

A Valuable Book for the Sámi Community – and Others

Bergman, Elfrida, and Sara Lindquist (eds.) *Queering Sápmi: Sámi muitalusat mat ribkkot norpma* 2013. Translated by Lea Simma. Umeå: Qub 2013 (315 pages)

QUEERING SÁPMI: SÁMI *muitalusat mat ribkkot norpma* [*Queering Sápmi: Indigenous Stories Beyond the Norm*] is comprised of twenty-nine biographical stories, of which eight are anonymous. Thus, a majority of the storytellers use their own names and real photographs of themselves. The storytellers come from three countries, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, with some of them living in the Sámi region and some outside of it. In terms of their age, they vary from being in their twenties to being in their eighties. They all have different backgrounds within the Sámi community; some are reindeer herders, some are artists, some come from villages, some from cities. What unites them is that they are all Sámi who break norms regarding gender and sexuality: gay men, lesbians, transgender/transsexuals, or those who consider themselves queer in a more general sense.

Queering Sápmi opens with Elfrida Bergman and Sara Lindquist, the two leaders of the project, telling about the beginning of the investigation that resulted in the book and a photographic exhibition. Bergman and Lindquist had found out that there was a lack in the visibility of Sámi LGBTQ people, and studies about them. Furthermore, apparently neither the national LGBTQ associations nor Sámi society were

interested in this group and the difficulties they encountered. When speaking with Sámi, Bergman and Lindquist nevertheless realized that there was a clear social need for a project that would draw attention to Sámi LGBTQ persons and their situation. LGBTQ Sámi themselves did not dare to launch such a project, so Bergman and Lindquist were encouraged to undertake the task.

At first, they were strongly criticized for not having the competence to run such a project, as they are not Sámi. Some complained that they, with their Swedish background, represented the colonialist rule despite the fact that they both belong to a sexual minority. The issue was resolved when two Sámi youth organizations, Sáminuorra and Noereh, joined the project. These organizations, which operate in the Swedish and Norwegian parts of Sápmi, had realized that there are young Sámi LGBTQ people in society that they had been ignoring in their work. Cooperation solved the problem that the ethnicity of the project leaders had initially given rise to; this way, it was possible to build trust and good communication of equal nature between the partners regardless of their ethnic differences.

The project gives voice to queer Sámis' personal stories, as the project leaders considered – on the basis of their work experience – the biography the best way to make social changes visible, and to promote understanding and respect. As most of the Sámi belonging to gender and sexual minorities had not yet come out at the beginning of the project, the first task was to find them and to involve them in the project. Sámi LGBTQ people had to be found through "the snowball method"; after one participant was recruited, information on the project spread and others also wanted to join in.

When having found them, Bergman and Lindquist visited the participants to interview them. The interviews lasted from a few hours up to three days. The material finally consisted of about 200 hours of recordings and approximately 20,000 photographs. Each storyteller had also the opportunity to check his/her story and photographs and thus to choose what to show other people. In this way, the project has been exemplary and democratic; the participants have had real control over the

material about themselves. This way of working is consistent with the approaches put forward as ethical within the area of indigenous studies.

Certain themes are repeated in many of the stories; the storytellers reflect on how they have searched for, found, and accepted their sexual or gender identities. Another recurring discussion centers on concepts such as Sáminess and the Sámi identity, which are often seen as further aggravating the situation for individuals. Thus, although the stories focus on sexual and gender identities, they also address ethnicity. Many participants tell how they started to doubt their heterosexuality in puberty at the latest and how they have tried to find answers and cope with the suspicion that they do not square with heteronormativity. This quest for an identity also involves defining one's Sámi identity; the storytellers want to be accepted as queer but also as Sámi. Thus, many of the storytellers tell about a problematic relationship to their own Sámi group or Sámi identity. In the different narratives, the Sámi appear as a tight ethnic group, the members of which have a sense of solidarity, corporate identity, and capacity for concerted action. Indeed, what comes to mind when reading the biographical stories in *Queering Sápmi* is Rogers Brubaker's discussion about the "group" as always already defined by the politics of categorization (Brubaker 2013, 34–5).

In *Queering Sápmi*, the double identity as both Sámi and queer is sometimes described as very problematic. Some individual storytellers explain that they do not dare to express their sexual or gender orientation as members of a Sámi group. They feel excluded by the categorizations of the group. Many of them have not had the strength to subvert or change these categories; thus, they have often left the ethnic group and moved to live elsewhere. Another possibility is to accept the categories and stay invisible or hide one's gender identity. The third possibility – an extremely tragic one – is to commit suicide; some have done so, with only their friends left to tell their stories. The fourth possibility is to try to subvert and change these categories – just as many have now done, by making themselves visible through telling their biographical stories. Indeed, most of the stories account for the ways in which the storytellers have dared to come out and how this has strengthened them and

made them feel free. They have found the courage to show their families, friends, and the community who they are, and how they live and want to live. Many of the storytellers also say that, through their example, they want to help others to come out and build secure "rooms." The stories also focus on the desire to teach other people and acquaint them with what it means to be Sámi queer. As the two project leaders, Bergman and Lindquist, say, initially some people even doubted both the need for their project and the very existence of queer individuals in Sápmi.

Queering Sápmi is an important and valuable book for the Sámi community. It profoundly deals with the difficulties that the storytellers have experienced in their lives as a result of heteronormative attitudes. Moreover, it has opened a window into the diversity of Sámi society and its members. Through biographical stories, it focuses on people who have had no voice or whose sexuality has been denied by the Sámi community because it deviates from the norms of society. The family members of the storytellers have sometimes also become part of the process of finding their own identities. Thus, they, too, have had to reflect on their norms, categorizations, and attitudes towards queer people. In some cases close relatives or friends have not wanted or been able to accept information about an identity that deviates from heteronormativity; instead, they have cut off contact with the storyteller. The book also contains narratives about how the closest relatives or friends had already suspected that the storyteller was different; thus, the information on him/her being queer did not frighten them or was not new to them.

Thus, the stories in *Queering Sápmi* are not meant just for the queer community; they also help heterosexuals to understand queer people, respect their sexual and gender identities, and enhance understanding and knowledge about the issue. It is also important that the book has been published in five languages: in Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, South Sámi, and North Sámi. This means that the book is available for a wide readership both among the Sámi and the non-Sámi. This review is based on the North Sámi translation, a translation that is for the most part a good one. As it says in the introduction to the book, it was a challenge to find Sámi terms for the various concepts that are used in deal-

ing with queer matters. Therefore, it might have been wise to include a separate list of terms on LGBTQ issues in the book for the readers. Through its stories, the book shows the diversity that exists in the Sámi community and the many circumstances in which individuals live and experience their gender, sexual, and ethnic identities.

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