

On nature and reindeer luck

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Abstract: This paper describes the reindeer Sami understanding of a worthy life expressed in qualitative distinctions centred around the term 'reindeer luck'. Reindeer luck does not in itself mean a good life but is an ingredient of a good life. Reindeer luck lasts from cradle to grave but it can change along the way. To a certain degree it is possible to influence your own reindeer luck, but you can also spoil it through actions, behaviour, words and thoughts. These are more important than means-to-end rational actions with the aim of intentionally improving reindeer luck. The paths to reindeer luck are discussed with the aim of articulating the moral ideals implied in this type of understanding. This theme is discussed in regard to what we may learn from relations to nature.

Key words: herding, moral luck, nomadism, pastoralism, *Rangifer*, Sami.

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Do aboriginal societies really possess a kind of 'primitive ecological wisdom' and what is the content of this wisdom? I will try to answer this question by examining the place of reindeer in Sami reindeer herders' conception of human agency and nature.

Both natural scientists and reindeer herding peoples are engaged in interaction with reindeer. The main source of data on how herders and scientists perceive and interact with this animal is the language that is used to describe it and the explanations of the ensuing descriptions. A common view has been that herders' perceptions of reindeer differ from the 'real *Rangifer*' owing to their ordering their observations according to their imposed cultural scheme. The perception of reindeer is perhaps in every case culturally defined and made meaningful through practical engagement and cognition. I think this is relevant for scientific perception and interpretation of reindeer, too. Hence, the difference between a scientific and native perception of reindeer is not a question about the cultural characteristics of knowledge but about the validity of knowledge.

It is a well established and accepted view that traditional knowledge has no cross-cultural validity.

Its validity is widely held as internal to a particular language and culture. Scientific knowledge is clearly widely perceived as having cross-cultural validity. This is not necessarily untrue but it should not be treated as a dogma with no need of proof or refutation. The privileged status of scientific knowledge cannot be assumed *a priori* and it is rather a question of accurate and concrete argumentation from case to case.

Human societies differ greatly in their culture and values. They present different ways of being humans. The problem of the cross-cultural validity and commensurability of knowledge involves aspects of morality, our ethical approach to facts and the validity of empirical knowledge. There may be different kinds of human realisation which really are incommensurable but commensurability is a question of how far articulation can be extended. It might be that our contact with certain cultures will force us to accept the incommensurability of different kinds of knowledge but we cannot assume this *a priori*. Until we meet this limit there is no reason to take for granted that the conception of good in other cultures has nothing to say to us or perhaps ours to theirs.

However, my main concerns are ethical and

moral questions and the place of reindeer in Sami reindeer herders' evaluation of their lives as meaningful, fulfilling, good, etc. Questions as 'Who are we?', 'How is it best to live our lives?', 'What is the best way to understand ourselves and others?' have to be answered with reference to conceptions of the good life and hence to reindeer.

After these preliminary comments, I will attempt to articulate reindeer Samis' understanding of what is human and what is a worthy life, as expressed in qualitative distinctions centred around the concept of 'reindeer luck'. My aim is to articulate the style of reasoning concerning these types of questions. The following might be an example of reindeer Sami conceptions of the relations between humans and nature as these were expressed for 30 or more years ago. I do not pretend to give a social scientific investigation of the empirical distribution of this style of reasoning or to analyse how moral reasoning is changed. Of course, moral concepts change as society changes but not because society changes. I do not suggest that society and morality are two different things and that there is merely an external, contingent causal relationship between them. Moral concepts are embodied in and are in a particular way constitutive of forms of society. One way in which we may identify one form of society from another, as identifying social change supposes, is by identifying differences in moral concepts.

The Sami writer Johan Turi (1854-1936) wrote that knowledge is not enough to ensure success in reindeer husbandry and trapping (Turi, 1910). One must also have luck. We each have ten adult female reindeer. In the spring yours have eight calves, seven females and one male. Mine have five calves, three females and two males. By autumn seven of your calves are alive, while only three of mine have survived. The following years are similar. Why? At this point we can say that you have good reindeer luck, while mine is not so good.

There is a difference between reindeer luck and plain luck. Reindeer survival can be ascribed to either, or more correctly, plain luck can come from reindeer luck. Reindeer luck is not co-incident. You are lucky if the summer grazing land is good or if no avalanche takes any of your reindeer in winter. This could be plain luck or reindeer luck depending on whether it was an accident or not. For example, your reindeer luck can even improve if the summer grazing land is bad or the avalanche is just taking its due. If such is the case, being lucky or unlucky is not an issue. It is easier to describe plain luck than

reindeer luck. You have reindeer luck if your reindeer survive and the herd prospers. The cows calve. The herd is healthy, well provided for and beautiful.

