Again the Stállu Come: The Role of Folklore in the Resurgence of Traditional Sami Culture

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The Sami

• The Sami are an indigenous people who inhabit a region of northern Europe which encompasses areas throughout northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. Comparable in many respects to other cultures located within the Arctic Circle, their livelihood has traditionally consisted of coastal fishing, fur trapping, and various degrees of animal husbandry; although most Sami engage in a wide variety of economic practices, their traditional lifestyle of semi-nomadic reindeer herding remains the most recognizable element of the culture today. Relatively few Sami still engage in reindeer herding however, as most of the individuals who would identify themselves as Sami are well-integrated into and consider themselves to be a part of the Scandinavian population. With current population estimates ranging from 80,000 to 135,000, they are among one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups in Europe today, and are the northernmost indigenous people inhabiting the European continent.

The Project

• During the summer of 2010, I traveled to northern Norway and spent two and a half months living and working in a small coastal Sami village. The main focus of my effort was on collecting ethnographic information concerning the lifestyle, culture, and language of the local people. The data I collected was the result of direct observation and participation in numerous daily tasks and activities in the community.

Field site

• All data collection took place in the small coastal community of Kåfjord, which is located approximately 90 kilometers from Tromsø. As it is located well within the territory north of the Arctic Circle, Kåfjord experiences 24-hour sunlight throughout three months of the year during the summer and complete darkness for a portion of the winter.

• The municipality of Kåfjord belongs to the second northernmost county in all of Norway: Troms. Steep mountain formations run close to both sides of the fjord, and the three main communities (Oldedalen, Birtuvatn, and Maretalen) are spaced approximately equidistant from one another with a number of smaller settlements interspersed along the habitable strips of land between.

• The local economy revolves mainly around a mixture of small-scale agriculture and commercial fishing. Because the topography of northern Norway is not particularly amenable to wide, expansive fields, most farms remain small and thus many families often pursue additional occupations in fishing, forestry, or handicrafts.

Research Question

What I found to be of particular interest are the many mythical legends that speak of supernatural beings or spirits who are connected directly to the forests, mountains, lakes, and rivers. It became clear that many of the most salient warnings in these folk stories correlated directly with common environmental dangers. For all, there is an element of peril and a specific encoded message for the listener to avoid the territories that these beings inhabit.

I propose that these folk legends served primarily as mechanisms to (a) reduce the likelihood with which children come in contact with genuine environmental dangers, and (b) operate as explanations for bizarre misfortunes or enigmatic natural phenomena.

Sami folk legends

• Calcerërga - Water man; this entity ruled over a specific lake or river and was thought to be responsible for determining the success or failure of fishermen. Also cited as the cause behind drownings.

• Stállu - Man-giant; a large malevolent creature often associated with the disappearance of women and children. Similar in many respects to the legend of the Norwegian troll. These beings inhabit forests and mountains.

• Gullfisk - Hill-shelter; these entities lived in earthen mounds or in underground caverns called gyllfisklókk. They attempted to lure children away from camp.

Norwegian folk legends

• Nokken - Water spirit; associated with drowning, rivers, and lakes. This entity was said to wander the rivers and lakes in an attempt to lure children and women to the water’s edge after sunset.

• Troll - Forest and mountain-dwelling creatures that are made of stone or earth. Often portrayed as child-eating monsters that prey on those unlucky enough to find themselves lost in the wood.

• Havdruger - Sea ghoul; a ghastly, undead creature cited as the cause behind disappearances and deaths at sea.

Folk legends in modern times

• The great stállu and trolls of Sami and Norwegian legend are said to be created from the earth themselves, and nearly always take on a dark, morose appearance while lacking the deep interior of the forests. Such stories draw attributes directly from the natural environment to create a sense of fear and danger; the darkness of the forests, the shapelessness of moss-covered trees and rocks, all of these qualities invoke a sense of uncertainty in the minds of children. The stories associated with the rivers, lakes, and the sea conjure up an image of ephemeral, shape-shifting creatures, thus creating the illusion that these beings are but an extension of the environment that they inhabit.

In modern times, these stories have retreated from their prominence as exemplary tales into a more aged, well-respected position within the greater culture as a whole. Much of modern-day Sami writing continues to play with the idea of embedding the natural world into the flow and organization of each story. Similar to how the characters of the environment are woven into the legends about the stállu, havdraguer, and trolls, many Sami writers hope to capture a sense of their subject through subtle, stylistic writing. This is not a method that is unfamiliar to English poets and authors, but it fits quite properly with the rich relationship the Sami have traditionally had with their land.

• The richness of Sami tradition and the depth of the connection it has always had with nature is also reflected in modern-day continuations of the traditional yolk. A curious distinct style of singing, yoking represents an attempt to capture the essence of a person or a place through vocal expression and can be compared in many ways to how modern-day Sami authors are attempting to weave a sense of community with nature throughout their writing. As such, the yolk has emerged as a leading symbol of Sami tradition in modern times and remains a powerful form of cultural expression to this day.

Select References


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