Padraic Fitzgerald

Culture, Psyche, and Religion

**The Conditioning of Seiðr**

An issue of concern that reconstructed Germanic pagan congregations face lies in their chosen label, reconstruction. With many archaic sources to draw from, some of them direct and some of them second hand, modern practitioners are consistently presenting themselves with source material and wrestling with how it can fit within a modern context. Occasionally these issues revolve around accessibility as these beliefs are initially tribalistic, other times the issue is proper ritual practice, some ancient rites call for the use of blood as a sacrificial offering and there is a divide among congregations as to whether they should actually perform exsanguination or whether libations of alcohol or incense are appropriate alternatives. A third issue that contemporary practitioners are wrestling with is the place of seiðr, pronounced “sayth”, within their contemporary belief systems and its relation to both contemporary and archaic Germao-Scandinavian gender paradigms.

Seiðr is the ecstatic folk magical practice of divination, spirit healing, possession, and environmental influence referenced in many accounts of the Germano-Scandinavian cultural groups which was and still is to a certain extent held to be the domain of women. Men practicing it are held to be effeminate and in opposition of traditional gender roles and sexual orientation. However, among contemporary pagans, people of differing gender identities are practicing seiðr and many, particu report that after ecstatic trance sessions they feel what is called “ergi”, an archaic slur referencing cowardice and effeminacy that is occasionally used by some members of the Germanic pagan community today in reference to males engaging in seiðr practice. In the following pages, I argue that continued practice of seið serves to condition the practitioner to adopt and maintain passivity, calmness, and empathy, traits archaically and occasionally presently associated with the traditional view of women and considered effeminate markers.

**Seiðr and Shamanism**

The practice of seiðr is shamanistic in nature but is not necessarily shamanism itself. Both involve achievement and maintenance of ecstatic trance states through the use of internalized and external cultural symbols in addition to musical performance, and chanting. Furthermore, both involve intermediation between this world and the world of spirits and gods. Regarding shamanism, scholars have regularly sought to settle on a firm definition relating to this phenomenon that spans the globe with many having settled on a descriptor that highlights mastery over forces unseen.

The term itself is an honorific describing members of tribes in the Siberian cultural context that exhibit ecstatic abilities relating to healing and spirit communication, particularly the Tungus people from where the word shaman originates as “saman”[[1]](#footnote-1). Mircea Eliade describes it as “an archaic technique of ecstasy” defined by retained autonomy, “it will easily be seen wherein a shaman differs from a “possessed” person, for example; the shaman controls his spirits in the sense that he, a human being, is able to communicate with the dead, “demons,” and “nature spirits,” without thereby becoming their instrument”[[2]](#footnote-2). Concerning seiðr, scholar and practitioner Jenny Blain acknowledges that there are many similarities between seiðr and shamanism but takes great pains to emphasize that while seiðr is certainly shamanistic in nature, sharing similarities with the shaman practices of the Sami people in particular, it is not a shamanic practice in that the societies in which it was performed and it is currently performed do not revolve around shamanism. Blain elaborates that “Norse culture of a thousand years ago was not obviously shamanic in the sense in which the Tungus or Sami or Dene culture is said to be or have been shamanic: the sense in which Marie-Francoise Guedon says that “shamanism permeates all of Nabesna culture: the worldview, the subsistence patterns, and the life cycles”[[3]](#footnote-3).

Going further, Blain elaborates that despite their similarities, a prominent reason that she and many other reconstructed pagan practitioners do not refer to seiðr as shamanism is that in addition to the old Norse culture not revolving around subsistence and living patterns tied to the authority of a shaman, there simply were not people in the Norse cultural area that were referred to as shamans and practitioners of folk magic such as seiðr did not necessarily occupy central community roles at all times, only on certain dire occasions such as impending war, draught, or famine[[4]](#footnote-4). While Blain distances seiðr practitioners from shamans, she acknowledges that they utilize shamanic techniques and that most importantly, like shamans, they are key figures insofar as they are political beings. “In attempting to understand seiðr I prefer to approach “shamanism” as indicating the construction of specific relations of negotiation and mediation, achieved through techniques of trance – ecstasy attained by otherworldly experience – embedded ibn specific social relations and cultural settings. Thus the trance both emerges from and partly constitutes socio-political relations within the community. A particular “shamanism” becomes a specific expression of community and identity”[[5]](#footnote-5).