The herd is beautiful if it is composed of many reindeer of different shapes and colours giving it a picturesque unity with contrasting black and white in different patterns. In addition, it should contain many adult bulls and animals of all ages. But a colourful reindeer (*girjjat*) in itself is not necessarily beautiful. Reindeer with large contrasting spots (*lamsku*) are not necessarily considered beautiful and do not bring reindeer luck with them. But, while colourful reindeer are not necessarily attractive, they can be useful in many situations. Everyone in the *siida* (herding group) remembers particular colourful animals and will immediately notice if any one is missing - and in that way will also notice if other reindeer are missing, something which might otherwise not have been noticed until much later. It can be difficult to locate a herd in summer and colourful reindeer are therefore useful because they are conspicuous. With good reindeer luck there can be a beautiful and large herd. The herd should not just be large, it should also be beautiful. It should not be just beautiful but also large. But it is preferable to have a small and beautiful herd rather than just a large herd. To be rich in reindeer is not a goal in itself but it is a value. You can say that there are enough reindeer to meet your needs even though it wouldn't hurt to have more. It is rare to meet anyone who complains about having too few reindeer because this would insult the herd.

Reindeer luck lasts from cradle to grave but it can change along the way. You can influence your own reindeer luck through actions, behaviour, words or thoughts. These are more important than working to improve reindeer luck. To a certain degree you can improve your own reindeer luck but you can also spoil it, sometimes for a long time. Reindeer luck has certain unique characteristics that neither fishing luck nor dog luck have.

Some people have good fishing luck. When, for example, two people who know the water and weather equally well, fish at the same time and same place and get dramatically different results, we say that the successful person has fishing luck. Fishing luck also lasts a lifetime and it can get better or worse. Where it comes from is unclear but it certainly has something to do with how the lake and the fish are treated. Acting in an unrestrained manner, swearing, or making fun of the lake or the fish is not good. It is better to focus on catching fish and

to show interest in the fish. Catching only as many fish as one needs and taking special care of the catch is also important. You can borrow fishing luck from others but you cannot lend it. If I have bad fishing luck I can borrow yours and fish in your name and in your place. Then perhaps I will catch many fish. I can borrow it when I need it and so can others. I don't need to ask permission, I just think that I am borrowing your fishing luck and it is done. You can't lend it and neither can I. Nor can I spoil your fishing luck while I am borrowing it. I can only spoil my own. Fishing luck is seen as a resource and a blessing which can be used for common benefit.

Those who have dog luck have good and talented dogs which can perform all types of reindeer work: gathering, driving, fetching, separating and guarding the herd. A clever dog can anticipate problems and take measures to protect the herd on its own. A herder may not realise until later what the good dog has done. It doesn't need commands or discipline. It works independently and uses its own judgement. For a dog to become a good herder is, of course, dependent on how it is raised. But it isn't enough just to train a dog showing interest and treating the dog with care are necessary to have good dog luck. Some people have good dog luck and it is said about them that they have dog luck in their armpit (*beanalibku gidavuolli*) and this is considered a personality trait.

Fishing luck comes from how you treat fish and lakes and dog luck comes from your treatment of dogs. Reindeer luck doesn't just come from how you treat reindeer although that is included. Reindeer luck is dependent on how you live your life and it cannot be lent or borrowed. Whoever has reindeer luck can stabilise their herd, increase it and eventually become rich in reindeer. But a large herd is not enough, it must also be beautiful. Normally a large herd is beautiful, but not because it is large. If there are too many calves in relation to cows, and too many young cows in relation to adult cows, a herd is ugly both aesthetically and morally. You have not bred your own herd but scraped it together somehow. You can slaughter many reindeer, have plenty of food, be generous and be well supplied in many ways. The herd does not become smaller through slaughtering. Your reindeer survive and are healthy even if they do not grow in number. Then you have reindeer luck. Numbers alone cannot determine reindeer luck. Not everyone rich in reindeer has reindeer luck. The reindeer may have been inherited, received as wedding gifts, or stolen and

re-marked. To determine good reindeer luck the reindeer must survive over time. On the other hand not everyone who has a small number of reindeer has bad reindeer luck. Both the number of reindeer and the degree of reindeer luck can vary over time usually in relation to age. A child usually has few reindeer and herd size is reduced as old age comes but neither are any reflection on reindeer luck. Whether your number of reindeer means that you have reindeer luck today is not a meaningful question. In the first place you should not attempt to determine the exact number of reindeer. Determining the exact number of animals in a herd can spoil reindeer luck and can lead to bad reindeer luck (*guorzuluvvot*). I know approximately how many reindeer I have and sooner or later I will know how many survive. You shouldn't challenge your reindeer luck with accounting.

