Indigenous Sámi religion: General considerations about relationships

Jelena Porsanger

The indigenous religion of the Sámi people displays the relationship between humans and everything in creation, which can be called by the concept of 'Nature'. This close relationship has traditionally been reciprocal, and can be considered as the very basis of the indigenous Sámi religion.

Indigenous Sámi religion

Indigenous religion is a frequently used concept in the history of religion nowadays (see Harvey, 2000, 2002; Olupona, 2004). The concept includes religions that do not have a historical origin, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or other world religions, and that do not belong to any of the so-called revivalist movements.

The concept of indigenous religion points to the original starting point of a religion, its persistent nature and a distinctive tradition which is characteristic for a particular people, alongside an ongoing process of change. In the history of research, terms and concepts like 'the historical religions of literary cultures' (Pentikäinen 1998) or 'literary religions' have been used to describe the world religions, while the concept of 'indigenous religions' represents religions which have been practiced by peoples mostly without a tradition of writing, e.g. Rydving (1993, 1995) and Braun and McCutcheon, 2000).

< Drum at Sámi Museum.

The concept of indigenous religions is used in Asia, America, Africa, Oceania, Australia and other parts of the world, where indigenous people are found practicing their own religion. The first part of the term 'indigenous religion' points to the original belonging of a religion. 'Home' or 'belonging to a home place' are connotations for the term indigenous. This concept leads to the notion of being produced or living naturally in a particular region in geographical, ethnic, or religious sense (Long 2004, 89).

Present day researchers of religions have abandoned such terms as 'primitive', 'pre-Christian', 'heathen', 'illiterate' and 'oral'. Academic religious research has traditionally focussed on issues that were quite distant from those that indigenous peoples themselves considered as indigenous religion. In connection with the Sámi indigenous religion, a sample of abandoned descriptive terms would include the following terms: 'the Lapps' idolarity', 'witchcraft and superstitions', 'the Lapps' religion', 'the earlier Sámi heathen belief and superstitions', 'the original or 'primitive' heathen religion of the Lapps' or 'Sámi Pre-Christian Religion' (Rydving (1993, 1995). These concepts are no longer in use. For the study of the Sámi spiritual culture in the Sámi language, using a Sámi approach, a new Sámi term has been proposed - *sámi eamioskkoldat* (in the North Sámi language, see Porsanger 2007). The concept of the Sámi indigenous religion emphasises the connection between the spiritual heritage and the ongoing process of change in the spiritual life of the Sámi people, the central importance of the elders and ancestors as the carriers and teachers of the Sámi traditions, as well as embodying an inseparable unification of people and nature.

The concept of nature

The Sámi have traditionally had a different notion of nature than, for example, urban people. The Sámi concept of nature implies relationships, reciprocity, and a notion of power, both for humans and for the whole surrounding world. There is no one single Sámi word, which is equivalent to the Western concept of nature. Instead, there is a variety of terms for what the Sámi considered as nature. That is why the term nature is used in this text in quotation marks. For nature one can find, for example, in North Sámi, the term of *luondu,* which implies the character of somebody or something, like *beatnaga luondu* 'the nature of a dog', *olbmo luondu* 'character of a human', *luonddubiras* 'surrounding environment' etc. The term *meahcci* implies territories and recourses outside peoples' permanent living places, but there is a diversity of meanings of this concept (Schanche, 2002).

Nature traditionally has been for the Sámi both a physical and spiritual entity, and humans are a natural part of it. For the Sámi, nature represents at the same time a home, a way of life, the source of survival, continuity and oral history, the present and the future. Tra-

ditionally, the aim of the Sámi people has not been to make the most efficient use of the natural resources as a source of income, but rather to use them rationally in a sustainable way, as survival in the North depends on the renewal of the riches of nature.

The values and norms regarding nature that the Sámi learn already as children are especially crucial today both for the Sámi themselves and for the world, in general. Many indigenous peoples nowadays bring forward their values and understandings of their relationships with the natural environment. They emphasise that holistic understanding of the relationships practised by many indigenous peoples can teach the world a lesson about sustainability, balance and respect in the time of climate change and environmental problems.

The Sámi have traditionally had a holistic understanding of relationships with nature. This can be exemplified by the concept of 'maintenance of life', used in the daily language by the North Sámi nowadays. This is a concept of *birgejupmi*, which is associated with people (both individuals and collectives), natural resources, physical, spiritual and psychical health, and implies a close connection between the landscape, environment, and ecosystems and the social and spiritual healthy development and identity, belonging. *Birgejupmi* for a person or community means ways to manage and to have good life socially, economically, spiritually and in respect to health.

