

# Opening Address

*at the Symposium on Saami Religion arranged by  
the Donner Institute 16–18 August 1984*

BY CARL-MARTIN EDSMAN

On behalf of the Donner Institute here in Åbo I wish you all heartily welcome to this symposium on Saami religion. We are glad to see specialists from all the ancient four Nordic countries as participants. We enjoy the presence of scholars from other circumpolar fields, too. I hope that we may have a fruitful meeting together, learning from each other as we are representatives of different scientific branches and institutes treating Saami religion and culture from varying approaches. The intentions of the organizers are formulated by Dr Tore Ahlbäck in the invitation to this symposium and need not be repeated here, nor does the programme of the coming three days need any repetition.

Instead of that I will make some general comments on the subject of this symposium. When one of those invited to attend this symposium—not present here today—heard what we were to discuss, he said that Saami religion was a topic which, in his view, seemed to have been exhausted. This criticism has, in reality, already been answered by Dr Ahlbäck when he explained the reason for holding this conference: we need to know about fresh research results and current research in the field of Saami religion. I myself came to think of what was originally my own academic discipline, namely New Testament exegetics. Although it is almost 2000 years old, if we think of Alexandria around the year 200, nobody doubts in the slightest that there still exists tasks to be studied and that congresses in this field still need to be arranged. It is true of all scholarship that, even though the source material remains more or less constant, new facts keep on emerging from time to time. Moreover, the methods used to study the various sources change in step with the developments that take place in scholarship generally. The fact that research is closely bound up with its historical background can be easily observed in the individual branches of knowledge; their history therefore offers much for us to learn and prompts us to careful self-examination.

It is not my intention to give you a historiography of Saami studies. Suffice it to mention the names of some earlier symposia which have dealt

with Saami problems in general and their religion in particular. It is merely a selection of such symposia in which I myself have had the honour and pleasure to participate in some way or other. I also wish to mention a number of research surveys that have been made and give some examples of the importance of inter-disciplinary contacts.

At the International Congress of European and Western Ethnology, which took place at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm in 1951, the professor of Finno-Ugrian languages at the University of Uppsala read a paper entitled "Uppsala Contributions to the Knowledge of the Life and the Language of the Lapps". To begin with Björn Collinder mentioned his predecessor Karl Bernard Wiklund and his contributions to what Wiklund himself called "Lappology", and then went on to Harald Grundström, and Karl Gustav Hasselbrink, learned clergymen of Lapland, both of them Doctors of Philosophy, and experts on Lappish. Knowledge of Lapp language is naturally considered extremely important by Collinder as also the contribution of scholars who themselves are Lapps, such as Torkel Thomasson, Carl Johansson and Israel Ruong. This short abstract was published in the proceedings of the Congress as late as 1955. There, however, one does not find the paper called "Ethnographical Investigation of the Lapps" by Ernst Manker, Head of the Lapp department of the Nordic Museum.

The enlarged version of Collinder's contribution appeared in *Svenska Landsmål* 79, 1956, under the title "Swedish Research on the Language and Folklore of the Lapps" (pp. 25-50). His evaluations can also be found in the foreword to the book on *The Lapps* published in English 1949 and in Swedish 1953, in which three writers of handbooks are praised for their knowledge of languages. They are the Norwegian missionary Knud Leem, professor at the Seminarium Lapponicum in Trondheim (1767, reprinted 1956 and 1975), the Swedish Gällivare vicar and member of the Royal Academy of Science in Stockholm, Pehr Högström (1747), and the Finnish scholar of language and religion, Toivo Itkonen (1946). The Lapps Carl Johansson and Israel Ruong and the Lapland curate Harald Grundström are characterized by Collinder as the best Swedish experts on Lapps.

