending beyond Siberia, and the concept has been expanding in space and time ever since.

Konsta Kaikkonen, in his doctoral dissertation, “Contextualising Descriptions of Noaidevuotta: Saami Ritual Specialists in Texts Written until 1871” (2020), points out that the discourse of “Saami shamanism” entered the academic world through the paradigm of comparative mythology as adopted by Finnish ethnographer and linguist Matthias Alexander Castrén in the 1840s. Building on Castrén’s theories and ideas, in 1871 Norwegian linguist Jens A. Friis introduced this discourse into the up-and-coming field of “lappology.” The concept of the shaman, in other words, is an example of the complexities often involved in translation processes over time and across space (see Znamenski 2007; Rydving 2011; Johnson & Kraft 2017; Nikanorova 2022). These translation processes were never equitable and neutral, and they fed colonial perceptions, exotification, and othering. When it comes to the types

Kalevalaic tradition has been connected to contemporary shamanism in Finland from the very beginning, as have influences from Harner.

of translation processes to which the terms shaman and shamanism have been subjected, it is important to keep in mind what James Clifford has highlighted with regard to the concept of translation: “Translation is not transmission. . . . Cultural translation is always uneven, always betrayed. But this very interference and lack of smoothness is a source of new meanings, of historical traction” (Clifford 2013: 48–9).

Climate: The North as a Spiritual Geography

Shamanic materialities produce religious spaces that address specific material conditions and shifting social networks. Through the drum, the sacred place, the power animal, and the mushroom, local sites take shape as spiritual geographies and centers. These spiritual geographies reveal the dwellings and crossings (Tweed 2006) of people, symbols, and rituals. The spiritual geography develops in dialogue with contemporary narratives about the north as a resource, symbolically, economically, climatically, and culturally. These ways of communicating the north are in sharp contrast to the perception of the north only a decade ago as “backward and less developed” in terms of lifestyle, education level, work opportunities, economy, and culture (see Grønaas et al. 1948).

The role of Saami as the Indigenous people of Northern Fennoscandia – Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia – raises ethical considerations with regard to the use of Saami cultural elements (Äikäs & Salmi 2019; Mathisen 2020). There have traditionally been different Saami cultures and languages. Moreover, today the Saami people have different cultures and histories, as well as being subject to different laws and regulations by nation-states despite their shared Indigenous identity. Despite being “one people,” not all Saami enjoy the same rights or representation across the four nation-states due to these different national and cultural influences (Josefsen & Skogerbø 2021; Lilleslått 2021). Norway is the only Nordic country to have ratified ILO Convention No. 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention), which states that Indigenous people require “special measures, which promote the social and economic rights of the peoples concerned and protect their spiritual and cultural values.”⁷ These types of regulations also affect how shamanic materialities are approached and activated.

In other words, Saami shamanism exemplifies the importance of national frameworks and regulations with respect to religious developments in this case, and also in the sense of legal definitions regarding what constitutes a religion (see Gilhus & Kraft 2019: 15). The external forces of governmental laws and

⁷ www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:55:0::NO::P55_TYPE,P55_LANG,P55_DOCUMENT,P55_NODE:REV,en,C169/Document.

regulations have direct consequences for the design and maneuverability of shamanistic groups. A law on religious freedom has been enshrined in Finland since 1923 and in Norway since 1964, which has also made it possible for groups without any affiliation to the Church of Norway, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, or the Orthodox Church of Finland to be classified legally as religious communities. In Finland, registered religious associations can perform legally valid marriage ceremonies and teach their respective religions in elementary schools and high schools if at least three pupils require it (see Taira 2010). In Norway, an approved religious community may perform ceremonies such as initiations, weddings, and funerals. While no country provides the same level of financial support for religious communities, registered religious communities receive similar public subsidies per member, as does the Norwegian Church (see Askeland 2011). The presence of a high number of “organized groups” distinguishes the shamanic topography in Norway from its Nordic neighbors (Gilhus & Kraft 2017: 11). As Gilhus and Kraft (2017: 11) argue, this might be due to the Protestant Church’s strong position, whereby the church functions as a model for how religion should be shaped and organized. Norway is also the only Nordic country in which a shamanistic group has received recognition as an official religion (see Fonneland 2015). In Finland, Karhun kansa was the first pagan community to gain the status of a registered religious community in 2013. The Shamaaniseura (Shaman Association) is recognized not as a religion but rather as a religiously, politically, and ideologically independent organization, as stated on its website (Shamaaniseurary 2022, usein-kysytyt-kysymykset).