Reciprocity and dialogue

The traditional Sámi outlook on life is based on notions that reflect the relationship between humans, animals, non-human beings, nature, gods and other powers. In this relationship humans and nature are not opposed to each other. Rather, humans are an integral part of nature. On the other hand, nature – both physically and spiritually – is a part of the nature of humans and a source of strength for humans. The weakening of this reciprocal relationship and disruption of this balance may decrease the strength of humans.

On an individual and collective level, the relationship to the internal and external world is maintained through rituals. These rituals keep the order of life in balance, which is very important for the survival of the community. Balance has been traditionally maintained by the Sámi people through rituals, by following normative patterns of behaviour, and established practices, by showing respect, and through a dialogue on both an individual and collective level. By following rules and normative patterns of behaviour people function, Sámi think and feel that they can achieve something. Especially in the worldview of the northern people, the well-being of both humans and nature depends on the balance between them. In Sámi spirituality and tradition both humans and nature are living and active interdependent beings. That is why a constant dialogue between these parts is necessary. Nature and everything that is part of it can be spoken to directly or indirectly. For example, in the

Kola Sámi oral tradition it is natural to say 'You, my grandmother River', 'Thank you, old woman Lake' etc. The relationship between humans and everything in creation is not only personal, but also has a moral meaning – the world around us is ethical and just.

Natural phenomena and spirits of nature

In Sámi cosmology, many natural phenomena were considered universal, independent of people. These included, for example, the Midnight Sun, the Northern lights (*aurora borealis*), and the thunder rumbling during short summer. In Sámi cosmography, each of these had a role in explaining the origin and structure of the universe and the concept of time. It is worth mentioning that the traditional Sámi concept of time is not linear, but circular. For example, according to oral tradition, cosmic hunting of a wild reindeer or elk has happened since the beginning of the world and will never end. The hunters – in some stories the thunder god, in others the Sámi forefathers who invented skis and became stars (*Gállá bártnit* 'sons of Gállá' in North Sámi, three stars in the star constellation known as the Orion Belt) – can never reach the animal. That is why the thunder god is shooting his arrows (lightning, *tiirmes tool* 'fire of thunder god' in Kildin Sámi) from year to year. The constellation of Gállá bártnit never comes closer to the constellation of the Elk on the northern sky, but the hunters arise to the sky each evening trying to reach the Elk, which is constantly moving away from them. These movements and happenings are a part of the cycle of the universe.

Sámi people are aware of natural spirits and the realms that they control (see for example Bäckman, 1975; Porsanger, 1997a). In the names of natural spirits we find a reflection of the Sámi philosophy: one of the North Sámi terms for spirit *vuoigŋa* is connected to the verb *vuoiŋŋat* 'breathe', as it is in many other cultures and languages. In the eastern Sámi languages names of natural spirits are compounds in which the world for 'natural spirit' can be translated as living being, creature, dweller, and inhabitant. The first part of the compound comes from the place where the spirit lives: for example, 'water creature' or 'mountain dweller'.

Natural spirits are not considered to be supernatural, physically invisible spirits or masters; they are creatures that live in the surrounding area; they are a part of living nature. Nature follows its own laws, and people need to know its way of life. The natural spirits must be taken into consideration when one settles on a new place, starts to fish, goes to hunt, or lives on a lake or a river. People need to follow certain rules to maintain the balance of nature in their nearest environment. The natural spirits control the way humans use nature.

Offerings

The relationship with nature and its forces is not submissive but active.

Humans can, when necessary, influence the powers of nature by giving, offering, sharing, asking, promising, taking care of, showing respect to, or assuming the shapes of animals.

Offerings were made to the natural spirits only when necessary: for example, when a spirit was known to be angry because people had broken some rule. One did not ask spirits for help, but for goodwill and patience while one stayed in their area. Every geographical place was considered an entity in which the physical dimension was in balance with the spiritual one. Both aspects needed to be taken into consideration when making a living. Therefore, the ideas about natural spirits are closely linked to the Sámi way of life.

Human beings know that natural powers influence their success in hunting and fishing, and they must therefore ask these powers to be kind and helpful. That is why individuals, families and communities found places to worship these powers.

