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SHAMANISM
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SHAMANISM AND ITS CONNECTION TO IRAN. Archeological and ethnological sources in Iran do not lead to confirmation of the existence of shamanic practices there, whether ancient or modern. Yet some scholars have tried to find traces of them, based on certain literary data of ancient Zoroastrianism. Two sets of facts lead to a possible existence of an Iranian shamanism: (1) remains of a vocabulary which, in the Avesta, point to phenomena of a shamanistic kind; (2) the connection between Iran and its neighbors, which makes it unlikely that Iran could have somehow avoided a form of religious ideology which surrounded it on all sides, and which had marked the prehistory of a major part of humanity for millennia. This form, though known under different variants, is here called “shamanism” for want of a better term, although certain specialists of modern shamanism of Eurasia and Hellenists do not accept it.

On the historiographical level, it may be useful to briefly allude to the quarrel between H. S. Nyberg, who considered the *Gāthās* of the Avesta as evident signs of Iranian shamanism, and H. W. Henning (q.v.), who found the Iranians too healthy and morally advanced to engage in experiments requiring the absorption of hallucinogenic beverages, leading to the conclusion that “the existence of shamanism among Iranians and Indo-Aryans has never been demonstrated” (Gignoux, 2001, pp. 66-67). In 1979, Ph. Gignoux approached the problem from a different point of view: he tried to show that, in the 3rd-century Sasanian inscriptions, the distinction between the bony soul and the bony body (also known among the Gnostics) and the importance of the bones

after death, in the Avestan and Pahlavi traditions, might refer, like the theory of the multiplicity of souls, to concepts well known among numerous Eurasian adepts of shamanism. Several scholars (G. Gnoli, G. Fussmann, J. Kellens, M. Schwartz) have acknowledged the validity of these proposed interpretations with various measures of appreciation.

What exactly do we find in the Avestan sources? Several terms like those for henbane (Av. *bangha-)* and for the sacred plant (Av. *haoma* /Ved. *soma*) point to plants having sedative, analgesic, or narcotic properties which may lead to ecstasy, whether or not of a shamanic kind. Similarly, urine (Av. *mūθra-*), as shown by I. Gershevitch (1974), comes from the Daevic vocabulary linked with the absorption of the sacred beverage. More convincing in its relation with shamanism is the term Av. *vifra-* corresponding to Ved. *vipra-*, which may be explained by its root "to tremble, to shake," thus suggesting the trembling of someone preparing to go into a shamanic trance (Gignoux, 2001, p. 74). According to *Yt*. 5.61-65, a vifra named Pāuruua was shipwrecked, but Θraētaona, who had assumed the shape of a vulture, threw him into the air. For three days and three nights—the length of time in which the soul remains with the body before venturing on its perilous voyage towards paradise or hell—this vifra was incapable to return down to earth, but at the end of the third night Anāhitā brought him back to the ground. Anāhitā, who is described like the *daēnā*, who guides the soul in its extra-terrestrial voyage, was invited by the vulture, the agent of the magic flight and symbol of the shaman (who has to wear a costume made of birds' feathers in order to go and seek a soul in danger). In the Avestan account, this act of Anāhitā is indeed a rescue. Since something similar is also attested in India (Thieme, 1975, pp. 352-53), one might think that the legend goes back to the Indo-Iranian period (in my opinion). The costume of birds' feathers is also attested in the account of Zoroaster's voyage to the beyond: according to the *Bahman Yašt* (*Yt.* 14.34-36), Zoroaster asked Ahura Mazdā how to rid himself of a curse. The great god told him to take a feather of the vulture and rub his body with it, for "the man who carries bones of the powerful bird or feathers of the powerful bird, nobody can kill or hunt such a lucky mortal" (Gignoux, 2001, p. 75). This ritual must have been a practice of a shamanic type actually known to the author of the Yašt.

Other literary testimonies, regarding extraterrestrial journeys, for example, may also be interpreted as experiences of a shamanic type. Indeed Zoroaster's voyage as described in the *Bahman Yašt* is a kind of myth, but G. Widengren

(1968, pp. 88-91) thought that the prophet had used a technique of intoxication to go into a trance, for he remained asleep for seven days and seven nights. In any case, the voyage of Vištāspa, who was said to be Zoroaster's first convert, has more of the appearance of a shamanic trip; for, according to the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* (chap. 47), Ohrmazd sent his messenger Nēryōsang to tell Ardwahišt to give Vištāspa a mixture of wine and henbane. Having drunk it, the latter fainted; while his body remained in a state of apparent death, his soul was taken to paradise. Thus, when he regained consciousness, he was convinced that he had to follow Zoroaster's message.

These accounts are purely mythical, but such may not be the case for other voyages that might have been made by historical personalities. In the 3rd century C.E., Mani may have been suspected of having had some experience of a shamanic type: when he was imprisoned by King Wahrām II, the latter ordered that Mani's body be carefully examined after his death. The king indeed feared that Mani had taken a drug to kill himself or to go through a shamanic experience (*Manichaean Psalter* 225, in Allberry, p. 17.5-18; cf. Puech, pp. 110; 141, n. 227; Russell, 1990). The vision of the mowbed Kirdir is described at length, especially in his inscription of Sar Mašhad, but is not quite understandable due to the gaps in the text. Kirdir relates that, due to his piety and his efforts to foster the expansion of Mazdeism, the gods had granted him a vision of paradise and hell. (Perhaps he achieved the vision by means of a medium, according to the interpretation of F. Grenet [2002, p. 18].) The use of a narcotic is apparently not mentioned, but the experiences of the female shamans of Bhutan (see below) prove that this was not indispensable. The motifs in the vision that are invoked by this religious leader are perhaps intended to conceal the character of his experience as of a kind incompatible with the practices of the official religion.

