Skolt Sámi literature

Rießler, Michael
Yhdenvertaisen kulttuurin puolesta ry
2018


http://hdl.handle.net/10138/305132

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.
Skolt Sámi literature

Michael Rießler

Introduction

This short chapter presents a general overview of oral and written Skolt Sámi literary genres as well as other artistic or poetic uses of the language and describes the most important writers and other performers.

Although Skolt Sámi is predominantly spoken in Finland today, historically it belongs to the Kola Sámi languages of Russia. Skolt Sámi speakers still maintain close ties to the Sámi speaker communities in Russia, with whom they share, for instance, Orthodox Christianity, the national costume as well as genres and topics in traditional oral literature. See also Sergejeva (2000), who subsumes the Skolt Sámi and Kola Sámi cultures and languages under the term "Eastern Sámi". Since the summaries in this report are divided according to the contemporary Sámi written languages, Skolt Sámi is presented separately from Kildin Sámi. However, this chapter and the one on Kola Sámi partly overlap and allow for interesting comparisons.

Skolt Sámi literary practices have thus far not been described comprehensively, but information about writers and other performers is sometimes included in encyclopedic and popular scientific overviews of the Skolt Sámi language, history and culture. Siegl and Rießler (2015) provide a historical description of the planning and writing of Skolt Sámi since the 1880s in comparison to Kildin Sámi (and two native languages of Siberia), but do not include specific information about literary genres and authors; McBride-Utasi (1995) describes the rise of Skolt Sámi literary writing in the 1970s as a result of systematic language planning and the creation of a normalised orthography; Moshnikoff (2005) offers another short overview of the recent history of Skolt Sámi literacy, which also only briefly describes the existing literary genres.

The Skolt Sámi language and the first publications

Skolt Sámi is spoken only by a few hundred speakers today. They live predominantly in the municipality of Inari in Finland, especially in Sevettijärvi and Nellim as well as in Ivalo and Inari. Traditionally, Skolt Sámi was spoken on the Kola Peninsula and the adjacent mainland in the borders between Russia, Norway and Finland. However, most members of the original Suón'mjel (Suonikylä in Finnish), Paažjök (Pasvik in Norwegian, Paatsjoki in Finnish) and Peáccam siidas (Petsamo in Finnish, Petsjenga/Pečenga in Norwegian and Russian) resettled in Finland after the area was ceded to the Soviet Union in 1945. Only few speakers of Skolt Sámi remained on the Russian side, mostly from Njuõ’ttjau’r siida (Notozero in Russian), where also speakers from Muet’bkk siida (Motka in Russian) had been forced to resettle earlier on. The traditional dialect of Njauddám siida (Neiden in Norwegian, Näätämö in Finnish) in Norway is not spoken any longer, although a few active speakers of Skolt Sámi have moved from Finland to the Norwegian side, where they live permanently today.

Of the Kola Sámi languages Akkala Sámi is the language linguistically and culturally closest to Skolt Sámi and could therefore also be regarded a dialect of Skolt Sámi (rather than of Kildin Sámi). It has been regarded as a moribund language, or perhaps already extinct (Rantala and Sergina 2009; Scheller 2011).

The first written records of Skolt Sámi were folkloristic text samples collected by Norwegian linguists (e.g. Friis 1856; Qvigstad and Sandberg 1887) already in the 18th century. Later, also the Finnish linguists Arvid Genetz, Toivo Itkonen and Eliel Lagercrantz collected and published spoken folklore from different dialect areas (Genetz 1891; Itkonen 1931; Lagercrantz 1961). The first book written partly in Akkala Sámi (although most parts were written in Kildin Sámi) was a translation of the Gospel of Matthew published in a Cyrillic script by Genetz, who translated the text from Russian with the help of Akkala Sámi informants in the town of Kandalaksha (Matthew 1878). The publication, printed in Helsinki, was initiated and funded by the Lutheran Church. A Skolt Sámi translation of the same text was published in Archangel’sk in 1884 (Matthew 1884). The editor, Konstantin Schekoldin, was an Orthodox priest in Petsamo, i.e. in the Skolt Sámi area. Consequently, he worked with Skolt Sámi consultants on the translation. Schekoldin also published Skolt Sámi fairy tales in Russian (Schekoldin 1890).

