

Article

# Shamanism in Contemporary Norway: Concepts in Conflict

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**Abstract:** To choose a terminology for an investigation of shamanism in contemporary Norway is not entirely without problems. Many shamans are adamant in rejecting the term religion in connection with their practices and choose broader rubrics when describing what they believe in. When shamanism was approved as an official religion by the Norwegian government in 2012, the tensions ran high, and many shamanic practitioners refused to accept the connection between religion and shamanism. This chapter provides an account of the emic categories and connections used today by shamanic entrepreneurs and others who share these types of spiritual beliefs. In particular, the advantages and disadvantages of the term religion and how it is deployed on the ground by shamans in Norway will be highlighted.

**Keywords:** shamanism; Shamanistic Association; terminology; religion; worldview; governmental regulations; politics

## 1. Introduction

In the late 1980s, shamanism gained a foothold in Norway, at the same time influencing cultural life and various secular and semi-secular currents.

One aim of this chapter is to take the diversity and hybridity within shamanic practices seriously through case studies from a Norwegian setting. Overall, I try to paint a picture of shamanism in Norway in its cultural context and describe the concepts, rubrics, and connections that practitioners deploy to position themselves in a Norwegian cultural and political context. The chapter explores the dynamics through which abstract concepts and ideas find moorings in a local community and in participants' reality here and now, gradually generating distinct cultural fields. The history of shamanism provides insight into Western assumptions about religion and religiosity in general. It stands as an example of how religious labels are formed in ever changing contexts—as a by-product of broader historical processes.

Taking local practices and communities as a starting point offers rich opportunities for getting close to individual practitioners and their beliefs, visions, and creativity. Based on interviews with central persons in the shamanic environment in Norway from 2004 to 2018, as well as on fieldwork at courses, ceremonies, and festivals, this chapter will provide empirical knowledge about which notions of shamanism are used today by shamanic entrepreneurs and others who share these types of spiritual beliefs. As a folklorist and culture researcher, I aim at understanding how people create culture and form systems of meaning that organize everyday life. I seek to track changes, boundary markers, and the complex, procedural, and polysemic meanings people ascribe to their actions.

I have chosen to examine the field of shamanism in Norway ethnographically by focusing particularly on some specific contexts and personalities using interviews, observation, and document analysis as my main research tools. Even though these tools represent different approaches to the field, the combination opened the possibility for more depth as well as understanding.

Cultural analysis forms a central basis for my academic understanding. A culture analytical approach is about understanding and interpreting what is meaningful for members of a culture (Frykman and Löfgren 1979; Ehn and Löfgren 1982). It is about seeing how meaning is created and re-created. The focus is directed toward everyday reality, to the participants' lives, their experiences, and their meetings and negotiations in relation to dominant discourses. For me, cultural analysis constitutes a tool to highlight perspectives that say something about contemporary shamans' values, attitudes, and interpretations of everyday life, including shamanic activities and experiences.

## 2. Shamanism in Norway

Contemporary shamanism has become a global phenomenon with shamans in many parts of the world sharing common practices, rituals, and a nature-oriented worldview and lifestyle. The highlighting of shamanism as a universal phenomenon was inspired by the English translation of Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Eliade 1964). However, within this global fellowship, diversity is still its most prominent feature. 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. This means that studies of the dynamics of shamanic entrepreneurship 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 involves adaptations to local cultural and political climates.

The U.S. influence was particularly pronounced during the first stages of shamanism in Norway. Michael Harner's shamanism with its alleged Native-American base reached this region during the 1980s, along with New Age and occult impulses. Prior to the late 1990s, shamanism in Norway thus differed little from core shamanic practices developed by Michael Harner, often referred to as the pioneer of modern shamanism. Since then, however, practitioners of shamanism in Norway have been increasingly engaged in working to recover the indigenous traditions of their country and ancestors. A Sami version of shamanism has been established, along with a new focus on Norse traditions as the source for ritual creation and religious practice.