To return to the religious literature, the journey of the just Virāz in the *Ardā Virāz Nāmag* (see ARDĀ VIRĀZ; Gignoux, 1984; Vahman, 1986) is in fact presented as a shamanic journey. This book, which is still very popular, begins with a description of the entire ritual leading up to the voyage of the shamans: election of the person, confirmed by an ordeal to verify his competence as regards religious experience; choice of an appropriate place, which had to be isolated (in the state of apparent death, the man would be, like any corpse, susceptible of serious pollution) and ritually pure. There followed the consumption of a mixture of henbane and wine to induce lethargy. All these steps resemble exactly the prelude to the experiences of the female shamans

of Bhutan (Gignoux, 1990, pp. 16-19). Then Virāz visits hell, and the compiler complacently describes the various kinds of punishments and tortures there; paradise, by contrast, appears to be of little interest to him.

If the soul can leave the body during this kind of experience, it is due to the existence of the multiplicity of souls; this belief is not only a reconstruction of modern science, but is attested by Zadspram in his *Selections* (*Wizīdagīhā*, ed. Gignoux and Tafazzoli, 1993, pp. 103-5). Indeed, if there are several souls, one of them can keep the body alive, even if it really appears to be dead, while the other can venture on the extraterrestrial journey. As we know, the prescription in the *Vendidad* (6.45-51) to carefully preserve the bones of the dead appears to agree with the theme of the initiation of the shaman, all of whose bones had to be counted after he had been symbolically dismembered and put together again.

Concerning Mithraism, a subject close to that of Mazdean Iran, A. D. H. Bivar (2001) thinks that Mithraic initiation included a simulation of death and return to life, for the mystagogue's drinking cup contained a narcotic that enabled a neophyte to arrive at a state of apparent death, and to have dramatic visions like those that are described in the Mithraic liturgy. But there are a number of cultures bordering Iran in which shamanic practices have existed since ancient times (see below). In India there were the vipra and the use of soma to achieve ecstasy (see above). According to the *Atharvaveda* (Gignoux, 2001, p. 75), the disciple of a Brahmin can transform himself into a bird and carry out a magic flight. The sacrificial post, symbolizing the *axis mundi* and the cosmic tree, enables one to reach the world of the gods. Numerous similarities have been observed between the shamanism of the Ural region and that described in the Vedas: the vision as light (also in the Avesta), the use of drugs, the magic flight, the cosmic tree, and the bird. Farther east, in Cambodia, the cosmic tree with five branches is a fig tree (like the tree of paradise in Genesis, which is a fig tree in the Nestorian tradition); its shape is similar to that of a man represented by his five main body parts (head, two arms, and two legs), a form which is known in the Indus valley civilization and from Sasanian seals, representing a kind of sorcerer or shaman (Gignoux, 2001,pp. 90-91).

In northern Iran, the Scythian custom of burning hemp grains to inhale the smoke and reach a state of ecstasy was described by Herodotus (4.75). Even today, the Kalash shamans use juniper smoke to go into a trance. In the Ossetian epic of the Narts, some shamanic elements can still be observed.

According to G. M. Bongard-Levin and E. A. Grantovskiĭ (1974), the Scythians had borrowed the practice from their northern neighbors in the common Aryan period, when they must have been in touch with the Finno-Ugrian tribes of northeastern Europe, where shamanism still exists (Gignoux, 2001, p. 79). In the West, well-known phenomena in Greece, such as the vision of the beyond by Er the Armenian (in Plato, *Republic*, book10) or rites of healing by the god Asclepius, are of a shamanic kind, according to E. R. Dodds (1951).

Although the case of Greece may be less convincing, judging by the reticence of certain Hellenists to admit a shamanic interpretation of the facts, such is not the case for Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan. The shamanic traditions of the Himalayan countries are of great importance because they go back to the 12th century C.E., proving the historical continuity of medieval tales and their living presence today. The Nepalese shaman, singing mantras and without taking hallucinogens, arrives at a very altered state of consciousness; he also holds before him a bunch of broad leaves suggesting the *barsom* of the mages. The shamaness of Bhutan, like the mage Kirdir, does not use any psychotropic substances, and her extraterrestrial voyage is presented as a unique experience (Pommaret, 1989, pp. 86, 153). This assertion by the biographers may be a way to camouflage the non-Buddhist character of the voyage, as Kirdir also seems to have done. But there is a striking resemblance between the stories of the Tibetan female shamans and the *Ardā Virāz Nāmag* (Gignoux, 2001, p. 77). Tibet seems to have borrowed a number of religious concepts from Iran, such as the multiplicity of souls, the departure of the soul at the time of death, the rope used by the demon to take away the dead, and the use of an arrow as a shamanic instrument. These show a close relation between the two cultures, on which further research should cast more light (Gignoux, 1987).

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