Other samples of Skolt Sámi oral literature, especially chanting, have later been collected and published (as transcripts and translations) in Finland (cf. e.g. Launis 1908; Väisänen 1943; Widstrand 1961; Laatinen 1977) and (less so) in the Soviet Union (e.g. Senkevich-Gudkova 1959), but the next period of writing in Skolt Sámi started as late as in the 1970s, when the contemporary orthography was created and systematic language planning measures started in Finland. On the Soviet, later Russian, side of the Skolt Sámi territory, the Skolt Sámi written language has not been introduced until very recently when language teaching for children and adults has been occasionally on offer, supported exclusively from outside Russia (for instance by the Ávv Skolt Sámi Museum in Neiden).
The two most productive Skolt Sámi fiction writers both debuted between the 1970s and the 1980s, although on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. Whereas Askold Bazhanov in the Soviet Union wrote exclusively in Russian, Kati-Claudia Fofonoff in Finland wrote predominantly in Skolt Sámi.

Important writers (and other performers)

In the following section, a few important Skolt Sámi writers and other performers of literary language are briefly introduced, but one should bear in mind that the list is by no means exhaustive.

Askold Bazhanov, 1934–2012 (Аскольд А. Бажанов [even miss-spelled as Basanov in Norway]), published his first book, a collection of poems titled Солнце над тундрой. Стихи. (‘Sun over the Tundra), with the renowned Murmansk Book Publisher (Мурманское книжное издательство) already in 1983 (Bazhanov 1983). By then, he had already published several poems in anthologies. Bazhanov must thus be described as the very first Kola Sámi author (rather than the Ter Sámi Oktiabrina Voronova, see the chapter on Kola Sámi literature).

Although he was a native (and proficient) speaker of the Notozero dialect of Skolt Sámi, he wrote exclusively in Russian. In a conversation with the author of this chapter, shortly before Bazhanov passed away, the writer explained his choice of using Russian with the negative attitudes of the Russian Sámi “authorities” towards his native language. But applying the written Kildin Sámi norm would have meant disfiguring his language to the point of being unrecognisable, as Bazhanov found. On the other hand, his native variant of Skolt Sámi could have been written perfectly in the official Skolt Sámi orthography developed across the border in Finland. But this was of course strictly out of question in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, according to a perception of Sámi language(s) among Sámi people in Russia (as well as among Russian researchers working on Sámi languages and literatures) that has prevailed until today, different Sámi languages do not exist and all variants spoken in Russia are rooted in the Kildin Sámi written standard. This clearly goes back to the earliest stage of Kola Sámi language planning in the Soviet Union, when Kildin Sámi was chosen as the main variant for representing all Kola Sámi spoken varieties. Political reasons are likely behind this decision (cf. Siegl and Rießler 2015), which in connection to the regulated centralisation of Sámi culture in the town of Lovozero ultimately led to a strong Russian Sámi identity centring around the Kildin Sámi language and Kildin Sámi cultural expressions in general.

Bazhanov’s novella about a young reindeer herder, The White Reindeer, appeared as a series in the local weekly Lovozerskaya Pravda (Ловозерская Правда) and was also printed and distributed in a private publishing venture as a booklet with illustrations by students of the 10th Middle School in Murmansk (Bazhanov 1996a). In the same year, it was translated into Kildin Sámi and North Sámi (and not into Bazhanov’s mother tongue) and published by Davvi Girji in Norway (Bazhanov 1996b, 1996c). With this book, the international Sámi readership came to know Bazhanov as an important Russian Sámi author, although his Skolt Sámi background seems to have remained unknown in the West. Later, the popular original novella was reprinted in a booklet by the Sever (Cseép) publishing house in Murmansk 2007 (Bazhanov 2007). In 2009, Bazhanov published a new collection of poems in a series at the Humboldt University of Berlin (Bazhanov 2009). This bilingual publication of the Russian original and a careful English translation were edited by enthusiastic foreign researchers of Kola Sámi culture (the present author among them), who wanted to make the Skolt Sámi author better known both inside and outside Russia. For more references on Bazhanov’s life and work, see for instance Domokos (2009) as well as the several Russian-language overviews of Kola Sámi literature (mentioned in that chapter).

