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Indigenous Interdisciplinary Internationalism: The Modern Sami Experience, with Emphasis on Literature¹

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How do the Sami people manage the transition of a traditional culture into the modern way of life—a process we have been witnessing over the last few decades. The changes in social life, the introduction of state insured welfare programs, the ever increasing amount of consumption, and the dependence on public services has had a tremendous impact on Sami everyday life as well as on the incorporation of the Sami areas into the Scandinavian welfare system. This development has been beneficial for the improvement of social conditions in *Sapmi*, the areas where the Sami live, but has, at the same time, contributed to less obvious differences between the Sami way of life and the surrounding majority cultures. Being in the state of living in mixed communities over a vast territory, the Sami find themselves making up the majority of the local population only in the inner parts of the northernmost counties in Norway, Sweden and Finland. In these municipalities there are also certain rights connected with being a Sami. These apply mostly to securing the use of Sami language in public activities. In other areas, like along the coast, the Sami have for a long time been outnumbered by the non-Sami inhabitants, who for the last few hundred years have been in a dominant position.

Defending an indigenous people's culture in a modern world must mean something in practice for the Sami collectively and individually. There must be some cognitive and even philosophical justification for maintaining and developing a culture and a worldview that may seem outdated and backward for "modern man." Even though the Sami probably are one of the most modernized indigenous peoples in the world, their role as communicators between an ever more estranged "Western" conception of Nature and the indigenous peoples' preferred holistic view expressing the statement that all creatures are fundamentally dependent on each other, is important and steadily growing. This is the time to utilize the benefits of belonging to the affluent countries of the world, and also to benefit from a modern education system that enables the Sami of today to assume the position of mediators: Advocating the view of the "natural man" to the international society of the UN and the IMF, and, at the same time, convincing the indigenous peoples about the importance of letting one's voice be heard by the international community.² This is the task and the challenge of modern natural man, still hearing and obeying the heartbeats of the Earth itself, imparting its message through the most modern mediums to an increasing number of serious listeners.

Therefore, both art and science are in the process of revitalizing their roles as identity markers for many indigenous peoples of the world. Both disciplines defy limits and borders, also in an ethnic sense, and, therefore, they provide the best point of departure for

the establishment and continuation of contact between different people and nations. One conspicuous Sami example of art work in this line are the books by the award-winning poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943-2001). I will return to his works later, but first I want to create a historical background to place his art play in perspective.

The concepts of art and culture are relatively new to the Sami, but we can assume that what they encompass has been recognized so that art and culture have been manifested according to the Sami people's own understanding of their implications long before the terms became part of the language. In the rhetoric of cultural policy the theme has long been to preserve and develop Sami culture, a fact which would confirm that one at least has had a sense of what culture meant. "Culture" is a loan word into the Sami language. There is no traditional concept that covers the whole spectrum of meanings of activities that comprise the components of "culture." The closest one can come is *Sami vuohki* which is best translated "Sami ways," that is, way of being, way of living, mentality and values. "Art" is called *dáidda* in Sami, in contrast to applied art and handicrafts, for which the term is *duodji*. *Dáidda* is in this context a new Sami word for that which is ordinarily defined as art, that is, "art" as opposed to "craft."

There is, however, an important connection between *duodji* and *dáidda*, from applied art to art in the modern sense. *Duodji* comprises creative activities which are both intellectual and material, so a writer can equally well be called a *sátneđuojár*, a Sami word meaning a crafter of words, a wordsmith, or *girjecálli*, a writer of books. The principle behind their aesthetics is to use organic materials, allowing wooden sculptures to be exposed to wind and weather and eventually decompose and disappear without a trace. In a way, this is parallel to the traditional Sami relationship with the natural environment, where the hand of nature erases all traces of Sami migration and settlement, perhaps only leaving behind the ring of stones around a campfire or the folklore surrounding the meaning of a place name. The Sami structures have never been formidable, and our cultural monuments are, above all, memories of culture, transmitted *orally*, as reminders, rather than physical legacies such as a cathedral or a statue.

PROUD OF THE LANGUAGE

The Sami have always been very proud of their language, a postulate confirmed by the fact that a small minority has been able to keep up their own tongue through centennials of rather intimate contact with the surrounding majority population. Sami is, of course, "the language of the heart" to those for whom it is mother-tongue, but it is also one of the most developed languages in the world when it comes to describing Arctic nature and conditions of life in the North. Sami descriptions of landscape can function as maps, in which are incorporated topography, geography and information as to which routes are best to take. The Sami nomenclature pertaining to snow and reindeer herding is beginning to be recognized internationally.³ Sami is an exact language in those areas that demand precision, and, at the same time, it also preserves terms related to kinship, and in so doing, it preserves conceptual knowledge of relationships within and between immediate family and extended kinship.