In previous studies I have traced the history of the process of giving shamanism in Norway a local flavor to the Sami author and journalist Ailo Gaup (1944–2014) who is considered the first shaman in contemporary Norway (see Fonneland 2010). As Galina Lindquist argues, a striking feature of shamanic performances and “an important condition of its [shamanism's] existence” is that “its performative expression ... hinges entirely on certain individuals” (Lindquist 1997, p. 189). In a Norwegian context, few other individuals have had so much to say about the development and design of the shamanic environment than Gaup. I interviewed Gaup in 2005 when the process of bringing forth and developing local expressions of shamanism was in its infancy. His story reveals both a strong influence from Harner's core shamanism and a strong desire to bring forth Sami religious traditions as the basis for religious practice in contemporary society.

In contemporary Norway, the growth in shamanic practices and expressions is reflected in, among other things, the alternative fairs that are arranged in cities across the country. At these fairs, shamans and New Age entrepreneurs market their goods and services, and the public's interest, and thus attendance, rises annually. A Sámi shamanic milieu is constantly evolving, and a growing number of Sámi shamans offer their services online (Fonneland 2010). Additionally, a wide range of new products have been developed, including courses on Sámi shamanism, on the making of ritual drums (goavddis), guided vision quests in the northern Norwegian region, healing-sessions inspired by Sámi shamanism, and—to mention one of the latest innovations—the shamanic festival Isogaisa. Finally, yet importantly, a local shamanic association concerned with the preservation of Sámi and Norse shamanic traditions was granted status as an official religious community by the County Governor of Troms on 13 March 2012. The various products—and information about them—are available through advertisements, local media coverage, Facebook groups, websites, and through local shops. A variety

of Sámi ritual drums are currently offered, for instance, in tourist shops, at the annual New Age market, and on the websites of shamans (see [Fonneland 2012a, 2012b](#)).

Choosing a terminology for an investigation of shamanism in contemporary Norway has been a challenge and is not entirely without problems. In contemporary society, the words shaman and shamanism have become part of the everyday language, and thousands of popular as well as academic texts have been written about the subject. In recent years, the term shaman has in Norway become an umbrella term for the Sámi noaidi (the Sámi indigenous religious specialist), as is the case with religious specialists among people referred to as “indigenous,” more or less regardless of the content of their expertise and practices.<sup>1</sup>

However, the noaidi has not always been perceived as a shaman. The word shaman is an example of the complexities often involved in translation processes over time and across space (see [Johnson and Kraft 2017](#)). The term is widely regarded as having entered Russian from the Tungus samán, transferring to German as schamane, and then into other European languages in the seventeenth century, eventually entering the academic vocabularies of anthropologists and historians of religions and related to indigenous people elsewhere (see [Wilson 2014](#), p. 117). In the 1960s, the term spread to the neopagan milieu where the shaman is not only recognized as an indigenous religious specialist but as having abilities potentially enshrined in all humans. However, as Graham Harvey warns us, the use of the term shaman now encompasses numerous local words for shamans, each with their own particular associations ([Harvey 2003](#), p. 1). The term shamanism, in other words, can be seen as an expression of Western scholarly denial of the complexity of “primitive” religions and the reduction of their diversity to a simplistic unity. When it comes to these types of translation processes, it is important to bear in mind James Clifford’s reminder: “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](#), pp. 48–49).

During the past decades, several researchers have opposed the term shamanism (see, among others, [Von Stuckrad 2002](#); [Svanberg 2003](#); [Znamenski 2007](#); [Rydving 2011](#)). As Fonneland, Kraft, and Lewis argue, this is partly “due to the historical trajectories and to their results, including widespread notions of shamanism as an ism” ([Kraft et al. 2015](#), p. 2). In this chapter, I take account of emic categories and connections, focusing on which notions of “shamanism” are used today by shamanic entrepreneurs and others who share these types of spiritual beliefs. From this scholarly standpoint, I find it important to avoid entering the debate over whether shamanism is “genuine” or not. As a folklorist, I look at the invention of traditions as something ubiquitous, noting that indigenous religions also change. Tradition is not a static thing but an ongoing process. I support folklorist Sabina Magliocco who underlines, “What some scholars have called ‘inventions’, ‘folklorism’, or ‘fakelore’ I see as integral steps in the formation and elaboration of tradition, worthy of investigation in their own right” ([Magliocco 2004](#), p. 10).

