

Window in the skies: indigenous memory, resistance and experience of Eurasia and the onslaught of resource extraction in the Arctic

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Abstract: As the Arctic switches to “new normal” it is being re-imagined once again – region is viewed from the outside as a “window in the skies” – referring here to a distant window of opportunity, myth place, place of frontiers, resources and exotic peoples “somewhere” up there, away. This article positions the region differently: challenging this view based on *Terra nullius*, empty land of the North is the notion that the Arctic, here, including the boreal sub-Arctic too, is a homeland to a vast range of indigenous and local cultures with their non-Euclidean life-worlds. Methodological overview of indigenous societies of the North, presented in short form here, illustrates the vast diversity of societies – currently ignored for the most part in the “window in the skies”. Article concludes with the view that by engaging with the various traditions and oral histories of the North a more realistic view can be obtained of this region of geopolitical interests.

Keywords: Eurasia, indigenous knowledge, resource extraction, oral histories

Introduction: written and oral in the North

The Arctic is shifting into a “new normal” (Michel *et al.* 2013; Jeffries *et al.* 2013; Arctic Council 2013), which has profound consequences for the peoples and ecosystems of the region. Simultaneously, region is viewed from the outside as a “window in the skies” – referring here to a distant window of opportunity, myth place, place of frontiers, resources and exotic peoples “somewhere” up there, away (Mustonen 2012). This window is created and re-created through the decades by innumerable re-countings of the Arctic

using two-dimensional maps, scientific data and policy documents based on linear worldviews of the European civilizations.

Challenging this view based on *Terra nullius*, empty land of the North is the notion that the Arctic, here, including the boreal sub-Arctic too, is a *homeland* to a vast range of indigenous and local cultures (Lehtinen & Mustonen 2013) with their non-Euclidean life-worlds. This paper explores this “New Arctic” from the viewpoint of Indigenous memory, myth, resistance and experience. Recent decade-long community-based research inquiry from Jokkmokk, Sweden with the Sámi reindeer herders by the international

Snowchange Cooperative provides a case through which the issues are explored (Syrjämäki & Mustonen 2013).

Globally, the indigenous societies, while sustaining immense defeats and damages in the past 200–300 years to their knowledge and senses of the world, remain story-telling cultures (Lehtinen & Mustonen 2013). As Chinua Achebe, the celebrated Nigerian author, provides in his *Things Fall Apart*, transition from oral, spoken systems of interaction with the world into written forms is often a violent, imposed process.

The Sámi of Jokkmokk have been researched endlessly through the times of contact with the Swedish Crown (Syrjämäki & Mustonen 2013). The Scandinavian research methods tend to value, flowing from the heritage of Russian and German historical research, written sources. If it has not been written down, it does not exist.

Therefore there is a gap between spoken and written in the Sámi world – it has been often said for example amongst the Skolt Sámi, that their own culture, worldview and ways of being with the world do not get proper attention, because their oral histories are not made visible (Mustonen & Mustonen 2011). At its best, oral history does what it is supposed to do – makes invisible histories visible. Such a new reading of indigenous landscapes is both needed and has been recently advocated in scholarship (Mustonen 2012). Indigenous voice constitutes a key component of *resistance* against the interests developed outside the region – this resistance can take many forms from blockades organised to stop resource extraction of a mine (Syrjämäki & Mustonen 2013) to cultural resistance (Kii7iljuus & Harris 2005).

Indigenous memory, resistance and experience of Eurasia

Usually the Sámi kept no written records of a traditional subsistence practice. Therefore their views are dismissed easily. Of course we can argue that the traditional Sámi symbols, place names, pictographs, sacred places and other expressions of oral culture are physical manifestations of their land use and occupancy. In the Swedish court cases of early 2000s the Sámi called for a need "to use other evidence in courts" (Syrjämäki & Mustonen 2013), referring specifically to oral histories. Classical reports from Jokkmokk, Sweden, such as Riwkin-Brick and Jannes (1961), portray the Sámi as 'targets' of documentation. Such problems persist as Zorich (2008) quotes archaeologist Broadbent who says that even in 2002 a Swedish court dismissed the use of archaeological evidence, let alone oral or optic histories in contextualising Sámi land use.

Ryd (for example 2007a, 2007b, 2011) provides a large collection of collected traditional knowledge in Swedish from Jokkmokk. He produced massive collections of knowledge building on participant observation and co-authorship, avoiding use of recorders and digital documentation. He focused on specific topics, such as snow, fire and predators, using both oral history and visual documentation. Such a method works well when the researcher resides in the community for long periods of time.

Many Sámi knowledge holders recount *events* meaningful to them using oral and sometimes, *optic* histories (Feodoroff & Mustonen 2013). These forms of

cultural transfer of knowledge can be represented as valid through spoken – and then documented – *events* through which the Sámi have named and recounted their world and its issues. Such ”events” can be also documented using photos as in Manker (1978, 83, 175).

