

Abstract: In view of the way that the definitions of traditional story types tend to overlap – epics, myths, fables, folktales, fairy tales – a case is made in this paper for the introduction of a new genre of tale, the shamanic story, which is either based on or inspired by a shamanic journey (a numinous experience in non-ordinary reality) or contains a number of the elements typical of such a journey. Characteristics typical of the genre include the way in which the stories all tend to contain embedded texts (often the account of the shamanic journey itself), how the number of actors is clearly limited as one would expect in subjective accounts of what can be regarded as inner journeys, and how they have the potential to provide a medium through which psychic states that might otherwise be difficult to put into words can be expressed. After considering the characteristics of the genre, it will then be shown how the Georgian folktale *Davit*, which entails both a journey to the Upper World and shape-shifting, provides an example of just such a story.

Key words: Georgia / shamanism / shamanic journey / shamanic story / shape-shifting / the Upper World

The Shamanic Story – a Georgian Example

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In her paper “South Siberian and Central Asian Hero Tales and Shamanistic Rituals”, the Leipzig researcher Erika Taube suggests that

Folktales—being expressions of early stages of the development of human society—reflect reality: material culture, social relations, customs, [and] religious beliefs. When folktales were being formed and appeared as vivid forms of spiritual and artistic expression in correspondence with the general social development, those elements, which nowadays are usually regarded as phantastic creations of human mind, were strictly believed phenomena, i.e. they were accepted as facts. Therefore, it is not at all a new idea that such tales sometimes reflect shamanistic beliefs and conceptions (Taube, 1984, p. 344).

If they were forms of “artistic expression”, however, then they could well have been regarded as such by those they were told to and we actually have no way of knowing whether they were “accepted as facts” or not. On the other hand, what we can show is that they do reflect shamanistic beliefs and conceptions, and this becomes apparent once we start to analyze them.

Sir James Frazer made a similar claim in his abridged version of *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1922: “folk-tales are a faithful reflection of the world as it appeared

to the primitive mind; and that we may be sure that any idea which commonly occurs in them, however absurd it may seem to us, must once have been an ordinary article of belief” (Frazer, 1993, p.668). In reality, however, there is no way we can be certain that any idea that appears in such tales must once have been an ordinary article of belief as, not being able to get inside other people’s minds, we cannot possibly know what was actually the case.

On the other hand, as Emily Lyle (2007) points out in the abstract to her paper “Narrative Form and the Structure of Myth”, what we can be reasonably sure of is that “At each stage in transmission of a tale from generation to generation, modifications take place but something remains. Thus there is a potential for material to be retained from a time in the distant past when the narrative was embedded in a total oral worldview or cosmology.” In view of the fact that in the past shamanism was widely practised in the region where the tale presented here originates from, it should therefore come as no surprise that a shamanic worldview and shamanic cosmology is to be found embedded in it.

Stories have traditionally been classified as epics, myths, sagas, legends, folk tales, fairy tales, parables or fables. However, the definitions of the terms have a tendency to overlap (see Berman, 2006, p.150-152) making it difficult to classify and categorize material. Another problem with the traditional terminology is that the genre system formed on the basis of European folklore cannot be fully applied universally.

Consider, for example, Eliade’s definition of myth. For Eliade the characteristics of myth, as experienced by archaic societies, are that it constitutes the absolutely true and sacred History of the acts of the Supernaturals, which is always related to a “creation”, which leads to a knowledge, experienced ritually, of the origin of things and thus the ability to control them, and which is “lived” in the sense that one is profoundly affected by the power of the events it recreates (see Eliade, 1964, pp.18-19). However, many stories are “lived” in the sense that one is profoundly affected by the events they recreate without them necessarily being myths. Moreover, a number of the stories that will be presented in this study could be regarded as having the above characteristics but would still not necessarily be classified as myths.

