

## Book Reviews

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Helander-Renvall, Elina. *Sámi Society Matters*. Rovaniemi: Lapland University Press. 2016. 192 pp. ISBN: 978-952-310-980-3.

*Sámi Society Matters* is a selected edition which reprints seven journal articles written in English by Elina Helander-Renvall, a long-standing Sámi intellectual, activist, artist and scholar. The first article in this collection was written in 1999 and the most recent was published in 2014. This volume contributes to constructing the conceptual heritage of Sámi tradition, perspectives, epistemology and cosmology, and was put together in 2016 by Sanna Valkonen and Jarno Valkonen as a way 'to offer a comprehensive picture of Elina's research and thinking' (p. 146). The thesis of Helander-Renvall's work is 'to understand and describe the everyday life of the Sámi, in terms of the conceptions, perceptions and potential problems affecting it, just as the Sámi themselves see and experience these subjectively' (p. 146). This not only contributes to naturalistic and phenomenological inquiry in the Sámi societal context, but also serves a political purpose that is action-oriented and emancipatory. I am immensely inspired by how effortlessly Helander-Renvall's writing travels between the everyday life of the Sámi and their epistemology and cosmology. Through reading her work, readers are reminded that all knowledge systems are created in their own specific contexts and that external influences are a constitutive part of culture.

The volume consists of four sections, the first three of which are composed of Helander-Renvall's published articles arranged by themes in chronological order. Three articles concerning the subsistence and traditional knowledge of the Sámi (published in 1999, 2007 and 2009)

comprise the first section, two articles pertaining to animism (published in 2010 and 2014) the second, and two articles regarding the Sámi facing globalization and developing customary law (published in 2010 and 2013) the third. The fourth section is composed of Helander-Renvall's reflection on indigenous research, an interview conducted by Jarno Valkonen and a list of publications (1984–2015).

The articles in the first section, which are based on empirical data collected by Helander-Renvall, encompass descriptions of activities such as ptarmigan trapping, reindeer herding and fishing. She then links these everyday activities to distinct Sámi knowledge systems, epistemology and cosmology as a whole. In 'Sámi Subsistence Activities—Spatial Aspects and Structuration', she unpacks Sámi concepts of locality and territoriality when depicting ptarmigan trapping as a situated activity. In 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Snow and Sámi Reindeer Herding', she examines herding strategies through the literature of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). She also takes advantage of the opportunity to highlight the Sámi's rich snow terminology as an example that problematizes the inequality between indigenous and Western knowledge. Helander-Renvall returns to the argument of political and epistemological inequality more strongly in 'Beyond the Pale: Locating Sea Sámi Women outside the Official Fisheries Discourse in Northern Norway'. In examining the situation of contemporary Sea Sámi women, she confronts the dichotomies between the status of the Sámi people and Norway's colonial power,

between Sámi men and women, and between reindeer herding and fishing practices.

In the second section, the articles selected by the editors present analyses of reindeer herders in the context of animism. In the fourth article, 'Animism, Personhood and the Nature of Reality: Sámi Perspectives', Helander-Renvall challenges the boundary between nature and culture by arguing that while reindeer herding practice is embedded in the natural environment, the nature of reality is at the same time embedded in the Sámi cultural practice of reindeer herding (cf. p. 62). Based on this mutually embedded relationship of nature and culture, reindeer herders communicate in 'mythic discourse' with non-human beings in their environment (p. 71). Mythic discourse is a recurrent activity, taking place through 'dreams, rituals, stories, prayers, activities, performances and discussions' (p. 72), that helps hunters and herders with their everyday lives.

Utilizing reindeer herding practice as a focal point in the fifth article—'Relationships Between Sámi Reindeer Herders, Lands, and Reindeer'—Helander-Renvall elucidates how the notions of sustainability and adaptability in the context of reindeer herding in the Arctic are understood from the Sámi perspective. The Sámi make sense of living through a relational epistemology that recognizes that humans and non-humans—for example, land and animals—are equal and carry spiritual qualities. Reindeer husbandry is not only a way of life and a subsistence activity, but an activity whereby humans and non-humans sustain a reciprocal relationship.

The sixth article ('Globalization and Traditional Livelihoods') examines the impacts of globalization on indigenous communities, noting that they utilize the same toolkit as that used by globalization, and, indeed, which contributed to producing the phenomenon in

the first place (p. 116). Two case studies are employed as examples: the Sea Sámi of Tana Fjord in northern Norway who deploy global networks and international instruments, and the Nenets reindeer herders of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug who use global flows as toolkits. In the seventh article—'On Customary Law among the Saami People'—Helander-Renvall dives into the Sámi's traditional rules and customary laws by analyzing the notion of *siida* (village). Each *siida* 'owns' an exclusive area in which the *siida* administers resource-usage as a collective right for the community who live within it (p. 125). The notion of *siida* is a cornerstone of Sámi customary rules which are drawn from localized knowledge accumulated over generations; based on common understanding and social acceptance, the rules are both dynamic and flexible (cf. p. 131).

The interview presented in the fourth section unravels various aspects of Sámi research that Helander-Renvall developed throughout her career. In the course of conversation, she suggests that Sámi research needs to have a new scope that embraces the challenges posed by drastic recent change in the form of modernization and globalization. At the same time, instead of merely comprising a counter-reaction to Western academic and societal paradigms that spring from colonialism, Sámi research should develop distinct 'research methods, theories and topics' that best suit its specificities (p. 147).

*Sámi Society Matters* is a collection of well-written articles by an author who sees both the Indigenous and Western worlds with crystal clarity. Nonetheless there are three areas of research in which I would have appreciated more extensive treatment. First, the selected articles give the impression that the Sami are homogenous because they are based on the epistemologies and traditional knowledge

from a specific region. It would have been more satisfying if the content had included treatment of the Skolt and Inari Sámi. Second, the notion of indigenous sovereignty would benefit from discussion of the legal definition or self-identification dispute in Finland (see Aikio and Åhrén 2014), in particular the case raised by Erika Sarivaara (2012). Third, as Helander-Renvall is both an outsider and insider, her ethical considerations and researcher's position are highly relevant. Greater discussion of her application of reflexivity—how she negotiates her emic and etic position—as well as issues of authority, legitimacy and power are needed. As a young Indigenous scholar myself, I would have wanted to read more about her reflections on conducting research pertaining to her own communities.

The Sámi community can be congratulated on having eloquent writers who contribute to furthering a research paradigm based on the knowledge, epistemology and cosmology of the Sámi. Moreover, the subjects which Helander-Renvall addresses and emphasizes are invaluable

to the Sámi decolonization project, meaning that she is contributing to the indigenous research agenda (Smith 1999, Wilson 2009) for Sápmi as a whole.

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