

Narrating and Urban Shamanism

post-modern self representations of urban shamans and their storytelling

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Mihály Hoppál and I met first in Budapest in 1988. It was the unforgettable time of European changes and our ISFNR-Congress was overshadowed by the later collapse of the socialist countries. He – and his friend Juha Pentikäinen took me along to the “Heroes’ funeral” – and never ever shall I forget the silence among thousands of people who joined this celebration. This was not only the beginning of a new political era but also one of a solid friendship among two scholars from quite different disciplines. Me – so far a narratologist with a limited knowledge mainly in Maerchen (fairy tales) and folk songs, in legends maybe and a little bit in more modern genres of folklore, and him: one of the most distinguished representatives of Shamanistic research in the world.

In the beginning we did not seem to have much in common. German traditional folktales, do not show many shamanistic traces. With one exception, however: this was a Grimm-tale named “Machandelboom” (KHM 47/AaTh 720) in low German¹ contains - maybe – shamanistic elements. Several studies, among them Belgrader’s dissertation from 1980 have elaborated its possible relation to shamanistic roots and in the 90s the German expert for Maerchen-and Shamanism, Heino Gehrts continued this discussion². Hoppál, however, did not know the tale – therefore, it seemed to be a marginal question also for me, which I put aside for a long time.

However, some three or four years after Budapest, in the Black Forest, close to my hometown Freiburg i.Br., I happened to attend some esoteric “workshops” –

¹ In English this story is known under its Title „Juniper-Tree“ – which means “Wacholder” and is an incorrect translation, for Machandel is dialect for “Almond-tree”, a tree with a different connotation.

² Gehrts (1913 – 1998) organized a Congreß by the EMG (European Maerchen Society) in Bad Karlshafen in 1983 under the motto “Schamanentum”. Cf. also his study: *Das Märchen und das Opfer. Untersuchungen zum europäischen Brüdermärchen*. Bonn: Bouvier 2/1995. Review: in MSP (Märchenspiegel) 2/95

as they were called in those days, presented a paper on this experience on the Innsbruck-ISFNR-Congress in the year of 1992 and have published this as a much discussed article in *FABULA*³. I did not expect the topic would haunt me longer, but it did: after one year, Mihály Hoppál invited me to come along to another esoteric seminar organized by Urban Shamans, as they labelled themselves – high in the Alps above Kaprun/Austria, not far from the large water reservoir. And since Hoppál has repeatedly encouraged his colleagues to study the new, the “urban shamanisme among city dwellers” (Hoppál: “These new manifestations must be examined”)⁴, I should like to take another glimpse on their get-togethers and on their narratings.

Many features of this Austrian shaman-“seminar” were familiar to me, since I have experienced –as described in *FABULA* – almost the same facets and structures in the Blackforest meetings years before. There were even the same practises, for in Kaprun also certain spiritual techniques for attaining a state of transcendence (hyperventilation, drums and dancing, as well as hallucinogenic drugs etc.) were applied in order to prepare the participants for their meditative soul-journeys to the land beyond the beyond, however: in this case the shaman drums – almost perfect and much admired imitations of “originals” made by specialized craftsmen in Vienna – played the dominant role. When the participants, the “shamans” returned from that beyond, the narrating began – just as in the Blackforest.

And again I was fascinated by the idea (which is not new⁵) that these narratives in many respects approximate to our traditional folk-tales (Maerchen, mostly – among the ordinary tales – to the magic-or-wondertales AT 300-749 – with regard to motifs, structure and general tone of the discourse). On the other hand urban shamans’ narratives resemble to legends, especially because of the storytellers’ claim to truth⁶.

