

Václav Marek's approach to the indigenous Sami religion

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Introduction

Václav Marek made important contributions to many fields. One of them was the study of the indigenous religious traditions of the Sami during the 17th and early 18th centuries. This was a period when the indigenous religion had already incorporated elements from Christianity. Most of the Sami were baptised and married, and were to be buried according to Christian rituals. At the same time, the indigenous religion lived on, during most of the 17th century without much opposition from the authorities. It was only from the 1680s that a few decades of intense religious confrontation and missionary activities started. The Sami who still sacrificed to the indigenous divinities, used the ritual drums, or performed other rituals that were not accepted by Church and State, were punished and forced to hand in their drums. But despite this pressure, many Sami succeeded in continuing with indigenous religious traditions in secrecy.

Most of our written sources of knowledge about the indigenous Sami religion come from this same period. In order to fight the old religion more effectively, the authorities collected information

about it. The drums that are now found in museums were collected during this period, and lists of sacrificial sites that were made during the same period help us to find many of the places where the most important communal rituals were performed.

Many different terms have been and are used for the religious traditions Marek's research dealt with. Marek himself often used terms like the "old" or "ancient" religion; today it is more common to talk about "indigenous" religion, and that is the term I will use in the following text for the pre-Christian or non-Christian religious traditions of the Sami.

Marek's studies of Sami religion

Marek wrote innovative texts on the indigenous Sami religion at a time when few researchers devoted themselves to this religion. As a matter of fact, apart from him there were hardly any researchers who specialised in Sami religious traditions during the 1950s. Instead, researchers who in the main worked with other cultures and themes also wrote about Sami religions, but without any knowledge of the Sami language and with only superficial ideas about Sami culture in general.

Marek, however, based his texts on all of the sources available at the time,¹ and he related and contrasted his independent and

¹ From the 17th century, he not only used Schefferus's monograph *Lapponia* (1673), but also Schefferus's most important sources from the 1670s. Among the material from the 18th century, he used the published manuscripts that were available in addition to the monographs by P. Högström (1747), P. Fjellström (1755) and K. Leem (1767).

interesting analyses to both earlier research and the most recent publications.²

The first two of the four articles Marek published deal with ancient religious ideas and the question about surviving elements of what at that time was called “totemistic” ideas among the Sami,³ the third article covers the role of women,⁴ and the fourth discusses Sami ideas about life and death in relation to the South Sami so-called *saajvh* beings and the world of the departed, South Sami *jaemiehaajmoe*.⁵

Marek also wrote an introductory text about indigenous Sami religion. He completed it in 1968, but was never able to get it published. There he writes about hunting rituals and sacred stones,⁶ about different divinities and nature spirits related to hunting,⁷ about the activities of the *nåejtie* (the most important ritual specialist among the Sami⁸), about the ritual drum,⁹ and about sacrifices.¹⁰

In 2009, Michal Kovář republished the four articles and for the first time published the longer introductory text in an excellently edited volume.¹¹ This means that Marek’s texts on indigenous Sami religion are now easily accessible.

² As, for example, Manker 1950; Karsten 1952; Serning 1956; Manker 1957; and Pettersson 1957.

³ Marek 1955; cf. Marek (1955) 2009; Marek 1956; cf. Marek (1956) 2009.

⁴ Marek 1959a; cf. Marek (1959a) 2009.

⁵ Marek 1959b; cf. Marek (1959b) 2009. Sami words are spelled according to the present orthographies.

⁶ Marek [1968] 2009: 117–129.

⁷ Marek [1968] 2009: 129–133.

⁸ Marek [1968] 2009: 133–167.

⁹ Marek [1968] 2009: 167–215.

¹⁰ Marek [1968] 2009: 216–236.

¹¹ Marek 2009; cf. Kovář 2009a; Kovář 2009b.

The four articles

In this short text, I will briefly present and comment on the four articles published in the 1950s.