To speak about exact numbers of reindeer is seen as being confused and half asleep but that doesn't mean you should be so ignorant that you don't recognise your own reindeer or fail to notice if any are missing. People who may be good at recognising reindeer and remembering each reindeer as an individual but that is different from keeping exact accounts. Our humanity does not require us to be rich in reindeer and richness in reindeer is not a sign that we are honest, just and honourable. A large herd is good but not a moral obligation and not a sign of our moral stature.

In addition everyone has their lot in life. That lot is usually though not necessarily consistent because it can only be measured when the herd experiences a catastrophe. When you experience a catastrophe that reduces your herd considerably and it is usually said that the herd flowed out beyond your lot in life. It is rare to experience more than one large reindeer catastrophe in a lifetime.

Number of reindeer is not synonymous with the good life. A person rich in reindeer can be unhappy and a person with few reindeer can be happy. Unhappiness can take the form of not having a spouse or children. Reindeer luck does not in itself mean a good life but is an ingredient of a good life. Reindeer luck can get improved or worsen. It can be ruined but not improved for the sake of improving it. It improves if you live a value-driven life. You should be humane, honest, fair and honourable but these values do not automatically belong to everyone with a large and beautiful herd. How your reindeer luck develops depends on how you live as a person, not just how you handle reindeer.

You should not overwork draught reindeer, frighten them or force them to work but be observant and patient especially when they are tired. You should always keep in mind that when a draught reindeer cannot work it is not because it is lazy but because it has over exerted itself and is exhausted. In general you should handle the sled reindeer with kindness. To not feed draught reindeer properly is seen as insulting them.

The herd should not be thought of or treated as a means. It has a value in itself. It is considered in bad taste to point out a reindeer as fat or thin or point out an animal as a means to an end, such as a future meal or clothing. This insults the reindeer. The hide belongs to the animal whereas the clothing made from it belongs to people. These should be kept separate. It is acceptable to remark on how large the reindeer is and whether it is fatter or thinner than before. This is not insulting since you are comparing it with itself and not in relation to some external purpose. You may castrate a reindeer with a view to taming it as a draught reindeer or to fatten it up but a castrated reindeer is still a reindeer and should never be treated as transportation or a walking larder. Such behaviour would be less than human. You should always hold your own herd in awe and never disparage or devalue it. Therefore you never say that you have too few reindeer since that would belittle it, or that you have too many, for that would challenge reindeer luck. This would dishonour both the herd and yourself as a human. One way to honour the herd is to put on better clothes when seeing the reindeer corralled for the first time in autumn or when milking the cows the first time after the rut.

Reindeer Sami know that the survival of reindeer depends on how well you get along with others. It is important to know people not as just individuals but also their family line and their situation and to grasp situations quickly and negotiate without either being presumptuous or unfocused. It is believed to be impossible to drive someone out of reindeer business if they have reindeer luck. But that doesn't mean that all sociable people have reindeer luck.

Being honest, just and honourable means that you can get along with others but you must also get along with places - pastures, migration routes, calving places - anywhere that can be considered a home to the herd. Such places have protective spirits which you must also get along with somehow. An

appropriate way is to ask for permission from the land and to make requests of the land.

Both the reindeer and the reindeer Sami have strong ties to grazing land. Ancestors, memories, stories and conversations in general would be empty without reference to their particular setting. There is little to remember or tell without including the landscape which gave form to these events. It is not an accident that wishes and enquiries are addressed to the grazing land and that a place is remembered through *yoik*, embellished, made happy and invoked like an old and loyal friend.

You can come into communication with a *sieidi* (a sacred place in nature), persuade and prevail upon it. In addition you can make an agreement with the *sieidi*, idolise it and build up a trusting relationship with it. One way to get a large and beautiful herd is to make such an agreement with a *sieidi* and serve it. A grazing land is not the same as a *sieidi* but it may contain several *sieidi*. But this is not a good way because even though you will get a large and beautiful herd you will not get reindeer luck. There are two types of arguments against idolising and serving a *sieidi*.

