

# THE DIFFICULT, BUT CHALLENGING, COMPLEXITY OF CONTEMPORARY SAAMI REALITY – COMMENTS ON ROBERT PAINE’S ARTICLE “TRAILS OF SAAMI SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS”

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I shall begin my commentary on Robert Paine’s paper by discussing the more general issues which he considers.

Paine utilizes Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances in order to draw our attention to what he calls “patterned diversity within culture.”

I fully agree with Paine when he says that “we should not allow ourselves unexamined assumptions about ethnic homogeneity and, even more serious perhaps, about ethnic solidarity” (p. 172). You do not need to be an anthropologist to see (hear) that there are different “voices” speaking from the indigenous communities. At least that is the situation among the Saami and the Inuit in Greenland. These voices not only find their expression in opposing organizations (such as NSR and SLF in Norway) but also as opposing political parties (*Attasut* and *Siumut*) as in Greenland. Among the Saamis we are now hearing women’s voices. In the community of Karasjok the women set up their own list for the Saami parliamentary election. Saami women have also organized themselves in a Nordic Saami Women’s Organization, and in August 1990 they are to be the hosts of the first indigenous women’s conference.

Secondly, Paine raises the question as to who is competent to speak about *Saami self-consciousness*. He discusses several possible authorial stances, dividing them into Saami and non-Saami lists. He himself belongs to the non-Saami list. He concludes that in all cases there will be some problems of interpretation and generalization given that:

1. there is no entity – “Saami self-consciousness” – but many trails to follow;

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2. that I cannot assume competence, nevertheless I undertake to follow some “trails” – fully aware of my interpretive and generalizing pretensions!” (p. 174)

I agree with Paine that we cannot speak of one entity, “Saami self-consciousness,” just in the same way as we cannot speak about ethnic homogeneity. The second part of his conclusion, on the other hand, begs some comment. My remarks will have to do with the question of who has the *competence* and who has the *right* to speak about Saami issues, be it Saami self-consciousness, Saami solidarity or Saami homogeneity.

I do understand why Paine is so cautious. First, he does not see himself as an expert on self-consciousness as such. That is not his strongest point, he would argue, insofar as there might be scholars much more competent than him. Secondly, he knows there will be Saami academics who will accuse him of having neither the *competence* nor the *right* to speak of self-consciousness or of any Saami issue for that matter. The question of who has the right and the competence to do research among Saamis has been a bone of contention for at least 20 years now and, in my opinion, it is time to put this issue on the scientific agenda and not let the ethnopoliticians claim monopoly over it. I know it has been on the hidden agenda among anthropologists for quite a long time – and that this ethnopolitical statement has caused all sorts of reactions among anthropologists, varying from irritation as well as frustration to agreement – but why not face it? Why go on, as Paine actually does, assuming that the non-native does not have the competence to speak about “native issues,” and then in the next breath, display that competence and exercise that authority, if only before an academic audience? Given that, as scientists, we should not allow ourselves to leave the assumptions about ethnic homogeneity unexamined, should we also not challenge the assumption that it is only as a member of a specific culture that one has competence in examining issues in that culture?

The question of the *right* to do research is not unfamiliar to scientists, I would presume. In Norway, I have to ask the *Datatilsynet* before I am allowed to use a method that identifies individuals. If I am going to do research in a school, I have to ask the local school board and the parents. If my field is medicine I would have to present my project before an ethical committee. When one undertakes research, one is necessarily constrained by moral, ethical, political and legal rules and restrictions. The right to do research will always entail a satisfactory answer to questions about the purpose of one’s project. One enters a *dialogue* with “the other.” Such restrictions are less readily entertained by those who claim that as members of a specific group they have the competence to conduct research within their own culture. They argue that such competence is acquired as a birthright. It

is a gift of grace, so to speak, and since you were unlucky enough not to be born as a Saami, there is nothing you can do but go home again or hope to be reborn as one. There is no hope for a dialogue.

