

BEEZEBUB'S FLIES

Sámi Shamans and their Drums

by Nicholas Breeze Wood



reside in the drum, and these were brought to life by striking the drum. The C16th vicar of Nordland, Petter Dass, described Sámi magic as being like 'vile, dark blue flies.' and Sámi shamanism became known as 'Beelzebub's flies' from this remark.

TRIALS FOR THE SHAMANS

In 1627 a case was brought against a Sámi shaman called Quiwe Baarsen, who was accused of raising the wind by magic. Quiwe, was accused of summoning the wind for a fisherman called Niels Jonsen who had asked for a strong wind for his voyage. Quiwe agreed to this, performed a ceremony, and summoned the wind. Niels then got a favourable sailing wind.

Then the wife of a local merchant came to Quiwe and asked him to make a sailing wind for her so that her husband could

come home soon. She promised to give him a keg of beer if he would raise the wind, and again Quiwe agreed. But this time the wind became too strong, and all perished in the resulting storm.

In the trial when Quiwe was asked about shamanism he replied. "When the Sámi want to cast spells, they use a drum. The drum is made of pine and covered with reindeer hide. They use a piece of wood as a handle under the drum, and claws from every kind of animal are hung around it...

And when they want to ask their guiding spirit 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 [painted on the drum]. Then the shaman knows immediately what the spirit has answered".

Then Quiwe was asked if he had studied this craft for some time. 'Such things were introduced to him when he was a mere boy', he replied.

Two days later Quiwe Baarsen was sentenced to death for using 'witchcraft' to drown five people, and he was burned at the stake.

In 1692, one old Sámi shaman called Anders Poulsen who was also on trial, told the court about the use of his drum. He even stood up and demonstrated its use to the people present in the court house at the small fishing village of Vadso. This drum was taken from him and

The drum (*runebomme*) is central to traditional Sámi shamanic culture.

Although the shamanic traditions of the Sámi are no doubt very ancient, the first written record of them comes from the medieval chronicler Adam of Bremen.

Writing in the eleventh century he notes: 'So steeped in the skills of sorcery and conjuring are these [Sami] people that they claim to know what every individual in the world is busy doing. Large creatures of the sea can be beached upon the shore by them simply by muttering phrases of magical power.'

The Church believed that Satan himself had given drums to the Sami. According to Christians the drum was an instrument of the Devil, and was the means by which a sorcerer would summon his demons. Such demons were believed to



Above: C18th illustration of a Sámi shaman in trance.

Right: C17-18th Sámi 'bowl' drum front and back views Length 38.5cm

is now preserved at De Samiske Samlinger museum in Norway.

Today only seventy-one old, original drums still exist, mostly scattered across Northern Europe in museums.

BOWL AND FRAME DRUMS

Sámi drums all look rather similar from the front. They are roughly oval, generally egg shaped, symmetrical along their long axis. The narrower end is always the bottom of the drum. They are skinned in reindeer rawhide, and are painted with red line decorations of figures and geometric designs.

The two types of drums are distinguished by the way their frames are made.

The first type of drum is the frame drum, made from a hoop of bent wood with the skin covering just one side. The drum is held by means of one or more struts (often of wood) that go across the inside of the frame, making it stronger. The most familiar example of this type of drum is the Irish bodhran.

The second type of drum used by shamans is the bowl drum, where the skin is stretched over the open mouth of a wooden bowl, carved from a single piece of wood, often from birch burls. Sámi bowl drums do not have crossing struts of wood to hold, but are held instead by means of two holes or slits in the bottom of the bowl for the drummer's fingers.

The size of drums vary, the length ranging from around forty centimetres to more than eighty; the bowl drums are generally smaller than the frame drums as they weigh more.

The drums are played with a T-shaped bone or antler 'hammer' rather than a soft padded drumstick, or the fur-covered 'drum paddles' used by many shamans in much of Siberia.

SYMBOLIC DECORATION

Sámi drums are all decorated by a series of lines and designs painted onto the drumskin with a red ink made by chewing on the bark of the alder tree.

They generally have a central design which is often a cross and which represents the sun, and

also from which often come four arms which represent the sacred four directions of the compass. At the edge there is a line that goes all around the egg-shaped skin, and between this line and the central sun-cross there can be found other figures and shapes which represent different spirits, or places in the other worlds.

One of these places is *sáivomáilmmi*, the sacred ancestral mountain where the dead live a carefree life. The Sámi see high ground as being sacred, and such places were traditionally used as places of sacrifice, to represent *sáivomáilmmi*, and as places to store drums and other shamanic objects.

Humans and animals may be painted on the drum, 'floating' in the area between the sun-cross and the outer line. These are represented by small stick figures or even simple crosses. The line may also have V shapes on it which represent the tips of the people.

