

Nordic Influence on Saami Folk Belief: the “Buttercat” (Smørkatt)

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The past few years have witnessed the publication of many works on Siberian-Arctic shamanism in both the original languages and in translation. This has made it necessary and possible to review our opinions of shamanist and/or Nordic elements in Saami folk beliefs and their relationship to Siberian-Arctic and Nordic cultures. But we must avoid any romanticism as Louise Bäckman has noted. As a striking example in this regard I can cite a recently published article on Nordic influences in Saami religion, in which the caption under a picture of a wooden sculpture read: Saami idol from Ostyak region (Johansen 1982, 129). This was done without any mention of the comprehensive historical-ethnogenetic literary figures of human beings originating from east and west of the Urals and without any explanation of how the Saami people reached the Ostyak region. We must note, however, that some ideas may be typical and genuine both in Siberia and in Europe; cf. e.g. Ränk's book on the *Ruto* (Ränk 1981). What I intend to speak about here is a Saami superstitious belief, namely the *smørkatt* “buttercat”, which is without doubt a Nordic loan in Saami tradition.

J. Wall's recent book gives a detailed description of the woman who steals milk according to Nordic and western European tradition. Concerning Saami traditions, he cites (Wall 1977–78, 2, 61 f.) Læstadius' material from Karesuando, Fjellman's material from Utsjoki (Enare) and others from Troms and Finnmark in Northern Norway. I would like to mention here Ravila's material from Enare, which was unknown to Wall (Ravila 1934, 87 ff., 115). He concludes that the “buttercat” is doubtless a Nordic loan among both the Saami and Finnish peoples. He also mentions some Estonian data, to which I can add a similar Vadya tradition from a folklore text about a vindictive women who dried up a cow's milk (Ariste 1977, 86 f.).

In December 1983 I heard from a mountain Saami, a 73-year-old farmer residing in Karasjok, the following about the “butter cat”:

In olden days before this time there were people who sold themselves or half of their souls to the devil for a considerable sum of money. They made a “butter cat” in order to get more milk. The “butter cat” looked like a ball

of yarn. It stole cream and butter from the neighbour. The neighbour could not understand what had become of his butter. But he soon discovered that people who had only a few cows had a lot of butter. He chased after the "butter cat" and if he could capture it, the person who had sold his soul to the devil would die. This tradition existed among both the mountain Saamis and the Saamis who had settled down in the villages, but it was unknown among Norwegian people (!) according to my informant. I annotate to this narrative, that the form and function of the "*smørkatt*" together with the way in which it could be disabled is in line with the Nordic tradition. This milk-stealing creature, which might be a hare or any other animal, is often a cat, particularly in northern Norway. It is a common Nordic tradition, too, that the animal is identical with its master, and because of that the master must die when the animal is killed. This link between the master and the animal is closer in northern Norway than anywhere else. Woman, animal and devil are linked to each other in the Nordic tradition, too, but the tradition that the master sells his soul to the devil is found only in Karasjok. It is clear, however, that people must pay for the devil's assistance. This theme is well-known in Europe in other connections. In fact, there is a typical European tradition according to which a sorcerer has his witchcraft or knowledge by virtue of a contract with the devil. What differs from the Nordic tradition is that, in this case the master can be a man, too, and not just a woman. This has parallels in Finnish folk beliefs where both *Wuoren Eukko* "the old man of the mountain" and *Pirun-emäntä* "the devil's wife" are linked to the milk-stealing creature (Wall 1977-78, 1, 104). Some data from Enare may also be connected with this—according to the Saami people in Enare, it is the forest demon, the *gorrēmâš*, which milks cows grazing in the forest (Ravila 1934, 89 f.).

It is actually possible to take a step further back into the history of this tradition. According to some information in Norwegian materials, the "butter cat" is in reality a ball of hair formed in the stomach of the cows, i.e. aegagrophiloe (Grambo 1979, 3, picture). I believe this was the object that was later portrayed as a ball of yarn, or a sack sewn of hair and nails, etc. The cat has an important role as a magical animal for the Kolta Saamis as well as the northern Saamis. It possesses the magic power to give them hunting spoils (Itkonen 1946, 235). This must be a later variant of the original Nordic version about the cat which gives wealth, i.e. butter for his peasant master and game for a hunting master. Sociologically, it is very interesting that this custom is very common among the Saamis but unknown among Scandinavians, as my informant believed. This is a perfect example of how a minority adapts a custom and retains it longer than the majority culture, in which the custom dies out. Thus, it may happen that the

majority society regards customs that actually originate from their own society as specific customs of the minority. For example, in Norway the "butter cat" is called *finn kula* "Lappish ball". Names like this are connected with the reputation of the Saami people as sorcerers.

