

Article

Nature and Magic as Representation of “The Sami”—Sami Shamanistic Material in Popular Culture

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Abstract: This article examines how magic and nature become representations of both “the Sami” and “Sami shamanism” in animation films *Frozen 2* and *Klaus*, in the television crime series *Midnattssol* (*Midnight Sun*) and in three Eurovision Song Contest contributions partly by Sami artists, containing *joik*. With a methodological ludism approach and with material theory, the article asks how “the Sami” and shamanism are made relevant as spiritual or religious categories within popular cultural products, and how (and why) spirituality is being constructed and communicated on a more general level in a time of eco-crisis, where there is a growing global interest in perceived shamanistic and animistic perceptions of the world, nature, and ourselves.

Keywords: Sami; Sami shamanism; animism; popular culture; ludism; materialist turn; *Frozen 2*; *Klaus*; *Midnattssol*; KEiiNO; ESC

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase in the use of Sami religion and culture as a resource in popular culture products. In this article, I will present representations of “the Sami” given to the users of various popular cultural products, like animation movies, crime series and song contests, and discuss whether and how religion and spirituality—presented and allegedly perceived as Sami shamanism—are useful when considering these cultural products. This, I hope, can add to a more general understanding of how popular culture and religion intersect in the present, specifically seen in the light of our contemporary, urgent conditions of global eco crisis. My research questions in this article are hence *how are “the Sami” and shamanism made relevant as spiritual or religious categories within popular cultural products, and how (and why) is spirituality being constructed and communicated on a more general level in a time of eco-crisis, where there is a growing global interest in perceived shamanistic and animistic perceptions of the world, nature, and ourselves?* The analysis will thus provide answers to “how” in terms of illustrative examples of religion and popular culture interfaces, and “why” in terms of ecology, indigeneity, materiality, and religion as potentially powerful, cultural communication.

This analysis looks at the animation movie *Frozen 2* (2019) and the Netflix animated Christmas adventure *Klaus* (2019), as well as the Swedish television crime series *Midnattssol* (*Midnight Sun*) (2016), all of which contain mediation of Sami culture as central components. These visual and storytelling popular culture products are supplemented with performative popular culture in the form of Sami or Sami related contributions to the national (Norwegian) and international Eurovision Song Contest programs in 2017, 2019, and 2020, in order to have a somewhat broader selection of popular culture products, enabling modest comparison. As disparate as this material may seem, its common denominators are that it is part of Norwegian (Nordic) and Sami, mass mediated culture, and thus can be expected to have or have had some impact on these cultural settings, as well as globally, in terms of the material being to a large extent also globally distributed products.

The discursive uses of “the Sami” have similarities throughout all the examples listed, as I will demonstrate. Sami artists and personnel have been creators of or involved in the material that is investigated, and the popular cultural scene thus points to material engagements in the production of Sami religion, as well as identity politics and heritagization processes. Overall, I aim to show that this material and materialization/ritualization take place in a time where nature and ecology become important frames of reference, whether we are dealing with a global blockbuster animated children’s movie, a Netflix Christmas story, or the glittering scene of the Eurovision Song Contest, ESC.

Theoretical Perspectives and Methodical Considerations

Starting from a cultural analytical basis, where religion is seen as interwoven into the fabric of culture as a whole (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2001), the article will employ a mixed approach to the material, where media as a bridge between people and the realms of the spiritual they relate to, through “picturing the invisible” (Meyer 2015), is central, as well as religion and spirituality seen through a lenses of playfulness, “ludism” and the subjunctive (Droogers 2011; Grimes 2011). In line with these views, religion as enjoyment (Gauthier 2018) and the material turn (Bräunlein 2016) will also be employed. Taken together, these perspectives on media, senses, and enjoyment, materiality and the “nature” of religion open up to serious scrutinization of entertaining material as parts of culture, that is, religion and/through/as popular culture made important and relevant to both people and to the study of religion. This is what Endsjø and Lied (2011) calls religion “that people want to have”, building on the seminal works of Alver et al. (1999) of religion as “thinly distributed” on a cultural level, with detraditionalization, traditionalization, dedifferentiation, market logic, and media as factors and processes changing the religious landscape. Partridge (2004) followed by stating this situation as popular culture directly enabling religious participation, transformation, understanding and experience, and that the concepts and cosmologies in popular culture lead to familiarization and fascination as well as development of spiritualities (Partridge 2004, p. 141). Meyer (Meyer 2008, p. 18) discusses religion, popular culture, mediatization, and cultural impact as a necessary field of study, as this is something which impacts contemporary communities and religion:

Instead of grounding our analysis on an essentialist view of either community or religion as being in danger of corruption by the forces of mass mediatization, entertainment and the logic of the market, it is more productive to explore how the use of electronic and digital media actually shapes the transformation—and hence continuation—of both communities and religion in our time.

More specifically, I intend to show that the ludic “debordering” of religion is not only a reflective stance of the researcher, but a way of actively and creatively “work with” traditions and religions for the producers and consumers of (popular) culture, as (also) conscious tools of culture changing efforts and ambitions. As such, this article enters an ongoing discourse on reception of myths, rituals and religion connected to “the Sami”. Concerning reception, I follow Skjoldli in her definition of reception as “selective recycling, creative reuse and effect of something preexistent” (Skjoldli 2020, p. 44), in order to show how reception is at work in and from popular cultural products. The reception is furthermore related to the playful and fictional reorganizing and adding of new elements in the popular cultural products, partly defined by current interests and concerns, and the specific, discursive dynamics in which these works of reception and new, material products take part. This will be highlighted as hybrid forms and hybridization. Fonneland and Kraft (2013) see hybrid products as “products whose New Age components are open to different interpretations” (Fonneland and Kraft 2013, p. 132) and describe the interplay between secular and religious elements as hybridity and fluid boundaries (Fonneland and Kraft 2013, p. 143). Here, I follow their emphasis on fluid boundaries and a hybrid product as something open to different interpretations, also highlighted by the notion of semiotic resources and reception. We are dealing with new products, presented to a public with their unique blend of

elements, though still culturally and religiously recognizable and relatable—and perhaps even more so than less hybrid products, being popular cultural products that “sell”.