Sami is a verbal language, both in the sense that it is an oral language and that, as

a vehicle of communication, it focuses on the verb, on action. Because it is possible to change a word's meaning and focus by adding an ending to its stem, the language provides possibilities for an almost infinite number of variations. Descriptions of movements may serve as points of illustration. The verb *njuikut*, for instance, means "to jump," without saying anything in particular about how one is jumping. *Njuiket* means "to jump only one time," however, while *njuikkodit* means "to jump continuously." *Njuikestit*, further, means "a small jump, a hop performed once," while *njuikkodallat* denotes "several small jumps performed over an extended time." And here one can specify further the nature of the jump itself and the amount of time during which the jump is performed by saying *njuikulit*, for instance, which can mean both "making a few quick jumps" and "jumping away." *Njuikkodastit* means "to make small jumps for a very short time." *Njuikehit* means "to cause to jump" and "jumping up to get something," but it can also have an entirely different meaning, namely "to copulate," specifically describing how the male animal jumps up on, or mounts, the female during the mating act. This is just one example, and even this one could be made more extensive, but my point is only to illustrate how essential verbs are in Sami, and also to show how precision can be described even to the extent of not being able to actually demonstrate the different kinds of jumping in practice anymore. (This is an interesting example of how theory sometimes can supersede practice, even in societies not primarily known for their theorizing).

It is quite obvious that an awareness of the wealth of and possibilities within a person's own language makes him or her proud, and this awareness, therefore, contributes to creating a positive image of the language and the people who use it. The ambitions regarding one's own mother language are also expressed in the oldest surviving Sami texts describing contacts with other people in the northern regions. The texts were written down in the 1820s, but they refer back to several earlier generations. In these texts the others—the strangers—are referred to as "people without a language," because they don't speak Sami (Fellman 1906: 239–243). It must be admitted, though, that colonization and the rather harsh assimilation policies conducted in the Nordic countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reduced the actively Sami-speaking portion of the population considerably.

SUBORDINATION, RESISTANCE AND VALUES OF OUR OWN

Because of the majority culture's political dominance and attempts to assimilate the Sami, and the Sami's gradual subordination, both in terms of their social status and use of their own language, the fundamental relationship between the Sami and the nation states in which they live soon became one of minority and majority. Whereas aesthetics, rhetoric and social relationships earlier had been primarily geared toward our own affairs, the political aspect of practically all Sami activities now emerged in the recognition of the Sami's status as a minority. In many cases, being a minority was stigmatized by the assimilationists, something which naturally lay the cornerstone for Sami opposition to being declared incapable of managing their own affairs.

The establishment of Sami institutions of learning was promoted early on as something that would contribute to securing Sami self-awareness and identity. It was important that the

Sami themselves be involved and their resources utilized in areas of academic research. The need for Sami researchers became extremely important as a political consideration, both as a disciplinary concern and as a matter of cultural policy.

Even if we, in this context, are mainly talking about education according to a Western model, based on studies and theoretical training, we must understand that education as an idea has always held a central position in traditional Sami upbringing. It was important to learn the practical skill, but it was equally important to learn the words and concepts that were associated with the work at hand. This education started early with the stories told by parents and close relatives, stories accompanying concrete work assignments. These fictionalized versions of real life were important ingredients in the learning process. Already at a young age, it was important for a child to not only be able to perform a task, but also to explain orally how the task should be carried out; just as it was important to know the terms for landscape and topography in order to be able to describe a geographic location so well to others that they could find it without the use of a map. The great transition that many Sami children experienced when they entered the "Norwegian school" can, I believe, be blamed on the differences between the role of experience in the school setting versus in the Sami children's own world, as well as on the fact that the children were separated from their parents and close relatives and made to live at boarding schools.

A BI-CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The Sami realized relatively quickly the importance of mastering both their own world and the view that "the others" had of the world. In spite of everything, the Sami have lived in close relationship with their neighbors throughout history, and they have thereby learned that surroundings can be viewed and understood in different ways. Mastering both ways became a strength by itself. While the official view on bilingualism has been negative until the last decades, the Sami know better. Our entire history has told us that it is advantageous to master several techniques simultaneously. This was particularly true for the economic basis of Sami life, with combined operations consisting of, for example, farming on a minor scale, sea and lake fishing at different times of the year, berry picking and ptarmigan hunting. Our knowledge is transferable and useful in other contexts, however. Understanding the language of those in power is a precondition for knowing their thoughts; being able to use that language oneself is the most important tool for arguing for a different understanding of the way things are.

Going to Scandinavian schools did in fact benefit some Sami children by allowing them to develop a bi-cultural competence—learning Sami values and ideas at home, while at school becoming familiarized with majority history, culture and identity. I am not saying that this applies to all the children—the percentage of "drop-outs" and children who didn't want to or couldn't adjust is too high for that assertion—but it would also be wrong to portray the history of Sami schooling as one of only suffering. Many managed very well in the schools—and still remained Sami. Some of them who have become the most eager advocates of the establishment of a separate Sami school system are themselves products of the school system they call assimilative.⁴ An inventory of careers within the Sami society

would also most likely confirm that it is exactly those who succeeded in the “Norwegian” school system who have made successful careers. They have solved the dilemma of a person from a minority culture in the modern world—that of having to master the systems of both the majority culture and their own. An interesting remaining question is, however, how do they define their Sami-ness in the modern society? Do they refer to their cultural background and knowledge of tradition as the essence of their “being Sami,” or is their newly acquired ethno-political position *vis-à-vis* the minority and majority societies the main assets of identifying oneself as belonging to both parties?

