



BROWSE



Sami Shamanism: The Arctic Dimension

Rune Blix Hagen

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Sami Shamanism The Arctic Dimension

Rune Blix Hagen

Nor uglier follow the night-hag, when, called

*In secret, riding through the air she comes,
Lured with the smell of infant blood, to dance
With Lapland witches, while the labouring moon
Eclipses at their charms.*

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

In May 1627 a charge of witchcraft was brought against a man named Quiwe Baarsen living in the Norwegian part of Lapland. The judicial case was conducted over two days in a small fishing community called Hasvåg on the coast of the western part of Finnmark. Baarsen belonged to the indigenous people of northern Europe, the Sami (formerly known as Laps or Laplanders). The case turned out to be the first description of the use of a Sami drum (*runebomme*) in Scandinavian legal sources. During the court session Baarsen described and explained the purpose of his drum playing, which he had been practicing for years.

When they want to cast runic spells, they use a Sami drum. The drum is made of pine root and covered with reindeer hide or buckskin. They use a piece of wood, as a handle under the drum, and claws from every kind of animal native to this county are hung around the drum. Nine lines are painted on the drum with alder bark; this bark is also used to paint domestic pillows in the huts of the Sami. The first line on the drum represents their god, the second the sun, and the third the moon; these, in turn, symbolise the animals which can bring them luck or inflict harm on their enemies. And when two sorcerers (gandmen) want to test whose craft is the strongest, they paint two antler-butting reindeer on the drum. Whichever one turns out to be **[End Page 227]** the strongest will indicate which master is strongest and most cunning. And when they want to ask their apostle about something, they will take some small pieces of copper and hang them on the wings of a bird made of copper, which they then place on the drum. Striking the drum with a horn hammer, lined with beaver skin, the bird leaps around on the drum and finally stops on one of the lines. Then the master knows immediately

what the apostle has answered To protect the master, or whoever else may be in the hut, from accident, they beat the drum with the hammer. He whose bird falls from the drum will not live long.¹

Baarsen was also asked by the bailiff if he had studied this craft for some time. Such things were introduced to him when he was a mere boy, he replied. He was also asked how often he himself had been involved in beating such a drum. He answered that once many sorcerers came together to drum, to see whose craft was strongest. The Sami was also interrogated about who had taught him to raise the wind and make wind knots.

In the verdict, the local court made it clear that Quiwe Baarsen had made a free confession about the use of diabolic spells and that he had used witchcraft to drown five people by weather magic. The court sentenced him to death and to be burned at the stake.

Sixty-five years later, in 1692, a similar case of witchcraft was conducted against an old Sami called Anders Poulsen. The trial was held in Vadsø, a small fishing community near the Russian and Swedish borders in the very northeastern part of Norway. This particular case turned out to be the most important source of information on the magic drums of the Sami, and historians have singled out the case as the best source of information on Sami shamanism in northern Scandinavia. The Sami's confiscated magic drum has been preserved, and it is one of the few drums containing symbols and figures that actually have been described by the drum's owner.

Demonstrating Drum-playing in Court

The court, the local authorities, and the local council must have followed with great interest and curiosity how Anders Poulsen picked up his confiscated drum from the courtroom table, and how he began to give his...

Sami Shamanism

The Arctic Dimension

RUNE BLIX HAGEN

University of Tromsø

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