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In his doctoral dissertation Religion som samisk identitetsmarkør. Fire studier av film ['Religion as a Sami identity marker. Four studies of film'] the scholar of religion Cato Christensen discusses the relationship among cinema, religion and Sami identity. The main focus is on two films directed by the Sami filmmaker Nils Gaup, Ofelaš/Véiviseren ['The pathfinder'] (1987) and Kautokeino-opprøret ['The Kautokeino rebellion'] (2008). Christensen’s main argument is that these two films reflect, and at the same time contribute to, the ongoing revitalization of Sami ethnic identity. More specifically he claims that these films promote religion as an identity marker for Saminess, and that religion, then, functions as an important resource in the revitalization process. The kind of religion the author has in mind is what he calls “indigenous spirituality,” a religiosity which he sees as informed by both the pre-Christian Sami religion and ‘late modern indigenous peoples’ discourses.” These discourses are, in the author’s view, founded upon primitivist conceptions from the Western history of ideas and colonialism. According to Christensen this “indigenous spirituality” is a significant part of indigenous peoples’ cultural and political revival worldwide. With his choice of cinema as the object of study, Christensen wishes to widen the empirical scope of the study of religions to include also popular cultural expressions.

Religion som samisk identitetsmarkør is a compilation thesis and the “four studies” of the title are represented by four previously published articles, three in Norwegian and one in English. In addition there is an extensive introduction of 96 pages. I guess it takes some courage to choose a topic like Christensen’s, since it means critical scrutiny of the works of a celebrated representative of a historically discriminated minority group struggling for recognition and political rights. Christensen is aware of the hazards involved, but argues that, from an academic perspective his analyses are not particularly radical or controversial, even if they might be provocative from the perspective of those under study (p. 75). This leads him over to a discussion of ethics for researchers. In this context he warns against giving in to political correctness or what the Canadian anthropologist Ronald Niezen has termed “the politics of shame,” that is, that awareness of historical injustices guides the politics—and research—of today in a compensating direction. This must not, however, be done at the expense of commonly accepted norms for scientific work. In a rhetorically elegant discussion Christensen argues that it is rather an ethical responsibility for scholars not to refrain from critically scrutinizing romantic conceptions of indigenous peoples. Such critical studies do not necessarily stand in opposition to supporting these peoples’ struggle for political and cultural rights and recognition. On the contrary, Christensen maintains, critically investigating such notions among indigenous peoples is a way of taking these peoples seriously. I find in this reasoning the author’s main motive for the study.

Christensen makes a few interesting points in his thesis. In the article “Re-
ligion i Véiviseren. En analyse av samisk religios revitaliserings” [‘Religion in The Pathfinder. An analysis of Sami religious revitalization’] he shows how the depiction of Sami pre-Christian religion in Gaup’s film The Pathfinder is an adapted version suited for today’s audience. Drawing from the American folklorist Thomas A. DuBois’ (2000) analysis of the same movie, Christensen concludes that the plot is relatively true to the oral folklore on which it is based, apart from one ingredient—religion, which is largely absent in the documented versions of the legend. Furthermore, the Sami religion in the film is far from the demonized version of the pre-Christian religion that we know from the written sources by Lutheran clergymen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Christensen makes a point of the fact that Gaup has placed the plot in an undefined pre-Christian era. By doing so the filmmaker does not confront present-day Christian (and he particularly mentions followers of the conservative revivalist movement Læstadianism) or secular Sami with questions of “true faith,” and thus audiences are able to identify and sympathize with the Sami in the film regardless of their own religious belonging. This has also been pointed out earlier by DuBois.

The article “Reclaiming the past. On the history-making significance of the Sámi film The Kautokeino Rebellion,” originally published in Acta Borealia in 2012, offers a good analysis of Gaup’s film on the events taking place in and around Kautokeino, in Northern Norway, in the middle of the 1800s. A Christian revivalist movement among a group of reindeer herders—under pressure from, among other things, changing living conditions, alcohol abuse, the insensitiveness and ignorance of Norwegian authorities (including the Norwegian Church), and inspired by the preaching of the Swedish Lutheran clergyman Lars Levi Læstadius—culminated in a violent showdown in which several people were assaulted and killed (see Zorgdrager 1989 or 1997 for the most meticulous study of these events). Some 30 Sami were prosecuted and sentenced for the insurrection, and two eventually faced capital punishment. As a consequence and in the aftermath of the rebellion Norwegianization of the Sami increased and the incident has been a trauma and a stigma for the descendants of those involved in the revivalist movement (Gaup himself is a descendant of one of the leading figures in the movement). In the article Christensen structures his analysis of the film, its wider contemporary context and reception with the help of German literary scholar Astrid Erll’s theory of how film is able to successfully create “cultural memories” and “collective imaginations” of the past without necessarily keeping to “historical accuracy.” He plausibly explains how the film managed in “retelling, reimagining, reconstructing and reclaiming the past” and thereby giving the story, at least potentially, an ethno-political significance for the Sami. Many of his points about The Kautokeino Rebellion go for the The Pathfinder as well.