For Blain and many other practitioners of seiðr within the reconstructed Germanic pagan context, their ecstatic practice while inspired by shamanism, is not necessarily shamanism itself. Blain acknowledges that shamanism proper did not necessarily exist in the Norse context since communities were not based around the authority of a shaman figure. However, certain ecstatic practitioners would be called on in times of need to interact with the spirit community and performed similar roles to those individuals with access to ecstatic trance and abilities in societies centered around their authority as shamans proper. Furthermore, contemporary practitioners of seið acknowledge that they utilize shamanic tools and practices to achieve their trance states to intervene between individuals, their communities, and the spirits that interpenetrate them (Blain)[[6]](#footnote-6).

**Seið Work**

Achievement of trance is paramount for the individual who identifies as a seiðkona or seiðmaðr, seiðwoman or seiðman respectively. The seiðr trance is the primary vehicle through which the practitioner achieves certain ends. Often seiðr is done for divinatory or oracular purposes: answering questions related to work, health, love, and wealth. Other times though, seiðr is performed for healing purposes, to bring about changes on the environment such as filling a sound with fish[[7]](#footnote-7). Seiðr in its healing capability is also understood by some of its practitioners such as a man self-identified as Jordsvin, to “unhaunt” certain spaces, purifying them and ridding them of negative energy and the spirits providing that negative energy (Blain)[[8]](#footnote-8). Jordsvin, an informant of Blain’s, further describes that seiðr can potentially be used to “mess with people’s minds and luck”, continuing on to imply that such actions are strictly frowned upon and policed by the reconstructed pagan community (Blain)[[9]](#footnote-9).

The trance itself may be performed individually or in front of a group, when it is performed in the latter scenario it is often for the benefit of multiple community members, usually oracular in nature and three practitioners will take the presiding roles. Each takes their place elevated on high seats and garbed as one of the three Norns, or fates in Norse mythology (Blain)[[10]](#footnote-10). From these seats the seið practitioners enter their trance to perform whatever is necessary for their fellow congregants. Within the body of Germano-Scandinavian myth, the Norns are held to sit at the base of Yggdrasil, the world tree and axis mundi of the nine worlds of Norse cosmology. From their home at the base of the great tree they weave the fates of humankind and water the roots of the world tree with water from the nearby Well of Wyrd, the spring of fate (Blain)[[11]](#footnote-11).

The trappings that the seiðr practitioners wear not only represents the Norns but also serves to represent what has been detailed of seiðkona in the sagas and eddas, the repositories of Norse mythology and quasi-historical tales regarding the settlement of Iceland and feats of various heroes around Scandinavia proper[[12]](#footnote-12). Additionally, certain archaeological finds have informed the attire of contemporary seiðr practitioners, a find in Norway seemingly echoes the depictions in the sagas which contained a cloak, traveling robes, gloves, and a small pouch containing various stones, herbs, and bones (Blain)[[13]](#footnote-13). Most symbolism utilized within the ritual is internalized and meant to allow the practitioner to delve further and further into the trance state in the hopes of encountering various spirits and the gods themselves (Blain)[[14]](#footnote-14). Two particular gods that often make themselves known are Oðin, or Odin, the allfather and chief god of the Germanic pantheon, and Freya. Both divinities are pertinent not only for their importance to the archaic Germanic peoples, Oðin being not only the king of the gods but also a war and death god and Freya being a war god and patron of women, but due to their association with magic. Many tales reveal Oðin’s near constant search for knowledge and magical power, going so far as to impale himself to the world tree for nine nights by way of his spear, Gungnir, in order to achieve knowledge of the runic writing system and runic divination magic to pass on to humanity[[15]](#footnote-15). Of intrigue here, however, is that Oðin, despite being the ruler of the gods and the deity of wisdom, learned all of his skills in magic from Freya, who herself was initially not a part of the primary pantheon. She came from a neighboring tribe of gods associated with fecundity and the practice of various forms of magic[[16]](#footnote-16).