Kati-Claudia Fofonoff, 1947–2011, published her first poems, in Finnish, in the nationally renowned literary magazine Parnasso in 1982. Her first own book, called Paatsjoen laulut – Päätsjoog laulut (‘The Songs of Paatsjoki’) and printed as a private publishing venture locally in Inari in 1988, includes poetry and narratives in Finnish and a Skolt Sámi parallel text (K.-C. Fofonoff 1988). Another collection of poems in Skolt Sámi Jannam mutnum nuur’bboor’in, the title translates as (‘The Earth Turned Upside Down’), was published by Davvi Girji in Norway (K.-C. Fofonoff 1999). The book was later also translated into several Nordic languages, including North Sámi. Her translation (from Finnish) of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince (de Saint-Exupéry 2000) is also significant.

Jaakko Gauriloﬀ, b. 1939, is the first Skolt Sámi musician to become popular outside his home region, both nationally and internationally. He popularised the traditional Skolt Sámi chants (called leu’d in Skolt Sámi), but produced also other genres of popular music, performed at national and international concerts, and launched several albums with lyrics in Skolt Sámi and other languages. His first album in North Sámi was produced together with Nils-Aslak Valkeapää and Åsa Blind in 1976 (Blind, Gauriloﬀ, and Valkeapää 1976). His first album with his lyrics in Skolt Sámi Kud’ckëm sujaja vu’e’inn (‘Under the Wings of the Eagle’) was launched in 1992 (Gauriloﬀ 1992).

Tiina Sanila, b. 1983, (Tiina Sanila-Aikio, Paavvál Taarnâl Tiina) founded a rock band and launched two full-length albums with lyrics in Skolt Sámi, the first one in 2005 (Sanila 2005). Her single release Uuh! broke into the Finnish charts in 3rd place in 2006. Later, Tiina Sanila-Aikio became active as a politician and is the current president of the Sámi Parliament of Finland.

Several other persons can be mentioned as important contemporary writers or translators of Skolt Sámi texts or performers of Skolt Sámi music, for instance the married couple Satu and Jouni Moshnikhoff (she learned Skolt Sámi as her second language), Katri Fofonoﬀ, Seja Sivertsen,
Maria Feodoroff, Sinikka Semenoja, and Natalia Sanila-Koskinen. Nadia Fenina (Надя Фенина, by actual name Надежда Г. Лищенко) is a Skolt Sámi author from the town of Loparskaya in Russia and she has published several prose texts in Russian. Among the famous leu’dds performers are for instance Vassi Semenoja, Helena Semenoff and Domna Fofonoff from Sevettijärvi in Finland and Anfisa Gerasimova and Zoya Nosova from Verkhnetolomsk in Russia.