In shamanistic as well as in other esoteric sessions late-modern frustration over modern society with its alienation and its futile quest for genuine individuality seems to be the bond of the gatherings, therefore the contexts are almost

³ Sabine Wienker-Piepho: Junkfood for the soul. Magic storytelling during esoteric workshops in Germany. In: *Fabula* 34, 1993, 225-237

⁴ Mihály Hoppál: *Shaman Traditions in Transition*. International Society for Shamanistic Research, Budapest 2000, p. 94

⁵Cf. Peter Assion: Zur Kritik einer parapsychologischen Volkskunde. In: *ZfVkd* 71 (1975) II, pp 161-180

⁶ Besides, the gatherings corroborated also my first impressions of the genre-aspect: jocular genres do not occur in these modern town-shaman’s narratives. No jokes, no pranks and the like! In short, humour in esoteric narration would be contraproductive.

congruent – and so is the outlining structure of the group, its psychodynamic hierarchy for instance. Both formations like to have a “professional” leader, the so-called “coach”, as the English-German “newspeak” has it. His position is firmly established. One may generalize: as with many sects, an authoritarian principle of leadership makes itself felt in esoteric workshops⁷. In urban-shaman seminars, however, the coach is not the shaman, who does e.g. the journey for the others. It is just the opposite: while all the others are shamans he functions more or less as a hermeneutic listener. Like the psychotherapist he promises the narrator that he will take his story seriously in spite of (or because of) its illogical and often incomprehensible character. Supported by the group, the coach confirms that there is a narrative truth or a mythic validity in the narrator’s tale⁸. For him and for the other clients these stories are “gateways to inner space” as their nomenclature has it. Thus storytelling from the psychodynamic point of view not only functions as a outlet, that is “...setting free the subconscious potential of positive energies”, but serves moreover as a stabilizing element in the restoration of autonomy in our modern, emotionless, scientific and all-too technical late modern society. But, how is this storytelling done in detail?

In order to deepen my research I decided to do a follow-up study in the Blackforest again, now with another accent: shamanism. For in the meantime shamanism became fashionable also in the Blackforest, it was just “in”. Several shaman-workshops were offered in the period between my Kaprun-experiments and 1996, when I participated for the last time. In spite of their relatively high charge (up to 250 € for one weekend, including a macrobiotic diet), I subscribed for four of them in total.

As far as I could see, there is no such a thing as a specific epistemology. Every individual workshop may thus differ in many respects from any other. However, the tutors (coaches) of the several “schools” almost entirely opt for the narrations as one of the most important organizing elements of a successful workshop.

When in the summer of 1987, I had attended my first workshop under the heading Farewell to Father I had learned that there are impressive networkings behind such meetings. My first one e.g. was organized by the so-called Forum

⁷ Cf. again Peter Assion: *Der Soziale Gehalt aktueller Frömmigkeitsformen. Zur religiösen Volkskunde der Gegenwart.* In: Hess. Bl. f. Volkskunde und Kulturforschung NF 14/5 (1982/83) pp. 5-17 (= Materialien zur Volkskultur 1).

⁸ Cf. Frederick Wyatt: *The Narrative in Psychoanalysis: Psychoanalytic Notes on Storytelling, Listening and Interpreting.* In: *Narrative Psychology. The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*, ed. Theodore R. SARBIN, Praeger Special Studies, Praeger Scientific, New York/Westport CT/London (after 1985), pp.193-210.

International, which, in its own publicity claims ‘to make plausible the sciences, myths, religions, technologies and traditions in their mutual complementarity’. Its international seminars and congresses in Alpbach (Austria), Crete and even Freiburg were attended by an panel of VIPs, among them the Dalai Lama, Jorge Louis Borges, the science-fiction author Ursula Le Guin, the philosopher Feyerabend, the New-Age physicist Friedjof Capra and the late Mircea Eliade, along with other remarkable personalities. This splendour has a bit degenerated, but the VIP-glamour still attracts many people.

All workshops, including my later shaman-meetings, took place on isolated farms in the Black Forest mountains. The places are alleged to be located in an area of good geodetic influences (no earth rays but good, so-called “ley lines”⁹, declared free of iron nails etc., having already been investigated by geomants by means of a pendulum¹⁰). The sites are also suited to dowsing. In short, there existed an optimal biosphere and good vibrations, as their jargon would have it. The participants again ranged in age from 16 to 60, among them again more women than men – women speaking about their “matriarchy” in the German way of political correctness. As before, these “shamans” came from different social strata, mostly the lower and upper middle classes (businessmen, managers, teachers, housewives). Some were obviously physically ill. That is to say, they suffered not only from “ecstasy deprivation” but also from very real pains. Many thus took the workshop to be their last hope.