Terminology is an equally debated issue among shamanic practitioners. The shamans I have interviewed reject the term neoshaman, partly due to its biased tone, but primarily to designate their affinity with the past and eschew any distinction between their practices and those of ancient and indigenous cultures. From an academic point of view, the word neoshaman is nonsensical. What I can observe and know is that in contemporary Norwegian society there exist numerous shamans. What was found and which terms made sense in local indigenous communities several hundred years ago are much more complicated questions, and they are related to various scholars’ interpretations of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> We lack a historiography of the noaidi’s meeting with the shaman, but this meeting most likely represents a long and gradual process. The term shaman appeared in texts from the late 1800s, including in J.A. Friis’s *Lappisk Mythologi, Eventyr og Folkesagn* (Lappic Mythology, Fairytales and Folktales) ([Friis 1871](#)), but the term first became a “standard of norm” during the 1970s (see [Kraft 2016](#), pp. 52–53).

During my fieldwork among shamanic practitioners in the period, 2004–2018 the term that arose most in debates was the term religion. Whether shamanism should be classified as a religion or not led to intense discussions on several occasions. Until recently, many shamans, such as, for example, Ailo Gaup, adamantly rejected the term religion in connection with their practices. In keeping with his teacher Michael Harner, Gaup regarded core shamanism as a “technique” (Eliade’s term) and a way of life—not as a religion. In his book *The Shamanic Zone* (Gaup and Gundersen 2005) Gaup wrote:

I am aware that some people describe shamanism as a religion. I hear it being referred to as animism, nature religion, primeval religion or primal religion. There are still some who call it Paganism, and probably Satanism as well. The term charlatanism belongs to the more curious, although it occasionally has a certain justification. Shamanism is not a religion at all for me, and I am not striving to spread a new religion. Religion is for those who cannot see for themselves. That statement is from a Nepalese shaman (. . .). Michael Harner says that a religion is a mixture of spirituality and politics. Shamanism is spirituality and I hope it stays as spiritual as possible. (Gaup and Gundersen 2005, p. 323)

Gaup underlined a skepticism concerning the connection with what he referred to as spiritual practices and politics. He wanted his practices to be free from dogmas, laws, and institutional structures and regulations and feared that these were factors that may gradually “corrupt the message” (Gaup and Gundersen 2005, p. 324). Later in the same chapter, he noted: “If I have any religion, it is creativity” (Gaup and Gundersen 2005, p. 326). Creativity in *The Shamanic Zone* is highlighted as a powerful creator god that one, by activating, can free oneself from the pressure from outside and from everything that wants to capture one’s attention. Gaup emphasized this further by pointing out that:

“Shamanism did not arise in the same way as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, each of them being created by a separate religious founder. This old art has been here all the time as a possibility or an original heritage innate in human beings. (Gaup and Gundersen 2005, p. 9)

Shamanism is presented here as a foundation in all the world’s cultures, as art, and as a spiritual heritage in all human beings. Creativity in this context becomes a key through which people can access and express the art of shamanism. To elaborate on shamanic practitioners’ ideas on the concept of shamanism, I asked four female and one male shamans at the Isogaisa festival in their forties to describe their connotations to the word shamanism.<sup>2</sup> They point out:

“Shamanism is the oldest known techniques for healing, power and insight”.

“Shamanism is to be in the nature and to have the power to ask questions and to get answers”

“Shamanism is that one believes in powers outside humans’ control”. “Shamanism is to look upon man as part of the nature—as part of the circle of life. Humans does not stand outside the circle and cannot control it.

“Shamanism implies a respect for everything living”.

“Shamanism is the free mindset. To have the possibility to believe and think what you yourself want to”.