The minority’s other dilemma is, in fact, that, if we want any results whatsoever, we always have to explain our issues in such a way that the powers that be, the majority cultures, understand us. But then there are new potential dangers; when we have learned the language of power, we may begin to forget the thought patterns that form the foundation of our own language. Then our “differentness” can develop into purely a rhetorical veneer, turning us into a kind of political actors without a cultural base. We may ourselves begin to regard experiential knowledge as inferior to scientific knowledge. Science, in the formal sense, has status because it is “rational,” while the Sami precise observations and terms are regarded as mere empirical and typological knowledge—and consequently of lesser value. Our perception of the distinction between experiential knowledge and theoretical science has influenced the Sami so much that we have even felt forced to create a new word denoting “science” in order to be on equal footing with the majority culture. The new word *dieda* [science], derived from the verb *diehtit* [to know], is thus set apart from *diehtu* which is the traditional noun for “knowledge.”⁵

The terminology for animals and landscape, snow and conditions for traveling on snow, family and kinship is so precise that no scientific system can be more so. Nonetheless, parts of this precise language are not remembered or taught anymore because of changes in society and a decreased use of such specialized terms in a modern world where distance between humans—the Sami included—and nature is increasing. An awareness of the fact that, historically, our people have had a scientifically developed language should instill pride in our own language in spite of the fact that we, in the past, perhaps have not differentiated so clearly between knowledge and science. But the differentiation probably was not so important in the past. Do we now have to introduce a separation of the two concepts in order to legitimize Sami research, and, if so, to whom do we legitimize it when we create expressions which perhaps contribute to alienating the user of the language from his or her own linguistic heritage? Will it be possible to operate within two different language-based conceptions of reality and still communicate across these in such a way that people who know the linguistic and cultural codes of both will be able to understand each other?

Are, perhaps, academics, artists and journalists today’s architects in the construction of the new Sami society, a society which preserves its own values and traditions while it emphasizes the importance of working within the mainstream in a common effort to learn from and teach each other how to insure the survival of our planet.

LITERATURE AS AN EXAMPLE OF A NEW MEANS OF IDENTITY EXPRESSION

What makes Sami literature—in general—interesting in an *international* context, is its affinity to indigenous peoples' literatures in the rest of the world. Since the 1970s, there has existed a collaboration between different aboriginal populations through organizations like the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The activity has not just involved politics. Cultural festivals, putting up joint art exhibits and theater performances, common research projects and student exchange programs are some of the benefits from the shared efforts. Recently we have even gotten the first translations of contemporary Sami literature into English, meaning that Sami literature finally joins the international arena with its own voice from the margin.⁶ Until now the Sami have been able to enjoy the writings of their native brothers and sisters elsewhere, without having the opportunity to share their own literature with the rest of the world. Now, at a time when things are changing in this field, we start to see the commonalities and similarities between the different indigenous literatures, in thematics, in the literary situation and to some extent even in regard to content. The identity question in all its nuances is naturally a common theme, as is the recurring problematics of the minority situation. The language issue is another returning theme—to know it or not to know it. There is, however, still another dimension to it in the matter of how to read it—even though you don't know it—between the lines, in a more or less “hidden communication” with your primary readers, the ones familiar with the cultural codes of the author, meaning one of your own people, who understands more than what is expressed *in* the lines due to cultural affinity (Gaski 1988: 18–20).

The Choctaw-Cherokee Native American novelist and professor, Louis Owens (1949–2002), explains in his book *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1994) that it is at the disjuncture between myth and reality that American Indian novelists most often take aim, and cites the Chippewa writer and professor of Native American literature, Gerald Vizenor, when he says, “I’m still educating an audience.”

Owens' theme is the American Indian, but the case of the American Indians is very similar to the situation of a lot of indigenous peoples in the world, so his point is applicable as a description of the minority-versus-majority relationship between the Fourth World and Western societies as a whole:

The problem of identity comprehends centuries of colonial and postcolonial displacement, often brutally enforced peripherality, cultural denigration—including especially a harsh privileging of English over tribal languages—and systematic oppression by the monocentric “Westernizing” impulse in America (Owens 1994).

Against this background Native American literature represents a process of reconstruction, of self-discovery and cultural recovery. Thus the identity question becomes “the central issue and theme for the contemporary [American] Indian novelist—in every case a mixed-blood who must come to terms in one form or another with peripherality as well as both European and Indian ethnicity,” Owens asserts and refers to James Clifford's suggestion about ethnic identity as always being “mixed, relational, and inventive.” “We are what we

imagine,” as the Kiowa writer and Pulitzer prize recipient N. Scott Momaday has put it.