What this tells us is that shamanic materialities are not neutral but entangled in and in dialogue with local social and political trends and tensions (see also Strmiska 2018: 10). An examination of the local setting, climate, and local politics are thus important in order to understand precisely the domestic traits of shamanism.

Since the start of the twenty-first century, several researchers have claimed that shamanism is one of the fastest growing religions in the Western world (Wallis 2003: 140; Partridge 2004: 47). This growth is reflected in the Nordic countries in both secular and religious arenas. Various shamanic festivals, each with its own particular content and scope, have recently emerged (see Fonneland 2015a). New shamanic denominations are being constructed (see Fonneland 2015b), and a growing corpus of shamans are offering their services and products to the public. Furthermore, shamanism and articulations of Saami religion are being expressed in secular arenas like the tourism industry, media, films, products for sale and consumption, and the education system (see Christensen 2013; Äikäs 2019; Andreassen & Olsen 2020; Fonneland 2020; Kalvig 2020; Mathisen 2020). Shamanism has also been recently activated in

various forms of political activism, often with a spotlight on the environment and saving the planet (see Kraft 2020). Saami shamanism therefore caters to not only spiritual needs but also the more mundane needs of the tourist trade, place branding, and entertainment, as well as for Saami nation building and the ethno-political field of Indigenous revival.

Shamanism in Nordic countries takes shape through the selection and interpretation of the “local” and the “traditional,” and through the activation of different events, practices, and materialities that are highlighted as particularly meaningful for shamanic practitioners. Authenticity is here tied to distant times and places, to a past not yet touched by the detrimental influence of civilization, and to an authentic, organic Nordic culture living on in the guise of Christianity (see also Gregorius 2008: 132). Embedded in this quest for a Nordic past, a critique of civilization – a form of anti-modernism and anti-urbanism – can be traced. This quest and narrative also underpin and develop discourse about Indigenous religion by presenting Saami cultures as spiritual, close to nature, in balance with the natural elements, and associated with ancient traditions. In this Element, we use the connection of shamanism to Saami religions as a starting point but also scrutinize how shamanism has moved into other spiritual and even popular culture contexts.

Theoretical Framework

In this Element, we take the material turn as inspiration to look into the relations between things and humans – how things play an important role in shaping shamanic entrepreneurship in contemporary Nordic countries and how shamanism happens in material culture. “Thinking through things” reveals how things create people as much as people create things. As Daniel Miller states:

We cannot comprehend anything, including ourselves, except as a form. . . . We cannot know who we are. Or become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us. This world confronts us as material culture and continues to evolve through us. (Miller 2005: 8)

The diverse and complex contemporary expressions of shamanic materialities can be described as processes of religion-making. Religion-making, according to a model developed by Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair (2011), sheds light on the manifold layers of agency in religionization processes.⁸ In their model,

⁸ Dressler and Mandair draw on social constructivist and postcolonial approaches and are inspired by the studies of Edward Said (1978), Jonathan Z. Smith (1988), Talal Asad (1993, 2003), and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005).