Blain details many instances of oracular seiðr within her book and all seem to tread a similar path in the sense that they all take the individual seiðr practitioners on similar visualization journeys during the trance. The practitioners occupying the high seat and the accompanying chairs will have assistants to catch them just in case he or she falters mid-trance. When light trance is achieved through the drumming and singing of the audience and ritual assistants, the practitioners will go through a complex, regimented visualization. According to Blain who herself has been inducted and trained as a seiðkona, the visualization begins by envisioning oneself passing through a tunnel of trees only to emerge in a vast field overlooking the massive world tree. The practitioners are then instructed to journey to the Well of Wyrd at the tree’s base and from there, they follow one of the roots under ground to the realm of Nifelheim[[17]](#footnote-17). Each of the nine roots of Yggdrasil is described in the corpus of cosmology to connect to one of the nine worlds, Nifelheim being one of these. This realm in particular is defined as a barren, rocky land of freezing mist and impenetrable fog[[18]](#footnote-18). This realm is also where the final destination, in more ways than one, for the seið practitioner lies, as it is where the great hall of Hel the death goddess is located. The officiants visualize a journey across the river Gjoll, guarded by a female jotun, or giant. Upon crossing this bridge the practitioner visualizes a treacherous, winding path through a foggy landscape, sometimes green and fertile, other times barren and desolate, until they reach the gates leading to the home of the death goddess. The practitioners do not actually enter the hall, for that would mean death, they wait by the front gate until they are approached by whatever spirits they seek to contact make themselves known[[19]](#footnote-19). Often this is the spirit of a long dead seiðkona, considered by some to be the very one once called upon by Oðin to answer his questions (Blain)[[20]](#footnote-20). In many oracular performances, the meeting with this ancient spirit is the goal, as she, like the rest of the dead, is held to possess knowledge outside of time and may be consulted on the behalf of others.[[21]](#footnote-21) While this scenario is common, it is not the only visualization trance that occurs, practitioners will enter trance in small groups or by themselves in order to gain new insights into their personal practice. One such instance involves a practitioner finding their Fylgja, a guardian spirit that appears in the form of an animal[[22]](#footnote-22). The Fylgja, along with other spirits the seið practitioner encounters serve as allies in dealing with other spirits when the practitioner is engaging in divinatory or healing work on the behalf of another and when the practitioner embarks on individual trance journeys.

**Symbols and Construction**

Like all religious systems, reconstructed Germano-Scandinavian paganism is rife with cultural symbols that the individual adherent consults to construct and define meaning for themselves and to orient themselves within the world and their belief system. Specialized practitioners such as those involved with seiðr utilize symbols in this way as well, but also at a deeper level as these symbols help these individuals work their way through the realm of the trance and to interpret answers that are given to them by spirits and gods or that appear in the visualized landscape. One is led to ask, “how are these symbols empowered so?”. Many theorists have worked to analyze the power of symbolism from Freud to contemporary scholars such as S. Brent Plate. However, despite the amendments and critiques made to his work, Clifford Geertz offers an introductory stepping stone to the importance of symbols both in waking reality and the reality of the shamanic trance.

Geertz elaborates that symbols are vehicles which convey meaning at the societal and religious levels, he explains that in a religious context, symbols “act by inducing in the worshipper a certain distinctive set of dispositions (tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, proneness) which lend to a chronic character to the flow of his activity and the quality of his experience”[[23]](#footnote-23). Furthermore, he maintains that another reason these symbols have efficacy is due to the fact that they produce moods and motivations within practitioners which in turn help to define a sense of order. “Motivations are “made meaningful” with reference to the ends towards which they are conceived to conduce, whereas moods are “made meaningful” with reference to the conditions from which they are conceived to spring”[[24]](#footnote-24). These statements, while important are nonetheless contested by thinkers coming after him.

One such contentions springs from Geertz maintaining that these symbols are sui generis which among other things leads to a critique by Talal Asad, who brings in the argument that these symbols are not self-generating but are conditioned. This argument is of relative import as it brings in post-structuralist Foucauldian concepts relating to conditioning and the construction of meaning. Asad relates that symbols are conditioned phenomena and that while a human being develops they cannot possibly have an idea of a grand event before they are further informed of meaning by way of later experience and influence of community members. Meaning is therefore conditioned “by the social activities which he or she is permitted or encouraged or obliged to undertake-in which other “symbols” (speech and significant movements) are crucial”[[25]](#footnote-25).

