

Book Reviews

Idioms of Sámi health and healing. Barbara Helen Miller (editor). 2015. The University of Alberta Press. 248 p, softcover, illustrated. ISBN 978-1-77212-088-2. £24.99.

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The book *Idioms of Sámi health and healing* covers a multitude of different themes associated with insights and discussions related to the subject matter with regard to extensive knowledge concerning folk medicine, alternative approaches to treating illness and disease, and the uses and applications of Sámi traditional knowledge, through curing and healing both inside as well as outside health-care systems in northern Norway. The publication in English language, to which credit has clearly to be given to the books editor Barbara Helen Miller, on her accomplishment, carries with it much importance in relation to understanding Sámi culture, language and traditions. Because and by contrast, earlier texts about Sámi healing have been typically published in Norwegian or Sámi languages. Furthermore, the earlier texts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for example, about Sámi healing practices, which were subsequently translated into English, were strongly influenced and shaped by the forces of colonialism and therefore viewed as being inferior. As a result, knowledge surrounding Sámi shamanism and healing practices has, until recently, been kept secret and not to be shared with outsiders.

This combined scholarly works brings with it an abundance of new information that provides many insights into one of Europe's oldest and most secret healing traditions consisting of a series of embodied practices, which are at the core of Sámi traditional knowledge in relation to healing methods, folk medicine and alternative approaches to combating maladies, which effect, the body, mind and spirit. Also, one of the most important and likewise, essential ingredients within Sámi culture, as discussed within the context of the book, is their cosmology as a knowledge system and the position, which spirits take up, with regard to examining underlying causes of suffering and imbalance, and their involvement within these processes. Needless to say, the phenomenon of spirits is a subject, which is rarely touched upon or understood within Western science, especially with regard to healthcare, thus making this contribution of the utmost value in this presentation about traditional knowledge and healing.

The basis of each chapter is influenced by colonialism and its mechanism, which are still evident in numerous settings. As a result, a multitude of different perspectives presented amongst the pages of the publication by Sámi scholars who are all specialized within their respective fields, shed new light and insights from the 'insiders' points of views and experiences. These approaches to the study of indigenous peoples, their culture, religion and healing practices have been solidified through the ways ethical considerations and research ethics have been taken into consideration and thereby applied throughout.

The opening chapter by Stein R. Mathisen is titled *Constituting scholarly versions of a 'Sámi folk medicine' research practices in the colonial contact zone*. Mathisen's approach to the subject matter is divided into two parts; the first highlights

the bitter and critical colonial history and misappropriation of Sámi traditional knowledge in relation to Sámi healing practices. The subject matter examines the consequences for the Sámi concerning the power imbalance created in what he refers to as the 'contact zone' in relation to how materials and knowledge were collected with regard to taboos and customs and how the knowledge was used, to subordinate the Sámi, their culture and ways of life.

The following chapter by Anne Karen Haetta – *Secrecy in Sámi traditional healing* – does, likewise, provide a series of contrasting contexts concerning the customs and taboos about the use, application and sharing of traditional knowledge in relation to various types of healing practices. What animates Haetta's contribution is the fact the knowledge, which has been compiled through interviews with traditional Sámi healers, was undertaken in the heart of a Sámi village in Marka in the north of Norway. The ways the scholar has presented, clarified and contextualised the different insights and practices reveal firstly, the critical role secrecy plays with regard to limitations of the types of knowledge to be shared and with whom, and also, and perhaps most importantly, how power is used within different contexts and for what purposes. The chapter is refreshing inasmuch as it reveals some of the complexities and layers involved in Sámi ethics and how these are, in the Sámi area, strongly tied with identity and well-being.

The contribution from Marit Myrvoll in her chapter *Traditional Sámi healing – Heritage and gifts of grace* brings into focus contrasting landscapes and perspectives, again within a local Sámi context in relation to different sciences and knowledge systems with regard to the Sámi worldview and approaches to health and disease in the area of Måsske, located in Tysfjord, northern Norway. Myrvoll strives to make the distinction between the knowledge, work and cultural responsibilities of the noaidi (the shaman) and those of the folk or traditional Sámi healer. What is illuminating about her input on matters regarding healing practices and approaches is how she describes western and indigenous health care systems, their functions and the requirements concerning engagement with these systems by persons as a way to stay healthy, but from the Sámi perspective.

Chapter four, *Dynamics of naming – Examples from Porsanger* by Barbara Helen Miller, takes the discussion concerning idioms of Sámi health and healing into a contrasting and indeed highly informative topic with regard to the types of responsibilities that come with the use of language in relation to naming and the baptism of children within the Sámi context. Miller places special emphasis on examples of well-being and illness in relation to the name given to a child or adult person. The numerous examples in her work demonstrate how Sámi language contains with it a unique system of both vocabulary and expression, which determines the fate of an individual in relation to the use and application of power.