In Jokkmokk, Sweden a Sámi reindeer herder Carl-Johan Utsi has documented the contemporary life of his community using such optic histories. We can view an example of them in the Figure 1.

By reviewing this remarkable image we see the geometries of power, imposition, persistence and tradition transformed, all at once. While the image can be read from multiple viewpoints, to offer a baseline, we can determine, that the reindeer spring migration, while being mechanised, still goes on with the reindeer in Jokkmokk. Secondly, the open body of water visible

is not caused by climate change, but a history of a 100 years of imposed, state-sponsored hydroelectric development on the community. Thirdly, the pellets fed to the reindeer are an in-direct impact from climate change, as the pastures have been wrecked both by the new ice rains in autumn and industrial logging. Lastly, the wind power turbines visible in the horizon are the messengers of the “Window in the Skies”, the supposed green energy that can be produced based on decisions in administrative centres of Stockholm, Umeå or other regions, with little consultation with the Sámi.

Such events as conveyed by the photo by Utsi have also been called *Earthviews* by Lehtinen and Mustonen (2013). They argue, that given the rooted co-learning practices of the indigenous societies of the Arctic, we should approach these



Figure 1. Spring migration by Carl-Johan Utsi. Photo: Carl-Johan Utsi 2014.

voices, events and communal practices as a knowledge category of its own, in relationship and on the same level as [‘Western’] science practices. Earthviews are crucial in themselves and there is a need to address and listen to them, as they affect the knowledge basis of how reality is constructed in a given space, and therefore offer a more diverse and rich understanding of situation on the ground.

Solutions from collaborative and shared scholarship with the indigenous knowledge holders

Helander (1999) has made a convincing argument, based on her fieldwork both in Jokkmokk and in Utsjoki and Kaldoaivi areas in Finland, that the Sámi have *their own kind of knowledge* as well as time-space apparatus. If this is the case, and Sámi oral history needs to be conveyed using these specific means of social capital production and relationships. Learning from this basis, in the thirteen years of work in Snowchange Cooperative we position the local peoples as co-researchers, who own their knowledges and oral histories. From early on, we have chosen to put strong emphasis on the oral histories of the Sámi.

The people participating in the oral history work in a given community has been pre-selected, or recommended by the Sámi themselves. This does not remove the local biases or conflicts, but it transforms the oral histories from “mere” documents or anecdotes into *communal*, in some occasions, *family* processes (Lehtinen & Mustonen 2013). The purpose of such community-

based work is to respect indigenous governance and mechanisms of *how* oral history and traditional knowledge are handled and discussed in each and every place – it is always different. And oral history is human history too – it contains its problems, challenges, misrepresentations and mistakes, just like any other source of knowledge.

Oral history documentation will not solve all problems associated with the hierarchies of power and knowledge production easily. However, the presence and increased visibility of Sámi oral histories is crucial today, because even if the information it contains may challenge the majority view, at least *we have a view* that challenges the established knowledge structures of Fennoscandia.

Oral history work such as this can only provide a competing “window”. Such a window can be criticized, dismissed or applauded, based on the viewpoint of the reader. But communal oral histories allow hidden to emerge and challenge the mono-truths of history and reality in Fennoscandia.

Academic criticism is often directed at the communal interpretation and representation of oral histories. Critics may say that the Sámi speak fulfilling the images of a “golden past” or “best possible stereotype” of their cultures. Biases in interpretation lead scholars astray. It is true that occasionally the Sámi in the 1800s and early 1900s provided (mis/dis)-informative accounts of their lives and cultures across Sámi – whether these events were carefully planned cultural defence mechanisms or just plain humour at meeting the arriving peoples, is hard to say. But what we do know is that

the Sámi have been *aware* of the current situation through out the times of contact and colonization, and have responded accordingly.

By employing post-colonial frames such as oral history approach we can only hope to demonstrate, by working in close proximity, but still as outsiders, with the respected and chosen cultural carriers an authentic and truthful representation and interpretation of events, peoples, places and change.

International experiences of applying co-authorships based on indigenous knowledge

Some of the Canadian partners of Snowchange, such as the Sto:lo, Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth and other First Nations as well as Inuit and Inuvialuit, have successfully won recognition of their oral histories as a valid mechanism in land use and occupancy, justice, and other research initiatives – for example the Supreme Court Decision of *Delgamuukw* from 1997 in Canada (Macdonald 2000) is a landmark event for the indigenous oral histories as a “valid” systems of recounting and providing information.

Macdonald (2000) demonstrates successfully the high value of a long-standing oral history work which is community-grounded and -based. He worked in the Inuit community of Igloodik in Nunavut, Canada from the 1980s to 2000s to preserve and document local Inuit Elders' and peoples' oral histories, on the wishes of the local Elders society. Only a small portion of this

community-approved oral history materials has been published so far (Macdonald 2000). Starlore materials which have become available speak of the high quality of work when the community is in charge of how and to what extent the oral histories are used properly.