Another alienating factor for a lot of the indigenous writing is the language issue, what language to write in—the mother tongue or one of the majority languages? What about all the writers who have lost the minority language, or at least lack the degree of proficiency necessary to produce fiction in it? The Aboriginal writer and scholar Mudrooroo Narogin, formerly Colin Johnson, was the first Aborigine to publish a book in Australia. He says, “It is a curious fate to write for a people not one’s own and stranger still to write for the conquerors of one’s people”(Narogin 1990:148). Narogin explores the Aboriginal writer’s dilemma with language itself when the “mother tongue” has been lost, when standard English has been, by social and educational custom, unattainable to all but a privileged few of the Aboriginal population, and when the Creole patterns of Aboriginal speech are subject to erasure by white editors. Narogin opens his book, *Writing from the Fringe*, with an assertion that pinpoints the political burden carried by any Aboriginal writer today: “Aboriginal Literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the white man. It is a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood” (Narogin 1990).

Writing in the language of the dominant culture leads to a reorientation. This is a point also made by Louis Owens: “For the [American] Indian author,” he says, “writing within consciousness of the contextual background of a nonliterate culture, every word written in English represents a collaboration of sorts as well as a reorientation (conscious or unconscious) from the paradigmatic world of oral tradition to the syntagmatic reality of written language” (Owens 1994).

In the example from the United States it is the privileged class that produces fiction. In Owens’ words, “Contemporary American Indian writers have indeed most often permanently entered that class, possessing as they do a consistently high level of education (almost always at least one college degree) and mastery of English, a fact that certainly adds complexity to the overarching question of cultural identity” (Owens 1994).

The Sami and Inuit case is, on the contrary, that very few of the indigenous writers have any higher education at all. Still the identity question is a major theme in all their literary production, but the fiction texts themselves may not to the same degree be used as a battlefield between different approaches towards the question of identity as the case may be in Native American literature.

Among Sami authors the complicated language issue has been articulated in a self-contradictory phrase: The biggest problem for the Sami writers is the fact that they cannot write—meaning that they haven’t got any education to write in their own language. I will not go any further into the possible consequences of this particular statement, but its background is easily understandable in light of historical facts. Most Sami writers produce their texts *in* Sami, a language that has been taught in selected schools only since the early 1970s. This means that just a few of the currently established Sami writers have ever had any schooling in Sami. Consequently most have not mastered Sami orthography, nor have they learned anything in school about their own background and culture to make them feel proud enough to write about it. What they know about Sami issues stems mostly from what they have learned at home as children and what they have experienced themselves growing up

and living in a Sami area. A lot of the education they had in the majority language they did not catch or care about because it was alien, it did not have any reference to their own lives and it did not prepare them for a life and a livelihood in the cold, harsh Sápmi, i.e., the Sami area. Thus a lot of Sami youngsters in the 1950s, 60s and even 70s did not get what they should have gotten out of school. They were asked to reject their own background, but the alternative they were given was not explained in an intelligible way, so it passed by as well. To try to find out what really happened, to discover and explain both to themselves and to their readers, or maybe more correctly, to investigate together with their readers what Sami culture really means and represents for today's people, is a major project for Sami artists. It is also a recovery project, a search for identity, the native identity that would have given them assurance and self-confidence (Gaski 1993: 122-3, 126-7).

Sami writers of children's books have also been concerned to produce Sami originals for the youngest readers. Though ancient legends and fairy tales often form the starting point of a story, it can still be quite relevant to present-day society. The fact, however, that only a small part of this literature reflects the concrete everyday life of Sami children may be seen as a shortcoming. But, as in the case of adult literature, this too has an obvious explanation, namely, the Sami author's desire to retain, and relate to, a continuity within the Sami narrative tradition, using literature to fill the place left vacant by the school.

LITERARY SUBSIDIES AND LITERATURE AS AN INSTITUTION

Sami literature is concerned to show Sami resilience. The pressure that Sami culture in general has been—and is being—exposed to is well known, and therefore Sami writers realize the necessity of eliminating the sense of inferiority and hopelessness among their own people. Literature and art are cultural factors that they try to use in an effort to shape a viable minority society, one that must be able to resist powerful influences from the outside, both from the entertainment industry and from the mass media. On the other hand, we also see Sami literature being produced which does not have as its primary concern the problematic everyday life of Sami villages and livelihoods. This literature does not look much different from other peoples' modernistic and post-modern writings, but still the fact that the literature is being brought about *in* Sami, proves some kind of awareness and concern about the language issue, and the preservation and development of Sami as a literary language. All Sami publishing is completely dependent on economic support from the cultural authorities of the government,⁷ because the reader base—and consequently the market—is so small that no publisher can count on recovering the production costs through sales. For the same reason no authors become rich from writing in Sami, because there are no major royalty incomes from publishing in a language with only a few thousand readers.

Unfortunately, literature as an institution and Sami cultural journalism—not to mention literary criticism in any of the Sami mass media—are so poorly developed that Sami authors receive responses to their books from “primary readers” far too seldom. Newspapers and radio do not review books on a permanent basis, and there are no literary journals. Nor is there any literary debate worth mentioning, either in the Sami media or in those of Northern Scandinavia, and to the extent it exists, it often treats more or less extra-literary subjects in

myopic detail, presents interviews or offers portraits of individual authors.