Genres, major topics and quantity

In addition to the orally performed and transcribed texts for scientific publication (see the references above), samples of folkloristic oral literature have recently been republished in edited versions in contemporary orthography for a more general reading audience (e.g. S. Moshnikoff 1992; Ruppel 2009). The book ‘Kôhimorâ. Nuorttadmi mainnâdž’ (Sweetie Pie’) (Pacija 2011) also deserves to be mentioned here for several reasons. First of all, it is the only well-documented example of interaction between Skolt Sámi people from both Finland and Russia in the field of literature. The original texts were adapted Russian versions of original Kola Sámi fairy tales published by Jevgenija Pacija in Murmansk (Pacija 1990). The Skolt Sámi culture and language activist Zoya Nosova (b. 1937) proposed the idea of translating and publishing them in the Skolt Sámi language in Finland and asked the Sámi Parliament of Finland for support. Furthermore, this publication is also noteworthy because the translation was done orally and recorded on audio, because Zoya Nosova has never learned to write in her native language. Transcribing and editing Nosova’s speech in order to produce a book of fairy tales in the current orthographic standard was the work of a whole team consisting of the mentioned native speakers, Katri Fofonoff, Jouni Moshnikoff, Tiina Sanila-Aikio, and Seija Sivertsen, together with the Finnish linguist Eino Koponen in an advisory role.

Another well-known genre of oral literature production is improvised chanting of so-called leu’dds, a tradition which differs from the less melodic and epic Western Sámi yoiks. Typically, leu’dds describe places or persons (see A. Linkola and M. Linkola 2005 for a brief overview of traditional Skolt Sámi music and further references). The tradition of leu’dd is characteristic of all the Kola Sámi groups, but it has been documented more systematically for Skolt Sámi than, for instance, for Kildin Sámi. Two recent collections of leu’dds have come from Jouste, Moshnikoff, and Sivertsen 2007 (with performers from Finland) and Saastamoinen 2007 (with performers from Russia).

The most important works of contemporary fiction and music have been described above in the section on writers and performers. In addition, a significant number of children’s books have been published in Skolt Sámi. It is however interesting that these books first appeared on the market when Kati-Claudia Fofonoff had already published fiction for adults. Furthermore, the bulk of the texts for children consists of translations from Finnish or other Sámi languages (predominantly North Sámi). Relatively few books for children are originally written in Skolt Sámi, the two very first ones by S. Moshnikoff (1999) and K. Fofonoff (2000). In this Skolt Sámi differs strongly from Kildin Sámi (see the chapter on Kola Sámi in this report), where children’s books were the first genre to be written in the language.

Similar to Kildin Sámi, most Skolt Sámi writers are women and several of them are educated teachers. The publishers include the Learning Materials Office of the Sámi Parliament of Finland, the Sámi publisher Davvi Girji from Norway as well as other publishers mostly in Finland. There are probably more than 40 books published in Skolt Sámi entirely and containing literary texts, albeit only very short ones, with no decline in the production of books during recent decades. Unlike their Kildin Sámi counterparts in Russia, these books have normally gone through professional editing and copy-editing and are appealing in their cover design and typesetting.

The availability of literature in the Skolt Sámi language is likely an important resource for language teaching and revitalisation, although its actual reception by students and other learners has not been investigated to my knowledge.

Further relevant issues

This brief overview offers basic information about Skolt Sámi literature, while only touching upon interesting issues regarding the production and distribution of literature in this small and endangered language community. Hopefully, future research will produce more systematic analyses to gain more insight to Sámi literature and other minority literatures in general, and to support culture and language revitalisation through literature.

Although the issue of endangered literatures is sometimes mentioned in scientific investigations on Sámi and other indigenous cultures, languages, and societies, the relevant descriptions of Skolt Sámi have so far been restricted to superficial inventories of texts and biographies of writers. Several very interesting phenomena differentiating Skolt Sámi literature from other Sámi literatures have thus far been completely ignored in research. Especially comparison to literary production in the Kola Sámi languages across the border in Russia – which is different in some respect and similar in others – seems very fruitful for better understanding the mechanisms of literary production and perception in a minority context. Although all Kola Sámi languages share a common linguistic and cultural ancestry as well as popular topics in contemporary literature, it is interesting to see that Kola Sámi writers from Finland and Russia do not seem to take notice of each other. The work of one of the most productive and skilled Skolt Sámi writer, Askold Bazhanov, has largely gone unnoticed among Skolt Sámi in Finland.
Bibliography


Gaurilo ff, Jaakko (1992). Kua’čkkem suajai vue’Inn. MC.