This article does not present fieldwork; hence, central questions are not whether actual, selected people “believe” or not in the narratives and claims of popular culture, neither the personal stories of popular culture use or consumption in people’s daily lives and meaning making. As an ethnic Norwegian doing the present analysis, my rendering of how “the Sami” is made relevant is thus from a non-Sami point of view, based on the products as “semiotic resources” (Undheim 2019), and the contexts into which I consider these “affordances” (interpretations, possibilities) of the semiotic resources, namely the contexts of nature, magic and eco-crisis. Magic and religion are slippery concepts subject to century-old discussions, as is the concept of shamanism. In this article, I will use magic and religion interchangeably, following Goody (Goody 1961) in that these cannot be definitively separated. I employ magic due to its popularity as phenomenon and denominator in popular culture, not least in commercialization of “the Arctic” (Mathisen 2014). However, there is a need for conceptualization of what is meant by religion and magic in the following, and with a methodological, ludic approach, religion is, according to Droogers (2011, p. 361),

The human capacity for play to the articulation of the tension experienced between inexpressibility and representation, between belonging and separation, between a unifying identification and a differentiating identity, adding an extra dimension to reality that allows the believers to overcome this tension

An “extra dimension to reality” is what will be scrutinized in what follows, in a globalized setting that seemingly “stimulate free religious play” (Droogers 2011, p. 361). We will see that the material presented is dealing with the “extra dimension” to overcome tensions of various kinds, and whereas I do not deem popular culture users and producers “believers”, they might be called “practitioners” in the playful ritualization (Grimes 2011, p. 82) of reality that immersion into fiction and performance can be said to entail. “Believers” are thus in this context exchanged with viewers, listeners, audience, as I operationalize this definition in a magic/religious “reality” that might well be short-lived, with a duration similar to the popular cultural product, or the ritualization, that takes place and becomes part of our cultural communication. As such, it may have an impact beyond its immediate sphere of consumption or experience. The subjunctive “as if”, mediated through and consumed in popular culture, where “extra dimensions” are vital and central, is at play whether or not “belief” is. The playful and/or fictional dimensions in the mediated representations of religion (the adding of an extra dimension) also have serious and even somber aspects to them, due to the minority position of the Sami as indigenous people, highlighting power aspects of the belonging and separation-dimensions of this intricate web of religion in/as popular culture. This will also be evident and discussed when analyzing the material.

In addition to religion and religiosity, I employ the concept spirituality. Although it might be argued that spirituality is a superfluous word in a discourse that already has religion and magic at hand, my use of the word has again to do with what appear as common, contemporary denominators for religion. Magic and spirituality appear as vernacular concepts preferred to religion due to both the study of religion’s professional history itself, and the hegemonic, perceived connotations of religion in Western society as something institutional, denominational, solemn, textual, pious (resembling Christianity), etc. The study of religion has historically underscored Christian, official assumptions of religion as “archetypical” or the most “real”, and this favoring has not been missed by other groups relating to religion, opting for “spirituality” as a way of pointing out a different stance. That said, I do not follow, for example, Heelas and Woodhead in their dichotomous framework of qualitative differences between religion as “life as” and spirituality as “life from within” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 7), as this cannot be empirically tested and appear too emic or normative. I simply relate to, and use, words that are common in the field that I study, that is, popular religion and alternative

spirituality, and when spirituality is seen as a meaningful word to many actors in this field over religion, it is used in this analysis as well.

Shamanism in this context is also a construct pointing to popular as well as academic use. It is beyond the frames of this article to clarify the historical and scholarly uses of (Sami) shamanism as object of study (Hutton 2001; Hammer 2015; Kraft 2016), but as a denominator for certain phenomena and practices in this article, it points to religious and popular cultural practitioners using historical and invented symbols and rituals as semiotic resources, in the receptive way illustrated by Skjoldli (2020). Here, the shaman is a person capable of communicating with the spirits, a mediator between the various “dimensions”, and, for example, the Sami shaman drum and drumming, Sami song, *joik*, and Sami notions of and connections between powers in nature are “remembered”, and the U.S. origins of neoshamanism as core shamanism developed by Michael Harner, is “forgotten”, or more precisely, these elements are selectively recycled and creatively reused (cf. also Fonneland 2015, pp. 47–51). The shaman and shamanism are thus broad terms in this article, primarily pointing to practice and use of semiotic resources.

I focus on a concrete material in this article, that is, popular cultural products, and their relation to spirituality. In his article on the material turn in the study of religion, “Thinking Religion Through Things”, Bräunlein (2016) scrutinizes how “far” we may follow the material turn, or the ontological claims of New Materialism, and what methodological consequences this gives for our scholarly endeavors (Bräunlein 2016, p. 367). I follow his argument that a serious attention to things and materiality opens new perspectives regarding spirituality, and I also follow his warnings against believing that a “non-anthropocentric” analysis of things, “vibrant matter” (Bräunlein 2016, p. 386) and “agency of things” actually are possible to convey scientifically. For such a shift in perspective, Bräunlein suggests semiotic ideology, methodological ludism, and aesthetics-of-religion as approaches (Bräunlein 2016, pp. 387–91), whereby we can “discover new relations between thing and humans” (Bräunlein 2016, p. 392). Seeing how popular cultural products like the ones I will present, deal with the materiality of reality, and how, where, and why spirituality is addressed, put the semiotic resources, the ludic “as if” attitude and the aesthetics and sensational aspects of religion to the forefront. We will see that, *within* these products, according to the perspectives and “cosmologies” that they offer, matter (nature) is indeed vibrant, with agency and with ontological statements about the relation between the spiritual and material realms, that often become indivisible. As such, *animism* may serve as a summarizing concept (Harvey 2017).

In what follows, I will present short synopses of the films, series, songs, and performances chosen. I will then highlight the semiotic resources they offer and answer the “how” and “why” nature, magic and eco-crisis become relevant for understanding the materializing of Sami shamanism in/as popular culture.