Asad continues that religious symbols gain their faculties through a sort of conditioning process found within the performance of ritual. Setting this up he quotes Geertz as saying that “it is in ritual – that is, consecrated behavior – that this conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated[[26]](#footnote-26). However, there is more to this rather than repeated behavior, symbols and ritual are both conditioned entities and furthermore provide conditioning for their participants and users. S. Brent Plate describes the embodiment of symbols and the experience of religions through human body’s and their senses, body’s here being conditioned subjects. In his piece “The Skin of Religion”, Plate explains that the skin of the human being is a medium through which not only all religious experience is constructed, but all religious space is constructed (Plate)[[27]](#footnote-27). These constructions are enabled through the engagement of our sense organs through which we experience the world. Furthermore, what we interpret can be inferred to be informed by cultural conditioning which enables a unique construction of religious space from person to person that is simultaneously similar and different to other individuals within a given cultural and religious context[[28]](#footnote-28).

Through the combined efforts of Asad and Plate, we are presented with the human being as a malleable figure that is capable of being conditioned by its surrounding environment in order to formulate meaning and attribute it to different things such as symbols. This malleability, this conditioning is accomplished in myriad ways for many different things, religion being no exception. Sabha Mahmood spends time discussing how Islamic women in Egypt practice self-conditioning when they wear their veils and presents it in the context of feminist and religious identity construction and how such construction may be understood as using a part of the status quo to not only define themselves but to ultimately rebel against said status quo by their self-definition. She describes that this construction of the self, their agency, is predicated on docility, or the ability to be malleable and conditioned[[29]](#footnote-29). Subjects that submit themselves to conditioning will ultimately change, in this case the end goal with Mahmood’s subjects was a cultivation of shyness and piety, two paramounts for Muslim women. Mahmood explains that in the context of constructing piety, the subject “required inculcation of entire dispositions through simultaneous training of the body, emotions, and reason as sites of discipline until the religious virtues acquired the states of embodied habits”[[30]](#footnote-30).

What does this mean for the practice of seiðr? Seiðr is the practice of trance, emphasis here being put on the word practice. This phenomena is allegedly able to be undertaken by any with sufficient training and interest. However, there are historical associations with the practice that have not been shaken despite centuries. As in the descriptions from the sagas, women, who are seen as valid practitioners of seiðr in certain situations that pose a threat to the community at large are seen as wicked, uncouth, and problematic at best when practicing the art at other times. Men who practice seiðr in the sagas were regarded with outright distrust due to them breaking from their traditional gender norms and their approved form of magic, “galdr”, referring to the chanted magic and the singing of spell formulae[[31]](#footnote-31).

This deviation was considered a problem in old Germanic society and was discouraged as an unmanly pursuit that often was punishable by death, as was the fate of one of the sons of the Norwegian king Haraldr Finehair who with one of his sons, Eirikr Bloodaxe murdered his other son, Rögnvald, for practicing seiðr with eighty other individuals, though it is revealed that this murder was done equally as much out of the king’s distrust for seiðr as much out of political intrigue as shown in the following saga account translated by Blain. “Eirikr Blodöx planned to be the king over all his brothers, and so wished he and king Harald; father and son were always together. Rögnvald had Hörðaland; he had learning in fjölkyngi (seiðr) and became a seiðman. Seiðworkers were disliked by King Harald. In Hörðaland there was a seiðman who was called Vitgeirr; the king sent him a message and told him to stop making seiðr. He replied and said “there’s no harm if we do seiðr, children of ordinary men and ordinary women, when Rögnvaldr straight-leg does seiðr, Harald’s famous son in Haðaland.” And when Harald the king heard this, then by his advice Eirik went to the uplands and came to Haðalandand burned his brother Rögnvald, in his house with eighty seiðworkers and this work was much approved”[[32]](#footnote-32).

This passage not only serves to highlight distrust of liminal folk practitioners, but also serves to highlight a problem that has resurfaced across time and across religious traditions. Religious practitioners, particularly those with shamanic capabilities are seen as having the potentially disrupt the ongoing social order, “introducing unpredictable elements into political decision making (unpredictable, that is, for those who do not have the ability to speak with “the spirits”)”[[33]](#footnote-33). Blain, referencing Taussig, further elaborates that another reason for shamanic capabilities being problematic lies within loyalty to the practitioner rather than to the ruling power, stating that “shamanic activity is localized and predicated on local loyalties. There are, therefore many reasons why those bent on extending their spheres of influence might seek to obliterate local shamanisms and their practitioners and why the local practitioners, adjusting their practice to changed political conditions, might at times reinforce their ‘difference’ from the governing classes or powers”[[34]](#footnote-34).

