Inspiration and Coastal Sami Healing

The religions should constantly recall to us the origin and original character of the spirit, lest man should forget what he is drawing into himself and with what he is filling his consciousness. He himself did not create the spirit, rather the spirit makes him creative, always spurring him on, giving him lucky ideas, staying power, “enthusiasm” and “inspiration” (Jung CW 9, I, par.393).

The limitations of knowledge which leave so many incomprehensible and wonderful things unexplained do not, however, exempt us from the task of trying to understand the revelations of the spirit that are embodied in dogma, otherwise there is a danger that the treasures of supreme knowledge which lie hidden in it will evaporate into nothing and become a bloodless phantom, an easy prey for all shallow rationalists. It would be a great step forward, in my opinion, if at least it were recognised how far the truth of dogma is rooted in the human psyche, which is not the work of human hands (Jung CW 14, par.489).

Jung’s assignment, “to try to understand the revelations of the spirit that are embodied in dogma,” is my point of departure for this paper; to explore the set of beliefs (dogma) that concern the spirit helper in Coastal Sami healing practice. This exploration will then allow for a few observations of a psychological nature, an attempt at Jung’s assignment: “It would be a step forward if it were recognised how far the truth of dogma is rooted in the human psyche.”

After graduating from the C.G.Jung Institute, Zürich in 1998, I dedicated more of my time to a research project that had presented itself during the time I was completing my Master’s degree in Psychology and Religion in 1994. The research project focused on the healing tradition of the Coastal Sami and finally led to my promotion in 2007 in Anthropology (Miller 2007). The Sami are the indigenous people of northern Europe, better known as the Lapps. The present day Coastal Sami healer is an inspirational healer, as was the Sami shaman in pre-Christian times. The heritage of shamanism brings with it (not for all but for some of the Sami people) difficult to answer questions concerning the inspiration employed by the Sami healer. Within Christianity inspiration can be understood as a divine influence, and can be interpreted as the direct action of the Holy Spirit. Within shamanism inspiration arrives via the spirit helper. During the 18th century the Sami were Christianised and the missionaries considered the Sami shaman’s spirit helper to be a demon. Among the Sami today the inspiration of the healer receives not one uniform interpretation. Some people share the Christian interpretation that the spirit helper is a demon (it is expressed somewhat differently, they speak of a ghost). But then they apply this harmful way of working only to Sami sorcerers of the past, and view the present day Sami healer as having a special connection to the Christian God. Others give Christianity a Sami interpretation: Christ has always been connected to the Sami people, and Sami healers have always been among the people.

The Sami have different views on the source and the value of spiritual inspiration. Which, on the one hand, is understandable through the (still) entangled worldviews of shamanism and Christianity, but on the other hand, in other regions these questions of source and value are ongoing and have a long history (see William James’ classic work *The Varieties of Religious
Experience). For example in Christian mysticism the problem of discriminating between such messages and experiences that were really divine miracles and others that the demon was able to counterfeit. Therefore, let us consider different interpretations of inspiration looking comparatively at other cultures.

Within some cultures inspiration goes together with a miraculous event. The miraculous event is interpreted as a message from, for example, the all encompassing order, or God, and indicates that the inspiration is ‘correct.’ In this context consider a belief from India (one that was noted by Prof. Jonathan Silk in his oratie in Leiden of this year). In Indian traditions, including Buddhism, there is a belief in the magically potent force of true speech. True speech is understood to have the effect of a physical agent, so that a spoken truth can have the power to cause supernatural phenomenon. For example, true speech can cause a river to flow uphill. However, in other cultures there can be considerable circumspection concerning such a conclusion of divine revelation. A culture may not give inspiration together with a miraculous event such a confirming interpretation. Consider in this context a Talmudic story for which I am indebted to a colleague, Henry Abramovitch. In this Talmudic story there is a dispute over the ritual purity of a specific construction of clay vessels. One rabbi was passionately certain of the correctness of his position and called out “If the law is with me, may this tree fly.” And miraculously it did. He called out again “If the law is with me, may this stream flow uphill.” And miraculously it did. But the other rabbis replied, “In these matters, we do not listen to flying trees or streams flowing uphill.”