The combined scholarly contributions of Kjell Birkely Andersen, Sigvald Persen and Barbara Helen Miller form the fifth chapter of the book titled *Multiple views from Finnmark*. The contribution brings forth critical insights and understanding in relation to illnesses caused by spiritual attack and intrusions, healing techniques and client involvement in healing, in the

following ways. As a healer and psychotherapist, Andersen addresses one of the fundamental dimensions in patient assessment as a pre-requisite to treatment, which is by and large missing in so-called orthodox approaches to treating illnesses and disease and it concerns the role of black magic or haunting against a family or individual who might have had a spell or curse put on them, and subsequently, caused injury.

The short but informative contribution from Sigvald Persen who uses cupping, which is a healing technique administered consisting of releasing impurities from the blood, outlines the value of the clients own involvement in the healing and recovery process and the role and function the Sámi healer plays in helping to both facilitate and support and some of the mechanisms as such, involved during consultation, treatment and thereafter.

The contribution from Trine Kvitberg in chapter six – *Suffering in Body and Soul: Lived life and experience of local food change in the Russian Arctic* – make another important contribution to the study of Sámi health and healing illness and disease. The material is presented through a case study of women on the Russian Kola Peninsula, northwest Russia. The core of the research examines the background to the changes that have taken place as a result of Russian dominance and destruction of Sámi culture, ways of life; with particular emphasis placed on reindeer herding and food as a livelihood and source of nutrition, well-being and nourishment, and how this has changed dramatically.

The contribution from Mona Anita Kiil in chapter seven brings into focus Sámi health practices as drawn from participant observation from a clinic in the municipality of Nordreisa, which is in northern Troms, Norway, that are by and large unknown outside the culture. Emphasis is placed on what has been adapted as a cultural practice in relation to Laestadianism, known as 'Reading' which when further defined is also represented by the terms 'curing' and 'blowing' according to Kiil. This activity relates to the use of prayer and spoken word as a method, which has significant value with regard to the 'inner society' of society in relation to identity and culture; meaning its application highlights the critical function a home plays concerning security

during the healing and recovery process through a support network.

Chapter eight by Randi Nymo is titled *Keeping the doors open: Everyday life between knowledge systems in the Markebygd area* This was encompassing and like the previous chapters, a delight to read. Moreover, it is a thoroughly interesting and important contribution, which was skilfully compiled and presented through a series of interviews with Sámi persons. Like the former contributors and concerning the background to the study, Nymo reflects on the influence colonialism has had on Sámi ways of life, concerning healing practices, customs and the use of traditional knowledge in everyday life for health and well-being, and the consequences of these forces, which has manifest as violence and racism, are covered within education, medicine, agriculture and religion.

The last chapter, nine, titled *Gifts of dreams: Connecting to Sámi epistemic practice* by Britt Kramvig brings the scholarly publication to a close with a fascinating chapter about the important role and function dreaming plays in health, healing and well-being in different setting in north Norway. What makes the chapter of particular interest is how the discourse is presented through participant observation with various subjects sharing their stories about truth dreams and other forms of dreaming that heal and bring forth premonitions and answers to future events and directions for living.

To sum up the review of this new book, I would say that the positive experiences of reading the book was the amount of new information within the chapters, which I found to be of much interest and value concerning Sámi studies. Engagement with Sámi healers provides different examples of how the culture is opening up in order to document and preserve traditional knowledge. The downside of the book was that some of the written composition of a number of themes in chapters went off in different ways in order to discuss other subject matter and then returned to the original themes, which blurred the focus. Other sub-chapter headings would have been needed in order to emphasize this, thus at times, avoiding getting lost in the text. (Francis Joy, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, PO Box 122, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland (francis.joy@ulapland.fi)).

Heroic failure and the British. Stephanie Barczewski. 2016. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 267p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 9780300180060. £20.00.

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Heroic failure and the British is Stephanie Barczewski's most recent treatment of British polar exploration. Barczewski's first work on the topic was *Antarctic destinies*, a commendably thorough dual-narrative of the changing reputations of Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton (Barczewski 2007). In a subsequent article Barczewski expressed her wish that future polar history should concentrate, not on 'the feats or failures of individual explorers' (Barczewski 2014: 226) nor on 'the human focus' (Barczewski 2014: 228), but instead on 'the environmental history of the Antarctic' and 'what the history of environmental change in the Antarctic means for all humanity' (Barczewski 2014: 228). However, in her new book Barczewski evidently still believes 'the human focus' is worth examining:

here she tackles the feats and failures of historical individuals, some of them polar explorers.

This book's hypothesis appears to be that, from 1800 until the end of the British empire, British failure, military and expeditionary, was publicly promoted as 'heroic' as a specific strategy to provide public distraction from the supposedly shameful existence of the British Empire. The book, however, lacks evidence for a concerted propaganda campaign at the highest levels. As Barczewski has hypothesized a direct link between the celebration of 'heroic failure' and British shame arising from imperialism, it is a pity that she does not identify any individual or organization whose specific aim was to use the concept of heroic failure to 'help the British feel good about the uglier aspects of imperialism in the nineteenth century' (page ix). Furthermore, Barczewski's underlying hypothesis of generalized guilt for the Empire's existence more properly belongs to the twenty-first century, not the nineteenth. Previous to the First World War, empires and colonialism had been the global norm. Almost every European nation possessed