The shaman’s main equipment is the drum – and by means of several drums the spiritual proceedings began in the afternoon. Several mysterious manoeuvres were applied to help clients pass from one state of being into another, that is to say, into a trance. Sitting on cushions on the floor, the drumming began after an initial meditative silence with closed eyes (followed by a drums-music-mantra-murmuring-sequence). This lasted for about 40 up to 60 minutes. Then the voyage began and those who felt in trance had to describe his or her’s experiences during the journey into another world and its apparitions. The magic storytelling started.

At my first session I had collected a hairdresser’s story (from Freiburg, aged 32) and would like to quote it again;

⁹Cruciades of power-lines (Kraftadern); cf. the periodical “The Ley Hunter” *The Journal of Geomancy and Earth Mysteries*, Penzance (England) 115 (1991). Cf. also: Gertrud Kühnel: *Heilige Stätten, Orte der Kraft*. In: *Schweizer Volkskunde* 79/5 Basel (1989), pp. 65-74 (She refers to Alfred Watkins, who detected ley-lines first, and gives a definition of Geomancy (both p. 66).

¹⁰“Mental radiaesthesia” was the technical term for the preceding pendulum-exercises.

“Guided by a rainbow, I flew across the valley in order to meet once again the dragon, my friend of the year before, who was living under the wall of the dam in the artificial Schluchsee. I was flabbergasted when I realized he had changed the colour of his scaled wings. They turned from a shimmering green into a metallic gold-and-blue. At first I thought, it wasn’t the same dragon. But when I addressed him by his name Orgon (German pronunciation)¹¹, he wished his tail and invited me to join him on a visit to an initiation ceremony on an island in Lake Balaton in Hungary. I was scared because I had no identity card or passport, but then I realized the custom-officers might not check a man on a dragon (shy laughter). In a jiffy Orgon was in Hungary. I saw many people, or beings who looked like people, gathering around a circle of stones, sacred stones of course, in front of a huge mountain. They smiled. They ate something; bones lay around. They invited me to join the meal, but I refused. Then they kindly encouraged me to touch a stone. I tried and it was icy cold in spite of the sunshine. Orgon meanwhile mutated into a small kind of animal with legs and arms instead of legs and wings, and I mutated into a bird, when all of a sudden the mountain opened and we all moved inside through a long, narrow-gauged tunnel...” and so on. (extract from an aide memoire; the duration was about 10 minutes, S.W.-P).

This narrated “*vision-quest*” (the English-German terminology obviously serves to enhance the niveau) was not interrupted¹². The others listened eagerly and mute, sometimes nodding. Similar tales followed. As today one can find much literature on shamanism in many esoteric stores, which name themselves for instance “Healers, Shamans and Magic”¹³, some of the participants obviously had certain ideas about shamanistic elements, as bones, flying, birds, trees, death and rebirthing etc. Their stories all dealt with these elements

A male student (computer sciences, about 21 years old) was a good storyteller. Silently and with calm eyes and a clear vision he reported what he had experi-

¹¹He had obviously adapted Reich for his own purposes. The Orgon theory was mainly developed by Wilhelm Reich in: *Der Krebs. Entdeckung des Orgon*, vol. 2, Cologne (1974); cf. also Ina-Maria Greverus and Gisela Weltz (eds.) *Notizen/Institut für Kulturanthropologie und Europäische Ethnologie*, Universität Frankfurt a. M. vol. 33 (1990) pp.9-30 (see esp. 13ff). and 155ff.: *Kryptoerotische Variationen: “Nach Reich ist Orgon die mit Sexualität identifizierte Urenergie. Auf dessen Hochschätzung des Orgasmus...und die Hingabe an die Bioenergie baute Rajjneesh, insbesondere unter Hinzuziehung des Tantrismus”* (p.157).