Dressler and Mandair put forward three different levels of religion-making that shed light on multiple layers of agency in religionization processes:

(1) religion-making from above, that is as a strategy from a position of power, where religion becomes an instrument of governmentality, a means to legitimize certain politics and positions of power; (2) religion-making from below, that is, as a politics where particular social groups in a subordinate position draw on a religionist discourse to re-establish their identities as legitimate social formations distinguishable from other social formations through tropes of religious difference and/ or claims for certain rights; and (3) religion-making from (a pretended) outside, that is, scholarly discourses on religion that provide legitimacy to the first two processes of religion-making by systematizing and thus normalizing the religious/secular binary and its derivatives. (Dressler & Mandair 2011: 21)

An additional arena of religion-making was added by Dressler in “Modes of Religionization: A Constructivist Approach to Secularity” – namely what he refers to as religion-making in cultural encounters, “and the translations and negotiations of new and old concepts and practices that they engender” (Dressler 2019: 13). Dressler and Mandair are concerned with the linkages between these major dimensions and how some or all of them can be intertwined. They point out that religion-making from below forms a dialectical relationship with religion-making from above, and that attention needs to be given to the “more complex dynamics of agency in the adaptation of these discourses in non-Western vernacular languages” (Dressler & Mandair 2011: 22). They argue, with reference to Charles Hallisey’s concept of intercultural mimesis, that:

We need to think the appropriation of the Western discourses of religion and the secular in a manner that does not reduce local actors to the role of passive objects but instead focuses on “local productions of meaning,” that is, the agency of locals in the encounter with Orientalist knowledge. (Dressler & Mandair 2011: 22)

Religion-making can also be connected to history-making when there is an experienced connection with religious traditions of the past. Brian Roberts, for instance, describes how history-making can be constructed of public and private, individual and group narratives (2004: 91). Different people, groups, and media create various stories of the past, which can serve present purposes and influence each other. Hence, history-making can be seen as a social process (Kalela 2013).⁹ When people’s experiences of the past, and interactions with the relics of the past, become part of history-making, the process can be seen as highly embodied. In recent decades, embodiment, bodily practice, and

⁹ History-making can also be seen in the context of traditionalization discussed in Section 3.

performance have become a main focus of rituals and religion (Bell 1992; Insoll 2009; Salmi et al. 2011; Mitchell 2018). The body is approached “as a site of lived experience, a social body, and site of embodied agency” (Joyce 2005: 139). Bodily experience is seen as an important part of rituals and religion, as rituals are experienced with both one’s body and all senses and emotions (Insoll 2009: 303). As Jon P. Mitchell observes:

Embodiment figures the body as both locus and conduit of embodied religion; the subject, rather than object, of religious process. The concern is therefore less with religious regulation of the body, or the body as symbolic representation of religious meaning, than with the various ways in which religion is enacted, performed, embodied. (Mitchell 2018: 1)

Äikäs and Ikäheimo have shown how people can bring the past into the present through interaction and bodily engagement (Ikäheimo & Äikäs 2017). Here the historicity of the relic is not as important as the possibility for bodily engagement with it.

In all of the preceding contexts mentioned, indigeneity and “Indigenous religion” are approached as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973). For a variety of reasons, a range of diverse actors view Indigenous spirituality as something that is worth pursuing, owning, and consuming. This has led to controversies and to questions about appropriation. Colonialism is not just about territorial claims, economic strategies, and racial ideologies; it also involves the appropriation of material culture (Naum & Nordin 2013; Äikäs & Salmi 2019).

Religion, Worldview, and Way of Life

The concept of religion is and has been imbued with varying connotations and values in different societies and contexts. In the shamans’ descriptions, the word religion is absent. Shamanic praxeology, ontology, and cosmology are described here in broad rubrics as ancient techniques and as holistic ways of life in close contact with and respect for nature. In addition, their statements can be said to exhibit what Heelas termed “unmediated individualism” (1996: 21) by placing a high value on individual freedom and autonomy and revealing a suspicion towards institutional structures. Contrary to religion, shamanism is approached as a worldview or way of life, one that is closely linked to an individual practitioner’s own inner guidance. As Ann Taves and Michael Kinsella (2018) underline: “To govern a way of life, a worldview does not necessarily have to be highly elaborated or rationalized or even explicitly articulated. It may be expressed in practice (enacted), represented (in objects), articulated (in speech), recounted (in story), and textualized (in writing).”¹⁰

¹⁰ See www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/-ethnographies, accessed January 8, 2022.