Another problem encountered is that a number of the definitions of what a myth is are so general in nature that they tend to be of little value. For example, the suggestion that a myth is “a story about something significant [that] ... can take place in the past ... or in the present, or in the future” (Segal, 2004, p.5) really does not help us at all as this could be applied to more or less every type of tale. For this reason a case was argued in Berman (2006) for the introduction of a new genre, termed the shamanic story. This can be defined as a story that has either been based on or inspired by a shamanic journey, or one that contains a number of the elements typical of such a journey. Like other genres, it has “its own style, goals, entelechy, rhetoric, developmental pattern, and characteristic roles” (Turner, 1985, p.187), and like other genres it can be seen to differ to a certain extent from culture to culture. It should perhaps be noted at this point, however, that there are both etic and emic ways of regarding narrative (see Turner, 1982, p.65) and the term “shamanic story” clearly presents an outside view. It should also be pointed out that what is being offered here

is a polythetic definition of what the shamanic story is, in which a pool of characteristics can apply, but need not.

Characteristics typical of the genre include the way in which the stories all tend to contain embedded texts (often the account of the shamanic journey itself), how the number of actors is clearly limited as one would expect in subjective accounts of what can be regarded as inner journeys, and how the stories tend to be used for healing purposes.

In his Foreword to *Tales of the Sacred and the Supernatural*, Eliade admits to repeatedly taking up “the themes of *sortie du temps*, or temporal dislocation, and of the alteration or the transmutation of space” (Eliade, 1981, p.10), and these are themes that appear over and over again in shamanic stories too¹.

Additionally, given that through the use of narrative shamans are able to provide their patients “with a language, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be expressed” (Lévi-Strauss, 1968, p.198), it follows that another feature of shamanic stories is they have the potential to provide a medium through which psychic states that might otherwise be difficult to put into words can be expressed.

They are also frequently examples of what Jürgen Kremer, transpersonal psychologist and spiritual practitioner, called “tales of power” after one of Carlos Castaneda’s novels. He defines such texts as ‘conscious verbal constructions based on numinous experiences in non-ordinary reality, “which guide individuals and help them to integrate the spiritual, mythical, or archetypal aspects of their internal and external experience in unique, meaningful, and fulfilling ways” (Kremer, 1988, p.192). In other words, they can serve the purpose of helping us reconnect with our indigenous roots.

The style of storytelling most frequently employed in both shamanic stories and in fairy tales is that of magic realism, in which although “the point of departure is ‘realistic’ (recognizable events in chronological succession, everyday atmosphere, verisimilitude, characters with more or less predictable psychological reactions), ... soon strange discontinuities or gaps appear in the ‘normal,’ true-to-life texture of the narrative” (Calinescu, 1978, p.386). It is also the style of storytelling that we find in *Davit*, the tale that follows:

There was, there was, and yet there was not, there was once a man who had two children, a daughter named Svetlana and a son, Davit. The son loved to hunt, and he

¹ Despite the criticism now levelled against Eliade’s work, without him the current interest in shamanism would probably never have materialized. So instead of dismissing Eliade out of hand as someone who merely popularised various ethnographic reports written by others, by casting a critical eye over what he has to say and by being selective, it is felt there is still a lot of value to be found in his writing and thus justification for referring to it.

started every morning at dawn and hunted the whole day through until the sunset. But one morning, when the usual time came for him to go out, he could not rise, and he lay as dead. All day he was that way. Only when the sun went down in the evening did life return to him. From then on, that was his Fate.

His father called doctors and wise men and magicians and old women. Nothing helped. When all else failed, his sister, Svetlana, decided to go and ask the sun, himself, what would cure her brother.

On her feet, she put a pair of shoes made of stone, "Until these wear out," she swore, "I will not give up my journey to the sun."

She walked and walked. Who knows how far she walked.

She came, one evening, in the first year of her travels, to a little village.

"Have you a room for me?" she asked an old lady standing in the doorway of the first house she passed.

"All guests come from God," the woman answered. "Enter and be welcome."

But, that night, Svetlana could not sleep for she heard a woman screaming. She called the old lady and asked her the reason.

"It is my son's wife," she answered. "For three months, she has been in labour but her child will not be born."

Svetlana thought a minute. Then she told the story of her journey. "And," she concluded, "if I find the sun, I will ask him what will help your daughter-in-law."

"Do," urged the old lady, and, next day, she prepared a bag of food for Svetlana to carry on her way.

She walked and walked. I cannot tell you how far she walked.

One day, as she passed through a barren field, she saw a thin sheep staring with hungry eyes at the fresh grass in the meadow beyond. Yet, all that kept him from it was a thicket hedge.