Being a Sami scholar in the field of comparative literature represents an interesting approach to the research on traditional Sami songs, stories, and even modern literature. Knowing the cultural background of the texts, and, at the same time, knowing the literary methods normally used for the interpretation of textual materials, may serve as a two-fold approach to Sami literature, where cultural background, linguistic skills in Sami and literary methods converge and enrich each other to comprehend more of the texts than knowing only one of the skills would allow. There is, nevertheless, a residue left in the text—something, which is not easily explicated through the methodical exposition of the subject. This something I like to think of as being a more or less culturally internal code or mode, which is hard to catch without a broad knowledge of the background and context of the story, song or myth.

Being aware of this extra potential of the text, and also being able to explicate it, is of course the advantage, superiority and enjoyment of the “insider.” This is furthermore the part of all artistic performance—and understanding—that represents the specific values of each culture, and thus is celebrated as a certain kind of cultural wealth. In the Sami case the old lengthy oppositional song poems transcribed by the Finnish minister Jacob Fellman in the Tana valley at the beginning of the 1800s, from the times of colonization, may serve as an example of texts of this kind, where a subtle use of double meaning in the song poetry made it possible to communicate on two levels at the same time, so that one type of message was conveyed to a Sami audience and quite a different one to outsiders. While the Sami listeners immediately understood the underlying encoded message, those representatives of the government present at the performance only grasped the meaning of the yoik at its most superficial level (Gaski 1993: 120–22).

Still, be these internal matters as important as they may, the real interesting point of this “internality” only comes into its own when it is made communicable for a larger audience. In regard to literary interpretations of texts celebrating limited openness, some may only want to emphasize their esoteric potential, while others prefer to try to make them more communicative.

I myself, like the ethnocritics,⁸ to borrow the name from Arnold Krupat’s expression, am more interested in the *meeting place* of different texts or cultures, rather than just seeking and explaining the internal meaning of a text to people who supposedly already know it. The “translation”⁹ of a text into new contexts may be much more interesting than just repeating the already obvious. A combination of a linguistic-poetic translation and a culturally contextualized explanation may open the text for new audiences to be regarded as an expression of that specific culture, but, at the same time, every translation is also an interpretation, and nothing can—or should—restrain new readers from associating other things with the text as compared to the reception of what I would call the “primary intended reader or listener.” The Sami songs and stories should primarily be understood in accordance with and within their cultural context, but can in addition be analyzed as, for example, literary expression, as long as one is aware of the alienation this represents from the original cultural context to which they primarily belong as traditional artistic forms of expression. This is also, for that matter, a very exciting question of artistic perspective and hermeneutics; how

differing sets of expectations determine the way in which we interpret cultural expressions.

An important dimension regarding the Sami yoik—the traditional singing or chanting, a vocal genre—is its exclusive and, to some extent, excluding ability as a communicative form. These double layers of communication have both the goal and intention that a Sami should be able to understand more than a non-Sami. This is in part what Sami artists attempt to accomplish in their work: one desires to say more to the Sami than to the others. This need not imply a condescending attitude toward the others, but should be considered an outgrowth of taking Sami cultural history seriously—that one, for example, continues in the esthetic process that the Sami have always enjoyed playing with. When applied to language usage of all kinds, this suggests finding a means of communicating within the group, so that the Sami take more pleasure in that which is spoken and written than do those who do not fully understand the code. The idea behind such a form of communication is that those inside the culture comprehend all from the beginning, while those who do not understand may actually come to understand to the extent that they are no longer uninformed, but hardly ever become “completely” informed.

This is a problematic stance to take, I admit, and I am not at all sure that I myself believe in a cultural positioning implying a dichotomous division between the “partly-informed” and the “fully-informed,” especially not when it comes to interpreting, as it ultimately will concerning artistic expressions. There is probably also a need to differentiate between criticism per se and the intended perception of a more or less culturally implicit message that one may find in traditional communicative forms like the yoik. Even though the yoik text’s primary aim and content, for instance, may be just to amuse a locally limited audience, the text in itself may still contain other more subtle levels which may be interpreted otherwise by the Other, be the Other another Sami from a different community or a “real” outsider in the shape of a foreign critic, whose only involvement is with the text. In this case it is at least conceivable that the not-fully-informed might yet offer insights that the (presumably) fully-informed might not, meaning that even though the insider is likely to have a cultural advantage in understanding the text’s full potential, he or she may still be blind to details and layers that may prove to be important for the interpretation of the text as a literary product. It may sound strange, I agree, to differ between a “primary-addressee’s” *understanding* of a traditional expression like the Sami yoik on the one hand, and a, let us say, scholarly *interpretation* of the same text, where all parts of the text are thoroughly scrutinized. Still, I think that the differentiation is not just possible, it is also desirable, because it takes into account not only the intended contents of a message, but also makes room for a reading of the possible un-intentional implications and connotations of the text.