Some drums, especially the bowl drums, have horizontal and, or

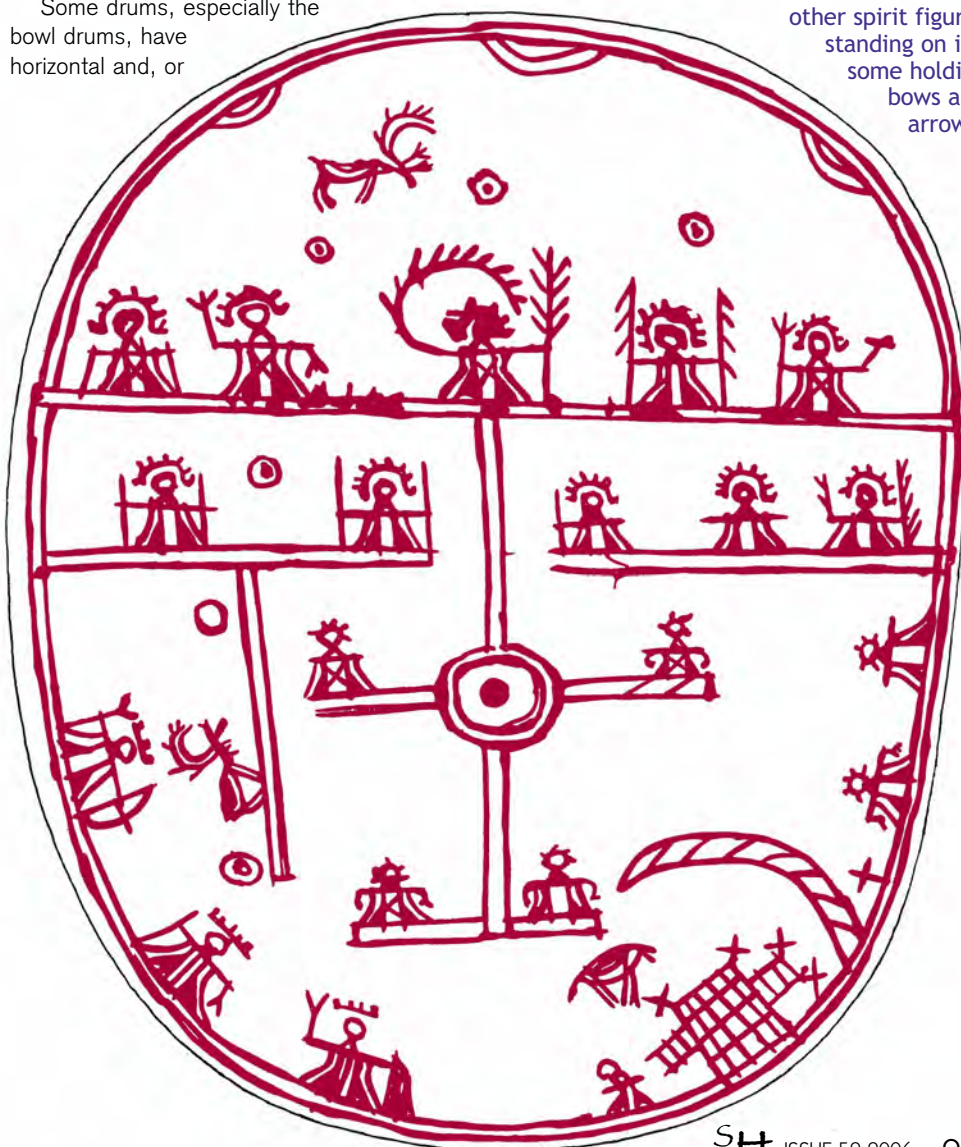


Left: The 1692 drum of Anders Poulsen now kept in De Samiske Samlinger Museum

vertical lines that go across them, dividing the drum up into two or three distinct sections. These sections represent different areas of the sacred realms, most notably the Lower, Middle and Upper worlds of the shaman's cosmos. Along these lines are generally to be found spirits or god figures, and around them there are often reindeer.

The designs on drums often show a great similarity with the ancient rock carvings found in the area, but these carvings are thousands of years old whereas

Below: the decoration from an old Sámi drum showing the central sun-cross as well as horizontal and vertical lines dividing the drum into the worlds of the shaman. A Reindeer can be seen floating in the top section, and spirits stand on the top horizontal line. Around the edge is the circle line with other spirit figures standing on it, some holding bows and arrows.





the drums are only hundreds, so it is hard to say if there is a direct ritual link between them.

SEEING ALL THE WORLD

As seen in the trial of Quiwe Baarsen, one of the ways in which the Sámi shamans use their drums is as a way of divining the future and seeing events from far away. To do this the drum is placed flat, skin side up, and specific objects (mostly brass rings or pieces of bone or antler) are placed onto the skin which is then hit with the drum hammer, causing the objects to move about because of the vibration of the skin. The designs on the drum are also used in this as a way of reading the drum; objects moving to certain parts of the skin or landing on certain painted symbols will give the shaman information.

years and is an experienced shamanic practitioner. He enables people to make their own drums and leads small groups to explore other aspects of shamanism. For more information Email: Nick@sacredhoop.org

Above: C18th Sámi drum and carved antler drum hammers.

Right - top: Sámi drum. The outer circle has tipis around it, and reindeer float in the spaces by the central sun-cross.

Right - bottom: Ancient Sámi rock carving of a shaman playing a drum

Below - Antler drum hammer and brass ring used by Greta Huuva, resting on her drum.

Bottom of page: C17th painting showing the life of the Sámi, from hunting to entering trance and communicating with the animal spirits.

THE FUTURE OF THE DRUM

Despite the plethora of badly made fake Sámi 'shaman's' drums, daubed with designs in red paint in tourist shops, more and more Sámi are finding their shamanic culture again.

Genuine drums are being made once more and people who were taught the old ways as children are less ashamed of them and more willing to stand and be proud about their heritage.

Now, four centuries, after Petter Dass decried a sacred way of life, so mistakenly, it would seem these people of the drum are once again finding their voice and we can have another chance to appreciate the true beauty of 'Beelzebub's flies'.

Nicholas Wood has been making shamanic frame drums for 25