¹² My presence - and this is extremely important for these contexts - did not irritate the others as an outsider, because I did clandestine participant observation or better “observant participation” (cf. Michael Pye: *Participation, Observation and Reflection: an endless Method*. In: Veikko Anttonen & Nils G. Holm: *Ethnography is a Heavy Rire. Studies of Comparative Religion in Honor of Juha Pentikäinen (Festschrift Pentikäinen)* Åbo 2000, 64-79, here 67.

¹³ For instance in Augsburg, close to the old Fuggerei. Invited by Augsburg University in 2002, M.Hoppal participated in a conference on *Narrating between the Cultures* and was delighted by this prove for international fake- or pseudo-shamanism.

enced during his journey with a huge black bird as his animal helper. Others, e.g. an old disabled lady in a wheel chair spoke as if under hypnosis. She told of her disguise in rags, while – “in fact” – she was a princess who had to lead “the sick” to a land of eternal health. One “shaman” intruded himself as a “music healer in old indigenous traditions”, a 50 year old tradesman, who was the proprietor of an expensive drum and wearing a phantastic costume of rags and feathers, told the story of his flight which led him to “a land behind the sun”. Others told about soulbirds, and huge trees that reached the sky, so they got in touch with heaven, and one participant, who spoke of himself als a “healer” (“Heiler”- the old German term for “medical doctor”) told about a “revival from bones”. Most of these narrations, therefore, not only equalled traditional Maerchen again, but also those of the Maerchen which incorporate – maybe – shamanistic elements or “survivals” (v.i.).

As I tried to demonstrate in an earlier study on parts of our post-modern society being obsessive by arcaisms, by the prehistoric past, by “authenticity” (everything that is archaic is true, is supposed to be “good”)¹⁴, I could find again these traces in shamanistic workshops in the Black Forest. In that article I investigated the present Märchen- or storytelling-scene and have linked its inclination to “survivals from very ancient times” (Andrew Lang)¹⁵ with modern, urban shamanism with these words:

„Ein anderer, derzeit in der Märchenszene auch wieder hochgeschätzter Anknüpfungspunkt für Atavismen ist der Schamanismus, der ebenfalls in vage Vorzeiten zurückzuweisen scheint. Tatsächlich ist es nicht allzu schwierig, schamanische Elemente und entsprechende rituelle Grundmuster, etwa Initiationen, in den Märchen zu erkennen. Dazu gehören etwa das Motiv der Wiederbelebung aus Knochen, das der sog. “external Soul”, die Jenseitsreise, welche der ekstatischen Schamanenfahrt entsprechen würde, die schamanische Dreistaffelung des Weltbildes, das Seelentier, meist ein Vogel, oder auch den Weltenbaum, der bis in

¹⁴ Sabine Wienker-Piepho: Von „Urmüttern“ und „Megalithmärchen“: Urzeitrezeption und Archaismusbesessenheit in der neueren Märchenpflege. In: Vorgeschichtliches Seminar der Philipps-Universität Marburg (Hg): Frauenbilder – Frauenrollen. Frauenforschung in den Altertums- und Kulturwissenschaften? Symposion des Vorgeschichtlichen Seminars der Philipps-Universität Marburg v. 30.-31. Okt. 1998 (Kleine Schriften 49, Redaktion: Bernhard Schroth) Marburg 1999, S. 63-74

¹⁵ Andrew Lang was one of the representatives of a school which saw fairy tales as „survivals from a very ancient time“, quotation following Dietz-Rüdiger Moser: Art. “Altersbestimmung des Märchens” in *Encyclopedia of Maerchen (Enzyklopädie des Märchens) I* (1977) col. 407-419

den Himmel reicht - man denke an das in England besonders populäre Märchen von "Jack and the Beanstalk" oder das von dem Maler Philipp Otto Runge an die Brüder Grimm gesandte, sehr grausame und fremdartig anmutende Märchen vom "Machandelboom" (Juniper Tree) das fast alle schamanischen Elemente zu enthalten scheint. Diese Richtung hat in der Märchenforschung ebenfalls lange Traditionen, sie beginnen bei Propp, Saintyves, Eliade und Findeisen, und setzen sich fort bei Heino Gehrts (v.s.) und dem jungen Schweizer Ethnologen Kurt Derungs¹⁶, der im Märchen nun allerdings nicht nur schamanische, sondern auch "vorschamanische matriachale Relikte" sieht, womit er ganz im Trend der von Frauen dominierten "Märchenszene" liegen dürfte..“ (Wienker-Piepho ibd. 1999:7)