(1) The first of them, published in 1955, is an introductory text. Here, Marek presents the most important sources, both the texts from the 17th and 18th centuries and the oral traditions collected later; then he takes up the most important research texts. He uses examples from the whole of the Sami territory, from the South Sami to the East Sami, but he does not make a point of regionalising. Instead, he uses the material from the different areas and time periods to sketch out the history of the development of Sami religion, since his main point of departure was that of cultural evolutionism in – what one could call – a “light” Marxist-Leninist variant. His idea is that certain forces in nature were gradually deified and made into divinities. Among the themes he deals with, one could mention the stones and mountains in nature that were regarded as powerful and therefore received sacrifices, and he discusses the role of the inner part of the tent where the hunting equipment and the ritual drum were traditionally kept.¹²

(2) The second article deals with “surviving elements of totemistic ideas”, one of the great themes within anthropology at the time. Here, Marek focuses especially on the bear, bear rituals and bear terminology, and the article is partly based on narratives he had collected himself during the 15 years he lived among the Sami of the South Sami region of Säävsoe (Norwegian Susendalen).¹³ The idea with “totemism” was that larger or smaller groups of related people (clans, phratries) had special relations with certain animals. The whole theme was abandoned after the publication in 1962 of

¹² Marek 1955; Marek (1955) 2009.

¹³ Marek 1956; Marek (1956) 2009.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Le totémisme aujourd'hui* (Totemism today),¹⁴ but in the 1950s this was still a central theme.

On the basis of this article, I would like to make a general comment on Marek's writing strategies. In the same way as place, time and scholarly trends influence *our* writing habits, Marek was, of course, also dependent on his contexts. But it is interesting to see how comparatively freely he acted in relation to the demands of what was regarded as good scholarship at his time. If one compares the introductions and conclusions of the Czech texts and the Russian summaries of his articles on the one hand with the main parts of the articles on the other, one sees this clearly. In the introductions, conclusions and summaries, he presents the results in accordance with cultural evolutionism and uses the terminology that was demanded within that paradigm, but the main parts of the texts of the articles are much more focused on interpretations of items of information in the different sources and therefore more empirical. To take one example, in the summary of the article about "surviving elements of totemistic ideas", Marek states – absolutely according to the handbooks of that time – that "hunting magic" was gradually developed into worshipping of animals, and that animals and people were later in the process of development understood as related, since they were all regarded as having souls. When such a relation was fully established, one talked about an "advanced totemism".¹⁵ He could have written this without having performed any analysis at all of his sources, since this was the way evolutionary development was understood. In the main part of the article, on the other hand, the evolutionistic ideas about a totemistic stage in the development of cultures are toned down. Instead, the focus is on the perception of animals in different Sami contexts, on rituals involving animals

¹⁴ Lévi-Strauss 1962.

¹⁵ Marek 1956: 54; Marek (1956) 2009: 66.

(and especially the bear), on divinities and other spiritual beings related to the animal world, etc.

(3) The third article is the most innovative one. As a matter of fact, it is the first scholarly text that specifically deals with the role of women in the indigenous Sami religion.¹⁶ I will therefore present this article in more detail.

Long before the study of the position of women in religions began in the 1970s, Marek had published the first scholarly article on women in Sami religion, but not only that. His article is, as a matter of fact, one of the first texts devoted to the role of women in any religion. Gender and religion, and especially women and religion, is today an important aspect of any study of any religion. But even today, however, most researchers who write about women and religion are female researchers. There are men who study this theme, but far fewer. In this respect also, Václav Marek was a forerunner and set a good example.

When one starts reading this article, one is at once transplanted into a type of cultural discourse common in the late 1950s. Nothing else would have been expected. However, when Marek on the second page of the article starts discussing concrete Sami phenomena, he gives interesting examples of female beings in the folklore traditions as well as in the earlier sources, first with some North Sami examples. Beginning with the ambivalent and powerful *Áhčēseatni* and *Njávešeatni* (the first of them described as hasty and thoughtless, the second as slow and slack in the folklore traditions), he continues by discussing *Gieddegeašgálgu*, ‘the old woman from the end of the meadow’. She was regarded as a wise and kind being living at the edge of the cultivable land, where she ruled over wind and