In the article “‘Overtroen er stor blant Viddenes folk.’ Om religion og koloniale relasjoner i samisk filmhistorie” [“Superstition abound among the people of the Fjelds.” On religion and colonial relations in Sami film-history] Christensen accounts for the portrayal of the Sami in Norwegian cinema from the 1910s until the present, and more specifically he analyses the depiction of Sami religiosity (in its widest sense) in these films. He concludes that in the oldest films religious belonging played the role of demarcating ethnic boundaries between Sami and Norwegians, and that the religion of the Sami was demonized. Later on, and for most of the twentieth century, religion was all but absent in the “Sami films,” at least as
a marker of ethnic differences. With Gaup’s two movies came what Christensen calls a “religious turn,” in which the religious theme is once again present as a marker for Saminess, but now with an affirmative attitude towards Sami religiosity. This conclusion seems quite plausible at first glance. But since Christensen, in a footnote, mentions no less than ten other films, produced during the same period as *The Pathfinder* and *The Kautokeino Rebellion*, and since he does not mention anything about the religious theme in these movies, one cannot help but wondering whether they perhaps display the same lack of interest in religion as most films in previous decades. In that case, Gaup’s movies are perhaps exceptions from still prevalent attitudes, and not a general “trend.” Even if Gaup’s films have reached, and been appreciated by, an incomparably larger audience than the others, Christensen should have clarified this in order to make his conclusion plausible.

In general the texts in the thesis are well-written and it is easy to follow the author’s reasoning. However, despite rather extensive discussions in the introduction, Christensen’s treatment of the concepts of “religion” and “spirituality,” as well as the relation between those two, is somewhat confusing. Since these concepts, together with his assumption about “indigenous spirituality,” are fundamental for his analyses this lack of clarity is not an insignificant flaw. One obvious drawback of a compilation thesis such as this, with all the articles and the introduction focusing on the same theme, is also that repetitions of facts, arguments and conclusions abound. In short, the things said and claimed could have been presented on considerably fewer pages, and that would have given Christensen both the time and the space for widening his empirical source base as well as making deeper and more thorough analyses of his material.

Regarding the empirical base Christensen has chosen not to consult or interview Nils Gaup for his research. He justifies this with a desire to have a high degree of transparency by using what he calls “naturally occurring texts,” that is, the films, and with not wishing to give the views of the filmmaker priority in the interpretations of them. Still he accounts at times for what Gaup has had to say about the films in interviews made and presented by Kari Synnøve Morset in her doctoral thesis (2009). Obviously, then, he finds it fit to consult the director on some points. I believe that Christensen would have benefitted from consulting Gaup more. That would have given him more and better material to make more balanced analyses and draw more reliable conclusions. To rely on interviews with an author does not necessarily imply giving priority to the author’s interpretations, only making the interpretations of the researcher more well-informed.

In the article “Religion i Kautokeino-opprøret. En analyse av samisk urfolksspiritualitet” [“Religion in the Kautokeino Rebellion. An analysis of Sami indigenous spirituality”], which Christensen has written together with his supervisor Siv Ellen Kraft, the authors claim that Gaup’s film is not in accord with historical events. They mention the essential research made on the revivalist movement of the mid-1800s around Kautokeino, but they do not account for what is known about the movement and the rebellion from this research nor from any primary sources available. Thus, they present no evidence for their claims about the movie’s inaccuracy. For example, they contend that Gaup has played down the extent of the violence performed by the revivalists, and that he has reversed the burden of guilt and detached the movement from the underlying circumstances (article 2, p. 24). But which underlying circumstances Christensen and Kraft find wanting
they do not tell. This is quite surprising since watching the film it seems as if Gaup is focusing on nothing but what might be called underlying circumstances: the wide-spread alcohol abuse and the economic and social unrest this caused among the reindeer-herders; the stress imposed on the reindeer herding community when several of the Sami were imprisoned; the insensitiveness and lack of empathy among representatives of the Norwegian Church and state; the influences on the revivalists from the Swedish priest Læstadius; the clash between Sami and Norwegian norms for male and female authority; the secondary status of the Sami in relation to the church and Norwegian authorities and society in general. I am not saying that Gaup's version is historically correct in every respect—and as an artist, hardly would Gaup. But Christensen's and Kraft's contention that he detaches the events from its background remains an empty proposition when they do not inform us which decisive causes they find lacking.