In the shamans’ descriptions the word religion is absent. Shamanic praxeology, ontology, and cosmology are here described in broad rubrics as ancient techniques and as holistic ways of life in close contact with and respect for nature. In addition, their quotes can be said to exhibit what Heelas termed

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<sup>2</sup> This fieldwork took place in August 2014 and was organized in cooperation with archeologists Tiina Äikäs, Wesa Perttola, and Suzie Thomas, and scholar of religion Siv Ellen Kraft.

“unmediated individualism” (Heelas 1996, p. 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 closely linked to the individual practitioners’ own inner guidance. As Ann Taves and Michael Kinsella underline in the presentation of this special issue: “To govern a way of life, a worldview does not necessarily have to be highly elaborated or rationalized or even explicitly articulated.”<sup>3</sup> As such, both the terms worldview and way of life embrace the individual aspect that the shamans emphasize. People engaging in shamanism in Norway describe themselves as part of a community dedicated to highlighting Sámi or Norse indigenous traditions as a spiritual heritage. Rather than an organized movement with identifiable doctrines, practices, and leaders, shamanism in Norway is complex, multifaceted, and loosely organized. It shows how local pasts, places, and characters are woven into global discourses on shamanism, and in this melting pot, new forms of practices and worldviews are taking shape.

Still, neither the term worldview nor the term way of life has the official recognition held by the term religion. This became utterly clear in the processes of converting shamanism into an authorized denomination in Norway in 2012.

### 3. The Shamanistic Association—Concepts in Conflict

It matters what we call things. This fact was highlighted in the debates that followed the Norwegian governmental approval of the Shamanistic Association (SA) as an official religion 13 March 2012. In Norway, this was the first time a shamanic movement was able to obtain the status of an official religious community with the right to offer and perform life cycle ceremonies and gain financial support relative to its membership.

According to Kyrre Gram Franck, the first leader of SA on a national level, the intention behind the establishment of SA is that the association will develop into a unifying force with the ability to strengthen individuals’ and groups’ rights to practice shamanism. Not least, he hopes that the association will develop into a true alternative for those who adhere to shamanistic belief systems, and that the construction of life cycle ceremonies like baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals will help to increase people’s interest in shamanism.

The external forces of Norwegian governmental laws and regulations play an important role in shaping the Association. In the application process, governmental regulations had to be dealt with in many arenas. Initially, Gram Franck applied to the County Governor for permission to start a shamanistic organization building on a shamanistic worldview. In our conversations, Kyrre points out that the word worldview was emphasized precisely to help ameliorate emic tensions connected to the term religion. However, this proved to be difficult because of the bureaucratic system and rules regulating freedom of beliefs. If SA was going to have a chance at getting approval to perform shamanistic life cycle ceremonies, they first needed to establish themselves as a religious community. Groups applying for official status as a religious community need to frame their application according to The Religious Communities Act (Lov om trdomssamfunn og ymist anna). By doing this, they also reproduce a certain understanding of religion derived from Christian understandings of what constitutes the “core essence” of religion (Owen and Taira 2015, p. 94).

SA, then, is a construct designed to meet the requirements for the recognition of religious communities, highlighting how shamanic practices and worldviews are adapted, transformed, and changed to fit governmental regulations (see also Taira 2010).<sup>4</sup> To gain support, a religious community,

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special\\_issues/-ethnographies](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/-ethnographies), accessed on 4 April 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The external forces of Norwegian governmental laws and regulations have direct consequences for the design and maneuverability of shamanistic groups. The law on religious freedom has been enshrined in Norway since 1964. This has also made it possible for groups without any affiliation to the Church of Norway to be classified legally as religious communities. The idea of equal treatment based on faith and belief is rooted in the Declaration of Human Rights, which among other things highlights the equal right to freedom of religion and belief and the right to protection against all unfair discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief. The Religious Communities Act (Lov om trdomssamfunn og ymist anna).

according to the report, must “be based on common binding perceptions of existence in which man sees himself in relation to a god or one or more transcendent powers” (confession of faith) (§ 2-1, entitled to financial subsidies).

