

The Epistemology of North: Indigenous Re-orientations from Northern Fennoscandia

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Since at least the time of the Romans, Northern Europe and its people have been the focus of intensive southern and scientific curiosity, exploration, and description. *Knowing from the Indigenous North: Sámi Approaches to History, Politics and Belonging* (2020), edited by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Sanna Valkonen, and Jarno Valkonen, is a welcome provocation for scholarly re-orientations towards northern Fennoscandia. Shifting readers' perspectives not towards, but *from* the north, readers are invited to reflect over the question "not where but what is the North?" (p.5).

Focusing on scholarship from the Finnish side of Sápmi – the Indigenous homeland of the Sámi people overlapping the nations of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia – the volume considers the North (capitalized throughout the Introduction and volume) as a particular "epistemic position and phenomenological world of experience" (p.5). The North, Valkonen, Valkonen and Ingold argue in the book's introduction, is a "a particular place and position of knowing and being, which not only has its specific history and ways to be and to dwell, but also its own understanding of what knowledge is and how it is produced." (p. 5).

The volume consists of eleven chapters grouped in four subsections. The first and shortest subsection, *On Knowing from the North*, contains the introduction and a chapter titled “On local knowledge,” which outlines a theoretical framework and concepts through which to read the six empirical chapters in the three subsections that follow. The empirical chapters of each subsection are followed by a commentary chapter, which provide reflection over themes raised and serve as conclusions for each sub-section (there is no standalone concluding chapter).

In Chapter 2, Jarno and Sanna Valkonen demarcate “local knowledge” from “traditional knowledge,” two concepts they identify as often used interchangeably in social scientific writing about Northern societies (p. 13). A key argument is that “tradition” should be approached as an emic concept, to be first analyzed and understood from the perspective of interlocutors, only subsequently serving as the basis for a scholarly theoretical understanding and conceptualization of tradition in the research process. The authors also reflect on the relationship between local knowledge and Western scientific knowledge, in conversation with scholars across anthropology, sociology, and Science and Technology Studies (STS) to highlight the role of embodiment, place, and multiple possible realities (and actors) within these distinct knowledge systems.

In part two, critical approaches to Finnish Sámi history are highlighted. Veli-Pekka Lehtola’s chapter is a particularly powerful intervention, shedding new light on everyday forms of Sámi resistance (Scott 1989) to colonialism through a critical re-reading of works penned in the late 1930s by a former colonial administrator in the northern Finnish district of Utsjoki. In identifying these strategies as those of a subaltern group, Lehtola challenges popular representations – as in Sweden – that Sámi accepted the imposition of Finnish law, customs, and society without resistance. Rather, they reveal Indigenous survivance and continuity in a colonial context, arising from two institutions and systems of knowledge in conflict. Eeva-Kristina Harlin’s chapter also shows how different institutions and systems of knowledge – Sámi *duodji* artisans – diverge in their approaches to the preservation of Sámi history and material culture. When *duodji* (Sámi handicraft) artisans engage with museum collections, Harlin shows how museums become both “contact zones” and ontological “conflict zones” (p. 53), as the cultural meanings and historical orientations associated with handicrafts objects – whether towards the past or towards the future – differ radically for curators and for artisans. Finally, the commentary chapter by Thomas Hylland

Eriksen forefronts how Harlin and Lehtola's texts speak to being in the North and the challenges of Sámi political autonomy and recognition, closely linked as they are to environments under threat by large-scale development (p. 72).

The third part focuses on another key theme of the volume, belonging and the production of home. Saara Tervaniemi & Päivi Magga's chapter (p.75) provides a detailed chronology of the emergence of Sápmi – the homeland of the Sámi people – as a transnational Indigenous homeland, region, political institution, and movement. Tervaniemi and Magga importantly highlight how cartographic representation of Sámi land – as well as Sápmi itself – reflects colonial histories and relations, but also what these do not show: land use, customary laws, and place relations expressed in Sámi oral traditions and languages, or the ways in which material practices like *duodji* also embody place, and belonging, and boundaries. Forefronting these diverse ways of conceptually, materially, and socially producing space, the authors conclude that Sápmi may be understood not only as a region but as a process, network, and counter-narrative to settler colonialism (p.87). Extending this understanding of Sáminess through processes and networks, Jarno Valkonen & Petri Ruuska re-consider the role of the snowmobile in the social organization of reindeer herding (cf. Pelto 1987), analyzing the snowmobile as an actor and “fluid object” that comes into existence through relations with herders, animals, and the environment, and expressed in the narratives and identities of herders (p.92). Valkonen and Ruuska follow the “movement” of the snowmobile as it assembles different actors, co-produces knowledge, and is itself transformed through its relations with other actors. Tim Ingold's commentary chapter, rounding off the section, returns to themes raised in the Introduction of North as an epistemic location, a particular kind of history, way of being, and dwelling. Here, Ingold introduces an intriguing framework for categorizing histories and contemporary discourses associated with “West,” “South” and “East” (and to which he suggests “North” as a missing approach) (p.109). “Northern” history, Ingold argues, can be done almost anywhere, when “everywhere” is defined by practices inhabitation and thus “never nowhere, always somewhere” (p.118).

Finally, part four considers the production of Sámi identity formation through Sámi literature, politics, and governance in Finland. Tapio Nykänen's chapter traces the “dialogical message” (p. 124) of Sámi poet and activist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää to understand how Valkeapää articulated

Sáminess as a political identity in poetry and interviews. The chapter follows how and when Valkeapää communicated his political message to different audiences – internally, in relation to Finnish society, “southerners” and other Indigenous peoples of the world – and in turn, how Valkeapää was able to represent a Northern way of being which resonated far beyond the North. Turning from the personal political to the national, Sanna Valkonen’s chapter delves into the evolution of Sámi rights and recognition as Indigenous people in Finland. This chapter will be essential reading for those seeking to grasp how indigeneity is understood in the Nordic countries, particularly national debates around the ratification of ILO 169 (Indigenous and Tribal People’s Convention, 1989). Valkonen’s chapter shows how legal and political concepts can influence common understandings of social categories and belonging in Finland (also applicable to Sweden), where Sámi identity has been rapidly transformed in the 20th and 21st centuries. Crucially, Valkonen shows how this “conceptual governance” (p.143) may reinforce colonial limits on Sámi self-definition, as Indigenous subjectivity is increasingly connected to historical rights and relations, or what Elizabeth Povinelli terms the “priority of the prior” (Povinelli 2011). The final chapter and section commentary by Michael Skey underscores what is at stake in struggles over Indigenous belonging in Finland, when the motivations, values, politics, and privileges associated with markers of belonging remain unexamined in relation to greater institutional structures, from the local to the international.

In sum, this volume is an important contribution to conversations on Indigenous identity, society, culture, and difference in the Nordics today. The collection not only brings a Northern Sámi research agenda to a global audience but expands the scope of global critical Indigenous scholarship from North to South, East to West.

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