In 1962 a Nordic symposium was held at the Provincial Museum in Luleå on "Life in a Traditional Hunting and Fishing Milieu in Prehistoric Times and up to the Present Day". This was a real North Scandinavian ("Nordkalotten") conference. The long time perspective, which took into account both intellectual and material progress, contributions from scholars from a number of university disciplines and representatives from practical life together with an excursion to Swedish Lapland made this conference a most rewarding experience. On my return to Uppsala, I was able to

announce the confidently to the Rector of the University that "In Luleå I have experienced a greater degree of interdisciplinary interaction than in this city". The proceedings of the congress were published in English in 1965 while the Swedish-language reports appeared in 1970 and 1975.

In 1973 it was again the turn of the Nordic Museum, which hosted an inventory in Swedish of what in the duplicated text was called "Saami Research today and tomorrow. Report from a Symposium on Saami Culture held November 19–20 at the Nordic Museum (Nordic Museum Jubilee Symposia)." In the accounts given of different projects in progress at different institutes both Finland and Norway are represented. As in Luleå, the history of religion was properly considered.

On the occasion of the 500th anniversaries of the universities of Uppsala and Copenhagen in 1977 and 1979 respectively Saami problems were discussed at those jubilee symposia dealing with the North and North Scandinavia (Uppsala) and Christian missionary work and colonialism (Copenhagen). Anton Hoem of the Pedagogical Research Institute at the University of Oslo read a paper on "Local Saami communities, Christian mission and colonialism". Anker Steffensen from Denmark provided an account of "The Background to the Breakthrough of the Saami Mission in the 18th century". Both contributors used their mother tongues. The symposium had an epilogue here in Finland since the critical reflections of the ethnologist Sören Lund on the theological contributions to the symposium were published in English in *Temenos* (Lund 1981, 116 ff.) without the other side having a chance to reply. — In the 17th century it was, as a matter of fact, considered the duty of every Christian authority to root out all forms of idolatry and thereby ensure the salvation of their subjects. To a pluralist society of today, where freedom of religion is something entirely natural and everybody's religious beliefs are considered to be his own private affair, such an interference seems like a crime against inherited belief and custom. But such a view is obviously an anachronism, which nonetheless serves to set church historians and cultural anthropologists farther apart (Edsman 1982, 41).

The Copenhagen contributions, with the exception of Sören Lund's, are unpublished. The same also holds for the proceedings of the symposium "Saami Pre-Christian religion" held at the Department of Comparative Religion at Stockholm University on September 26–28, 1980. The journal *Arv* is to devote a special number to publishing these papers in English (now in vol. 39, 1983, printed 1985). The contents of the Stockholm conference correspond to the programme for the first day of the three-day symposium here in Åbo. However, there is no duplication, which just shows that the field is a rich one.

Several research surveys have already figured in this list of symposia on Saami questions. Others naturally form the preface to handbooks of Saami religion, of both earlier and more recent date. Here in Åbo with cultural anthropologists such as Helmer Tegengren and Nils Storå and a church historian like Bill Widén we have reason to look back and remind ourselves of Uno Holmgren–Harva's *Lappalaisten uskonto* (The Religion of the Lapps) of 1915. The unpublished manuscript of the Swedish translation of this work made by P. A. Boreman, who was later to become the vicar of Övertorneå, is included in the K. B. Wiklund manuscript collection of the Uppsala University library, catalogued in 1981 (Signum 75:8). Even before it was catalogued it was in frequent use by Swedish Saami scholars. The same file also contains unpublished papers given by K. B. Wiklund at the congress of comparative religion held in Lund on August 28, 1929 (Signum 55:8) entitled "Die Quellen unserer Kenntnis von der alten Religion der Lappen". In it this famous Swedish Lappologist says that Holmberg's monograph is "the best description hitherto of the religion of the Lapps".