"Why do you not go over and eat grass, sheep?" Svetlana asked him. (I must tell you that this all happened in the days when men and animals still lived like friends and could speak, one to the other, in the same language.)

The sheep only answered, "Where are you going?"

"I am trying to find my way to the sun." She told again the story of her brother.

When the sheep heard this, he said, "Perhaps the sun could help me, too. For three years, I have stood here hungry, and I dare not go into the next field lest the thicket

hedge catch my wool and hold me fast.” “If I see the sun,” Svetlana promised, “I shall surely ask him to help you, too.”

She walked and walked. Only God can tell you how far she walked.

At last, in a clearing in the middle of a forest, she came to a stag whose antlers grew so tall they were lost in the sky.

“Where are you going, my dear?” the stag inquired.

Once more Svetlana told her story.

“Please,” said the stag, “I dare not go into the forest for my horns are so long they catch in everything. When you reach the sun, ask him what I should do.”

“Gladly,” Svetlana answered. “But one thing worries me. I am beginning to wonder how I shall ever find the sun.”

“Climb up my antlers,” offered the stag. “I have no idea how far they go, but, at the rate they have been growing, I think they must reach beyond everything. I will wait here and, when you are ready, you may come down the same way.”

She went up and up and up, past the treetops, past the flying birds, past the clouds, past the moon who looked at her coldly, past the stars and, at last, she reached the floor of heaven. There, she found a neat, small house and, sitting on the doorstep, was a little old woman with grey hair.

“My goodness,” the old lady said. “You frightened me. You are the first person from the earth who has ever found his way up here. What brought you?”

“I want to see the sun,” Svetlana answered, and she told her why.

“I am the sun’s mother. I will try my best to help you. Stay here tonight, but I must change you into a broom. The sun does not like human being around.”

At dusk, she changed her over and stood her in the corner with the dustpan to keep her company.

As soon as the sun came in the door, he sniffed the air. “Some human being has been here.”

“No, my child,” his mother told him. “Perhaps the wind is blowing from the earth today. Sit down and eat your supper.”

She had cooked everything he liked and, as he ate, she talked to him.

“You know, my life is sometimes very dull here. I am alone from dark to dark. Of course, for you it’s quite a different thing. You have a chance to see the world. Tell me of your experiences. Tell me of the human beings you shine upon.”

“Human beings,” the sun said, with his mouth full of carrots. “Why do you want to hear about them? They never do anything but make me trouble so I have to get rid of them.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, not long ago a nice hazy day came—a good chance for me to throw my rays at my sweetheart, the moon. But a young man kept shooting his gun at me until, to get some peace, I had to strike him.”

The sun’s mother got up, took the broom, brushed a few crumbs away and set the broom down by her chair. “Will the young man never be cured?” she asked.

“Yes,” the sun said, “if he stays for seventeen days in a curtained room where I can find no chink to crawl through.”

“Think of that!” cried his mother in astonishment. “Lamp, broom, and walls! Do you hear how clever my son is? Tell me some more, my dear. I suppose you see people in all kinds of trouble you might help?”

“In a window I shine through quite regularly, I see a woman three months in labour.”

“What would help her?”

“If she moves from the soft mattress where she lies to a bed of hard boards covered with straw, her child will be born.”

“Bag, broom and basket! Hear that!” said the old lady. “The world is certainly an interesting place. Tell me more.”

“Under a tree where I throw dappled shadows every day, stands a sheep who is afraid to cross the thicket lest the thorns catch his wool and hold him.”

“I don’t suppose there is any help for him.”

“Yes, if he would go straight to the thorn thicket and walk along brushing first his one side and then his other against it. That would pull out all his old wool and he could go through without fear.”

“Plate, broom and spoon! Was there ever anybody like my son! I had no idea life down on earth was like that. Does every animal get into some kind of trouble? Oxen? Cows? Deer, too?”

“There is even a stag whose horns have grown so long he cannot go in the forest.”

“Then he must die?”

“No, not if he finds a spring and stamps his hoof in the mud until water collects in the print, and then drinks it and shakes his head.”

“Stove, broom and pot! Listen to my son! There is nobody like him.”

“Now, Mother, I must rest, for my day starts early.”

He went to bed.

Next morning, as soon as he left for work, his mother changed Svetlana back. “Do you remember everything he said?” she asked.