I am particularly fond of this story. The rabbis give an answer that we don’t expect, and it is full of humour. To give you another twist, I told this Talmudic story to a Sami healer, and he ruminated, “I wonder what happens to the flying tree when it is not listened to?”

What I hope to have demonstrated is how easy it is to take our own interpretation of a miraculous event as the standard, but that in every interpretation there is a cultural determinant. Following the standards and understanding within the culture, the folk will make distinctions, and logically, not all pronouncements are conceived as oracles, and interpretations are made of excess, for example, the excess of seeing signs over all. Distinctions are made between a magician or juggler and the individual the folk understand to be a prophet. Additionally there are distinctions made by outside observers.

Historic view

When travellers and clergymen encountered shamanic practice some considered the shaman to be a magician. Alternatively the early observers of shamanic practice saw the shaman as a juggler, simply doing slight of hand. If they saw a power behind the activity, as was understood for a magician or sorcerer, then the power was assigned to the devil. Anthropologists are careful to state whether an interpretation is made by the folk or by the outside observer. Unfortunately we only have accounts from the outside observer for Sami shamanism, but the early accounts are still of great interest. The earliest is from the Historia Norvegiae, written in Latin by an anonymous author in approximately 1180, and the account is the oldest there is of a Sami séance. The séance begins with a visit to a Sami dwelling by Norwegian merchants, and an explanation is given concerning the Sami practice of magic.

For there are some of them who are venerated as prophets by the ignorant populace, since by means of an unclean spirit that they call a gandus they predict many things to many people,
both as they are happening, and when delayed; and they draw desirable things to themselves from far off regions in a wonderous way, and amazingly, though themselves far away, they produce hidden treasures. By some chance while some Christians were sitting at the table amongst the Lapps for the sake of trade their hostess bowed over and died; hence the Christians mourned greatly, but were told by the Lapps, who were not at all distressed, that she was not dead but stolen away by the gandi of rivals, and they would soon get her back. Then a magician stretched out a cloth, under which he prepared himself for impious magic incantation, and with arms stretched up lifted a vessel like a tambourine, covered in diagrams of whales and deer with bridles and snow-shoes and even a ship with oars, vehicles which that devilish gandus uses to go across the depths of snow and slopes of mountains or the deep waters. He chanted a long time and jumped about with this piece of equipment, but then was laid flat on the ground, black all over like an Ethiopian, and foaming from the mouth as if wearing a bit. His stomach was ripped open and with the loudest roaring ever he gave up the ghost. Then they consulted one who was versed in magic about what had happened to them both. He performed his job in a similar way but not with the same outcome – for the hostess rose up hale – he indicated that the deceased sorcerer had perished by the following sort of accident: his gandus transformed into the shape of a whale, had by ill luck struck against an enemy’s gandus changed into sharpened stakes as it was rushing across a deep water, for the stakes lying set up in the depths of that same water had pierced his stomach, as appeared on the dead magician at home (translation from Tolley 1994, 137).

Contained in this account are features that are recognised as distinctive for shamanism. To quote some scholars: “To shamanize is as much a corporeal technique as a spiritual exercise” (Rouget 1985, 319). We see this in the Historia Norvegiae account. The shaman made preparations for his spiritual practise, chanted, jumped, and then lay flat out on the ground. Another scholar, Siikala states, “The technique of communication used by the shaman as a creator of a state of interaction between this world and the other world is fundamentally an ecstatic role-taking technique…spirit helpers play a key part in the dynamics of shamanic role-playing” (Siikala 1978, 28). Again, in the Historia Norvegiae account, we can note the state of interaction between the worlds created by the shaman, and the part played by the spirit helper. After the second shaman completed his successful efforts he informed the audience on what had happened to the first shaman. The first shaman had sent his helping spirit in the form of a whale to the other world. In the other world his whale had met the sharpened stakes of his rival. The audience was informed that this was what had happened while the shaman was lying lifeless.

