

Introduction

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The indigenous religious traditions of the peoples of the Arctic and Sub-Arctic areas were very diverse before they were superseded by Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam – and later by secularism. Despite their diversity, these traditions have, however, often been presented as more or less similar. But in recent research, diversity and the local have shifted towards the focus of interest. It was for this reason that we chose source criticism and comparisons as the theme for the conference where preliminary versions of the chapters in this volume were first presented. Source criticism and a new understanding of the sources combined with critical readings of earlier research are therefore basic methodological tools in all the contributions. In addition, the following essays test out different comparative approaches to historical material.

The nine chapters analyse material from different time periods, from the Middle Ages to the present. They address examples of ritual and narrative traditions among a selection of ‘northern peoples’: Estonians, Finns, Karelians, Samis, Scandinavians, and Irish in Western Europe; Khantys, Mansis, Nganasans, and Sakhas in Siberia; Assiniboines, Crees, Lakotas, and Ojibwas in northern North America. Some of the chapters focus on aspects of the traditional cultures of these peoples, others are critical readings of research about them. The themes of the chapters that deal with traditional practices and narratives vary from hostage traditions to ancestor mountains, from bear rituals and sweat baths to the ritual drum. The research historical chapters discuss source critical and terminological problems, or consider the contributions of scholars in the emergence of what eventually become identified

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as religions. The purpose of collecting these rather diverse texts into a single volume is to exemplify some of the ways in which the history of indigenous religious traditions of Arctic and Sub-Arctic peoples are studied today, with a focus on various forms of source criticism and comparison.

The book is divided into three parts, each with three chapters. The first part gives examples of comparative approaches to 'Localised practices and religions'. The historian of religions Stefan Olsson, an expert on hostage traditions in Fennoscandia and the British Isles during the Viking Age and the Middle Ages, discusses four place names, a Swedish one that Saxo Grammaticus Latinised as Gyslamarchia, the Karelian Kihlakunta, Kihelkonna on the Estonian island of Saaremaa, and the Irish Airgíalla. Olsson shows that even such minimal material can be the basis for interesting observations, because it is possible that all four names contain a word for 'hostage'. But is that really the case? And is it possible to draw any conclusion about medieval hostage traditions on the basis of an analysis of these names? These are two of the questions Olsson attempts to answer.

In recent decades, there has been a certain scepticism about earlier analyses of the indigenous religions of Fennoscandia that compared, for example, Sami and Scandinavian traditions and asked questions almost exclusively about origin. This is now changing and the leading researcher in the new endeavour of comparing and relating Old Norse and Sami religious traditions is the linguist Eldar Heide. In his contribution he returns to the earlier discussion about ancestor mountains with a new comparative analysis of the Icelandic Helgafell and the South Sami *saajve* complexes. He presents the sources, characterises the two complexes, and asks whether or not Helgafell and the *saajve* mountains were regarded as realms of the dead. Finding connections and similarities, he suggests how they could be understood.

In his doctoral dissertation, the folklorist and historian of religions Vesa Matteo Piludu investigated songs of Finnish and Karelian bear ceremonies. One type of these songs is *The Birth of the Bear in the Sky*, and it is these that Piludu takes as the basis for a comparative analysis here. The Finno-Karelian examples are compared to Ob-Ugric (Khanty and Mansi) songs of the

same type. In contrast to earlier research, which focused on the similarities, Piludu has investigated both differences and similarities asking questions like: What sources exist and how have they been analysed in earlier research? Were the bear songs in the two different cultural contexts used in the same or in different types of rituals? What is similar and what is different in the contents of these songs?

In the second part, ‘Indigenous Sami religion: research history and source criticism’, the three contributions focus on different source materials – a ritual drum and texts written by clergymen and missionaries, records of a court proceeding, and two introductory research texts. All three chapters, however, give ample proof of the necessity of source criticism. The historian and geographer Dikka Storm and the folklorist Trude Fonneland write about a North Sami drum that was found in the early 1990s and deposited at the Arctic University Museum of Norway in 2016. Storm and Fonneland discuss several interesting questions relating to the find: What period does the drum date from? What were the religious conditions within the area at that time? How was Christian work organised, and what do we know about the local forms of indigenous Sami religion? What were the religious identities of the Sami?

In the witchcraft trials of northernmost Norway during the seventeenth century, a comparatively large percentage of those who were accused, judged, and executed were Sami men and women. The contribution by historian Liv Helene Willumsen, the preeminent expert on these trials, presents an interpretation of the best known case, the one against Anders Poulsen in 1692. In a close reading of the court proceedings with recourse to the discourse analysis of the literary theorist Gérard Genette, Willumsen investigates the context of the trial, the ‘voices’ that played such a central part, and how Poulsen’s interpretation of the figures on his drum can be understood. Finally, she asks whether the manuscript reveals anything about shamanism.