2. Material

2.1. *Frozen 2*

Frozen 2 is Disney’s sequel to the first *Frozen* animation film success back in 2013, both directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee. Set in a fictive Norway, the kingdom of Arendelle is now ruled by Elsa, who in the first film discovered and eventually became able to control her magical powers, that is, her ability to create ice and snow. Her sister Anna is also her closest friend, and lives with her in the castle of Arendelle, at the coast of the fjord. Whereas trust and mutual understanding between the sisters are important vehicles for the plot in both stories, in *Frozen 2*, this has to do with Elsa and Anna’s discovery of their “Sami” ancestry. As it turns out, there is a land hitherto unknown to the sisters, The Enchanted Forest of the Northuldra tribe, to the north of Arendelle, and a long-standing conflict between the Northuldrian people and the people of Arendelle becomes evident. The tribe is a nomadic people herding reindeers, and Elsa and Anna’s late grandfather deceived the tribe by building a dam in order to contain their powers—they are able to communicate with the spirits of

nature and were seen as a threat by him. Elsa and Anna's parents are also dead (shortly described as shipwrecked in the first film), and, in *Frozen 2*, we learn their shipwreck was on a journey up north in order to find out where Elsa's magical powers originate from.

Initially and throughout *Frozen 2*, Elsa hears a song resembling a "kulokk", a traditional Nordic calling of the cows in the mountain pastures. Her attention to this song awakens the spirits of nature and forces the people of Arendelle to evacuate. Advised by the trolls, the plot thereafter is about Elsa's discovery and recovery of the happenings of the past, and Anna's demolition of the dam with the help of the earth spirits, rock giants dwelling up north. The key to all the events is that Elsa and Anna's mother is a Northuldrian, Iduna, who saved their father's, Agnarr's, life. As a prince and part of the Arendelle troop to the Enchanted Forest, he became part of the fatal clash between the peoples in the past, instigated by his father, Runeard, who dies in the chaotic battle. The battle causes the spirits of the forest, earth, wind, water, and fire, to disappear, and a wall of mist encases everyone in the forest—both the remaining Northuldrian people, and the troop from Arendelle, except the few who managed to escape, among them Elsa and Anna's parents. When Elsa, with the help from the Nokk ("Nøkken") spirit, manages to go all the way up north to the river of memory, Athohallan's springs, all the wrongdoings of the past become evident to her, and her own status as the fifth elemental spirit is finally revealed. This status is a gift, or the result, from her mother's selfless act of saving Agnarr. The gift is nature's or the spirit dimension's way of epitomizing the unifying of differences and border transcending as a most powerful, magical force. Peace among the Northuldrian and Arendelle people is finally realized, the waters from the dam are set free, and Anna is coronated queen of Arendelle instead of Elsa, who from now on is the protector of the Enchanted Forest, its people, and spirits.

2.2. Klaus

This 2D (hand drawn) animated Christmas story, directed by Spanish Sergio Pablos, is seemingly the opposite of *Frozen 2* in terms of magic and an "extra dimension" explaining and driving the events. It is a fable suggesting the secular origins of the Christmas folklore. Pablo chose to situate his story in Smeerensburg, a place he in interviews has said he thought was in Norway, as he was looking up the most Northern, inhabited places on earth (Radulovic 2019). In real life, it is an abandoned whaling station in Svalbard, in the film redesigned as a North-Norwegian coastal and/or island location with Sami people dwelling in the plains in the interior of the land. Jesper, the main protagonist besides the old carpenter and Smeerensburg dweller Klaus, is a spoilt son of a Postmaster General, the setting being sometime in the 19th century. To make Jesper become a decent, hardworking man, his father sends him to Smeerensburg with the task of posting six thousand letters within a year, or else he will be cut off from the family estate. Jesper encounters a gloomy community, ridden with family feuds and hostility. When visiting an isolated dwelling at the outskirts of Smeerensburg, Jesper discovers its buildings are brimming with wooden toys, and he encounters and is terrified by Klaus, the toymaker, a square-built, bearded old man. Motivated by a sad drawing by one of the town's children, a drawing that Jesper inadvertently had found and left behind in Klaus' address, Klaus forces Jesper to help him deliver a toy to brighten the sad child. Then, the word spreads that writing letters to Klaus will result in toys delivered, enabled by this unlikely duo, though secretly, at night. Jesper actually had a plan of escaping Smeerensburg by making the kids send letters, but his selfishness diminishes by the joy they create in the children's lives.

The heads of the feuding families are not at all interested in more amicable relations starting to grow in Smeerensburg due to the toy delivery by Jesper and Klaus. They scheme to put an end to it. Meanwhile, a plot line involving the Sami becomes the turning point of the film: Margu, a little Sami girl that has come all the way from the plains in order to make Jesper write and deliver her letter to Klaus, is repeatedly dismissed because nobody understands what she says (she speaks Sami in the movie, in real life voiced by the young Sami Neda Labba living in Tromsø, Norway). When Klaus and Jesper at last receive help to translate by Alva, the young teacher in town, they are reconciled from a dispute of their own, and hurry to carpenter and deliver the little sledge that Margu wishes for.

The whole Sami community then gratefully shows up at a critical point when Klaus and Jesper are all out of toys, and Christmas is coming up. It is the Sami community that enables the story to have a happy ending—with plot lines of deceit finding their solutions. The feuding families almost succeeded in destroying what Klaus and Jesper had built up and done for the next generation of Smeerensburgers, but both the children and the Sami come to the rescue. The Sami community form the labor force of Klaus' toy workshop, and with their uniform blue and red garments and hats, they are likened to Santa Klaus' elves in anglophone folklore and suggested as their "origin". At the end of the film, the story behind Klaus' storage of toys is revealed; it was made for his own, future children that he and his wife Lydia never had. Eventually, Lydia died and left him all alone with all the unused toys before Jesper arrived. As a story, the film tells of acts of kindness being necessary for change and development, and the biggest changemaking act is, besides Jesper's arrival, that the two men actually respected Margu, got help with translation and fulfilled her wish, obtaining the Sami community as a powerful ally. In the years to come, Jesper and Klaus continue their gift giving service on Christmases, but then Klaus one day disappears, as he follows whirling autumn leaves into the light, meeting his beloved Lydia again, that is, he dies. Nevertheless, the gifts magically continue to be delivered each Christmas, as the telling voice of Jesper concludes.