I am not trying to underestimate or minimize the importance of the inside reading of a text, I’m just problematizing the difficult *positioning of criticism* in this picture, not totally willing to accept the *exclusiveness* of a so-called indigenous (indigenist) criticism on the one hand, and on the other pointing out the shortcomings of a merely outside, and “neutral” criticism, claiming nothing else but the text in front of you to be relevant for the “correct” and full interpretation.

In my view this kind of debate is a conscious and productive way for the indigenous societies to communicate with current international theorizing on oppressed

peoples' literatures—including post-colonialism—while insisting on the importance of “native understandings,” but still be willing to engage in theoretical discussions with open-mindedness and an *inclusive* attitude towards outsiders, who see our points, but still want both us and themselves to clarify the groundings we all stand on in an attempt to get to an even better level of understanding. In the Sami case, there is a need to take into account a culturally—and linguistically—based criticism of Sami literature in addition to, or rather as a part of, more established methodical readings. Otherwise one runs the danger of leaving the Sami silent even in the literary discourse pertaining to Sami issues and thematics.

LITERATURE AND GIRJJÁLASVUOHTA

In an ethnocritical—and “translation conscious”—connection in the context of Sami literature it can be interesting to problematize the question of where the borders for literature *qua* literature lie. If one leaves the Latin (and the English) for a moment and instead observes the question from a Sami language point of view, there is not necessarily a divide between the established binary opposition *litera*-ture and *ora*-ture. In Sami these terms are unified in what is usually the translation for literature, namely *girjjálasvuohta*. The term derives from the substantive *girji*, meaning “pattern” and “book.” To the noun is added the ending *-las*, creating the adjective “patternly” (that is, something which follows a pattern or has something to do with patterns) in one meaning, and “bookly” (something which reminds of a book or has to do with books) in the other. From the adjective *girjjálas* one can again create a substantive by adding the ending *-vuohta*, so that the direct translation of *girjjálasvuohta* would be “patternliness” and “bookliness,” that is, something which follows a pattern or is pertaining to books.

As one can see, the Sami term for literature opens up possibilities for a much broader interpretation of what can be defined under the wings of literature than the Latin-based *litera*-ture allows, because the latter limits everything to the letter and that which is related to it. An oral narration also follows a pattern; it has its own structure, in the same way that a book has one. A yoik can have many sub-motifs and digressions, “wrinkles” in its performance, but it too is built up from a pattern, and therefore falls quite naturally into the literature term in Sami, whereas that which is primarily an oral form can have problems being accepted as a literary genre in a more limited definition of what belongs inside the framework of the bookly art's expressive forms.

This is just an example of how different the points of departure for literary approaches to a subject area can be, depending on language choice and cultural context. I shall not further explore either linguistic or literary hair-splitting at this time, but just use the above example as a demonstration of the interesting possibilities associated with choosing other points of departure for reading/interpreting than only the existing and estheticizing methods.

A REINDEER HERD ON THE MOVE

Multifaceted Sami artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää made his debut as an author in Sami in 1974. As a poet, as well as a painter and musician, Valkeapää reaches for the special quality

in that which is Sami. He approaches his projects from several angles—the words in the lyrics are the yoik in the words, and from them grow forth associations and images that are transformed into his paintings, often with a mythical and mythological meaning. Nils-Aslak Valkeapää wants the Sami to learn from the past, from what has been passed down to us, from the messages in myths and the wisdom in tradition. We should be open to impulses from the outside, but we should never forsake our own background. Against all odds, the Sami have survived in the North for many thousands of years, so it stands to reason that some of the things that our forefathers and foremothers experienced and learned are useful in today's world. In any case, this is true if we Sami want to continue to be indigenous people within a cultural historical context where the experience and learning of the past will influence the modern Sami way of thought.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää won the Nordic Council's Literature Award in 1991 with his book *Beivi, Ahcazan* [*The Sun, My Father*], whose title alludes to the myth about the Sami as the children of the Sun. The book is an amalgamation of old photographs and newly-written lyrical poetry that ties together the past and present, the documentary and the fictional, in a form that is innovative and creative and with a content that unites visual images, words, and music. It provides at once an expression of Sami cultural history and the richness of language. The double and multiple meanings of its words inspire the reader to reflect. The photographs illustrate various aspects of the Sami people's lives and history and comprise an enormous body of documentary material, which the author spent six years collecting in Scandinavia, Europe, and the United States.

In a purely artistic sense, Valkeapää continues in *The Sun, My Father* his idea from *Ruoktu váimmus* (1985) [*Trekways of the Wind*, 1994], but he goes a step further by testing new forms for combining words and images, visual impressions and associations, expressions and content.

The section of *Trekways of the Wind* that has, perhaps, reached further out into the world than any other Sami literature—with the exception of Olaus Sirma's love poem from the 17th century—is the "My Home Is in my Heart" sequence. In this section we find the classic conflict between the Western ownership-and-exploitation attitude toward nature, and a relationship that is based more on a sense of kinship and equality with our immediate surroundings, as expressed in indigenous peoples' respect for nature. In some respects, this poem can be seen as a modern parallel to the old antiphony "The Thief and the Shaman" from the beginning of the 19th century.¹⁰

"My Home is in my Heart" is not a Country & Western song, even though the title may bring your thoughts in that direction. Valkeapää is, on the contrary, trying to explain a different way of viewing the whole concept of utilizing nature in such a way that nature provides you with the necessities of a good living, while remaining undamaged.