Yet this gap between the spoken world and the written world remains – globally and in Fennoscandia. McMillan (1999) identifies the different truth statements and understandings when he explores the cultural heritage of the British Columbian Nuu-chah-nulth, Ditidaht and Makah First Nations uses of the land and histories. While he recognizes that there are gaps of how and where history has been made and happened, it is important that in the post-*Delgamuukw* context, he identifies the oral histories as crucial sources of information.

Six years later the Haida First Nation participated in a major multi-disciplinary investigation (Fedje & Matthews 2005) into the past of the Haida Gwaii archipelago off the West Coast of Canada, close to Alaska. Aspects of this work are worth mentioning here too. Kii'iljuus and Harris (2005, 122–123) identify that while oral history research often analyses the events as either re-created in each generation, or unable to transfer knowledge from thousands of years ago in an unbroken line, in fact the Haida open their cultural doors to provide us with an astounding revelation.

According to Kii'iljuus and Harris (2005, 122–123) the Haida *trained* a handful of oral historians from each clan and family to learn *all* of the oral histories of that people. Or as they say: “The *Xaayda* protect the integrity of the oral histories by allowing only those who are properly trained and

have the right to tell their clan stories to do so“ (Kii7iljuus & Harris 2005, 122–123).

Observations provided by Kii7iljuus and Harris (2005) come close to some of the Jokkmokk Sámi oral history keepers (Syrjämäki & Mustonen 2013), suggesting that there may be indeed, a shared “indigenous” cosmology, an argument often advanced by the indigenous scholars themselves (Helander 1999). While it will be up to the Sámi themselves to comment and make public, in their terms, whether similar indigenous-controlled and -trained systems of knowledge protection and preservation exist, the experiences from the Inuit, Nuuchah-nulth, Haida and other northern indigenous peoples which have successfully engaged with the “Western” histories lead

the way to a more holistic understanding of place, time, and events.

Transforming the window: peace for the Arctic

Indeed, only by understanding those hidden histories which can be made public, we start to understand the legacies of power that Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia have imposed on the Sámi. From such an understanding a peaceful relationship may emerge, but we need to act quickly, decisively and in a coherent manner, to make sure the Sámi culture and all of its histories and beings have the space-time it needs to heal from the damages we, members of the mainstream societies, have wrecked on it (Figure 2).

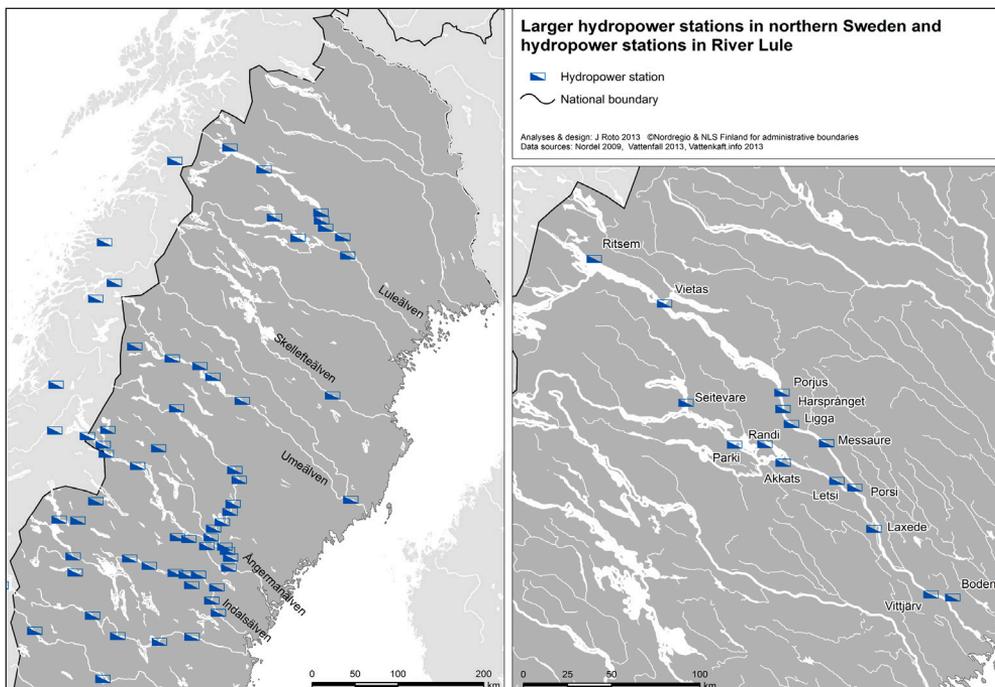


Figure 2. The history of hydroelectric power production in the Luleå watershed, including the Jokkmokk region.

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