2.3. *Midnattssol*

The critically acclaimed television crime series *Midnattssol* is directed by Måns Mårlind and Björn Stein. It mainly takes place in the town of Kiruna in the Northern Sweden, part of traditional Sami land or Sápmi ("Lappland" in Swedish). The plot deals with differences, borders and reconciliation on many levels; the French police inspector Kahina Zadi (Lëila Bekhti), with a family background from Algeria, arrives in the town in mid-summer to investigate the brutal murder of a French citizen. She cooperates with the prosecutor and detective Anders Harnesk (Gustaf Hammarsten), half Sami, half Swedish, and with a homosexual orientation that he hides from his teenage daughter. Zadi has not only ventured on a job far up north. She has also fled from her teenage son's discovery that she is in fact not his sister, as her family has pretended, but his mother, secretly giving birth at the age of 15.

As *Nordic noir*, the eight-episode series covers several brutal murders, part of an intricate web of both ethnic and cultural conflicts, economic interests, and industry secrets on multinational levels, in addition to the relational conflicts and issues in various families. Most important regarding the current analysis, however, are the Sami-Swedish relations and the use of Sami religion and spirituality as part of the plot. It turns out that (most of) the killings are a revenge carried out by the young Sami Eddie Geatki (Iggy Malmborg), to avenge the killing of his sister, Evelina (Maxida Märak). She was shot dead because she got to know of a bribing crime committed a decade earlier by several employees of the Kiruna mine, the community's cornerstone company. The narrative technique in the series is tricking the viewer to believe Eddi's sister is still alive, as Evelina accompanies Eddie in all the scenes where they are alone; however, it is Eddie's delusional mind/ the ghost of Evelina that is accompanying him. In addition, she tells him to avenge her death by alluding to Sami mythology and folklore in each killing, confusing the inspectors to believe that a Sami activist group leader of Kiruna is responsible. This gloomy representation of the Sami is balanced by the important role played by the Sami female shaman, named only The Nâjd/Noaiden in the film (Sofia Jannok), who helps the investigators by using her "sight" and Sami traditional rituals in order to reveal the truth about what has happened in the past, and who the killer is. In the end, the murder mystery is solved, and important relations mended on the micro level, however, structural injustice and ecological destruction remain unsolved.

2.4. *Eurovision Song Contest 2017, 2019, and 2020—Elin & The Woods and KEiïNO*

The Sami performances in the Norwegian national semifinals and international final of the popular song contest ESC that will be analyzed in this article, are from the duo "Elin & The Woods" and the trio

“KEiINO”.¹ “KEiINO” ended as number six in the international finale in 2019 and won “the viewers’ votes”. “Elin & The Woods” won third place in the national finale in 2017, and the second place in the semi-finale in 2020. Both of these musical groups are ethnically mixed and consist of both Sami and Norwegian artists; Sami Elin Kåven in “Elin & The Woods” and Sami Fredrik Buljo in “KEiINO” are songwriters, performers, and use *joik* as part of their music.

“Elin & The Woods” take their name from the experience of Kåven repeatedly telling duo partner Robin Lynch “I have to go out to the woods before I decide!”, when making music together (Elin & The Woods 2020a). Their 2017 MGP (Melodi Grand Prix, the national competition) song was entitled “The first step in faith”. It is a kind of electronic folk music, “Electrojoik, which is electronic music with heavy beats blended together with the traditional Sami singing known as joik”, as the group formulates it on their web pages (Elin & The Woods 2020a). The song is in Sami, with a few English lines in between (“(Just take) the first step in faith”, “You and I” and “Let us take”). The lyrics goes as follows (translated to English):²

The world is how is supposed to be/ Hey o o yo o yo oh [*joik*]/ Even when rushing you will see that too/ Teyo oyo onyo ah/ Heyo oyo yo yo yo/ Exactly like the primal human/ You are what you are/ Teyo eyo oyo yoyo oh//

Just take the first step in faith/ Te yo oyo oyo ah/ Teyono oyo ah/ Teyono oyo oyo o yoyo yo ah/ Heiono oyo ah, heiono oyo ah/ Teyono oyo oyo o yoyo// You are nature and love/ Te yo o yo yono ah/ Accept that you are perfect/ Eyo oyo yo yo ah/ Heio oyo yo yo o ah// Let yourself be/ You are what you are/ Teyo eyo ojo jo//

(...)

Come into faith/ Come into faith/ Hey o lo Leah lo Leah lay la (x 4)/ Heyo o yo oyo oyo oh/ Te yo oyo oyo ah//

You and I/ Teyono oyo ah/ The first step in faith/ Teyono oyo oyo o yoyo yo ah/ Let us take/ The first step in faith/ Teyono oyo ah/ You and I/ Teyono oyo ah/ The first step in faith/ Teyono oyo oyo o yoyo/ Let us take/ The first step in faith/ Oyo oyo oyo oyo o

When performing this song, Kåven wore a pair of reindeer antlers on her head, had her long, red-colored hair flowing down and wore a green, full tulle dress, with her chest heavily adorned with Sami jewelry, that is, silvers and gold broches.³ The scenography was dominated by dark green colors and spotlights, wide screen footage of trees, and fog-like smoke. In glimpses, the audience was also shown partner Robin Lynch, placed below and in front of the scene, drumming a giant Sami shaman drum as well as an electronic drum pad. Two-thirds of the way into the performance (ESC/MGP songs are only allowed a duration of 3 min), Kåven was accompanied by a choir of six Sami persons dressed in traditional costumes, *kofte*, or *gákti* in Sami, joiking along the chorus lines, and, shortly thereafter, a somewhat mysterious choir of twenty cloaked persons appearing behind Kåven, their faces hidden by hoods, singing the same joik as both Kåven and the six “traditional” Sami singers.

The 2020 contribution of “Elin & The Woods”, entitled “As One”, has the following, largely English, lyrics:

He-lo e loi-la [*joik*]

¹ Sami singers and songwriters have several times participated in MGP (Melodi Grand Prix)/ESC in both Norway and Sweden. In 1960, Norway debuted in ESC when the ethnic Norwegian Nora Brockstedt performed the song “Voi voi” that ended up in fourth place. The title is a somewhat misspelled version of Sami “hi”, and Brockstedt was dressed as a Sami girl singing to her beloved one far away, about their next meeting. This representation of the Sami by a Norwegian would not be relevant or accepted today. For an overview over Sami entries and contributions to ESC from Norway, Sweden, and Finland, see (Maude 2019).

