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# Olaus Sirma, poetic irregularity, and the question of authorship

We are happy that our analysis has stimulated discussion and we agree with Michal Kovář on the difficulty of saying anything definitive about the relationship of Olaus Sirma's poems to the Saami oral traditions, due to the lack of sources about the seventeenth-century Kemi Saami traditions. In deciding to limit our analysis to folkloristic, linguistic, and musicological perspectives and cognate traditions (Kallio, Valtonen & Jouste 2019), we hoped that this would also nourish further comparative work and content analysis (see e.g. Kallio 2019).

For us, one weakness of the wide and multidisciplinary research into historical Saami traditions has been the lack of serious attempts to try to understand and analyze the poetic structures on their own terms. The reasons for this are evident: the versatile Saami practices with no regular poetic meter, stanzas, or rhymes did not fit the classic Western understanding of how poetry functions. The close relationship of Saami poetics to musical rhythm, performance, and contextual factors adds to the analytical challenges. This has led to a situation where, despite all the fame of the North Saami *luohti* (often called *joik*), we still do not have a full-fledged poetic analysis of the spectrum of the various different Saami traditions, although Marko Jouste has done important and extensive work on the relationships of music, meter, and performance in different Saami languages (see e.g. Jouste 2011; 2020; Jouste et al. 2020).

In the comparative research on Olaus Sirma, the cultures outside the most central European sphere of influence are clearly underrepresented. We argued that a comparative reading focused on the poetics of cognate oral cultures helps to understand and appreciate features of Sirma's poems that have not been analyzed in detail before. For these reasons, our main focus was on the poetic idioms of the two texts, both characterized by irregular patterns of sound repetitions and parallelism.

## *Morse faurog*

The most important single result of our article is the new interpretation of the versatile and complex poetic structure of *Morse faurog*, which, to be honest, left us awed. The poem is characterized by:

1) a structure of poetic lines consisting of three partly optional elements

   A: an opening element of 1–7 syllables,

   B: a longer word of 3–5 syllables with an anticipatory repetition without an independent meaning of the final 1–2 syllables (18 times, e.g. *dzim Soopadzim*), sometimes just a similar longer word without the repetition (5 times, e.g. *korngadzim*),

C: two words or a compound with an anticipatory repetition, with independent meaning, of a second word or element (14 times, e.g. *Jaúfre Orre Jawre*).

Here, a line must always include A and either B or C or both (AC, Ab, ABC, AC, AB, AB, AB, AC…), but the combinations do not form regular couplets or stanza structures;

2) irregular line-internal and sometimes inter-line uses of assonance, consonance, alliteration, and morphological rhyme;

3) ample but irregular use of parallelism (explaining most of the irregular morphological rhymes);

4) irregular word repetitions across the lines; and

5) lack of regular poetic meter in terms of the amount and quality of syllables.

In our interpretation, the boundaries of the poetic lines are clear, defined by syntax and the varying combinations of three elements, and always ending with B or C. Yet, what is characteristic of all the structural elements of the poem is versatile irregularity.

This degree of irregularity is clearly at odds with the literary Swedish and Finnish traditions of the time, where, apart from medieval songs and some examples of classical Greek and Roman meters, the main poetic convention was that of somewhat regular rhymed stanzas and poetic lines (see e.g. Kurvinen 1941; Lilja 2006; Melander 1928–1941). In practice, the structures and rhymes were not always fully regular, but, as far as we know on the basis of the sources such as are mentioned in our article, the irregularity did not appear in amounts relative to *Morse faurog*.

When searching for an appropriate term for the anticipatory repetition patterns in *Morse faurog*, we also considered *echo verse* (e.g. Greene et al. 2012: 386), but we were not sure about its applicability. The repetitions in European pastoral poetry suggested by Kovář sound really interesting, and do warrant a more detailed analysis with actual examples: is it just about the overall ubiquity of repetition patterns in song cultures and in the literary traditions deriving from these, or is there an actual intertextual relation?

European pastoral poetry surely affected the reception of Sirma's poems. Yet, to our current understanding, the complex combination of versatile structural components and great degree of varying irregularity makes the poetic structure of *Morse faurog* quite special in the early modern European and even Baroque literary sphere.

In contrast, especially later examples of the Skolt Saami *leu'dd* but also other Saami and some Finnic and more distant Finno-Ugric song traditions, as explored in our article, build on a similar structural variation of elements at the melodic or textual levels and, while they often lack regular structures of couplets, stanzas, or rhyme,

they are rich in various kinds of word and sound repetitions, parallelism, and morphological rhyme. It is quite understandable that poetic traditions in cognate languages may share similar structural features or principles, although the historical trajectories of metrical systems and song genres differ.