**Seiðr and Ergi**

Many theorists, Blain included, make reference to the fact that shamanic and folk magic practitioners serve as political disruptors and therefore facilitate distrust by ruling powers. This further combines with the fact that shamanic practices such as trance and practices of folk magic, as in many other cultures, were feared due to the associated intangibility for most and the interaction with supernatural forces. However, magic in Germanic society was acknowledged in the sense that there were three forms, two of which were more or less acceptable and a third, seiðr which was only acceptable in certain liminal situations where danger and uncertainty ruled the day. The two biological genders each had an acceptable magical practice, women were seen to have a penchant for divination and talent as seers so those with ability became “volvas”, though the line between volva and seiðkona is tenuous. The chanting and singing of spells, “galdr” or “galdrasång”, was acceptable for men but not seeing or seið as these were initially seen as the domain of women only despite the fact that Oðinn himself practiced such things multiple times within the collected body of myth for the protection of self, his community of fellow gods, and their human charges[[35]](#footnote-35).

Males who practiced seiðr were referred to as “ergi”, an amorphous term which at the time was held to be highly offensive as it not only questioned one’s masculinity and ability as a warrior, but also when referring to seiðr practicing men implied loss of characteristic male aggression and fighting ability, womanly traits such as passivity or receptive sexual practices, or outright homosexuality[[36]](#footnote-36). However, in a contemporary setting, practitioners are attempting to recapture the word from its historical negative overtones despite it still being used to describe seið practicing men and the practice itself. Interestingly, many practitioners who are both biologically and gender identified as males have no qualms about describing what they feel after completing a session as ergi, more than likely because the chosen definition as been analyzed and changed to reflect the reconstructed nature of the practice and its place among contemporary heathen congregations.

Another interpretation of ergi, at least among male seið practitioners of heteronormative and queer orientations revolves around being liminal, drifting in between two modes of reality as an intermediary, “the ergi person is one who moves between worlds, deliberately transforming ‘self’ in specific relationships with people and other beings” further elaborating that queer is “whatever is at odds with the normal, legitimate, the dominant”[[37]](#footnote-37). The ability to access liminality may further be understood to be a side effect of ego death, which entails many shamanic initiation journeys. Many dedicated shamanic cultures such as the people of the Eurasian steppes feel that the best shamans are already liminal figures in the sense that they are “psychopaths” that see the world differently[[38]](#footnote-38). This is compounded by the “ego death” that occurs in shamanic initiation dreams when these individuals are “chosen” by the spirits and they experience a fever dream where they are brutally dismembered and put back together again by the spirits of their tribe, their gods, or their future helper spirits[[39]](#footnote-39). This is not unknown to contemporary seið practitioners, although this is not always the case. An informant of Blain’s going simply by Bil explains that while he was a participant in the Germano-Scandinavian heathen community in the states for many years, there was a harrowing period of time after he began training with a shaman in the American Southwest of Sami decent.

Bil explains that during this period, things began to happen relating to spirits and the shamanistic elements of seiðr practice. During this period he suffered “two years of debilitating illness (pneumonia and pleurisy being the worst) always governed over by the ghosts” (Blain, 118)[[40]](#footnote-40). These ghosts, it is explained, came to Bil in the different phases of his illness both during his sleep and during waking hours, one after another until he had nine primary spirit helpers (Blain, 118). This harrowing experience experienced by many shamanistic and shamanic practitioners may be understood as a grand exercise in both liminality and its relationship with ergi. The period of illness and the ensuing ego death where Bil was reconstituted and helped by benevolent entities serves as more or less a humbling experience that serves as the first of many during his career (Blain, 118)[[41]](#footnote-41). These ego deaths or ego conditioning experiences are common throughout a seiðr practitioner’s career for adherents of all gender orientations, though it is starkly described by practitioners such as Bil and other cis-gendered heterosexual identifying practitioners of the art. Bil himself refers to this ego loss as ergi. “My sexuality is heterosexual, I was never approached by the ghosts who follow me to change that in any way. I was, however, severely ‘lambasted’ for carrying too much of a ‘macho’ attitude and was forced to make many changes in that area – so much so that folks often wonder now if I am homosexual or not… My eccentricity doesn’t stem from sexuality or sexual preference but mainly from the fact that I have no emotional reactions any longer (I have emotions, I just don’t demonstrate reaction with them, that’s all)”[[42]](#footnote-42).