“Yes, but how can I be sure it will work?”

“Try it on the stag.”

Svetlana thanked her, walked to the edge of heaven, stepped out on to the stag’s antlers and descended.

“Any news?” the stag said, as soon as she jumped off his back. “Did you find out anything?”

She told him what to do, and by luck there was a spring near by. He stamped his front paw. Water collected. He put his soft nose in and drank, shook his head and, with a great crack, his antlers snapped off.

He ran round and round the clearing; he rolled on the grass; he rubbed his sides against the tree bark, and then he came back.

“I don’t know how to thank you.” He licked her cheek with his rough, red tongue. “Would you care to have my antlers to hang in your house? Human beings seem to be proud of doing that.”

But Svetlana refused and went on. In the same way, she saved the sheep and the woman in labour, and came home to her brother.

There she darkened the room and, in great anxiety, waited through sixteen days. On the seventeenth, her brother rose in the morning, a whole man again.

Only then did she take off her stone shoes. The toe of one was almost chipped away; the sole of the other was polished so thin that light shone through it.

In this world, next to a good mother, what can a man have better than a good sister?

It is known that in pre-Christian times the Earth, the Sun and the Moon were worshipped by Georgians and all three appear in the Georgian tale "Black-Teimuraz, Sun-Teimuraz, Moon-Teimuraz". According to Dr Meri Khukhunaishvili-Tsiklauri, at the Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature, the process of demythologization turned these deities into fairy tale heroes, thus affirming the genetic relationship between a myth and a folk tale (from the website detailing research carried out at the

Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature in Tbilisi in Georgia: www.social.iatp.org.ge/axal/philosophye.htm [accessed 5/10/2005]). However, though this might well be the case in the tale she refers to, it does not mean such a connection between a myth and a folktale can always be traced. The reason for referring to her research here is that from it we can assume it is highly likely the tale of Davit dates back to pre-Christian times too.

As in the case of *The Book of Jonah* (see Berman, 2006), what we find in this story is the distinction between the shaman (or prophet) and the hero, the way the shaman (or character representing the shaman) acts as an intermediary. For in this tale Svetlana, who represents her brother, the pregnant woman, the sheep and the stag, intercedes with the Sun (albeit indirectly through the Sun's mother) on their behalf.

The first point to note about the story is the way it starts. In place of *Once upon a time*, the Georgian convention is employed—There was, there was, and yet there was not. And it is also interesting to note it was only “when all else failed” that Svetlana decided to undertake what can be regarded as her shamanic journey, suggesting this version of the story dates from post pagan times when such techniques were already no longer considered to be quite appropriate.

The “pair of shoes made of stone” take the place of the costume the shaman would traditionally wear and the fact she undertakes a ‘journey to the sun’ indicates that it is to be an Upper World Journey. The saying “All guests come from God” is not only indicative of the influence that Christianity has had on the tale but also epitomizes the legendary hospitality of the Georgian people.

The repeated emphasis on the distance Svetlana walks is not accidental but helps to convey to us how removed the setting of the tale is from this reality, to bring about the severance from the everyday world that it is necessary before Sacred Space, in this case the Upper World, can be entered.

Three encounters take place during the course of the journey—with the old lady concerned about her son's wife, the sheep unable to get to the fresh grass, and the stag who had problems with his antlers. And from this we see Svetlana is not only journeying for herself but also for the community she serves. In her role as an intermediary, “the shaman can be seen to be responsible for maintaining the balance of the community and for creating the harmony from which life springs” (Halifax, 1991, p.15).

The narrator tells us that “this all happened in the days when men and animals still lived like friends and could speak, one to the other, in the same language”, in other words in the days of shamans. Shape-shifting can be viewed as the imitation of the actions and voices of animals, though the shaman himself would certainly not describe what he does in such terms. During his apprenticeship, the future shaman has to learn the secret language required to communicate with the animal spirits and how to take possession of them, and this is often the “animal language” itself or a form of language derived from animal cries. It is regarded as equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature and hence evidence of the ability to be able to prophesy. And by sharing in the animal mode of being, the shaman can be seen to be re-establishing the

situation that existed in mythical times, when man and animal were one (see Eliade, 1989, pp.96-98).