² I do not speak any of the three Sami languages, so I am depending on the accuracy of the translation online (BertBrac 2017). It is stated that it is taken from the official translation by Elin & The Wood, but I have not been able to find the original translation that is referred to.

³ The performance is available at (Elin & The Woods 2017).

Where do we begin?/ We are light and paper thin/ Born without a name/ Different and we're still the same//

[joik]

Guldalat/ Váimmusteamet/ Mii Oktan// ["We listen to our hearts as one"]

Light the sky, you're a shooting star (We are, we are)/ Shining no matter who you are (We are as one)/ Look inside, see what you will find (We are, we are)/ Always grow with an open mind (We are, we are) As one//

Leave for Neverland/ Your destiny is in your hands (We are, we are)/ Live in harmony/ Only love will set you free (We are, we are)//

[joik]

(...)

Light the sky, you're a shooting star (We are, we are)/ Shining no matter who you are (We are as one)/ Look inside, see what you will find (We are, we are)/ Always grow with an open mind (We are, we are) As one//

Oktan mii leat [joik](x 3)/ As one/ Oktan mii leat/ As one/ Mii oktan/ As one

[joik]

Again, the scenography had a scenery-like, green colored design, with tree coulisses and what appeared to be real, though tropical/ in-door plants arranged in several groups onstage.⁴ This time, Lynch joined Kåven onstage with his shaman drum and drum pad, though in the periphery, whereas she was in the center. Kåven was dressed in a long, golden, Sami inspired dress with a glittering shawl, and with bits of traditional Sami jewelry in her hair. This time, there were no choirs appearing during the performance, which had a somewhat more subdued style than their 2017 contribution.

KEiINO's "Spirit in the sky" is a more upbeat song, from a trio which came together for the purpose of MGP/ESC solely and has continued to work together since, with great success. Their music is "dance-pop, nordic folk, and joik", as described on their webpages (KEiINO 2020). The lyrics of "Spirit in the sky" goes as follows:

Can't you stay/ Stay with me into the night?/ Stay, I need you close/ You can go back when the sun rise again/ Just stay tonight, just stay//

Have you seen my spirit/ Lost in the night?/ The violent nightshade/ They took away my light/ They call us nothing/ My name is nothing/ Come see me/ Please see me//

'Cause I've been running with the demons now/ They all see my fear/ They say there's nothing/ Nothing here//

I see your spirit in the sky/ When northern lights are dancing/ He-lo e loi-la [joik]/ I hear you calling me at night/ Whenever wind is blowing/ He-lo e loi-la (x 2)/ Čajet dan čuovgga ["show me the light", North-Sami]//

I'll follow you until the daylight/ Shy us away//

I need a hero/ I need my light/ Her shining lightwaves/ Will break away the night/ I call it freedom/ Our name is freedom/ Come find me/ Please find me//

'Cause I am dancing with the fairies now/ They all sing our name/ I got my light here/ Shining here//

I hear you calling me at night/ Whenever wind is blowing/ He-lo e loi-la//

I can see your spirit in the sky/ When northern lights are dancing/ He-lo e loi-la/ Čajet dan čuovgga (x 2)

⁴ The performance is available at (Elin & The Woods 2020b).

Their international ESC finale show⁵ had several elements pointing to the north of Norway and Sami heritage, although two-thirds of the group are not Sami nor North Norwegian. The *joik* parts of the song are signature elements, as in the contributions from “Elin & The Woods”, but group members Alexandra Rotan and Tom Hugo Hermansen have prominent roles and are singing larger parts of the song than Fred Buljo. The show scenography was a mix of rather crude data animation resembling drone footage of northern Norwegian plains with *aurora borealis*, and then in the latter half of the song, data animated, large Sami shaman drum symbols accompanying Buljo’s *joik*, with three “spirit animals” appearing in the last seconds of the piece; a cubistic looking polar fox, a wolf and a reindeer/stag.⁶ The three artists were all clothed in black costumes, with Buljo’s costume resembling or being a variant of Sami traditional clothes.

3. Pictures of the Sami and Sami Shamanism in the Visual Media

The Sami and Sami shamanistic elements in *Frozen 2* are partly presented as an ethnic group, a tribal people, called the Northuldrians, and partly shown to be the powers of Elsa herself. The Northuldrians are easily conceived as Sami due to their way of life, a nomadic lifestyle in the northern plains (of “Norway”), herding reindeer. The color palette of both the *Frozen* films is mainly bluish and purple, though with orange autumn colors added in the second film. This perhaps could explain why the Sami/Northuldrians are depicted as a people wearing brown and beige clothes, contrasting their real life typical use (concerning traditional clothes) of bright colors like red, blue and yellow—for the contrast between the people of Arendelle and the Northuldrians to be made, and as a way of underscoring the fictive of this depiction, an atypical, brownish palette is chosen. This could perhaps also be in order to fit into possible mainstream representation and iconography of “the indigenous” as typically “earth colored”.

The *Frozen* Northuldrians appear as a flawless people, in terms of them being victims of the majority culture’s wrongdoings in the past, and as doing no wrong in the story’s narrative, in addition to the “secret” Northuldrian Iduna being the true heroine, with her self-sacrificing acts in the past. Moreover, they are “at one” with the elemental forces of nature, which makes them wiser and more powerful, although not powerful enough to escape the Enchanted Forest—here, the “missing link” represented by Elsa turns out to be paramount.

There are some confusing comments in the film about magic when introducing the Northuldrians—their connection with the elemental forces both is and is not magic, and the origin of the Northuldrian’s connection with these powers is not explained.

Iduna, Elsa and Anna’s mother in lifelong exile in Arendelle, sings the song of Ahtohallan to the girls as a lullaby one night, and the river Ahtohallan turns out to be a real, frozen river of memories that finally connect Elsa to her Sami/Northuldrian origin. She needed to *remember*, to see the past materialized through the magic of Athohallan, before reaching the full potential of her own powers. Once the memory of the past was restored, and the wrongdoings against the Northuldrians were mended, radically changing magic blooms in both Northuldria and Arendelle.