Why then do I, as a Saami, not leave it there and accept that as a member of the Saami culture I, and not Paine, have the competence to examine it? That would be rather convenient for me, and I would not risk being charged with ethnic betrayal. The reason for not adopting such a stance is that I, both as a social scientist and member of Saami society, very well know that there are many different voices among my people, i.e., that ethnic homogeneity is something politically constructed with specific purposes in mind. I have experienced "knowledge as distributed and controlled" (Keesing 1987). In Saami society, as in all societies, there are those who will control knowledge and keep it for themselves, so to speak. By controlling knowledge, you also control the political power structure. Both as a woman ethnopolitician and as a social scientist, I cannot look dispassionately at the way some (mostly well-educated young men in their late 1930s and 1940s, many of them first generation Saami academics) try to control the political power structure by controlling the distribution of knowledge. In one situation, they claim to be academics, in another to be ethnopoliticians. This is the Janus-face of ethnopolitics! And Paine knows this. As he so clearly put it himself, "they elevate their own experiences of self-consciousness (and their interpretations thereof) as though they are shared by all Saami" (p. 182).

I do not oppose the notion that one may, because one is born and raised in a culture, acquire a competence that is also useful when one sets out to do research in it. I myself do research in my own culture, and I do benefit from the fact that I was brought up in that culture. But if I had not been professionally trained to do research, I, as a "legitimate child" of the ethnopolitical movement of the 1970s, would surely have fallen into the ditch of ethnopolitics; i.e., I would for instance have claimed that those Saamis who did not join the NSR in the 1960s and 1970s suffered from "false consciousness." My point is, that it is not only the non-Saami academics who have "culturally blind spots," so do the Saami academics. In both cases it is a matter of professional training, and not of birth. The point here is to differentiate between *cultural background* and *analytical understanding*. The former refers to a person's knowledge, customs and values. Analytical understanding, on the other hand, is the basis for insight, on another level, into interpersonal relations and problems, even in multicultural situations. The challenge for native studies at the universities should, in fact, be to examine how they could incorporate this culture-specific competence as a part of systematic, professional training in analytical understanding.

Whatever his reservations, Paine does examine the issues of Saami self-consciousness. Given that he has had 30 years' experience, he acquits him-

self quite well at the task, a fact of which he can hardly be unaware. Nonetheless, it would appear that he would prefer that others should assume the responsibility for analyzing these questions. Here he points to a third group which he labels as “a kind of ‘métis.’” But legally there is no such category in Norway. The rules determining the eligibility of voters for the Saami parliament stipulate that the individual, or one of his/her parents or grandparents, should be Saami or Saami-speaking. The same criteria hold for the Saami parliament in Finland. (The Saamis in Sweden still do not have any parliament). Why should Paine have the right to withdraw to his office while some others, ourselves for instance, the second generation of Saami academics, are to be left alone facing “Goliath”? By taking that stand, he, on the one hand argues that, as a non-Saami academic, he does not have the competence, while on the other hand, before an academic audience, he claims that he has. That is riding two horses at once! As a social scientist, and especially as an anthropologist, given that his profession has been targeted for criticism from members of indigenous groups, he should have made a point out of that and discussed what kinds of competence he possessed, as an academic and not as a Saami.

The third general issue Paine calls the *temptation of chronology*. Although the story, which began in the 1950s with a fractured and stigmatized minority group and ended on October 9, 1989 with the convening of a Saami parliament in the presence of a Norwegian king, looks like a glittering political triumph, we must, Paine argues, ask “how correct is it to speak of political triumph?” We must, he goes on, “ask what cognitive changes have taken place among the diverse population which is called ‘the Saami.’” As with the assumptions about ethnic homogeneity, we must not leave the “glittering political triumph” unexamined. Paine actually asks if we could speak of a political triumph at all; “what cognitive changes have taken place within the ‘family of resemblances’ called Saami? What changes in everyday behaviour and attitudes? And far from the everyday, what changes in reaction to crisis?”