The first argument is that the herd of such a person will not last longer than the lifetime of that person and barely that. The descendants will be without reindeer and the herd will disappear when the server dies. The other argument is that serving a *sieidi* is to worship it. It becomes an idol and worshipping idols is a sin. Both Johan Turi and Lars Hætta (1836-1897) mention both arguments, Turi emphasised the first and Hætta the second. Indignantly, Hætta reported that the reason Rasmus Andersen Spein (1819-1894) stopped serving a *sieidi* was not because of any feeling of sin but because the *sieidi* had become too headstrong. Spein maintained that he hadn't done anything wrong but it was the *sieidi* who had done something wrong. (Hætta & Bær, 1982). Johan Turi makes a fine distinction between serving a grazing land as if it were a *sieidi* and making requests of it. Turi rejects serving a *sieidi* but richly describes getting along with a grazing land. Turi's description of coming to terms with the grazing land goes beyond making wishes and comes close to making agreements. One gives gifts, returns gifts and pays tax to the protective spirits to ensure that they take care of the herd. But to Turi this is not the same as giving gifts to and making agreements with a *sieidi*. Turi's distinction is perhaps better expressed in implying that the grazing land takes rent, rather than that we pay rent

to the grazing land. Even if you do not serve or idolise a *sieidi* you should still not insult, ridicule or tease it. To act respectfully, humble and polite toward the *sieidi* is not the same as worshipping it as an idol. Normal politeness indicates that you should greet it and wish it well in your thoughts when passing by. It is unheard of to argue with a *sieidi* or enter into conflict with it. It is best to wish it peace and leave it in peace.

Another way to get a large and beautiful herd is to steal reindeer, either to avoid slaughtering your own or to increase the size by re-marking another person's reindeer. The same arguments apply against stealing: it is a sin and the herd will not survive the thief's lifetime nor will there be any reindeer luck to pass on to descendants. Reindeer luck belongs to an individual and cannot be lent or borrowed. It can, however, be inherited. Reindeer thieves and *sieidi* servers can ruin reindeer luck for their descendants but reindeer luck from someone who has been honest, just and honourable in their life can go in inheritance for up to three generations. You can ruin reindeer luck by stealing reindeer but not every form of stealing is just as bad, and can be looked at from three perspectives: as sinful, as immoral and as a spoiler of reindeer luck.

Part of being human is to ask for permission and make wishes. In some situations it is a desirable way to get along with grazing lands. To do this to a grazing land is to show respect. When you migrate, for example when moving from winter pasture to the calving area, from the calving area to the summer pasture, or from the summer pasture to the autumn pasture you should wish that the migration is free of problems. When moving around inside one area this is not necessary. When you arrive you should wish that the herd lives healthily and safely and when you leave you thank the grazing land for taking good care of the herd. There is no hierarchy, or one all powerful grazing land. There is not just one mother nature but many small mothers. You must relate to each and every grazing land. The grazing lands are neither good nor bad; it depends upon how you relate to them. You do not 'serve' the grazing lands but seek to be in agreement with them. To serve them would be to worship an idol and turn life's purpose into honouring grazing land. You should not speak of your own reindeer luck either to complain about it or to celebrate it. If others speak about it in my presence, I should neither confirm nor deny what they say. Individual occurrences I can describe as lucky but reindeer luck is

not dependent upon individual occurrences. Reindeer luck is not the only measure of a good life. How we get along with others, primarily in our *siida*, has much to say.

Children are taught to make a wish when they bring bones and food scraps outside. They should wish for many reindeer. It is important to teach them to use a slaughtered animal fully, since that brings reindeer luck. You should really gnaw the bones well.

Another way to get along well with the landscape is to ask for permission, for example, to camp or sleep overnight even if not setting up a tent. You wish not to disturb anyone and you wish to be left in peace. To ask for permission and to make wishes is part of our humanity and it improves our reindeer luck. But we should do it as part of our humanity and not just to improve our reindeer luck.

What is the path to reindeer luck and what world view is implied in its understanding? In reindeer herding society you should not deny the world by fleeing from it or by trying to dominate or control it. You should not conquer the world but try to get along with it and come to an understanding with it. The relevant stance to the world is not mastery of or flight from it. The way of ascertaining the world is not secured in a passive manner of contemplation or in a manner of affirmation of the world by one-sided adjustment to it. The path to reindeer luck is through a conciliatory spirit and the ability to get along with the world. You cannot justify actions simply to improve your reindeer luck. Good actions should be done naturally, as a habit.

What may we learn by studying the type of culture presented here? Does it possess a 'primitive ecological wisdom'? Sometimes the distinction between nature and culture is inappropriate for describing Sami reindeer herders' understanding of factors they invoke to account for society and the terms they accept to explain human agency and nature. If it is a difference between nature and culture then it is not possible to explain this difference or to resolve it into a single dichotomy.

What we may learn by studying reindeer herding cultures among Samis in regard to ethics and morality is a different range of possibilities of making sense of human life and that can give us a new sense of what constitutes human satisfaction and well-being. This does not mean that it is possible to adapt and emulate the practices and worldview of other cultures. I would conceive that as lacking intellectual credibility. Nor does it imply an appeal

for a change in the practice of natural science. It makes claims on us, indeed, only to investigate our own ways of making sense of our lives without adopting ready-made solutions.

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