The term *bassebáiki* 'sacred place' in North Sámi is often used in literature and means a place reserved for worship or considered sacred. These places are meant for the establishment and maintenance of a connection between humans, the natural environment and the powers of nature. The term *bálvvošbáiki* can be translated as 'a place for offering'. The term *sieidi* (North Sámi, but known in all Sámi languages) designates the object of worship, especially a rock. In sacred places, offerings were made to enhance fishing and hunting, to protect reindeer herds, to bring good weather, to ensure good health, to ask a certain natural power to help people achieve what the people want.

The significance of sacred places is not found in the spirit or god controlling the place or the livelihood, nor in the offering or worship itself, but in the power of the thing worshipped. People live through the powers or nature, but they also live within these natural powers, as they do not separate themselves from nature and its powers. The aim of offering is to maintain the internal reciprocal relationship between nature and the people by seeking mutual benefit. When asking for goodwill or help of the natural powers, one must remember to strengthen the power through offerings and tokens of respect. Thus, the power of human beings and the power of nature are seen as interdependent.

Experts

The establishment of a contact with the powers of nature can require special expertise. For this purpose there are experts who can act on behalf of a person, a family or a whole community. Instead of the term of shamanism, which has been used in the study of religions, the Sámi term of *noaidevuohta* was introduced in the 1990s to the study of indigenous Sámi religion by Professor Håkan Rydving (1993, 1995). *Noaidevuohta* ('shamanism') is not considered a form of religion or a practical aspect of a special naturalis-

tic religion today; it is thought to be linked with the way of life and culture of a people. The Sámi *noaidevuohta* is based on the worldview of a people who are dependent upon nature, and it is in harmony with the environment, and the economic and social structures. The Sámi *noaidevuohta* is not just a collection of rites and practices and folklore that explains these structures, but a way of perceiving the world around oneself and acting in it.

The term of *shaman* is not suitable for the Sámi tradition, since there are own indigenous terms for spiritual experts and leaders. In North Sámi, *noaidi* is a term for spiritual experts, men and women, who are better than others at contacting the powers of nature and the world beyond. There are also different kinds of spiritual 'experts', 'those who can see', 'those who know', medicine men etc., and there is a variety of terms for different spiritual experts.

The Sámi *noaidi* was the most important member of the community. *Noaidis* were the ones who maintained the world order among the people – in the life of the community and individuals. They were in contact with the world beyond through their ecstatic experiences. In the Sámi tradition, as in the shamanistic tradition of many other northern peoples, the *noaidi* acted on behalf of the community in order to guarantee good luck in hunting and fishing, to protect the community's lands and waters, and to enhance the well-being of the community. They foretold the future, made contact with the world beyond, inquired about secret things, and were healers.

The strength of the Sámi *noaidi* traditionally lay in the fact that they had to master the laws of natural powers. They had to understand how the surrounding forces and the internal power of people influence each other, so that they could use these forces for the good of their community, while at the same time insuring that powers of nature were not depleted.

Holistic understanding

The definition of religion can be connected to a clarification of how individuals and societies define their place in respect to the power or powers which decide the fate and destinies of people (Rydving (1993, 1995). For more scholarly discussions about definitions of religion, see Platvoet and Molendijk (1999), Braun and McCutcheon (2000). In the indigenous Sámi religion, a close and reciprocal relationship to the powers of nature plays a central role. Everything in the world has been seen as interrelated. The main idea of the Sámi philosophy and worldview comes clearly from the Sámi religious tradition connected to offerings, sacrificial places, sacred mountains, waters, natural phenomena and spirits, world of animals, spiritual experts and their activities. The surrounding forces of nature and the internal power of individuals and communities influence each other. Individuals and communities need to maintain bal-

ance in order to make their living and to ensure their well-being. This presupposes that people think about the world and themselves in a holistic and reciprocal way. This understanding is found in the present-day language use. The above mentioned concept of *birgejupmi*, 'maintenance of life', describes a holistic Sámi understanding of well-being and survival and interdependence of everything in the world.

For a more complete explanation of the indigenous Sámi religion the author suggests the following articles: Kulonen et al. (2005), Rydving (2003, 2004, and 2010), Pentikäinen (1997 and 2002) and Porsanger (1997b, 1999, 2000a, and 2000b).