¹⁶ It would be 20 years before the next texts on the theme were published, all of them by female researchers though (Eira 1979; Bäckman 1982; Stephens 1983, etc.). Unfortunately, none of them referred to Marek’s article.

weather. If one met her and succeeded in speaking to her, one could – the stories tell us – ask her for anything, and she would give it.¹⁷

Then Marek moves on to the *háldit*, the rulers over areas in nature and over different species of animals and plants, one of them being Lottežeatni (who ruled over the birds), another Bármoáhká (who ruled over the land in the south where migratory birds stayed during the winter). In this group, he also includes the Lule Sami *gadniha*, whom the texts present as beautiful women with long hair who moved with their animals in the same way as the (nomading) Sami and who were as good at chanting as the Sami.¹⁸

Having discussed these beings in nature, Marek moves to the South Sami beings related to the tent and especially Båassjoeaahka, the being who ruled over *båassjoe*, the innermost part of the tent, where the ritual drum and the hunting equipment were kept.¹⁹

Finally, he comes to the most important female divinities of the South Sami: Maadteraahka, the first female ancestor, and her three daughters, Saaraahka, Joeksaahka and Oksaahka, all three of them related to the life of women. Saaraahka was the creator goddess and the most important divinity among the South Sami; Joeksaahka could change the female embryo to male if one wanted a son; Oksaahka guarded both the door of the tent and the sexual organs of women and also helped women during pregnancy and childbirth.²⁰

In the main part of the text Marek discusses these female beings with the help of the different sources; he compares the different items of information and presents an interpretation of the main roles of these female characters. He presents the material as evidence

¹⁷ Marek 1959a: 263–265; Marek (1959a) 2009: 69–72.

¹⁸ Marek 1959a: 265–267; Marek (1959a) 2009: 72–75.

¹⁹ Marek 1959a: 267–269; Marek (1959a) 2009: 75–78.

²⁰ Marek 1959a: 269–273; Marek (1959a) 2009: 78–84.

of a change from female to a male dominance, or in the terminology of the time, from matriarchy to patriarchy. However, even if we do not interpret the material in that way today, and the theoretical level therefore is problematic, the detailed analysis of the Sami material is still of utmost interest to anyone dealing with the indigenous religion of the Sami, not least because of Marek's vast knowledge of sources of various types and from different regions: Scandinavia, Finland and Russia.

Firstly, he emphasizes the existence of numerous female forest creatures (like Gieddegeašgálgu, the *háldit*, etc.), secondly, he presents Båassjoeaahka as originally being a goddess of the forest and hunting areas around the tent but also at the same time a being related to the tent and especially its hearth. Thirdly, he argues that when – at a later period – the men started to make the food, the hearth became “taboo for women”. Båassjoeaahka therefore had to step down to the ground beneath the *boassjoe*, the innermost part of the tent.

Later, Marek argues, the only important female divinities were those who protected women during menstruation and childbirth, and helped children during the early years of life (Maadteraahka, Saaraahka, Joeksaahka, Oksaahka). But even these divinities were, according to him, also related to the areas around the tent.

He concludes that women's interests represent the inner circle of family interest in the settlement and its closest surroundings. However, the outer circle of the family's area was protected by the most important idol of the men (the *sieidi* stones that received much of the sacrifices). When the men also started to get involved in the activities in the tent, for example by being responsible for the preparation of meat and fish for the meals, the roles of the men became even more important, and the women lost parts of their earlier power.²¹

²¹ Marek 1959a: 274; Marek (1959a) 2009: 86.

Even if this material would be looked upon differently today, Marek's interpretation cannot be rejected without serious consideration. His presentation of a possible development of the roles of the female divinities and spiritual beings of the Sami is an interesting way of ordering the information in the sources, of giving sense to disparate material full of contradictions. And in addition to that, the mere fact of having presented and analysed the scattered items of information about these female characters is a type of innovative gender analysis that to this day is all too uncommon in the study of the indigenous Sami religion.