I would like next to introduce accounts on pre-Christian Sami practices as told in Lapponia, a book written by Johannes Schefferus (1621-1679), professor of philology at Uppsala University. Schefferus employed travellers and clergymen reports and also information supplied by the few Sami who were studying at Uppsala University. Lapponia written between 1671 and 1673 is considered today to be the oldest trustworthy book on the history and culture of the Sami, and considering the time in which it was written, it is an exceptionally objective monograph.

With regard to magic among the Sami, Schefferus informs the reader “There is scarce a Country under the Sun, whither the Name of Lapland has reached by Fame or otherwise, which does not always look upon this nation as greatly addicted to Magic…. They are so well instructed in Magic that by their Enchantment they are able to stop Ships, under full Sail,…. [They] are very expert in Witchcraft. For, either by their Looks, certain Words, or some other
diabolical Arts, they know to bewitch People so, that they take away the use of their Limbs and Reason” (Scheffer 1704,119).

From the *Historia Norvegiae* we are told that the Sami can predict the future and from *Lapponia* that they can “stop Ships” and “they take away the use of their limbs,” which in other words is to immobilise. These two features, the ability to prophesise and to immobilise, are still expressed as expectations by the Sami folk as abilities for the Sami healer.

How should they be able to do these remarkable feats? The pre-Christian Sami tell the travellers and clergymen that the Sami have helpers. To indicate the helper in the *Historia Norvegiae* the author writes *gandus*. In Sami *gane* is an enchantment, in Norwegian *gand* is the witch’s broom stick (take your choice). Schefferus calls this helper variously ‘Familiar Spirit’, Demon, and ‘Genius’.

How did the Sami acquire or were able to enlist the help of the helper? Schefferus writes, “They bequeath the Demons as part of their Inheritance, which is the reason that one family excels the other in this Magical Art” (Ibid: 120). A Sami young man studying at Uppsala University informed Schefferus of the following method for acquiring a helper.

[Some of the Laplanders are seized upon by a Demon, when they arrived to Middle Age, in the following manner: Whilst they are busy in the Woods, the Spirit appears to them, where they Discourse concerning the Conditions, upon which the Demon offers them assistance, which done, he teaches them a certain Song, which they are obliged to keep in constant remembrance. They must return the next Day to the same place, where the same Spirit appears to them again, and repeats the former Song, in case he takes a Fancy to the Person, if not he does not appear at all. These Spirits make their appearance under different Shapes, some like Fishes, some like Birds, others like a Serpent or Dragon, others in the Shape of a Pigmee, about a Yard high; being attended by Three, Four or Five other Pigmees of the same bigness (Ibid: 122).

The helper may be (one) inherited, (two) met and then subsequently called up by singing. I will be returning to these methods as the means for acquiring a spirit helper, they both - inheritance and singing - appear in present day Sami healing practice.

With these historical examples I hope to have provided you with some background that supplies context and depth to the present day Sami concepts and experiences. The scope of my paper does not allow me to present a broader historical picture. I will present however, some present day examples of the worldview so that your grasp of the Sami understanding of the spirit helper is provided with context.

**Present day view**

From my survey I would say that many Sami have a certain familiarity with the experience of seeing (or otherwise registering) something that for another is not visible. For example, from one informant I heard about a time when he was 13. To understand this story I have to let you know that in this area during the summer months the sun does not set. So this boy, his brother and a neighbour had been out fishing during the summer, and had been without sleep for perhaps three days. When they were close to home, the neighbour boy turned around. He was asked what he was doing? He answered “I am bringing in the cows.” The other boys
understood that he saw cows while there were no cows, so they went through the motions of bringing in the cows with him, in order to get him home safely. This ‘13 year old’ did not give a supernatural interpretation to the seeing of non-material cows. Already at 13, he understood the experience of seeing what is not there due to sleep deprivation. We would understand this experience as hallucinating.

Another story I heard was of a man who had been crossing the mountains and when he came down on the plateau he saw a village. The people of the village were friendly and invited him into their home for something to eat. He felt not exactly right with this idea and so he declined and continued walking. After some distance he turned around and the village was not there. The daughter of this man asked her father what would have happened if he had sat with the people from the village. The father told that, well, he would have become one of them, and he would not have returned home. When I hear this story I think of the conditions in this area and how people lived. In the summer months, as I said, the sun does not set, but even then the temperatures can drop to freezing. So this man could have been walking for some days and I think, how wise to have somehow stored in one’s memory that one may see people and villages and be offered food and rest and the very thing that one must not do is to accept. Otherwise one could die while having this very vision of resting and eating with friendly people.