The connection between the former scientific approach and the workshop-scenery seems to be evident. Following Hans Naumann's often critically discussed idea on "Sinkendes" (or "gesunkenes") Kulturgut" (Sinking Cultural Goods) we may call this cultural phenomenon a "sinking good of science" – connected with what is called "Rücklauf" (return flow, reciprocity) in our discipline and this is not just arbitrarily done: most of the participants of "my" shaman-workshops obviously have had "prepared" themselves for the weekend in reading books about shamanism and shamans. Several new Castaneda's writings, which are still a mega-hit in nonacademic contexts in Germany. One of the participants even took Hoppál's own book on Schamanen und Schamanismus¹⁷, which appeared with many pictures in German language in the Pattloch-Verlag for a relatively moderate price. . .

In one of the sociological bestsellers of the last decade Gerhard Schulze outlines the post-modern subculture of such "new-inwardness-workshops" by its milieu. Schulze's coinage "Selbstverwirklichungsmilieu" ("selfrealization-milieu")¹⁸ has penetrated several disciplines and was received also in European Ethnology and Folkloristics. In fact, this term was haertily welcomed, for its neutrality on one and for its critical connotation on the other hand. In many facets, I am attempted to say, the post-modern search for identity in "archaic tales from prehistoric times" – by means of the texts narrated at Maerchen-workshops¹⁹ as well as

¹⁶ Kurt Derungs (Hg.): Keltische Frauen und Göttinnen. Matriachale Spuren bei Kelten, Pikten und Schotten. Bern: edition Amalia (1995).

¹⁷ Mihály Hoppál: Schamanen und Schamanismus. Augsburg: Pattloch (1994).

¹⁸ Gerhard Schulze: Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus (6. Aufl. 1996).

¹⁹ I have described (and analyzed) this milieu meticulously in „Märchen und Esoterik. Die neue magisch-spirituelle Märchenwelle. In: Das selbstverständliche Wunder. Die Welt im Spiegel des Märchens, Hg.: Evangelische Akademie Baden, Herrenalber Forum 17 (1996) 51-77

at urban shaman's – workshops might be attributed to this very alternative milieu. An esoteric shaman-workshop seems to be the ideal new locus for escapists, where the ideological homelessness can be forgotten among "other shamans". While the churches with their wellknown "traditional narratives" are empty (I do not think so much of more or less passive liturgic texts, but mainly of the form of Confession in Catholic contexts) are empty, the "workshops" which offer confessions in the form of those postmodern narratives (in spite of their extremely high attendance fees) are overcrowded. It is not easy to characterize this new genre with old terms. What kind of texts can we find in these workshops? Are these oral texts subtexts, hyper- or meta texts, or is it just a certain kind of intertextuality? In her contribution to the Pentikäinen-Festschrift, Helena Helve raises this same question, however not so much under linguistic or the "shamanic" point of view, when she asks: "Do we live in a postmodern world, in which people construct their own postmodern narratives, suited to their own situations"²⁰

Again, we should take Hoppál own words into account, even if he did not think so much of the urban shamans that meet on Back-Forest esoteric workshops and somewhere in the Austrian Alps: "...these young shamans of today are not genuine, but even so, these new manifestations must be examined"²¹.

²⁰ Helena Helve: The Implications of Postmodernism for World View Research. In: Veikko Anttonen & Nils G. Holm: Ethography is a Heavy Rite. Studies of Comparative Religion In Honor of Juha Pentikäinen. Religionsvetenskapliga skrifter No. 47, Åbo (2000) 101-123, here 120.

²¹ Cf. again his book „Shaman Traditions in Transition, Budapest (2000), here p. 94.