## Berhyme the rhyme: *Etkös ole Ihmis parca aiwan arca*

At the beginning of our work, we actually had the idea that the Lutheran hymn *Etkös ole Ihmis parca aiwan arca* by Johan Cajanus, mentioned by Kovář, might have served as an inspiration for Sirma. The poem is based on the Swedish hymn by Lasse Lucidor (Lars Johansson) with similar stanza and rhyme structure (Kurvinen 1941: 82–83). To fill this scheme, Cajanus creates a skillful structure derived from Finnic oral Kalevala meter.

According to later local knowledge, Cajanus wrote the hymn shortly before his death at the age of 25 in 1681, and the song was published posthumously in 1683 (Kallinen 2007; Kurvinen 1941: 82–84; Rapola 1960). The poems by Sirma were printed already in 1673. Although the hymn clearly could not have served as an inspiration for Sirma, it is likely that the two actually knew each other: Johan Cajanus enrolled at Uppsala University in 1671 (Kallinen 2007), only a year before Olaus Sirma.

While both Sirma's and Cajanus's texts evidently have relationships to oral cultures, the hymn by Cajanus is not similar to *Morse faurog* in terms of the poetic structure or style. The poem has been praised for its regular syllabic structure and regular full rhyme (Kurvinen 1941: 84), and it also has a regular stanza structure. *Morse faurog*, in contrast, builds on non-measured verse and two kinds of irregular line-internal repetition patterns, and no stanzas or regular or full rhymes.

This complex irregularity is consistent with the historical poetic principles in different Saami traditions. Here, irregularity does not indicate undeveloped or poor quality of the poetry, but merely the presence of different aesthetic conventions. It appears to be the case that in traditional oral Saami poetics, complex multi-level irregularity is a positive value.

## Complexity of authorship

While it is evident that the students at the Uppsala University may have been aware of a wide spectrum of European vernacular poetics, it is also worth remembering that when Sirma provided songs to Schefferus, he was a young Saami boy who had just arrived in Uppsala. His previous studies were limited to one or two years at the Torneå elementary school, which probably provided the basics of classic poetics and a good knowledge of vernacular Lutheran hymns.

In Uppsala, the freshman Sirma was apparently asked to offer to a highly respected professor an ethnographic example of his own oral tradition with detailed contextual information. Taking into account this context, we do not consider it very likely that, on the basis of literary conventions in non-Scandinavian vernacular languages (or the very regular Swedish or Finnish Lutheran hymns), Sirma invented or applied two echo rhyme structures not present in his own tradition to compose a new irregular poem. As we do not (yet?) know of early modern literary texts that might have served as a direct inspiration for Sirma, we still have to conclude more probable that the poetic structure and style of *Morse faurog* derive from Sirma's own oral tradition. For our reasoning, the irregular structural ABC logic revealed by the use of the repetitions is more important than the repetitions themselves.

Yet, all this is not to say that Sirma could not have adapted or modified the stylistics or the content of the songs. The authorship of oral or traditional songs is a very complicated question; a song can refer to many directions at varied levels of form and content, and be individual and traditional at the same time.

At the level of content of the song, we would, similarly to Matti Kuusi (1974: 191), interpret the last seven lines of *Morse faurog* as a biblical epilogue to the song rather than as an inconsistency as suggested by Kovář. There are several passages in the Bible that the poem may build on. In particular, the first psalm of the Book of Psalms expresses the idea of going astray from the righteous path and of wandering thoughts that "are like chaff that the wind drives away". Being happy with what one has is also voiced in Ecclesiastes 6:9: "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind". (Quotations are from the modern English Standard Version.) This biblical epilogue was possibly created by Sirma himself following traditional Kemi Saami poetics and style.

We do agree with Kovář that the love poem, especially with an aerial journey, may have been anagogically associated by Sirma, Schefferus, or the contemporary readers with love and longing for Christ, as was customary also in the Lutheran hymns of the time (see e.g. Bastman 2014; Laitinen 2005). This is an important interpretation we did not realize earlier. Yet, as the European imagination was built on the archetypes of the pagan Saami, this reading does not seem to have been prominent in the reception of the poem.

As Thomas A. DuBois (2016) emphasizes, the two songs were published in a chapter describing the courtship and marriage of the Saami, and contextualized with descriptions of the singing context: the poems were sung by young men when separated from their bride or beloved and missing her. Yet, in the reception, the poems have often been read "in isolation from all the social details provided in the text" (DuBois 2016). In our reading, these details actually outline the local conceptions of tradition and authorship.

According to *Lapponia*, Sirma's songs represent a versatile tradition, where each singer in each situation makes his own version based on traditional conventions and style. A potential for adaptations was characteristic of this genre. In our article, we suggest it is possible that Sirma, while not necessarily inventing or adding new

stylistic elements, reworked the traditional form or content as needed in his literary performance in a particular context and for wider audiences. This was in accordance with the traditional genre-specific conventions.

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