Other male informants of Blain’s have described similar experiences regarding both the spirits they interact with but also the feelings and exhaustion that is left over after performing seiðr that they equate to the notion of ergi. A gentleman by the name of Malcolm who performs seiðr in his homeland of Scotland relates that following trance sessions he “reacts less than most people” and continues by saying that “perhaps this is because emotion is so important to the seiðr work I do. It’s like the fuel for the tools I use, so maybe I’m conserving it?”[[43]](#footnote-43). These two individuals are heteronormative males though, two homosexual practitioners and informants of Blain’s going by the names of Jordsvin and Ybjrteir open up a conversation that hints at gay and queer people may have an easier time undertaking trance than people identifying as heteronormative due to the fact that as culturally marginalized people, they have existed within a type of liminality already and are better prepared for the drift between worlds than most[[44]](#footnote-44). Ybjrteir explains his own experience as follows, “I learned to wear two selves – the part of me that I kept hidden that could talk with and see things and the part of me that I showed to my parents and friends and at school…at high school I was a great student, played sports, had girlfriends; while, at the same time I had other abilities and that I was gay. This is the beginning of learning how to switch forms back and forth” (Blain, 127)[[45]](#footnote-45).

**Societal Structures**

Shamanic and shamanistic practitioners such as those undertaking Germanic seið working ply a trade of negotiation and intermediation between different parties in a small community. To society at large, these practitioners, particularly by governments, are seen as threats and upsets to the normal social order due to the loyalties they command from people in their said communities. A note must be made on how shamanic communities are now currently more common in the east than in the west due in no small part to colonial efforts, but the echoes of these colonial efforts continue to sound through eternity as they have established a societal system starkly apart from those communities in which shamanic traditions initially arose. These shamanic communities may or may not have been accustomed to the liminal, perhaps “queer” figure of the shamanic practitioner and as such, it was easier for shamans to continuously ply their trade and serve their communities. One may see even as far back as the Viking Age that the west, particularly the Northern European west, while it had shamanistic practitioners and individuals who could enter liminal trances to communicate with spirit beings, these individuals were mistrusted for their “effeminate” natures and their capability to disrupt the status quo.

Regarding the Germanic notion of ergi relating to homosexuality or effeminacy in western societies starting with the Germano-Scandinavian peoples and continuing to our current western heathen congregations, we are led to consult Foucault. The liminal, queer nature of the ecstatic practitioner that mediates between worlds goes against normative western gender formations. Ergi has been mentioned as referring tot that which goes against the norm, queer, deviant, “unnatural”, but this is largely due to what the west has constructed. Blain cites Michel Foucault in describing how he highlights that at least for the term “homosexuality”, the term itself was formulated in the nineteenth century as a “social construct, a way of categorizing and pathologizing people while institutionalizing specific kinds of heterosexual behaviors: creating therefore a category of pathological ‘deviance’ and a normative system of binary opposition”[[46]](#footnote-46). This establishment has served to cement certain practices and ways of being, not necessarily sexual orientations but the practices of religious specialists, as alien, other, and foreign, unworthy to be acknowledged and worthy of being shunned.

Within this framework we come to recognize the prominence of the heteronormative view, particularly regarding what is perceived as masculine which is coincidentally detrimental and hindering in the performance of ecstatic feats such as seiðr. Blain describes that “western society rewards male autonomy, and there are issues here of suspension of control. In accordance with indigenous shamans and in contrast to Western society’s expectations of them, these seiðmen give accounts of working with spirits and relinquishing ‘control’”[[47]](#footnote-47). This relinquishing of control, going against western heteronormative ideals, is precisely what is necessary for the ecstatic practitioners to do their work. The ergi described by the heteronormative practitioners such as Bil and Malcolm may be understood as not only a more preferable state for the conduction of seið trance, but part of their conditioning, through the continued practice of said trance and the interaction with the spirits on the behalf of their communities that it brings.