In this fairly long poem Valkeapää expresses the views of a nature-based culture when it comes to the question of ownership of land and water, the clashing of totally different notions of closeness to the places a person moves in, and most of all the feeling of inadequacy and impossibility in reaching across with an explanation as to why the whole environment—including landscapes, people, weather, the bushes, the lakes—why it all is a part of a person, an inseparable part of that person's whole identity: "My home is in my heart

/ it migrates with me / (- -) You know it brother / you understand sister / but what do I say to strangers / who spread out everywhere / how shall I answer their questions / that come from a different world.” The concept of “place,” the notion of “home” is dealt with in this poem—into the core of the matter, a Sami or a Native American probably would say, whereas a “Westerner” would call it romanticizing—a naivistic or may be a nativist view—which is totally out-of-date and marginalized in today’s modern society.

In Valkeapää’s view, the time has come to renew the Sami traditions through innovation in traditional artistic forms and genres. One example of his many-leveled linguistic play is poem No. 272 in *The Sun, My Father*. The poem spans seven and a half pages, where the words spread out more and more on the pages till they finally are scattered all over pages 5 and 6. On pages 6, 7 and 8 are found some dotted lines that, at the end, form one dotted line. The poem is a typographical play as well as a linguistic challenge to every Sami with a high proficiency in the specific terminology regarding reindeer names, because the poem in fact represents a reindeer herd on the move. The herdsman is leading the flock in the opposite direction of our reading of the book, that is, we meet the herd on our wandering on the tundra (read: the pages of the book). We pass the herd, which has spread all over pages 5 and 6, because the reindeer are resting and grazing on those pages. When we further continue on our trip, we meet with the tracks and the footprints of the passing reindeer. The text in italics consists of onomatopoetic sounds from the moving herd, as well as of descriptive poetic echoing sounds of the natural surroundings. The plain text represents different reindeer, according to their age, their appearance, whether they are male or female, whether they are spotted or have any other kind of special marks and so on. The Sami language has an enormous vocabulary for describing reindeer. This fact is of course a richness and a challenge for poetic use of the language, like that which Valkeapää has displayed in this particular poem.

As a matter of fact, a poem like No. 272 is impossible to translate into any other language as poetry. At least, I do not know about any other language with exactly the same kind of terminology for reindeer names. In any case the poem was left un-translated in the Scandinavian and English renditions of Valkeapää’s book, because these languages lack the equivalent terms for reindeer. Thus the limitations of the majority languages are laid bare, they are unable to match or rival Sami in regard to explaining with exact preciseness the content and consequences of Sami experiences. Accordingly the Sami readers are reassured about the fitness and importance of their own language as the best and most useful tool to cover the needs of Sami communication. The larger claim to make would be to assume that the sort of sophistication shown regarding reindeer is potentially applicable to other phenomena as well, so one does not have to be particularly interested in reindeer to be impressed with the intellectual complexity of a language that can do what Sami can do in one word. This fact may contribute to boost an exploration into Sami language in an attempt to use these succinct terms in other fields as well to examine the accuracy and exactness of scientific terms and language in general, not least in regard to Arctic experiences.

Also when it comes to defining poetry this specific piece of work is challenging the traditional view of what can be regarded as lyrical writing. No one can seriously oppose poem no. 272 being a *poem*, as long as it is found in a book of poetry, and also reads in its

original as poetry. For non-Sami readers the un-translated poem may at first sight represent an amusing and exotic example of the peculiarity of a totally different language, but it might as well provoke because the poem remains unintelligible to someone who doesn't read or speak Sami, with the exception of the typography. There is, admittedly, a difference between having the poem in a Sami poetry book and reading it there, and finding the same poem un-translated in a Scandinavian or English version of the book.

What originally would be interpreted as a humoristic, but still realistic and fully possible thing to do in the Sami book, suddenly appears as an ironic commentary upon the inability of the majority language to fully express Sami experience. The poem becomes politicized, esthetics turn into ideology. The example may well serve as a basis for further theorizing, not only about two different language codes, but also more fundamentally as evidence for two different ways of viewing the world. If that is so, and in fact there exist a lot of fields where Sami and Scandinavian languages are distant from each other when it comes to describing the essence of the experience, the condition in itself is actually so interesting that it should absolutely inspire more thorough analysis into the matter. Theoretical approaches are at least always dependent on an abstract language, and if it is true that *the linguistic explanation of the things we see is quite different between two separate cultures*, then consequently this fact must have an influence on the theories we choose and the methods we create to view and interpret our surroundings.

THE MAGIC DRUM WITH THE TORN SKIN

The title of the award-winning book *The Sun, My Father* plays upon the myth about the Sami as descendants of the Sun. The Sun's daughter gave the Sami their reindeer, allowing them to wander along the sunbeams down to earth, then she taught the Sami how to yoik to domesticate the animals. The Sun's son went courting in the land of the Giants and brought the Giant's daughter home with him. Together they produced the Gállábárbnit, who were such accomplished hunters and skiers that, when they died, the Sami raised them to heaven instead of burying them in the traditional way. Today they form the constellation Orion's belt ("The Skiers"). It is from these proud ancestors that the Sami descend.