Paine gives us illustrations of some cognitive changes which have occurred between the 1950s and 1960s and the present. For instance, “the interface between [reindeer pastoral] Saami and non-Saami identity was expressed less [than is currently the case] around language policy, pasturing rights, and such like” (p. 180). He notes reactions to crisis: for example the different reactions in the north and the south to radioactive contamination from Chernobyl. I could go on listing examples of changes that have taken place; changes that we could label cognitive changes. One of these would be the developments which have occurred in the SLF. It is not only that they have changed their statutes and no longer have the sentence that they honour and respect the constitution, the king etc., but in their relation to the Norwe-

gian society they more and more argue for “equal worth,” as NSR always have done. Even though they opposed NSR’s picture of the world (Saamis without any rights in Norway *as Saami*), they have never claimed that they were not Saamis any longer, as Paine believes (p. 185). Their claim was: “We are Saamis, but *also* Norwegians.” But in an ethnopolitical movement, particularly in its initial phases, there is no room for such a category; you are either/or, not both. Among those who joined the ethnopolitical movement of the 1970s, there are now those who dare to say that, in fact, they also feel that they are members of both groups and have two identities, that they cannot point out what is the Saami part of them, and what is the Norwegian part of them. What they tell us, is that to create and maintain a new ethnic identity in a majority/minority context is far more complicated than just proclaiming that you are of a different category than the majority. It also tells us that we, as social scientists, should not leave unquestioned the cultural emblems that ethnopolitical movements use in their nation-building.

We may now question whether or not these recent changes represent a political triumph. Some undoubtedly would say that the changes that have taken place are for the worse, while others would claim that they are for the better. The attribution of credit for these changes is also an issue. (It is often a matter of interpretation, and is dependent on variant readings of history.) I would consider it a political triumph when the local social democratic party in a community, after years of opposition to calling the community by its Saami name, agrees to do it, and abruptly co-opts their earlier opponents’ argument about the right of the minority language to occupy the same status as the majority language. But I am not so sure that the new *Saami Language Act* is a political triumph. According to the law the Saami language is to be given the same status as Norwegian in specific communities. Accordingly, it stipulates that the administration will have to be bilingual. That would not be a problem for those administrators who deal face-to-face with people, because most of the them are Saamis themselves and do speak the language. The problem is that very few of them have ever learned to read and write their native tongue. And even though many of them have been taking language courses over the last few years, no “official” language exists which is appropriate to their administrative task. How are they, for instance, going to set up a letter in Saami? At school they have learned Norwegian correspondence, but no one taught them Saami correspondence. New lexemes will have to be created in Saami. I have talked with quite a few Saamis working in the administration and they all tell the same story. They all agree that the Saami language is to be given the same status as Norwegian, they all went to language courses and had a hard time learning to read and write, but they still feel incompetent in using Saami in their professional work, a fact which now makes them frustrated. The world outside expects them to write

in Saami – “haven’t you had language courses?” – so it all ends up being their *personal problem*. There is, as far as I know, no program or funding for making new words, and I have not seen any proposals for such a project from those ethnopoliticians who once so passionately supported this new language law.

If I were to answer Paine’s question whether we could speak of a political triumph, I would say “yes.” In certain ways we can talk of a triumph, but we should also be aware that all triumphs have their price, that there will always be winners and losers. That is much more of a “painful truth,” to paraphrase Paine, than the fact that there are different interpretations of Saami identity. Why are not we (i.e., Saamis) allowed to have different interpretations, why are we not allowed to disagree amongst ourselves? If we are not allowed to bring our different opinions out in the open, how can we endeavour to control the “distribution of knowledge?” In my opinion it is time to look at the reverse side of the picture. Only when we dare to do that can we have a hope of constructing a society without big internal cleavages. Then we may realize that October 9, 1989 was not the end of the road but another crossroad. And in this process, the non-Saami academics, doing research in Saami societies, have a responsibility too.

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