**Conditioning of Ergi**

By revisiting Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, one may infer the possibility that the Germanic notion of Ergi, despite all the connotations surrounding it such as negative femininity, the breaking of traditional masculine gender roles, and the liminality that comes with both it and perhaps queer gender identities, is necessary for “good” shamanic work. The shaman has been said to be a queer figure even in communities based around the shaman’s work, the shaman is a figure that exists within liminality and perhaps exhibits these particular traits not from initial gender orientation, although that is a possibility, but through continued practice of the ecstatic arts and the exhaustive interactions with the unseen. Furthermore, while certain scholars make distinctions between seiðr and more traditional shamanic practice to be found among societies that hold the shaman to be a central figure, certain shamanic elements such as the facilitation of trance have been able to find there way to the West, initially through the intervention of Sami practitioners where northern Europe is concerned and today with contemporary reconstructed pagan practitioners looking to various resources on shamanism ranging from books to workshops run by various shamanic organizations such as “Hrafnar”, which specializes in northern European neo-shamanistic instruction[[48]](#footnote-48).

The seiðr trance is performed in a ritual setting either for a group of varying size or by an individual adherent. A space is established in a certain manner as to encourage the achievement of trance, often this is the utilization of various cultural symbols and performances such as drumming and chanting to demarcate said space[[49]](#footnote-49). This demarcated ritual time and space is not only conducive to the facilitation and maintenance of trance states but also conducive to the formation of conditioned behavior patterns. Talal Asad references that within consecrated behavior, religious convictions and directives are verified but also infers that through the construction and performance of consecrated space and behavior, in addition to external community factors, “selves are formed”[[50]](#footnote-50). Furthermore, Asad relates that the discipline of body, speech, and mind in various forms of ritual, in this case the seið trance, generate the capacity for the generation of specific forms of though and action, lending into the creation of self[[51]](#footnote-51).

These sentiments are further echoed by Mahmood, particularly regarding the training of the body to produce a certain desired outcome which in the case of her subjects was the development of piety and shyness in an Islamic context. Mahmood however, emphasizes the necessity for the repetition of these scenarios in which the self may be constructed and the necessity for malleability or docility in this process. Utilizing a piano virtuoso as an example, Mahmood describes that “a virtuoso subjects herself to a regime of disciplinary practice and hierarchical structures of apprenticeship in order to acquire ability”[[52]](#footnote-52). From here, referencing Asad’s notion of ritual behavior in the construction of the self, Mahmood describes that “repeated performance of certain acts enables the creation of the self over time” and that “each performance builds on prior ones”[[53]](#footnote-53). Utilizing these notions brought forward by Asad and Mahmood, one can see that within the shamanistic practice of seiðr, all performers are continually conditioned to better perform ecstatic trance directly by continued repetition of trance rites. This conditioning largely relates to the notion of ergi, albeit not in the archaic sense of the word as a slur, but rather in the contemporary view of the term describing liminality and passivity when applied to contemporary ecstatic practitioners. The exhaustive performance of trance and the interaction with unseen beings that it brings demands a sort of docility, sometimes as a command from the very spirits according to certain male practitioners such as Bil, but often a product of the strenuous situation that lends itself to future trance endeavors.

**Conclusion**

The ecstatic trance that is a staple of both shamanic and shamanistic traditions takes a temporary but exhaustive toll on the practitioner that lends itself to the better conduction of trance instances by the individual in the future. The passivity brought on by exhaustion and fatigue after trance is commonplace, but in many Western societies this is seen as a symptom of femininity and of breaking away from traditionally mandated gender roles when viewing male practitioners. This initial view is compounded by the fact that many practitioners exhibit non-binary qualities or possess eccentricities that differentiate them from the rest of the population. However, these traits cultivated by practitioners are necessary for the more efficient performance of trance work and may be understood to be honed through regular performance of ecstatic trance and interaction with spirits therein. While practitioners may be considered as deviating from established societal constructs, ergi in the Germanic context, this “deviate” nature is necessary for these practitioners to perform their unique work and is cultivated by routine ecstatic performance, allowing one to make the assumption, at least in the reconstructed Norse heathen context, that the more ecstatic performances a shamanic or shamanistic initiate undergoes, the more ergi they become, and the more ergi they become, the better they are at utilizing seið to benefit their communities by way of spirit communication, divination, and healing.

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