Valkeapää uses a golden magic drum to decorate the front cover of *The Sun, My Father*. At the center of the magic drum he has placed the Sami sun figure, which reappears in the book along with the "creation story," told as a poem. Among the photographs there are also pictures of Sami mythological places and of old, preserved magic drums. At the end of the book, Valkeapää returns to a representation of the mythological pantheon, except that in this picture he now shows a shaman's drum with its skin torn and a Sami burial place. The poems at the end of the book form a circle around the idea of time. Even the shape of one of the poems is that of a half circle, which says, "and time is not, no end, none / and time is always, forever, it is..." (Poem no. 566).

In order to complete the circle, the first poem is repeated at the end of the book. It is not identical to the poem at the beginning, but its theme is the same, just as the form can vary in a yoik, but the content revolves around the same idea. And when there are no words left, the book leaves us with its final poem, "and when all is gone / nothing is heard any

more / nothing / and it is heard.” As we close the book, we discover that the back cover doesn’t have the whole magic drum but only the sun figure that we found placed at the center of the front cover. With the torn magic drum in the photograph in the back of the book and the magic drum no longer being part of the sun figure, the symbolism should be quite clear: Times have changed; old beliefs are disappearing; but the Sami must hold on to the certainty given them by traditional knowledge that we are the descendants of the Sun, and that we have obligations to meet in the way we live as an indigenous people in more than the political sense.

NOTES

- 1) This article is a version of previously printed chapters in my book *Sami. Culture in a New Era: The Norwegian Sami Experience* (1997: 9–28, 199–220), and my article on the Sami yoik in *Sami Folkloristics* (2000: 191–214).
- 2) This option, obligation, and possibility has become even more imperative now that the UN has established a Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples, with the former President of the Norwegian Sameting (Parliament), Ole Henrik Magga, as its elected leader. The forum is based in New York City and represents all the indigenous peoples of the world.
- 3) See for instance Nils Jernsletten’s article in the previously mentioned book, *Sami Culture in a New Era* (1997: 86–108).
- 4) There has been a great deal of research and writing about how the Norwegian (and Swedish and Finnish) school has not worked *vis-à-vis* Sami children and Sami traditions. This is partly connected with research done about the period of “Norwegianization” of the Sami and of the Finnish immigrants, and the formation of boarding schools that were part of the strategy to assimilate Sami children. Sources on these topics include Asle Høgmo 1989, Anton Hoëm 1976, L. Lind Meløy 1980, and Knut Einar Eriksen and Einar Niemi 1981. Among more recent material on the position of the school within today’s Sami society, attention must be drawn to a new monograph by the Sami scholar Vuokko Hirvonen, *Mo samaidahttit skuvlla* (How to make school more Sami), and a collection of essays, edited by Hirvonen, *Sámi skuvla plánain ja praktihkas* (The Sami School in Plans and Practice), both published in the fall of 2003. In these books the current education system is evaluated and different attempts to create an education more in harmony with Sami values and traditions are assessed. The monograph will be published in English in 2004.
- 5) Cf. K Nielsen’s dictionary in which the concept of “dieda” is not included. The main part of Nielsen’s dictionaries were compiled from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the beginning of WWII. In Pekka Sammalahiti’s *Sámi-Suoma sátnegirji* (1989) the concept is included meaning “science,” p. 110.
- 6) See for instance the translations of some of the poetry books by the award-winning poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *Trekways of the Wind*, 1994; *The Sun, My Father*, 1997; and my anthology of contemporary Sami prose and poetry; *In the Shadow of the Midnight Sun*, 1997.
- 7) Even though the distribution of the support to Sami cultural projects is now channeled through the respective Sami Parliaments in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, the money for distribution still comes from the national government. Concerning the amount of support to Sami culture, and the distribution of the support, see Gaski/Kappfjell (2002: 53–64). Even though the report is in

- Norwegian, the numbers still should give an impression of how much money is being spent on supporting the development of Sami culture. A summarizing article in English based on the report is published in Dueland (2003: 415-436).
- 8) Referring here to Krupat's book *Ethnocriticism* from 1992.
- 9) Again, an adjustment of a Krupatian concept, "anti-imperial translation," this time from his book *The Turn to the Native*, 1996, especially dealt with in chapter 2 "Postcolonialism, Ideology, and Native American Literature," pp. 30-55. In his most recent book, *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (2002), Krupat elaborates on the terminology and takes it further from ethnocriticism to cosmopolitan comparativism as opposed to a nationalist or indigenist approach to criticism of Native American literature today. Still this cosmopolitan comparativism is eclectic and cross-cultural in the sense that it takes into account the nationalist and the indigenist views as well, but never allows only one way of understanding be the ultimate and decisive interpretation.
- 10) See J. Fellman 1906: 254-59.

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