(4) The fourth article takes up a theme that has been much discussed: opinions about life and death and their relations to two types of invisible beings, one being the departed ancestors, the other the South Sami so-called *saajvh* beings.²² These beings were regarded as living in certain mountains. They were owned by humans, both men and women; one could sell and buy *saajvh* and children inherited the *saajvh* beings of their parents; status in South Sami culture was related to how many *saajvh* beings a person owned.²³

Also in this article, Marek presents what we today would call a gender perspective, for example when discussing the roles of the female *saajvh*. The most interesting parts of the article are based on his own interviews with the people he got to know during his years in Säävsoe. To mention only one example, he takes up the interesting traditions about name giving and how names were

²² The *saajvh* had earlier been taken up by, for example, Reuterskiöld (1912: 84–87, 91–94), and Wiklund (1916). Later the *saajvh* were discussed by Arbman (1961) and Bäckman (1975), among others. Sami ideas about life and death and about the world of the departed had earlier been dealt with by Pettersson (1957), and were later taken up by Storå (1971), Mériot (1976–78), and Bäckman (1979).

²³ Cf. Rydving 2010: 120–124.

chosen. One of his informants, Gunhild Børgefjell (1868–1959),²⁴ told him that when she heard that her sister-in-law had given her new-born son the name Nils, she started to cry, because she thought that the child was given the name of Gunhild's unhappy brother, who had been mentally ill, and now she thought that the child would in the same way have a life full of suffering and illness.²⁵ In such situations, however, when a child had received an improper name, it was possible to change the name for a better one, and of course Gunhild Børgefjell knew about that tradition, already well attested in the sources from the 17th and 18th centuries.²⁶ This is just one of many examples in his texts where Marek is able to show that indigenous religious traditions lived on long after the process of religious change – a process that in some areas began as early as during the 11th and 12th centuries and that was intensified during the decades around 1700.

Conclusion

Marek's articles often begin with some modern theme, something Marek had heard in Sàavsoe or read in one of the collections of folklore material. And from there he goes to the earlier material, searching for parallels or confirmations that the same type of ideas can also be found in that material. When he does that, he uses all the available sources and all the available research texts. His knowledge of both sources and research literature is nothing less than impressive. In order to find these examples, he must have devoted a lot of time to reading and re-reading extensive material.

²⁴ Marek 1992: 238.

²⁵ Marek 1959b: 397; Marek (1959b) 2009: 108.

²⁶ Cf. Rydving 1993: 115–122.

He seems to have been looking everywhere, and since he – like every serious culture researcher – was a polyglot, he was able to use material not only in the Scandinavian languages, Czech, Russian and English, but also in Finnish, German and French, not to mention his independent analyses of the original Sami material. Marek refers to Sami words, explains them and uses them as important elements in his texts. This method is a way to relate the more theoretical and general level of the analyses to the concrete ways of thinking of the Sami informants, be they his own or those who had been interviewed several centuries earlier. He takes the Sami seriously and was – I would say – able to think and analyse in a Sami way. His 15 years in Säävsoe are most probably the reason why he was able to analyse Sami ways of thinking in such a nuanced, respectful and well-informed way many decades before historical and anthropological investigations on the cultures and religions of indigenous peoples even tried to be nuanced, respectful and well informed. We should not forget that at the time when Marek wrote his texts, the peoples we today call indigenous were still called “primitive” and most researchers looked down on them. This arrogant attitude is never found in Marek’s writings, not even when he – rather unwillingly it seems to me – had to relate to the dominant theoretical ideas of his time.

However, the time-bound theoretical discourses are, as I have mentioned, in the main found at the beginning and at the end of Marek’s texts and in the Russian summaries. If we just dig through that thin layer, we find a much thicker layer of independent analyses of primary sources in dialogue with the leading authorities of his time. I do hope that he knew that he himself was one of these leading authorities on Sami culture and religion. We – who read him more than six decades after he wrote his articles – have no difficulty in seeing that he was not only one of the leading authorities, but also one of the most creative and most thought-provoking researchers. Therefore, his texts are still very rewarding to read.

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