To this it may be added that Holmberg–Harva's works still retain their value even today as the mass of factual information together with the circumpolar perspective fortunately take precedence over the obsolete theories of the turn of the century. The same cannot be said about chapters and articles on Saami religion by Collinder, of Manker's more popular works, often in international languages, and of Rafael Karsten's monograph, translated into English (1955). Naïve positivism, vague romanticism, cold rationalism and simplified ecology in turn characterize the attitudes towards religion of these three otherwise meritorious authors. Manker's major achievements on Lapp drums (1938, 1950) and the holy places of the Lapps (1957) must naturally be excluded from this criticism precisely because these comprehensive works are exemplary in their descriptive approach and because they therefore are open to so many interpretations. In the first of these works Manker has fulfilled one of the wishes expressed by Wiklund in 1929, who continues: "The final processing of the massive material will require the joint efforts of an entire generation of scholars." We can hardly claim, even today, that this work has been fully completed.

Before we leave the K. B. Wiklund manuscript collection I would like to draw your attention once more to the unpublished subject index of religion included in this collection; this index gives references to 17th century Lapland accounts in *Svenska Landsmål* 17 (1897–1909, reprint 1983), Högström's description of Lapland (1747) and Hammond's History of Christian mission (1787) (Signum 55:6). Thus, there still exists unstudied archive material, both old and new, about the Saamis. I recall, for example,

the manuscript collection by Erik Nordberg, once curate of Arjeplog (see *Arv* 39, 1983 [1985]).

I am well aware that some of the critical remarks I have just expressed differ from corresponding evaluations made by my colleague, professor Åke Hultkrantz in his rich and well-balanced "Swedish Research on the Religion and the Folklore of the Lapps" in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 85, 1955 (pp. 81–99). Criticism and evaluation are all part of scholarly dialogue and are likewise to be found in Collinder, Manker and Karsten. When Tore Ahlbäck, in his invitation to this symposium, takes as the theme Manker's survey (written in Swedish), "The Present State of Lapp Research" in *Rig* 1, 1942, this is in fact a reply to Collinder's article with the same title in *Saga och Sed* 1941 (pp. 102–114). Behind them lies a clash between two different methodological approaches and research traditions, the linguistic and the ethnological, the latter in the sense of the study of artefacts. But we need both "Wörter und Sachen", and the tension between Uppsala and Stockholm in this respect has now softened and been replaced by mutual respect. Today these conflicts belong to a generation of scholars that have passed on. But they still may make their appearance between representatives of different fields of study with different approaches to the same subject. It is then that we need personal contacts and interdisciplinary meetings as in this symposium.

A new generation of Saami scholars has emerged, among whom comparative religion, linguistics and Saami birth are all well represented. But the problem of existing premises of different kinds remains. This is true both as regards scientific theories and with reference to the political and ideological division into a majority and a minority nation, to use a mild expression, which has emerged as a result of the Saami people's movement. This opposition stands, in turn, in conscious and unconscious relationship to Marxist historical theory, which nevertheless has the advantage that it brings social relations to the fore. At the same time, however, this conflict leads to a simplification where one side is forced into a defensive position and the other levels unhistorical accusations. Journalism, mass media and the novel stand in the front line but scholarship, in this case comparative religion, may also be affected.

Some examples. In the announcement of a radio programme about the pre-Christian religion of the Saamis broadcast from Luleå at the turn of the year 1978/79 there is mention "of the political pressure to which the Saamis were subjected by clergymen—how via the clergymen the Saamis were forbidden to use their own language and their old customs" (*Röster i Radio/TV*). On the other hand, despite a certain unwise evangelising zeal on the part of the church, Lars Thomasson, Saami, writing in his annotated

bibliography, App. 5 in *Samerna i Sverige* (The Saami Report, 1975), says that "Materials written in the Saami language comprise, according to information provided by Adolf Steen in the 1960's, a total of between 500 and 600 books and pamphlets. Most of these are of a religious nature" (Thomasson 1975). To this can be added that the language of the Luleå Saamis was saved for posterity by the Jokkmokk clergyman Harald Grundström and that it has been ruled even right up to the present day that the vicar of this parish has to be able to speak the Saami language. This is, of course, in conformity with the Reformation principle that everybody should be able to listen to the gospel in his own language.

