

# Toornarsuk, or Shamanism Upside Down

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In our time "spirits" have been reduced to mythical beings often objectified in the form of masks.

The mask-figure of Toornarsuk, this cunning and mischievous Eskimo shamanistic spirit-figure<sup>1</sup>, seems to offer us both a mirror image of the various ways shamanism has been observed and a reflection of the complex picture shamanism presents to contemporary researchers. Shamanism, like Toornarsuk, seems both to mimic and to make sport of people and their moral and social orders. This is why shamanism, for a long period of time now, has constituted a kind of counterculture for minority communities.

Toornarsuk, this odd, mythical character of Inuit origin, is reminiscent – with his pranks, jokes, and palinodes on the one hand, and his "ogre-like" intentions on the other – of the ritual mask used by the Hopi Indians, called *Koyemshi*.

In 1974 this surprising connection was clarified by Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>2</sup> when he showed how the *Koyemshi*, those "hermaphrodite and impotent" ceremonial clowns, were the mythical spouses of the *katchina*, ambiguous divinities<sup>3</sup> who are now benevolent but were once ferocious. Another of its homologues is the "fool" (from Tarot). These characteristics immediately conjure up another image, that of the *miyako*, shamans of Okinawa whose great skills – including the ability to heal – are generally acknowledged, but who can suddenly turn cunning, ironic, and even debauched, perhaps inverting, like certain gods, all social roles; in this way they can become generators of disorder.

1. On Toornarsuk, cf. Sonne, B., "Toornarsuk, an Historical Proteus," in *Arctic Anthropology*, vol. 23, no. 1 and 2, E.U. 1986.

2. *Paroles Données*, Paris, Plon 1984, p. 141 sq.: "Cannibalisme et travestissements rituels."

3. On their shamanic traits, cf. Czapliska, A., *Aboriginal Siberia – A Study in Social Anthropology*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1914.

Thus Toornarsuk, thanks to his biting palinodes and his many-sided mask (some Eskimo masks constitute a veritable system of masks, one on top of another, of extremely complex design) appears to be both resolute and irresolute. This huge jokester (a cannibal to boot) leaves the observer as if frozen and petrified by his many metamorphoses.

Shamanism itself, like Toornarsuk, is upside down. Injured, amputated, and mutilated by the incomprehension of society, it "disguises" itself and becomes unrecognizable only to reappear – simultaneously Proteus, Janus, and Métis – in other forms, with other roles and functions. He toys with psychologists and analysts and interferes in their cures. He allows the psychotherapists of California to flatter him and does not disdain the company of Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian analysts. Yet he mocks and scoffs at certain psychiatrists who diagnose him as gravely psychotic. He gets along better with anthropologists, but how long will that last? At any moment the face of Toornarsuk's Proteus-mask<sup>4</sup> may change.

At the heart of minority communities, the shamanic cult fosters various encroachments on the socially dominant institutions of society; by laughter and disguise, rituals of rebirth and protest, and most gravely, by armed rebellion, the mechanisms of transgression shaped by shamanism are demonstrated.

The shamanism embodied by Toornarsuk is polymorphous. For this reason it seems well adapted to a diversity of situations, particularly those of profound crisis, as has been emphasized by many researchers.

Yet the shaman himself can be perceived as an ambiguous figure by a critical observer; such was the case of B. Malinowski in his research on the Trobriand Islands (Melanesia). After having attended a visionary trance of Tomwaya Lakwabulo in 1916, he reflected on its details and concluded: "What part was played in this matter by naive faith, what part by a desired illusion, and what part by deliberate cheating and deception? Is Tomwaya essentially an artist or a prophet? Was he motivated principally by vanity, cupidity, or by a desire for power and influence? There were elements of all it in him. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Many such accounts agree on this point.

It is an observable fact that contemporary societies – with the

4. The reader will by now have clearly understood that the mask of Toornarsuk is used here in a strictly allegorical sense.

5. Malinowski, B., "Baloma, the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands," in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, no. 46, 1916, pp. 353–430. This text was reprinted in French as part of *Trois Essais sur la vie sociale des primitifs*, Paris, Payot 1933 (1980).

exception of a few regions of the world where what we would call "shamanisms of order" hold sway, i.e. traditional shamanisms – can be compared in their broad outlines to phenomena of turbulence and rupture, of "disordered structures" and "strange attractions," i.e., of chaos; in short, to shamanisms of disorder rather than of order, corresponding to "logics of disorder" and/or "nebulous logics." If this has not yet been proven statistically, it can be.

In the meantime it is important to respond to this "disorder" by specialized research into the "structures of disorder." Among the most enlightened researchers in these new fields, physicists have, for several years now, been in the forefront of those mining these "disordered systems" and "logics of chaos." Sooner or later, specialists in the social sciences will have to catch up. According to the former, under certain conditions a dynamic system, while yielding to determinist referents, remains nevertheless unpredictable in its results.<sup>6</sup> Thus the notion of "deterministic chaos" is gradually taking hold as the field of the "unforseeable" grows.

There is nothing surprising about Toornarsuk rejoicing "under his mask" at these developments, since the crisis of scientific predictability opens the way to empirical techniques of "seeing" and to diverse forms of shamanic divination. There are already highly placed political and economic leaders who do not disdain their assistance. However these shamanic "users" should be extremely wary and cautious in their regard. On this point we are in complete agreement with Malinowski. One must always keep one's head. Yet we can no longer remain blind to the underlying and powerful, if often vague, "mystical" yearnings active in contemporary urban societies. It is also worth remembering that current research shows that shamanism will enter the new millennium in an upswing. Thus the quasi-expectation that the twenty-first century will be more mystical and religious than the twentieth seems justified. Is this a wager? It is clear that shamanism is alive and well. Still, because of its multiple disguises, shamanism continues to surprise its researchers, who find it where they least expect it

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6. It is clear that both within and beyond the problem of predictability lies the problem of decision. It is therefore essential to distinguish between "known universes," corresponding to modes of prediction that are equally known, and universes that are "not yet known," resulting from "structures of disorder" and corresponding to "logics of the possible," not of the probable – or to the theory of chaos." – Cf. Luck, J.-M., ed. *Systèmes désordonnés unidimensionnels*, Alea-Saclay, France 1992; Gleick, James, *Théorie du chaos*, Paris, Albin Michel 1989.