

Idioms of Sami Health and Healing

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Book Reviews

IDIOMS OF SAMI HEALTH AND HEALING. Edited by Barbara Helen Miller. Series Editor Earle Waugh. PATTERNS OF NORTHERN TRADITIONAL HEALING, Volume 2. Edmonton: Polynya Press, an imprint of the University of Alberta Press, 2015. 220 pp. C\$34.95, US\$34.95 (softcover). ISSN 978-1-77212-088-2.

The origin of this volume is a symposium on Sámi healing practices that was held at the Arctic University in Tromsø, Norway, in 2010. The papers included are based on presentations given at that conference. The book is the second volume in a series entitled PATTERNS OF NORTHERN TRADITIONAL HEALING. The value of the book lies in the fact that, while certain healing traditions, for example, Chinese medicine, have attracted much attention and have indeed become commonplace adjuncts to traditional Western methods of healing, little research has been undertaken in local northern healing methods. The book is one of the first English-language studies of the traditional healing methods of the Sámi. In their perspective, illness is viewed as primarily a social and cultural phenomenon.

The Sámi are an indigenous people with a range covering territories that correspond to the far northern regions of modern-day Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. The historical territory of the Sámi is known as Sápmi. The Sámi share a common language group deriving from the Uralic language family, which, in turn, consists of two main groups, the Samoyedic languages and the Finno-Ugric language. However, the Sámi have been dispersed and culturally divided.

The Sámi have traditionally been primarily nomadic reindeer herders but have pursued a variety of subsistence practices, including coastal fishing, particularly, as might be expected, among the Sámi living in coastal regions, and also fur trapping and sheep herding. Frequently, these activities were combined. Today, no more than about 10% of the Sámi are actively connected with reindeer herding.

Like many other indigenous peoples, the Sámi have always relied on traditional healing methods. Also, like

many other such peoples, a key aspect of this form of healing consisted of shamanism. The exact form this took varied but a basic definition is “to come into contact with the world of the gods and spirits through certain preparations” (Bäckman and Hultkrantz, 1978, p. 69). Sámi shamanism had a pronounced animal ceremonialism, especially to the bear, and included sacrifices to the life-giving powers in rituals at specific sacred locations. This traditional Sámi religion was practiced until around the early 18th century. Although efforts to christianize the Sámi had begun as early as the 13th century, little change occurred until after the Protestant Reformation. In Norway, around 1720, a systematic attempt was begun to obliterate their traditional religion. In Sweden, a puritanical pietist movement was introduced around 1840. A particularly important sacred object in the shamanic tradition was the drum. These were confiscated, destroyed, and their use forbidden, primarily during the 17th century in Sweden, and the 18th century in Norway. Politically, there has been a movement to absorb the Sámi into the mainstream societies of Norway and Sweden.

Many Sámi people would say that the battle for what they see as their traditional rights still continues, and there is currently a movement among the Sámi to return to the traditional pagan values of their ancestors, encompassing shamanism, animism, and polytheism. In 2012, the county governor of Troms district in northern Norway approved the Shamanic Association of Tromsø as a new religion. However, most traditional healers consider themselves Christian, and the traditional Sámi name for a shaman, a *noadi*, one who mediates between the human world and the underworld, is no longer used, but rather a name that means “improver,” “one who returns,” “one who knows,” and “reader.”

The volume consists of a foreword by David Anderson, a preface by Earl Waugh, an introduction by Barbara Helen Miller, and nine chapters by experts in the field. These chapters are *Constituting Scholarly Versions of a “Sámi Folk Medicine”: Research Practices in the Colonial Contact Zone* by Stein R. Mathisen; *Secrecy in Sámi Traditional Healing* by Anne Karen Hætta; *Traditional Sámi Healing: Heritage and Gifts of Grace* by Marit Myrvoll; *Dynamics of Naming: Examples from Porsanger* by Barbara Helen Miller; *Multiple Views from Finnmark* by Kjell Bir-

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kely Andersen, Sigvald Persen, and Barbara Helen Miller; *Suffering in Body and Soul: Lived Life and Experiences of Local Food Change in the Russian Arctic* by Trine Kvitberg; *The Paradox of Home: Understanding Northern Troms as a Therapeutic Landscape* by Mona Anita Kiil; *Keeping Doors Open: Everyday Life between Knowledge Systems in the Markebygd Areas* by Randi Nymo; and *Gift of Dreams: Connecting to Sámi Epistemic Practice* by Britt Kramvig.

In the first article, Mathisen makes the point that it is ironic that a substantial amount of the knowledge on earlier shamanistic and magical healing practices among the Sámi that has accumulated in literature and archives today originates from the writings of precisely those people who worked hardest to eradicate these beliefs. Activities that were related to healing were often interpreted as typical examples of heathen worship, or as contact with devilish powers. However, it is also highly interesting that hand-in-hand with the idea that the Sámi were entrenched in heathen practices went the idea among early scientists that the Sámi had much to inform the science of Western medicine as we know it, then in its infancy. A notable example is the Swedish botanist and physician Carl von Linné (1707–1778) who took a great interest in the “nature medicine” of the Sámi.

It would appear that herbs and parts of animals were usually used to heal illnesses. When these were not effective, people believed that the illness had been caused by evil people sending dead people to torment them. This required the use of *noaidi* or wizarding arts and it appears that a wizard could make a person ill merely by the power of thought. However, a Sámi wizard could use his powers to both negative or positive effect; for example, to put a curse on someone, but also to confound a thief, or to heal.

The fact that little is known about exactly how a cure was effected has to do with the fact that practitioners were usually reluctant to give details on how the cures were made. This was because the hidden “arts” should not be made public, because then they could lose their potency. This theme of the need for secrecy in traditional Sámi healing runs through several chapters in this book. Some healers are very private and are not known even to their friends and family—this is partly because it is important for a healer to show humility.

However, just occasionally a healer would be willing to talk. Marit Myrvoll states that in a community where she conducted research “only one of the traditional healers in the local community talked to me about his competence and his practice. He believed that ‘basically a traditional healer may heal all kinds of ailments and diseases. It is most common to heal pain and inflamma-

tion, and also stop bleeding and blood poisoning. Recently it is more and more common to heal people’s mental disorders such as anxiety. A healer is able to send away ghosts if someone is bothered by them” (p. 60).

The essays in this collection are both erudite and fascinating and represent much detailed research by a number of scholars in Sámi affairs. The book should appeal to a wide audience, from those interested in forms of non-traditional medicine and alternative ways of healing, to those interested in the Sámi and northern cultures in general, as well as in Shamanism and wizardry.

REFERENCE CITED

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