Let me give a further example. Such an outstanding and balanced Saami scholar as Israel Ruong characterizes the tragic events of 1852 in Kautokeino as "an uprising against the existing order" brought about by the terrorist activity of a local chief of police and triggered by Laestadian revivalism. These formulations are repeated in the 4th fully revised version of Ruong's handbook about the Saamis, published in 1982. The Norrbottens-teater, with its political awareness, uses even heavier artillery in its strongly biased interpretation of this event, which was quoted without comment by the official organ of the Swedish Church, *Kyrkans tidning*, in the fall of 1983. The antidote to this distortion can be found in Samuli Paulaharju, to mention an impartial, conscientious person well acquainted with the folklore and history of the region, who is nonetheless not a church historian. In his *Lappmarksminnen* (Memories of Lapland) published in Finnish in 1922, translated into Swedish as late as 1977, Paulaharju describes, quite correctly, the violence as the result of conflicts between the Saamis themselves, what the local population called "the war of the Lapps". In other words, it is an example of a phenomenon well-known ever since the early days of the Church when a spiritual, ecstatic group in pious selfconsciousness has opposed traditional Christianity in all its forms and demonstrated against it, in this case Laestadianism. We can compare this phenomenon in the North Scandinavian region with the later Korpela movement. According to the Marxist view of history, political opposition during the feudal period takes the disguise of religious protest which partly explains the above interpretation.

There are several current and completed bibliographies on the Saamis (see Edsman 1983, 124, note 5) and the Donner Institute seeks via *Temenos* to keep an eye on this field, too. Nevertheless, it is not rarely only a matter of coincidence that contributions to Saami research become known. For example, scholar exchange between the universities in Uppsala and Cracow and a personal visit to Uppsala by the Russian ethnologist Anita Thierry directed attention towards two essays that she had written in the

Polish journal *Euhemer* (no. 3 <81>, 1971, no. 4 <82>, 1971). The latter deals briefly with Lapp shamanism. The late Dr Åke Ohlmarks' monograph of 1939 on the same topic has attracted greater interest abroad than what Swedish critics have deemed it worthy. Ohlmarks gave blunt expression to his own views on these critical scholars and his attitude to the problems of shamanism in an interview published in Jochen U. Haas, *Schamanentum und Psychiatrie*, Diss., Freiburg im Breisgau 1976 (§ 5.9). In this case it is Hans-Joachim Paproth, now professor of ethnology at the University of Munich, who has provided the information and the photocopies.

An examination of a manuscript on the Skolt Lapps, written by the German amateur scholar Georg Heyne from Bielefeld resulted in a contact with Dr Elis Pålsson of Växjö, a cultural geographer. He is a specialist in the North Scandinavian region and has published a number of articles on Finnish and Russian Saamis and Karelians in the Vadsö newspaper *Finnmarken* and the likewise North Norwegian Saami journal *Sågat*. In these Pålsson has used and makes references to Russian materials including works by our Soviet quest Tatjana Lukjantschenko (*Sågat*, 26/5, 1982). More than twenty summers' sojourns in these northern latitudes has meant that Pålsson is well conversant with the environment there.

I regret that Dr Pålsson and Prof. Paproth have not been able to attend our symposium. The professor of missionary studies at Uppsala University, Carl Fredrik Hallencreutz, has also had to withdraw at the last minute. Fortunately, however, he has sent a comprehensive memorandum on "Further Research into Saami Religion and Church History". It includes a preliminary inventory of problems suited to an interdisciplinary approach. At the same time Prof. Hallencreutz also gives a report of work already completed or in progress; this is probably unfamiliar to those not engaged in these studies.

The increased interest in the Saamis in recent years has meant that a number of classic descriptions and dissertations from earlier years have been re-published. Similarly, we have seen several good monographs and special studies both by historians of religion and representatives of other university disciplines, dealing with the Saamis, their language, culture and history. Nevertheless, it is not too much to say that Saami religion still awaits a comprehensive monograph. Åke Hultkrantz has written a short summary in German in the collective work on the history of religion *Die Religionen der Menschheit*, Vol. 3, 1962 and there are also minor accounts in handbooks and encyclopaedias. What we need as a start is a summarising survey of the current research situation and an inventory of resources, both persons and institutions.