In the third source-critical investigation, the historian of religions Konsta Kaikkonen discusses an introduction to Sami indigenous religion, originally written by the Finnish clergyman Jacob Fellman. The introduction consists of two parts, a lexical one

that was written before the end of the 1830s, and a general one, probably written around 1850. However, the introduction remained unknown until its publication 1906 by Jacob's son Isak, who not only rearranged the material, but also, as Kaikkonen convincingly argues, added some sections. Kaikkonen discusses several source-critical questions, such as: To what extent is the introduction a compilation of earlier works and to what extent is it an independent source on Sami indigenous religion in Northern Finland? And how does the text relate to a similar manuscript from the same period, written by Fellman's Swedish colleague Lars Levi Laestadius?

In the third part of the book, 'Theories, comparisons, and the roles of scholarship', three historians of religions demonstrate how the use of carefully selected theoretical perspectives can illuminate empirical material from Native North America and Finland, from the Nganasan and from the Sakha in Siberia. Riku Hämäläinen makes two comparisons, first between the role of the bear rituals of the Eastern Cree on the one hand and of the Assiniboine and the Lakota on the other, and secondly between the Native North American sweat bath tradition and the Finnish sauna tradition. He interprets the bear rituals with the help of the ecology of religion model formulated by Åke Hultkrantz, and the sweat bath and sauna traditions with the help of the models for ritual analysis proposed by Arnold van Gennep and advanced by Victor Turner. In his conclusion, Hämäläinen discusses how the similarities and dissimilarities between the examples should be understood; in doing so, and in contrast to much earlier research, he places special emphasis on the importance of differences when studying religious traditions.

Although Olle Sundström's contribution analyses the technical terminology of Soviet ethnographers, his study is of considerable relevance even today to anyone studying world views other than those of the Nganasan. What technical term should one use for Nganasan *ηυḁ'*: 'masters/mistresses', 'spirits', 'gods/goddesses', 'deities', or something else? How did the Soviet ethnographers justify their choice? How did they relate the choice of term to Marxist-Leninist theory? Starting out from a general theoretical discussion of the function of comparative categories such as

‘spirit’ and ‘god’, Sundström discusses these questions through an analysis and comparison of how four Soviet ethnographers translated and categorised the Nganasan *ηυα*?

Finally, Liudmila Nikanorova explores how scholars have, in their writings and other activities, found, claimed, and authorised certain Sakha practices as ‘religious’ and ‘shamanistic’, or helped to demonise the Sakha *oyuuns* (an important category of Sakha practitioners). In recent years, several attempts have been made to reawaken Sakha ‘religion’ or ‘spiritual culture’. Nikanorova gives examples of three organisations that claim to represent authentic Sakha religion and poses critical questions about the roles of present-day legislation and scholars. She emphasises the necessity to contextualise the processes whereby ‘religion’ and ‘shamanism’ were constructed in pre-Soviet times, processes that still have practical implications for the Sakha today.

The historical study of the indigenous religious traditions of northern North America and northern Eurasia offers many interesting challenges for the researcher. One is the diversity of both the indigenous languages and the languages that research texts are written in. This puts great demand on the linguistic competence of the researcher. Another challenge is that the historical sources are not only of many different kinds but also problematic. Many were written by persons with very negative attitudes towards the traditions they were collecting material about. Many also lacked even the most basic linguistic competence in indigenous languages, which of course caused misunderstandings, even when the intentions were less biased. A third is the fact that the material is scanty and very variable. Some themes are dealt with at great length (naturally those that the compiler of the material found most interesting), others only hinted at, or entirely ignored. There are therefore many things about which we simply have no information. Also, themes that are central in the sources relating to certain peoples receive far less attention in sources relating to the traditions of other groups. In consequence, many researchers have felt tempted to fill the gaps in the information about the particular people, time and area in which they specialise with what is known from sources describing other peoples, other times and other areas. The assumptions behind this approach were, on the

one hand, that the religious traditions of each of these peoples were homogenous and static (which of course they were not), and on the other, that they can all be regarded as more or less similar (which is just as erroneous). Thus researchers did not hesitate to use material about some other people in order to fill out a description of some practice or narrative of the people they themselves were studying. Needless to say, this has not been regarded as an acceptable method in research texts about Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, for example.

It is this research historical background that motivates the very different approach to indigenous religious traditions of northern peoples in this volume. Here, the emphasis is on differences and on nuances. Therefore, critical analyses of earlier research, different forms of source criticism, and comparative methods that look for more than just similarities are all applied as essential analytical tools.