The antlers of the stag provide the means for Svetlana to access the Upper World in place of the tree or the mountain that is often used for this purpose. They bring to mind the woodcut of the Tungus (Evenk) shaman from Nicolas Witsen's *Noord en Oost Tartaryen* (1692) that is reproduced in Alby Stone's book. The shaman in the picture is portrayed as wearing a headdress with antlers attached to it. And such headdresses have also been found at the Mesolithic site of Star Carr in Yorkshire (see Aldhouse-Green, 2005, fig.1 for an illustration).

Other examples include the depiction of the stag-man that can be found in the Camonica Valley in northern Italy, an antlered "matchstick man" incised on a panel at Pian Cogno, and a dancer from Paspardo in the same region. Similar beings also appear on the late Iron Age silver cauldron from Grundestrup in Denmark and on a silver coin from the British Midlands, dated to about AD 10 (see Aldhouse-Green, 2005, pp.128-129, & 200). As to whether the depictions of antlered people represent ritualists wearing antler headdresses, the stages of the shaman's journey to becoming an animal during deepening trance-experience, characters in a non-shamanic mythology, or possibly just people in hunting disguises, we have no way of knowing for sure. And even the Aldhouse-Greens themselves "doubt that it is possible to argue backwards with confidence, from our understanding of the modern brain to infer the context of the earliest art and the nature of the belief systems of the earliest modern humans" (Aldhouse-Green, 2005, p.23). Nevertheless, all the evidence would seem to suggest a strong likelihood of some kind of shamanic connection cannot be ruled out.

A journey to the Upper World involves passing through different layers and these are indicated in the text: "She went up and up and up, past the treetops, past the flying birds, past the clouds, past the moon who looked at her coldly, past the stars and, at last, she reached the floor of heaven."

As for what takes place in the house of the sun, It is at this point in the tale that shape-shifting takes place, with the sun's mother changing Svetlana into a broom. Though shape-shifting is a feature found in many fairy tales, the fact the change here is into an inanimate rather than an animate makes this tale somewhat unusual. However, if we take a view of reality in which everything is understood to be inhabited by a spirit similar to all other spirits, there is no problem in believing that man can change into an animal, or an inanimate object, or the other way around for that matter (see Bettelheim, 1991, pp.46-47). What we find in the Upper World is that in many ways it mirrors our own—the way the mothers cooks her sons all his favourite dishes, for example—which makes it more accessible to us.

The return from being in Sacred Space involves reincorporation and this is provided by the Stag asking Svetlana if she would care to have his antlers to hang in her house, which serves the purpose of bringing the reader very much back down to earth as does the final question—"In this world, next to a good mother, what can a man have better than a good sister?"

The final point to note about this tale is the way in which the writer clearly wants us to be left with the impression that what took place was more than just a dream.

Evidence to support this can be found in the description that the toe of one of the stone shoes “was almost chipped away” and “the sole of the other was polished so thin that light shone through it.” A shamanic journey is more than just an imaginary event as anyone who has undertaken one can attest to.

To conclude, let us now summarise why this story can be described as shamanic:

Svetlana acts as an intermediary, a traditional role played by the shaman. The “pair of shoes made of stone” take the place of the costume the shaman would traditionally wear and the fact she undertakes a ‘journey to the sun’ indicates that it is to be an Upper World Journey. A journey to the Upper World involves passing through different layers and these are indicated in the text: “She went up and up and up, past the treetops, past the flying birds, past the clouds, past the moon who looked at her coldly, past the stars and, at last, she reached the floor of heaven.”

As for the purpose of the journey, it is undertaken by Svetlana on behalf of the community she serves, and everything takes place “in the days when men and animals still lived like friends and could speak, one to the other, in the same language”, in other words in the days of shamans. The antlers of the stag provide the means for Svetlana to access the Upper World, in place of the tree or the mountain that is often used for this purpose, and when the sun’s mother changes Svetlana into a broom, it is at this point that shape-shifting can be said to take place.

All this indicates that what we have here is essentially a shamanic story rather than what at first sight might appear to be just a simple fairy tale, and the same can be shown to be the case with many other tales from both Georgia and elsewhere—neighbouring Armenia for example (see Berman, 2007 and 2008 for further examples of shamanic stories from different times and cultures).

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