Faced with this, we might make the following reflexions. As historians of

religion, we tend to occupy ourselves with the outer forms of expression of religion and therefore become alienated from what is living reality for religiously aware people, what is the "Ausdruck" and not just the "Anwendung", to use the distinction of Ad. Ed. Jensen, the ethnologist of religion. In other words, the function of religion in practical life and the ability found in people's piety to combine what are, on the surface, incompatible elements.

In terms of comparative religion Norwegian materials are more rewarding than Swedish as far as the personal relationship to the invisible powers that control human life is concerned. Among the oldest and most reliable informants in this group is Isaac Olsen. He worked as a teacher, principally in the eastern part of Norwegian Lapland (Finnmarken) for 13 years up to 1716, when he was appointed to teach northern Lappish at the cathedral school in Trondheim. It was also he who communicated his knowledge of the Saamis' religion to Thomas von Westen and, in all probability, he who taught Western northern Lappish. In his work "Om Lappernes Vildfarelser og Overtro" (On the Misbeliefs and Superstitions of the Lapps) Isaac Olsen reports as follows: "There exist special prayers, words, songs and incantations for different accidents, e.g. when people have been smitten by illness or hurt by fire, water, steel, iron, wood, magic arrows and fairies' shots or when the trolls have done them ill. When domestic animals are beset by ill fortune, of whatever kind, then there are also special formulas, just as for good or bad weather, storms and tempests, morning and evening. The Lapps also have travel prayers and devil prayers, to ensure that no accident may befall them on their journey, that they may dream of good hunting, that they may sight animals during the day and be able to catch them, that they may find game during their travels and have the good fortune to shoot it" (Olsen 1910).

Otherwise both the Norwegian and Swedish materials are dominated by divination and the taking of omens with the aid of a "runebom", a magic or divining drum, what and to which god sacrifices should be made. This is also true of the official records of the hearings on witchcraft held in the 1680's and later in Swedish Lapland.

An idea of what actually happened when good hunting was divined by means of a drum can be had from the interrogation of the hundred-year-old Saami Anders Poulsen conducted at Vadsö north of the Varangerfjord on December 8, 1691. There are several versions of the court's record and the otherwise conscientious Adolf Steen does not indicate in this case that the last and best version is to be found in Qvigstad. The old nomad was born in Torne Lappmark in Sweden which by the way is further evidence of the insignificance of national frontiers. His poignant behaviour when faced by



the interrogator reveals a religious syncretism which accords well with the imagery of the drums, an imagery in which the Church and its beliefs are also represented. Anders Poulsen testifies to how he uses the drum by making the sign of the cross over both it and himself and saying the Lord's prayer and other prayers, which are incomprehensible to the three listeners because he intones them so softly. He begins with "weeping tears in the deepest devotion" while he examines the figures on the skin of the drum: "Oh, Father, Thy Woman [Mary] with Thy Son and the Angel [Holy Spirit], Thou who hast created heaven and earth", etc. After confessing his sins, the Lapp added in an appendix found in two of the versions that the gods [!] disagreed if he did not get the answer he hoped for. They should not be afraid that there were Norwegians present for the Norwegians could do them no harm. The gods should therefore tell the truth and not lie, but give an answer. In the end, he received an answer from the invisible powers. When reporting the figure of a wild reindeer on the drumskin, Anders Poulsen also mentions a prayer for good hunting (for refs. see Edsman 1982, 46f.).

By means of some examples from my own experience I have tried to show that there really exists a need for a symposium on Saami religion. In the hope that the days that follow will increase our insight into this topic, encourage personal contacts and stimulate further research and cooperation, I declare our symposium open.

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[According to the Manuscript Catalogue]

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