Finally, I intend to point out a wider context. Milk production, newborn children and women in confinement are the most protected objects in magic. Wall's book gives the impression that the milk-stealing creature is specific to western Europe and unknown in eastern Europe where the Mediterranean "evil eye" seems to be more prevalent. But this is not quite true. There are a few records of the "butter cat" in eastern Europe, which is often called by different names, e.g. the midwife, a kind of sorceress, who may take the shape of a cat (cf. English "hellcat") and want to eat butter; she takes the butter from the milk through a spiked thing or she vomits cottage cheese, etc. (Dömötör 1981, 129, 131, 160, etc.).

The structure of this tradition appears better when it is examined in just one population. The archaic Hungarian group of the Székelys in Bukovina had more connections with the east, and fewer with the west, than other Hungarians. There are similar ideas among them about milk-stealing, diabolical women, as in western Europe, but no devilish animal is connected with milk-stealing. On the other hand, this tradition contains not just cow's milk, but mother's milk too, which can be stolen like cow's milk. Departing visitors cast some hair from their clothes or fur-coat in the direction of the mother's bed and her newborn child saying: "I do not need your milk nor your sleep" (Sebestyén 1972, 189f.). This is the only occasion hair is mentioned in connection with milk-stealing. Otherwise, a ball made of cloth, bone, hair or leather and tied up with hemp-yarn or hair was used to bewitch people or animals. This object is identical with the butter-cat ball even if it is not called so, and its use is much more widespread. For example, it is used when meeting ghosts of unbaptized children (around Szeged in Hungary, Sebestyén 1972, 185f., 476). The name *guruzsma/korozsma* is connected to the verb *kuruzsol* "To practise quackery, magic" and is probably of Slav origin. So, even under other name, it is the same magical traditions, possibly in older form than that found in Scandinavia. On the other hand, there is a very widespread idea about taking the best part of nature's riches, e.g. the fat of the soil (Bálint 308–310); this is a close parallel to the butter in milk.

Magic connected with milk production is remarkably infrequent among nomadic and indeed all, peoples in Siberia in spite of the fact that milk products are the main source of nourishment in summer for people on the steppes, and is a sacrificial and ritual drink, as e.g. koumiss. Although the ball of yarn has some magical qualities (e.g. a woman took her daughter and

maid-servant on a journey in the form of two balls of yarn, Černecov 1935, 9–111), it plays no role in a person's becoming rich. Balls of hair found in the body of reindeer are the animal's master spirits and are a lucky sign for hunting, etc. among the Yakuts (Gurvič 1978, 486). On the other hand, people in Siberia tried to influence their prosperity too, but they wanted to ensure primarily the fertility of wild animals. The Voguls, for example, carved a stick during a ritual dance in order to get fishes for the following spring (Černecov 1971, 83–94). The use of hair to ensure fertility appears in the Siberian-Arctic area too, e.g. making animal of hair or wood is documented very early among the Finnish people. In the Kalevala *Mielikki* made a bear of wool and hair, which fell from the sky into the water. The belief that the bear had fallen from the sky—which is the case here, too, indirectly—is, on the other hand, typical among the Ob-Ugrian people as well as some other people. Cf. the Evenki tradition: the shaman steals some hair from an elk and spreads it over the hunting territory. It was believed that the individual hairs would turn into elks (Anisimov 1958, 29).

It seems that peoples in Siberia and the Arctic were more interested in the production of meat and fertility of their livestock and other animals. It is perhaps a consequence of their history, originating in a hunting/fishing way of life, before they learnt a nomadic life with livestock. They used other methods, different from European ones, even if they wanted to cure a cow's udder; for example, the south-Siberian Turks drove the cow over some stones crossing a river. The stones were the path of the shaman, they believed. Afterwards they gave the cow's first milk to a dog, and took the cow for recovered (Radloff 1907, 558, no. 31). The *smørkatt* "butter cat" is a clear European tradition, but not an isolated one: it is connected with other magic methods on our continent.

I would like to mention here two comments, which came after my paper: L. Bäckman said that these aegagrophiloes were often decorated with embroidery and worn as an amulet. Prof. Korhonen said that people wore them on their arm as a protection against rheumatism. I am grateful for these interesting remarks.

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