We can note similarities in this story of being out on the land and meeting non-material people, and the story from Schefferus of acquiring a spirit helper while being alone and out on the land. The Sami have a wealth of this genre of stories that can be said in general to be encounter experiences. Encounter experiences share similar features, for example, contained within the stories is the necessity to behave respectfully towards that which one has encountered. And also quite specific understandings for what has been encounter, for example, there are specific names for seeing someone before they actually arrive, hearing something arrive after their arrival, for a path that is still being travelled on by those who earlier travelled on it, etc. There are certain expectations for an encounter experience. One Sami healer said, “If you have an encounter experience that which you encounter has a message for you, otherwise you do not meet it.” The stories indeed indicate that the attitude of respect towards what one has encountered will facilitate that the message is received and correctly interpreted. But can we get a closer understanding of how the Sami understand the healer’s helping spirit?

The same 13 year old boy from the fishing trip above had already at this age seen prayer meetings of the revivalist Christian-Lutheran movement that were held in his parent’s and neighbour’s homes. At these meetings it could happen that those gathered went into an ecstatic state. During the meeting the congregation confessed their sins and asked each other for forgiveness, their co-congregationalists, according to this revivalist movement, held the Keys to Heaven and therefore held the power of the Keys to remit and retain sin. This Christian teaching of the Keys to Heaven is as follows. The authority to forgive sins was given by Jesus to Peter in the Gospel According to St. Mathew 16:18-19, “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church…. I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of heaven: and whosoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosened in heaven.” In this Christian interpretation, the giving of the Keys refers to the capacity to bind or unbind and retain or remit sin. In addition, the use of the Keys by the congregation was reported to be supported by John 20:22-23, “Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose so ever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose so ever sins ye retain, they are retained.” So that a Christian is admitted to the
Kingdom of Heaven through the mediation of the congregation who have the Keys. The congregation becomes ‘reborn’ after having received signs of God’s grace. This could be the experience of a voice from heaven saying ‘your sins are forgiven’. Ecstatic manifestations were also interpreted as a sign of grace and as proof of ‘living’ religious experience. For the congregation, felt sensations of the body contributed to the conviction that one had received forgiveness, and in this way ecstasy was also interpreted as a sign of grace. In the 1850’s, when this movement was spreading in northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, a Sami woman experienced forgiveness and at the same time there was an earthquake, which is very unusual for this area. The simultaneous experience of receiving forgiveness and an earthquake was given an evangelical interpretation, in which the wonderful happenings surrounding forgiveness happen together with earthquakes, as was the case with Christ’s death and resurrection (Kleistra 1982, 35).

Sami healers

The two Sami healers I had the most contact with were both members of the revivalist Lutheran movement, and their understanding of the source of inspiration that was active in their healing practice and was active in Christian observance was not in conflict. They understood their inspiration to be coming from a special connection to the Christian God. They also understood the transference of the gift of healing in a similar way as their revivalist Lutheran movement conceived of God’s grace. It is a gift that one who has it can give/pass on to another.

These two healers were mother and son, Nanna and her son, Sigvald, and were Coastal Sami, which means that they traditionally were farming and fishing. When I arrived in the field, Nanna was in her late eighties and on the look out for her successor. She had certain requirements for the person to whom she would pass on her gift. The person must be stable and capable of controlling their anger and of keeping the inner teachings secret. After some two years of hesitation, Sigvald finally accepted to be the recipient of her gift. He received instruction for about two years and then at 93 years of age Nanna passed away. She practised healing up to the very end.

The other healer I had contact with was traditionally a reindeer herder, Mikkel, and when I met him he was in his late eighties and also on the look out for his successor. Later I heard that he had passed his gift to one of his sons. Mikkel told that when he felt the need for help he went to his place of retreat and called up his passed away teacher by singing this teacher’s signature song. So Mikkel’s singing to call up his teacher is reminiscent of the report in Schefferus where the initiate should return to the special location and sing the spirit’s song to call the spirit to him.