Christensen and Kraft also contend that when the main character in the film—one of the revivalists—claims that "God does not live in buildings of tree and stone, he lives in humans," this does more reflect present-day "indigenous spirituality" than the views held by the revivalists in Finnmark in the nineteenth century (article 2, p. 23). However, the authors should have argued for this point in view of the historical sources that tell us that several of the revivalists in Kautokeino claimed that they had the Holy Spirit inside them and some even calling themselves Son of God or Jesus Christ. Is it perhaps possible that Gaup alludes to such statements? Further, it is not unlikely that the revivalists were inspired by St. Paul's words that God "does not live in temples made by human hands" (Acts 17:24) and that "your [the righteous'] body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Such ideas seem a bit far from the "indigenous spirituality" that Christensen and Kraft has in mind.

A similar kind of sweeping proposition is made in Christensen's and Kraft's conclusion that Gaup depicts what they call "reindeer holism" and they claim that this breathes of modern "indigenous spirituality." One cannot help but wondering how Gaup could have depicted it otherwise when he aims at describing the conditions for Sami reindeer herders in Finnmark during the nineteenth century. Were not the reindeer herding Sami entirely dependent on the reindeer and the well-being of the herds? Did not the care for the reindeer permeate the culture and everyday life of reindeer herders at that time?

The two authors also show indiscretion in their propositions that it is unlikely that the women to such a degree dominated the religious movement in Kautokeino, as Gaup makes us believe (article 2, p. 23). By a quick look at the research and source material on the movement one finds that several women were actually among the leading figures in the movement, and women were a majority among those prosecuted for the violent insurrection (see e.g. Zorgdrager 1997). What scale Christensen and Kraft has used when comparing the degree of female dominance in the actual events with Gaup's version of them they do not specify.

To my mind Christensen (together with Kraft) over-interprets some of the features in Gaup's movies, that is to say that his assumptions about the role of "indigenous spirituality" in the films guides his interpretations more than the material allows. For example, the two authors interpret the character Ellen Skum, in *The Kautokeino Rebellion*, as "a mixture of the Virgin Mary and Mother Earth, with unbounded capacity for Christian as well as indigenous spiritual ideals and values."
That Skum is the heroine in the film is indisputable, and hence she embodies ideals and values that Gaup brings to the fore. But it is very difficult to find any obvious references to the Virgin Mary or Mother Earth, and since Christensen and Kraft do not articulate more exactly what these references are, my imagination falls short. Therefore, to me, the proposition seems empirically unfounded. Another example—found throughout the dissertation—is the claims that Gaup depicts the religiosity or “indigenous spirituality” of the Sami as “unchangeable and inherent” or an “essence” in Sami culture and identity. Any evidence or example of how the filmmaker portrays this as unchangeable and inherent is not presented, and therefore the concepts appear to be merely slogans in vogue—or are they meant to be denigrating epithets, perhaps? Why could not Gaup’s intention have been to describe Sami religiosity in The Pathfinder and The Kautokeino Rebellion respectively as part of the particular historical epochs and cultures in which the films are enacted, that is as contingent instead of essential phenomena? If the plot in The Pathfinder is placed in an undefined ancient time in order not to offend Christians or religious sceptics—as Christensen concludes—then how could the aim at the same time be to depict the religious features as unchangeable and essential characteristics of the Sami? Furthermore, the religiosities depicted in The Pathfinder and The Kautokeino Rebellion are immensely different from each other, and I have difficulties finding any similarities between them. In the latter movie we also see Sami that are part of the revivalist movement, and some that are not part of it, or even against it. Are there any reasons to believe that Gaup wants to portray the latter group as less Sami? An interview with Gaup would surely have given Christensen the opportunity to gather more data, in order to make his own interpretations more reliable.

REFERENCES


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