Nature is the basis for, and the basic forms of, the magic shown in *Frozen 2*. The film starts with autumn leaves blowing, and the viewers are given the impression that the leaves are mediating a message, a trait that is followed up when Elsa and her team reaches The Enchanted Forest, and the elemental forces turn out to be real forces to interact with.

⁵ Here, analysis will primarily be based on this performance of the song, available at ([Eurovision Song Contest 2019](#)). However, the group released an official music video in April 2019 for the song, related to quite different tropes and symbols than those prominent in their scenic shows, where the Norwegian members of the group (quite humorously) are dressed up as (spirit) animals ([KEiiNO 2019](#)). Notably, Buljo is not dressed up or “funny” in this more parodic video.

⁶ The animals are also shown in KEiiNO’s Instagram post ([keiinomusic 2019](#)). Upon question, Buljo states that both the reindeer and the stag are his spirit animals, as their Asian illustrator first thought a reindeer was the same as a stag, when designing the logo for «Spirit in the Sky» (personal communication, 4 August 2020).

In *Klaus*, the Sami is depicted as representing something exotic, unintelligible, close to nature and the wild, a collective, benevolent force that rescues the majority culture (the people of Smeerensburg) when the crisis occurs. They are depicted as wearing blue and red-colored *kofte* and thus more in line with realities when it comes to the actual outlook of Sami traditional clothing, but the fact-to-fiction turn of the Sami as the origin of the image of the Santa Klaus' work force consisting of elves, is clearly problematic, and will be discussed below. Since the film is an alleged attempt at showing the secular origins of Santa Klaus—or a fabulation over what could be the origins—magic does not have a central place in the film. However, Klaus and his relation to his late wife does have magical or spiritual overtones. Again, autumn leaves are used to indicate magic afoot—the leaves show Klaus the drawing by the unhappy child (and eventually “rescues” him from his grieving state), and the leaves are also dancing when Klaus dies/disappears, as if the female figure in the beyond is somehow reaching out to the mundane.

Midnattssol clearly has a more realistic approach when depicting the Sami and Sami spirituality. Both Sami and non-Sami people in the series are all flawed, some are murderers, some with psychiatric disorders, they make mistakes, cheat on one another, deceive and disappoint one another—this is, after all, *Nordic noir* and not a product meant for children and families to watch together, like *Frozen* and *Klaus*. The cultural and social realities of being Sami in Kiruna are highlighted from several angles, and the narrative of the series is clearly sympathetic towards the Samis as indigenous people and their struggle for justice as ethnic minority. Sami mythology, for example concerning *Saivo*, the underworld, is even told in detail with a kind of sand paint animation in episode 3, with Hanesk as the telling voice, and, it turns out, as a story he, in the present/real life, tells his male lover, in bed. His lover has grown up in Stockholm and admits he never got to learn such stories about the Sami when growing up.

One figure, however, is strikingly “otherworldly” and benevolent, and that is the nameless Sami female shaman. She appears as a solemn, mysterious, young, strong, and just character, capable of using magic and/or shamanistic techniques for the better for both communities, both the Swedish majority and the Sami minority. She dwells with her partner in a simple hut out in the wild outside of Kiruna, and quite contrary to the situation in, for example, Norway, Sami shamans or *noaids*, are in the series told to be living in disclosure. Hanesk says he has never met one. Three old, male *noaids* that we do not get to know, show up outside the police station when the female shaman is there for examination, and both they and she start *joiking*, as if to cast off evil. All these shamans are wearing clothes that tell little of their Sami ancestry or their status as shamans. On examination, the female shaman tells of an “inauthentic” Sami shaman who has traveled around the world and talked to all kinds of shamans and is motivated by false persuasion, as she sees it, collecting plants and toxic substances that are not part of Sápmi. The man is called Bangkok Jori, a convicted criminal, and is depicted as someone who is not respected by the “real” shamans and is a shady figure. He covers his skin with ancient symbols and lives in a *lavvo*, a traditional tent. However, when inspector Kahina meets him, he is portrayed in a more nuanced way, as a former drug addict who tries to help the police. Still, the categories of authentic/respectable and inauthentic/ridiculous are clearly established and conveyed.

3.1. The Sami Magic and Mystery through ESC Songs

Elin & The Woods' lyrics in their two ESC (MGP) contributions are obviously religious/spiritual. “The first step in faith” (2017) is about *faith*, and although “faith” can be interpreted as trust, persuasion in various secular contexts, the song's narrative is about our human condition, spanning back to the “primal human”, in a world that is perfect, with us humans being perfect, too—consisting of nature and love—if only we realize it. The song could be read as a summoning of feelings of belonging and trust. The *joik* has its own status as spiritual song and practice and is a contested issue in Sami contexts (Kraft 2015; Bøe and Kalvig 2020, pp. 144–145), and, in this song, it heightens the feelings and connotations of ritual, magic, and spirituality. Kåven's appearance as a kind of hybrid forest creature with her antlers and adornment strongly adds to the spiritual and mysterious “package”

given to the audience, with the large Sami shaman drum as central symbol too. The Sami shaman drum is today emblematic as Sami cultural heritagization (Kraft 2016, pp. 58–59), and enlarging it to a clearly “oversized” version as Lynch’s is, can be seen as a statement of proud, Sami heritage and spirituality, even when Lynch himself is not Sami. The mix of choirs, the small, traditionally (North Sami) dressed and adorned choir of *joikers* and the large, “mysterious” choir of *joikers* that we never fully see, complete the song’s message of Sami spiritual, shamanic content in new forms and fashions. The more subdued “As One” (2020) conveys the same impressions, though stripped down to the core elements of *joik*, shaman drum, and lyrics about mysterious bonds tying us together as One in a harmonious state of love and evolution, symbolized by stars and starlight, that is, natural elements. In Elin & The Woods’ work generally, as in these two ESC/MGP contributions, the *Sami* is fundamental. Thus, even though the songs could be said to thematize mainstream neospiritual/“New Age” tropes, it is the placement and handling of their content in a Sami framework that makes them stand out.