The Religious Communities Act’s (Lov om trdomssamfunn og ymist anna) definition of religion favors Protestant Christian religious forms to which other religions are expected to conform to in order to gain recognition as a religion. The letter Gram Franck sent to the County Governor to establish both a national board located in Tromsø and a local shamanistic association is dated 16 January 2012. It contains certain requisite information in a number of paragraphs that deal with everything from rules for membership, to objectives, to rules for leaders of the local religious communities, to matters relating to the design of the Association’s life cycle ceremonies. To gain official recognition as a religious community, the community must also submit an official creed, the contents of which must not be “in conflict with public morals.” SA’s creed is highlighted in the first section in the letter to the County Governor:

§1.

1.1

The power of creation expresses itself in all parts of life and human beings are interconnected with all living beings on a spiritual plane. Mother Earth is a living being and a particular responsibility rests on us for our fellow creatures and nature. All things living are an expression of the power of creation and therefore are our brothers and sisters.

A shamanistic faith means acknowledging that all things are animated and that they are our relatives. And that by using spiritual techniques, one can acquire knowledge through contacting the power of creation, natural forces and the spiritual world. A shamanistic faith involves a collective and individual responsibility for our fellow creatures, nature beings and Mother Earth. Mother Earth is regarded as a living being.

Shamanistic practice means the use of shamanistic techniques both for one’s own development and for helping our fellow humans and other creatures. This means that creation is sacred and one celebrates the unfolding of the life force.<sup>5</sup> (my translation)

The main emphases in the creed are the struggle to protect the environment, a holistic worldview, and Mother Earth as a key symbol for shamanistic practitioners. The shamans whom I interviewed at Isogaisa in 2014 also highlighted these themes as the core of their shamanic way of life. The symbolic values and ideals emphasized in this paragraph are not unique to Nordic shamanism but can be found in shamanic milieus across the globe (see [Beyer 1998](#); [Von Stuckrad 2002](#)). From the very beginning, Mother Earth has been a central touchstone in shamanic practices. She is an essential figure to which one attributes power as well as offers sacrifices. A broad statement like this serves to encompass the diversity of practitioners of shamanism and excludes no one on the basis of national or ethnic identity.

Nevertheless, the call for a creed is clearly contrary to a religion that is non-dogmatic and it forces SA to conform to Christian values. Gram Franck emphasizes that it felt problematic to construct a creed, and that he was aware that this would lead to tensions. He still highlights that there was no way around it, if SA was to have a chance to be approved. He points out:

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anna) that was introduced in 1969 provides a framework for religious organizations in Norway. The Act ensures virtually equal treatment of the Church of Norway and other religious communities and denominations by facilitating that religious communities may apply for state and municipal subsidies per member. No country provides the same level of financial support for religious communities as Norway, and by this arrangement, the country represents an outer point where state and municipal grants form most of the resource base for the Norwegian Church, and where other religious communities receive similar, public subsidies per member (see [Askeland 2011](#)).

<sup>5</sup> The text is taken from the letter to the County Governor; <http://www.facebook.com/groups/291273094250547/files/#!/groups/291273094250547/doc/302374349807088/>, accessed 29 January 2013 (my translation).

GRAM FRANCK: That has been the heaviest obstacle (laughter), to understand what they were looking for. First, we got a nice disapproval, and an encouragement to resubmit. We spent a lot of time and I thought that if we do not make it this time, we need guidance. Then, we understood that it was a wording that had to be included for the document to be approved. We had to use the term “spouse,” for example. It had to be literal and in the right order. This shows that there is a bureaucracy that interferes with the religious communities’ design and what we can communicate that we believe in. Much of this builds on Christian principles, so I felt a bit reluctant to go into the process.

That this has been a challenging maneuver is something that also Lone Ebeltoft, the leader of the Shamanistic Association’s local branch in the county of Tromsø, reflects on in one of our conversations:

EBELTOFT: We had to work hard to find a formulation everyone could accept. Because it is important not to force anyone into anything, especially within shamanism because where the main goal is that everyone should be free. This is at the core of the critique against SA. We notice it when we are around at fairs and stuff and tell about the Shamanistic Association, then someone always says, “I’ll never join anything like that, no one will force me into anything.” They have simply not understood. We only wish to facilitate for shamanistic practices.