References

Bäckman, L. (1975), *Sájva: Föreställningar om hjälp- och skyddsväsen i heliga fjäll bland samerna* [*Sájva*: *Helping spirits of the sacred mountains among the Sámi*]. (Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion 13). Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Braun, W. and McCutcheon, R. T. (eds.) (2000), *Guide to the Study of Religion*. London & New York: Cassell.

Grim, John A. (1998, 2004), Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: Introduction to Indigenous Traditions (http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/indigenous). The original publication: *Earth Ethics* 1998 (Fall): 10, 1.

Harvey, G. (ed.) (2000), *Indigenous Religions*: *A Companion*. London: Cassell.

Harvey, G. (ed.) (2000), *Readings in Indigenous Religions*. London: Continuum.

Kulonen, U.-M., Seurujärvi-Kari, I. and Pulkkinen, R. (eds.) (2005), *The Saami – A Cultural Encyclopaedia*. (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 925). Helsinki: SKS.

Long, C.H. (2004), A postcolonial meaning of religion: Some reflections from the indigenous world. In *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, pp. 89–98.

Olupona, J. K. (ed.) (2004), *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. New York: Routledge.

Pentikäinen, J. (1997), *Die Mythologie der Saamen*. [Übersetzung aus dem Finnischen Angela Bartens]. (Ethnologische Beiträge zur Circumpolarforschung Bd. 3). Berlin: Reinhold Schletzer Verlag.

(1998). *Shamanism and culture*. Helsinki: Etnika Co (ed) (2002). *Fragments of Lappish mythology* / Lars Levi Læstadius. Translated by Börje Vähämäki. Beaverton, Ont.: Aspasia Books.

Platvoet, Jan and Molendijk, Arie L. (eds.) (1999), *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion. Contexts, Concepts and Contests* (Studies in the History of Religions 84). Leiden: Brill.

Porsanger [Sergejeva until 2002], J. (1997a), Ihminen ja luonto koltta- ja kuolansaamelaisten maailmankuvassa [Man and Nature in the worldview of the Kola and Skolt Sámi]. Lisensiaatin työ. Helsingin yliopisto, uskontotieteen laitos.

(1997b), Noaidiene blant samene på Kola. – *Ottar* 1997: 217, 28–36. Tromsø. [The Sámi noaidis (shamans)]

(1999), Traditionell samisk tidsregning: årstider og navn på måneder/ Áigeipmárdus sámi árbevierus: jahkeáiggit ja mánnonamat [Traditional Sámi understanding

of time: the seasons and the names of months]. – *Almanakk for Norge 2000: jubileumsutgave*. Universitetet i Oslo. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, pp. 167–177.

(2000a), Noen samiske stjernebilder: et jaktfolks forestillinger om stjernehimmelen [Traditional explanations of some Sámi star constellations]. – *Almanakk for Norge 2001*. Universitetet i *Oslo. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.*

(2000b), The Sun as Father of the Universe *in* the Kola and Skolt Sami Tradition. Pp. 233–253 *in Pentikäinen, J. &* H. Gaski & V. Hir*vonen & J. Sergejeva (eds.) Sami Folkloristics*. (NNF Publications 6, Nordic Network of Folklore). Åbo.

(2007), *Bassejoga èáhci: Gáldut nuortasámiid eamioskkoldaga birra álgoálbmotmetodologiijaid olis // The Water of the Sacred River: The Sources of the Indigenous Religion of the Eastern Sami Examined Within the Framework of Indigenous Methodologies*. Kárášjohka: Davvi Girji.

Rydving, H. (1993) (1995), *The End of Drum-Time: Religions Change among the Lule Saami, 1670s – 1740s* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Historia Religionum 12). Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.

(2003), Traditionell nordsamisk religion omkring år 1700 [Traditional North Sámi religion around the year 1700]. In Mytisk landskap: ved dansende skog og susende fjell. Ed. By Arvid Sveen and Håkan Rydving, pp. 9–23. Stamsund: Orkana.

(2004), Saami responses to Christianity: Resistance and change. In Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity, pp. 99–107.

(2010), *Tracing Sami traditions: In search of the indigenous religion among the Western Sami during the 17th and 18th centuries* (Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning / Serie B Skrifter vol. 135). Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture Novus forl.

Schanche, A. (2002), Meahcci – den samiske utmarka [Meahcci – the Sámi outfield]. – Svanhild Andersen (ed.)*, Samiske landskap og Agenda 21* (Dieđut 1/2002). Guovdageaidnu: Sámi Instituhtta.