KEiINO as a group has also made the most out of the Sami element in their 2019 ESC contribution. The group has explained the song to be about the need for respect and belonging for all, whether one feels at odds with one’s environment because of lack of friends with mutual interests, or because of sexual orientation or other kind of “othering”, like being Sami (Grøtte 2019). Neglect and bullying is thematized (in their official video this link is clearer), but, in the end, the spiritual dimension to it all, is what appears defining; hence, the song’s title, the lyrics and the performance focusing on *joik*, northern landscape and light, and “inner light” as well as spirit animals (the animals have been important in wider online dissemination, especially). With such a focus, the lyrics conveys, one’s name and freedom are (re)gained, and illustrated in the phrase “dancing with the fairies”. Buljo explains that his *joik* intends to give the audience a “quick tour” through historical phases of *joiking*, with the first strophes being simpler and more “arcaic” and then the final *joik* more modern and even song-resembling, together containing the feelings of an oppressed people (Grøtte 2019).⁷

3.2. Why Such an Appeal to Sami Shamanism and Religion, and Why Now?

From this analysis, we see that the (Sami) magic and religion that become evident in these popular culture products, come very close to Drooger’s definition presented above—belonging and separation being particularly important. What does this appeal to Sami shamanism and religion/spirituality tell us of our current, global cultural situation?

Playful ritualization is clearly taking place within popular culture, and “the Sami” has become centerpiece in this process, both as a people and as a vaguer denominator of certain ideas, traditions and practices. In real life, the majority of Sami people (or people living in Sami areas, as ethnic identity is not counted in religious belonging statistics) belong to various, Christian denominations, including the Norwegian Church (Den norske kirke) (Fonneland and Olsen 2015, p. 7). This is not thematized in the material I have presented, it is something made relevant in historical films like *Kautokeinoopprøret* (*The Kautokeino uprising*) (2008), and hardly presented as a trope in the fantasy and fictional genre of popular culture products. However, this also goes for the majority people in the films and series in the present analysis; the Arendelle, Smeerensburg, and Kiruna ethnic majority would most likely belong to various, Christian churches, and for the period set for the stories of the two films, it would likely be an important and hegemonic part of daily life, but this is not developed as something interesting to explore in these products. Neither is Christianity thematized from Sami nor Norwegian representatives or perspectives in the ESC/MGP songs analyzed. This probably has to do with institutional religion having a “less open affordance” as semiotic resource, at least in very clear and direct ways. This is opposed to the folk religious, the magical and “free floating resources” which have a much larger

⁷ When the 2020 Norwegian MGP final was held, last year’s winner was, as is the tradition, opening the show. In this version of their song and show, KEiINO wanted to highlight the “minority within the minority” and had four South-Sami male *joikers* dressed in the South-Sami *kofte* with them (Larsen 2020).

appeal in popular culture mediations (Alver et al. 1999; Hjarvard 2011; Endsjø and Lied 2011), due to its subjectively oriented, emotional, sensuous, embodied, and nature oriented character (Taylor 2013) (see also the introductory comments on the use of “spirituality” in the present article).

Kraft presents the Sami shaman and the Sami shaman drum as “heritagization” (Kraft 2016), using the cultural scientist Anne Eriksen’s analysis of how “cultural heritage” has become an omnipresent, positively laden word (Eriksen 2009), thereby also producing some “cultural heirs” as opposed to those who cannot claim this heritage (Eriksen 2009, p. 479). Cultural heritage is defined by our relation to things, and a certain way of evaluating this relation (Eriksen 2009, p. 480). Kraft’s article thematizes the Sami (fine) art and cultural field and how Sami shamanism has become a common denominator as cultural heritage in order to highlight something general, not confined by (various) religious belief system(s). As such, it resonates more harmoniously with a broader spirituality discourse, common in indigenous settings, providing “roots, borders and markers of community” (Kraft 2016, p. 70).

Within the popular, cultural fields and the products analyzed in this article, the Sami and the Sami shamanism are used in a more direct, ludic, hybridizing and religious-aesthetic way, pointing to something that seems to be presented as relevant and “good” religion/tradition for humanity as a whole, because it enables us to find new, sustainable ways of relating to each other and our surroundings in eco-critical times. The discourse is transcending the indigeneity debate, and brings the Sami shamanism into the general, both by being thematized in mass mediated, commercial, global settings, and by actively being and/or promoting hybrid interpretations, from hybrid originators.

In *Frozen 2*, the Disney team uses a whole range of Nordic folk religious and Sami shamanistic elements to create their new, magical, nature religion blend for children globally to consume, relate to, and reproduce.⁸ The Sami is underscored by the narrative about indigenous rights, historical wrongdoings, and by the Disney team discussing the production with the Nordic Sami Council and other Sami representatives during the making of the film (Verstad 2019), but the conclusion is *magic and nature speaking to everyone, everywhere*, realized *par excellence* by Elsa as the blend of Arendelle and Northuldrian ancestry finally releasing nature’s and our full, magical potential. This stem, however, from Northuldrian/Sami, ancient knowledge and tradition, so to speak. Furthermore, there is an *animistic* message underlying, and enabling, the further elaborations and cultural comments in the film. Matter (nature) is infused with (spiritual) agency.

In *Klaus*, director Pablos underscores the “respect” to indigenous claims by providing the central, Sami figure Margu with real, Sami speech, and the Sami are represented as the people from the plains who deserve respect and who turn out to be benevolent and rewarding “powers” in times of crisis. However, this narrative is problematic, in spite of things turning in the right direction only when Margu’s thoughts, wishes and speech were respected/listened to by the majority (she also gets her gift)—in the end, the collective of a Sami tribe becomes the origin of Santa’s elves, and there is what could easily be read as a colonialist othering going on here, where the Sami, except Margu, in the later folklore (so the film’s story goes) becomes an exotic *collective* primarily functioning as a work force. Significantly, Margu’s Sami speech is not translated in the subtitles of *Klaus* and remains unintelligible to all who do not speak Sami. We do not get to know what wish Alva translates from her, until Margu unwraps her gift. But, in the preceding scenes, when Jesper tries to carpenter her gift wish, the lyrics of a song sung are as follows: “The greatest things you’ll ever know, are invisible”. The wind blowing is nature/the invisible force showing where good/transcendent things will happen, and thus point to animism also in this film, even though it is rendered concrete as messages from the dead or “the other side”, whereas Sami people are “naturally” skilled in carpeting and selfless sacrifice. However, as in *Frozen*, it is the mixed forces of the ethnic majority representatives and the indigenous/Sami