Nanna and Sigvald’s spirit helper was understood as a special connection to the Christian God, and Mikkel’s was the passed away former teacher. Are these two separate and different ideas? No, they both contain the basic shared understanding that the spirit helper is the inheritance of a special spiritual connection. And the idea is that prior to Mikkel and Nanna, Mikkel’s teacher and Nanna’s teacher had themselves received ‘it’, and that this inheritance had been handed down, one to one, for generations.

What do the Sami people expect from their healer? It may interest you to know that what is often emphasised concerning inspirational healers by outside observers, the state of trance
(altered state of consciousness) does not interest them. It is important to view the occurrence of trance within the context of the cultures cosmology. If we move for a moment to include other shamanistic societies, we see that for the people themselves the shaman’s ritual behaviour, which can include his trance, is the mode of direct contact with his spirits. For the practising shaman and his audience their interest is in the shamanic vision and not the altered state of consciousness. Shamanistic societies do not make use of native terms corresponding to ‘trance’; the notion of ‘trance’ appears to be irrelevant for them (Hamayon 1993, 3-7).

From my own fieldwork I can say that the local population never referred to trance, but it was present in the practice. I can give an example of how this element was spoken of by the people. As I already mentioned, the elderly healer, Nanna chose her successor before she passed away at 93. When a patient first consulted the new healer she asked him, “Will you take care of what Nanna took care of?” He answered, “I have promised to do so.”

The Sami people expect that the healer will include a religious element in the healing. They expect that the healer has the ability to accurately make predictions and/or diagnose, and should it be ‘needed’ the healer can immobilise a person, or a vehicle. Which may remind you of the account by Schefferus in 1674 emphasised above, he wrote about the Sami’s ability to immobilise a ship and to take away the use of one’s limbs.

One of the stories about immobilising I heard concerned Nanna and is as follows. Nanna had finished a treatment with a woman whose husband then came and together they would return home. Before leaving the husband indicated to Nanna that he did not consider her treatment to be any thing that needed a payment. And the couple departed without further ado. Some time passed and the wife rushed into Nanna’s house saying that Nanna must come because on walking over the mountain her husband had stopped and could not move. Nanna replied that she would not come, but Nanna offered a glass of water. The wife could take the glass of water to her husband and say it was from Nanna. The glass of water was finally taken and given to the husband, after he drank he could move again. He came to Nanna the next day and apologised for his rude behaviour of the previous day. This incident of immobilising was considered by the participants to be a ‘just’ correction of the husband’s attitude.

**Psychological considerations**

This immobilisation sounds quite similar to bewitchment in our fairy tales. Considering Jung’s interpretation of fairy tales, fairy tales can mirror the basic patterns of the psyche. Fairy tales can speak of growth and development, and they can also speak of stagnation. In a fairy tale stagnation may be expressed by the activities of the witch. A typical witch eats children, turns them into stone, or an animal, or otherwise imprisons them, which in the fairytale is an enchantment or bewitchment. Used symbolically bewitchment and the witch express well the autonomous working of the complex. Subjectively experienced this can be felt as a freezing–over of the personality, the being locked into fixed actions or ideas. Which is a familiar experience in addictions, obsessions-compulsions, and depressions. If we look at the man’s immobility symbolically, the experience presents him with an image of stagnation.

I will try to relay in a compact way the worldview that Nanna’s activity encompasses. With her correction (he was immobilised) she has given this man a definition of himself that is more accurate than he entertained prior to the correction. She even used the term baptism for such a correction. “He was named/baptised.” Prior to the correction Nanna said that he seemed to think he had spirit powers. And we see that she let him know that he did not. He came down a notch in his estimation of himself. He had an experience that let him know
something about himself that was both revealing and sobering, additionally he acknowledged
and accepted her definition of him. For a Sami listener this story tells them that Nanna was
the stronger of the two. (We can in this context recall the Historia Norvegiae séance and the
vanquished shaman, defeated by an adversarial shaman.) To clarify what it is to be the
stronger: When the man left Nanna, he identified her as someone who was ‘of little value’.
He named her. If his name for Nanna ‘of little value’ had adhered to her, he would be the one
who could correct, the spirits having judged that this was the ‘just’ name. But because the
name was not correct, it did not adhere. One option for Nanna was simply to shrug it off, but
what this story tells is that Nanna used her other option, her capacity to name him.