To have a creed that says something about the relationship with a god/gods and that does not conflict with “public morality” is mandatory. This requirement is still inconsistent for shamanic practitioners who see their worldview as fundamentally non-dogmatic and for whom organized religion is viewed as a threat to authentic spirituality. In other words, public registration challenges some of the key ideals within shamanism, namely individual religious freedom, anti-dogmatism, and anti-institutionalization. For some practitioners of shamanism, and particularly for shamanic entrepreneurs trying to make a living from shamanic healing, through, for example, drum making or other practices connected to shamanism, SA’s entry into the shamanic arena in Norway thus appeared as a threat. They fear that SA will be introducing rules of conduct, religious leadership, and restrict religious freedom.

The association’s key figures and leaders, Gram Franck and Ebeltoft, have been interviewed by local and national newspapers, radio and TV. TV2, one of Norway’s largest national TV channels, covered the news about the initiation of a shamanistic association in Tromsø. The program emphasized that Ebeltoft welcomed the governor’s decision and she expressed her ambition for preserving and continuing the shamanistic traditions and practices of the country. It was further highlighted that the Shamanistic Association’s goal is to understand and respect nature. Nor is shamanism in any way mysterious. Shamanism is a *world religion*, and in the North, people are committed to preserving the Sámi and Norse (Arctic) traditions (TV2, 14 March 2012, italics by the author).

All relevant media stories have been characterized by a positive attitude toward the newborn religious association. The positive attention is in stark contrast to how the media in general has covered New Age events and entrepreneurs. According to Siv Ellen Kraft, the New Age does not hold a high position on the media’s list of real religions and acceptable religiosity (Kraft 2011, p. 105). In the case of SA, we thus have media contributions that show a genuine interest in the phenomenon of contemporary shamanism. In the various reports, shamanism is not portrayed as a countercultural movement, characterized by oppositional attitudes and naïve as well as unreliable social actors, but rather as a world religion. Media is, as known, a key player concerning the development of the field of religion, both in terms of internal relationships related to power and authority and in view of highlighting certain issues and angles as particularly relevant. In Norway, shamanism, which started out as a Harner-style version of shamanism in the late 1980s and gradually developed into Norse and Sami localized variants of shamanism, has entered the field of world religions with the support of the media. It is currently viewed as a positive contribution and a necessary alternative, embodying important attitudes concerning contemporary environmental issues and materialistic lifestyles.

#### 4. Conclusions

As James Beckford notes, “Disputes about what counts as religion, and attempts to devise new ways of controlling what is permitted under the label of religion have all increased” (Beckford 2003, p. 1). The Shamanistic Association (SA) appears to have been created for the purpose of meeting the criteria required for obtaining the rights of a Norwegian religious community. The national legal framework thus inspired a diverse group of professional entrepreneurs to join forces and organize themselves into a religious association.

Recently, the government has submitted a new law for consultation, “Proposed new law on religious communities”. In short, the proposed new law implies that religious communities under 500 members will no longer receive financial support. Several smaller religious communities, such as the Shamanic Association, may disappear if they fail to increase the number of members. The Board of SA has come up with a strong rebuttal against the new law.

The concept of religion is, and has been, imbued with varying connotations and values in different societies and contexts. Why is it so important for the Shamanic Association to maintain status as a religion in view of the fact that the approval challenges some of the most important ideologies within shamanism in contemporary times? One reason can of course be the statutory benefits that the financial support constitutes and the right to perform religious ceremonies. Equally, the process is about gaining acceptance in the Norwegian society. The state approval of SA as a religion implies an acceptance for shamans in the present time, for their activities, attitudes, and beliefs and as such, is a means for SA to reach out to potential members and to gain attention about themselves and their message. The approval by the county governor also makes SA a representative for the Norwegian shamanic environment in the public space, although this does not necessarily reflect the situation within the environment. In other words, the approval of SA as a religion functions in relation to social interests and power relations among practitioners of shamanism and in relation to society.

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