⁸ This Disney elaboration of Sami shamanism for children is in stark contrast to their 2013 *Donald Duck* story about the vile Sami shaman Elmeri (Kalvig 2015, pp. 82–84).

representatives that together enable good things to happen, and that finally set Klaus “free” (he can walk into the light, knowing he did create happiness for others, particularly children, even though he remained childless in this life). As such, recalling Drooger’s definition (Droogers 2011, p. 361), the “magic” presented in an allegedly secularizing film, turns out to be the “articulation of the tension experienced between inexpressibility and representation, between belonging and separation, between a unifying identification and a differentiating identity, adding an extra dimension to reality that allows the believers to overcome this tension”. A film that sets out to find the secular beginnings of the Santa Klaus folklore and ends up conveying an animistic worldview, could be said to embrace a conjunctive, “as if” ethos at full; the consumers/viewers are given the freedom to stress whichever layer of “explanation” given in the film that they choose, and the playful and subjective thus appear even stronger here than in a film like *Frozen 2*, which carefully builds a “unified” magical universe for the viewers to delve into.

Hybridity and animism are also promoted in *Midnattssol*, where half Sami Hanesk and the female Sami shaman together—with the directors using various, narrative techniques – present the viewers with an inclusive, ecologically conscious spiritual understanding and alternative that we perceive as sounder and better for our time—though not without flaws. Sofia Jannok, who plays the female shaman, is a well-known Sami artist and Sami rights activist,⁹ and it is her *joik* that is used in the series. The Sami knowledge of nature and nature’s sustainability are contrasted with the majority culture, with its mining and destroying of Sami land. When conveying the spiritual dimensions, the directors of *Midnattssol* choose to deviate from the social realistic narrative style otherwise utilized, and a kind of sand animation, appearance of people from “the other side” in realistic style and other magical situations rendered real, show us the visual media’s prerogative of “picturing the invisible” and playing with neomaterialist claims. The “painting” of the tremendous landscape of Sápmi/ Northern Sweden is also paramount in the series, with a lot of footage from helicopter rides, conveying the natural magnitude of the land, and framing the happenings and intrigues of the series in *nature*, and the struggle for finding one’s own place in nature, of belonging, connecting, and using/ relating with respect (mining versus Sami herding).

Even stronger examples of the conjunctive spheres than in visual storytelling are the real time performances of both musical and visual stories, as in the MGP/ESC songs and shows. Here, both Sami shamanism and animism most clearly come to the fore, as Kåven and Buljo appear as Sami “shamans” through their song and their *joik* in a condensed way that of course differs strongly from the multilayered narratives of lengthy films and series. During the time span of only three minutes, they must persuade the audience that they do have a magical, spiritual story to tell, a ritualization to perform, and that we can join their journey if we “open our minds” and go into “the flow” made by the combined soundscape and “landscape” created on the scene. As described, these “-scapes” together provide the audience/ritual practitioners with statements about—and preferably *experiences of*—the human condition, nature, relationality and how “an extra dimension” is all around us, in an animistic/ neomaterialist sense. There are also permeable borders between the artists on the scene and in real life, as both Kåven and Buljo strive to make Sami voices and concerns heard through various means and channels, as do Jannok from *Midnattssol*.

4. Conclusions

The magic and religion promoted by and/or materialized from these popular culture products, make perfect sense in a subjunctive, ludic, joyful and material way, fitting a popular cultural audience. Material religion is a large field of study, but, in the present context, I have followed Bräunlein (2016) who refers to scholarly efforts to analyze new relations between humans and things, here popular cultural products:

⁹ Cf. (Jannok 2020a, 2020b).

I take the material turn, including assemblage theory and ideas of New Materialism, as an inspiration to discover new relations or connections between things and humans. However, a reversed view, the frequently invoked non-anthropocentric perspective, can only be realized in a playful mode, with nevertheless serious consequences, since it is always the human being who reflects upon her or his relation to things and the complexity of the material world with which she or he is entangled (Bräunlein 2016, p. 392).

As such, the films, series, songs, and performances are/convey magic and religion in their own right, in playful ways, for those willing to see, listen, sense and indulge themselves. The creators of these products stand out as confident creators of new worlds, magical worlds and ritualizations for us to take part in. The “extra dimension” of these magical worlds has turned out to be Sami, shaman, and nature based. This is in accordance with what Fonneland and Kraft label “a reversal of the primitivism of the past” (Fonneland and Kraft 2013, p. 140), where the traits that once placed indigenous people on a lower, evolutionary stage now cater for their “position as peaceful, wise and noble caretakers of environmental wisdom” (ibid.). This reversal of a primitivism also essentializes non-indigenous, industrialized (Christian) cultures as detached from (Mother) Nature. Fonneland and Kraft (2013, p. 132) identify this as a discourse “forwarded by representatives of indigenous people’s movements, the UN and legislation, tourism and popular culture, academics and activists, and New Age and neo-pagan movements”, and spiritual bonds to nature, landscape, animism, and shamanism is crucial to this discourse. These standpoints and processes are clearly seen in the present material: Our eco-critical times call for attention to nature and relationality, and the responses hint to or confidently speak of animism as a solution. Animism in/as indigenous religion/ Sami religion or shamanism thus gain broader impact in popular cultural terms and avoid paradoxes and dilemmas that for example the Shamanistic Association in Norway faces (Fonneland 2018), as an attempt to gain approval and impact. Obviously, this popular cultural variant of (Sami) shamanism is also a kind of magic and religion evolving and spreading by means of commercialism, entertainment, and the plight of constant renewal that registered faith associations are less bound to. Nonetheless, in our present eco-critical times, animism and Sami shamanistic inspired elements seem to fuse successfully with mediatized, material longings and belongings, where “real” magic is where our hearts are, and we are *nature*. Sami culture and religion are a source from which some individuals are more entitled to drink than others, according to a cultural heritage, indigenous spirituality and human rights narrative. However, Sami people as producers, and Sami religion and spirituality as semiotic resources, offer all of us to join in the ritualization of these resources through popular culture. The material enables the experience of the Sami as a living version of animism, where we are “As One”.

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