The Sami healer’s interpretations of what they do: The healer makes and/or restores
connections. Sigvald told that when healing he asks and will talk to that part that is causing
the problem. He will try to know it and connect it where it should be connected. Sigvald said,
“The troublesome part stays where it is because it does not know any other connection. It
stays with what it is familiar.” Restoring the connection to God brings peace; incompletely
connected parts can haunt and cause illness. They need to be connected. The healer received
the gift to diagnose from a former healer and the inheritance is a special connection to God
and it is this special connection to God that the healer understands as his or her spirit helper.
The inheritance facilitates the formation of a diagnosis and the ‘thoughts that come’ reveal
the diagnosis. These thoughts are at times in the form of an image and at others they are
physical experiences. Nanna was remarkable in her ability to diagnose. Often to diagnose she
took the arm of the patient, felt the pulse and then slowly moved up the arm. She said when
she was above the elbow that she was ‘in’ the body of the patient. When she was ‘in’ she felt
in her body the pain of the patient and thereby knew where the problem was located. She
said, “It can be like sticks in my body,” it leaves quickly, and she knows that it is not her
pain. On another occasion she saw an image that revealed the diagnosis, in this case the
patient was complaining of intestinal pain and she saw the image of an intestinal closure. She
instructed the patient to have this closure medically checked and he later confirmed her
diagnosis. The diagnosis can concern the patient’s physical ailment but the healer’s
understanding of the diagnosis includes more. Diagnosis can be a definition of the person, of
the problem, or of the situation. It can also be a prediction. The Sami, when speaking English,
use the term ‘correction’ for what the healer does.

Unlike a medical doctor’s diagnosis where at the first meeting with the doctor the patient tells
the doctor where it hurts, the Sami healer tells the patient where the patient hurts. I would
expect that for the healer’s patient there is an experience of being seen. For the Sami patient,
this indeed remarkably accurate diagnosis can confirm their already held notion that the
healer sees more than does the ordinary person. Additionally, I am positing, the hearing of the
healer’s diagnosis stimulates the patient’s use of imagery, and allows for an experiencing and
registering of emotion. For example, when I visited the healer Mikkel, he met me with these
words: “You know your problem. I see your problem.” I would say, he did his work in just
those few words. I felt seen by him, including that area in me that I had been suffering from, I
made an image of that area, and my awareness of this area increased.

Often one hears from outside observers the comment that the healer must be working with
suggestion. And you can certainly apply the interpretation of suggestion and the
suggestibility of the immobilised man to the incident related above. And the power of
suggestion is a power to be reckoned with. Any study of the placebo effect and its opposite,
the nocebo effect (the word nocebo is Latin for “I will harm”) is striking in their findings.
However I think we can include more than the effect of suggestion in the practice of Sami
healing. We can add what we know about the importance of symbolisation and the use of imagination. That is, that symbolisation promotes the capacity to organise psychic space, it can reconnect separated elements whose significant connection has been lost, which in turn allows affect to be available (Gibeault 2005, 297-310).

I will close by quoting Jung. In the following his understanding and statements about spirit are remarkably in accord with that of the Sami healer.

“There are many spirits, both light and dark. We should, therefore, be prepared to accept the view that spirit is not absolute, but something that needs completing and perfecting through life” (Jung CW 8, par. 645).

“The manifestations of the spirit are truly wondrous, and as varied as Creation itself. The living spirit grows and even outgrows its earlier forms of expression; it freely chooses the men who proclaim it and in whom it lives. This living spirit is eternally renewed and pursues its goal in manifold and inconceivable ways throughout the history of mankind. Measured against it, the names and forms which men have given it mean very little; they are only the changing leaves and blossoms on the stem of the eternal tree “(Jung CW 11, par. 537).

References


