

Space, Time, Motion, Habit, and Saami Reindeer 'Nomadism'

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*Jot'tit lea buorit go orrot.
To move on is better than to stay put.*

Introduction

The semiotic experience of 'place' reflects how physical location intersects with, and is informed by, biologic, cultural, and individual habit emerging through time. The various tempos of habit and of societal lifeways thicken the threads making up the fabric of location. The paradigmatic warp, like harmony, lies in wait for each insertion of woof, for each extraction of melody. Some units and scales of analysis may be brief or serendipitous, some enduring or repetitious. The nomadic experience distinguishes itself at any unit or scale. Nomads do not wander aimlessly, but typically follow seasonal trajectories, scalloped by inspired digressions. Taking Saami reindeer breeders as a case in point, one can observe that the reindeer migration routes – themselves a synthesis of the biologic, the geographic, and the socio-cultural – are mimicked by mobility of persons and objects at other scales of smaller spaces and more abbreviated time periods. While people, their immediate possessions and the reindeer move about the landscape seasonally and periodically within the season and sporadically throughout the day, their every moment in any setting involves motion. Individuals of all ages move about the room in a house, in and out of the tent, and from task to pastime to emergency. At the same time, furniture, tools, and clothing exhibit mobility as well, transported by people, pets, and weather from place to place. 'The carpet, too, is moving under you' (Country Joe & the Fish, lyrics Bob Dylan) might be the theme for this wide-angled interrogation of Saami motion.

Ambling preamble

IT'S ALL OVER NOW, BABY BLUE: Country Joe & the Fish, lyrics Bob Dylan

You must leave now, take what you need, you think will last.

But whatever you wish to keep, you better grab it fast.

Yonder stands your orphan with his gun,

Crying like a fire in the sun.

Look out the saints are comin' through

And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

The highway is for gamblers, better use your sense.

Take what you have gathered from coincidence.

The empty-handed painter from your streets

Is drawing crazy patterns on your sheets.

This sky, too, is folding under you

And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

All your seasick sailors, they are rowing home.

All your reindeer armies, are all going home.

The lover who just walked out your door

Has taken all his blankets from the floor.

The carpet, too, is moving under you

And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

Leave your stepping stones behind, something calls for you.

Forget the dead you've left, they will not follow you.

The vagabond who's rapping at your door

Is standing in the clothes that you once wore.

Strike another match, go start anew

And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

Situating Saami in space and time

The Saami people of Saapmi – the Laplands of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia – all live in arctic environments but subsist from a number of occupations besides the stereotypic reindeer management, which, while 'typical', has never been the lifeway of the majority. There are also, of course, Saami who have migrated south and abroad, especially to national capitals in Fennoscandia and, a century ago, to reindeer management ventures in North America, and some of these emigrants and their descendant today virtually practice another sort of transhumance, enjoying wage labor in the city plus summer

gathering and hunting up north, where they stock up on winter provisions of berries and dried meat from their relatives.

Longer-distance 'transhumance' also obtains between the continents, as descendants of those North American transplants discover, and visit, their roots. One such woman, Faith Fjeld, publishes a newsletter for North American Saami, in English, of course, but the title is *Báiki*, meaning 'place'.

I will focus on the Saami reindeer pastoralists of northern Norway, because that's where I've concentrated my ethnographic research for over three decades. And I might as well start by relating the story of my first uncertain foot-hold on this moving landscape.

Insinuating the researcher into a moving landscape

Early in 1972, after scouting the two main centers of reindeer management in northern Norway via snowmobile and other conveyances – Guov'dageai'dno and Gárásjokkas – I returned by bus to the first town. It was late winter, but the sun had not yet returned, and I was not certain exactly where to find the frame-house dwelling of a family who had seemed accommodating a fortnight earlier. Gingerly, looking for the most emphatic beaten path through the snow, I found a house looking to be worth a try. Outside the door I set down my rucksack. One doesn't knock, that much I had already learned, so I ventured inside. Frankly, no one looked familiar, and how could they, but I felt encouraged by some persons seeming to know me, or of me.

Remember, at this point, I had mastered neither Saami nor Norwegian, and these many decades later I still find Finnish as good as Greek. I did the best I could to express my mission in Saami, but I also heard some Norwegian around me – not that that was of any help! Coffee came my way, many times over, and freshly-boiled reindeer meat. I selected a rib over what seemed to have an eye above the broth line, and when I turned to re-seat myself on one of the few chairs, I found that it had become occupied by one of the many strangers coming and going, so I re-assembled myself on the floor. I felt better after noticing that others had also lost their seats. The chairs were at the same time migrating around the two main rooms of the house – so the game was hardly any tame one of musical chairs. Rather, 'The carpet, too, is moving under you', as Bob Dylan portrayed impermanence in *It's All Over Now, Baby Blue*. It's not surprising that 'coming and going' appears in the title of one of my first articles about the Saami (Anderson 1977).

Then, some very animated children rushed in, talking at once and gesticulating toward the outer door. Serendipitously, the subject had to do with a term having a cognate in the English language: piss, or *tis'se* in Saami. Sure enough, at least one dog had relieved himself on my rucksack; the accused was named Run'ne, and he soon thereafter distinguished himself by adopting me – lock, stock, and barrel. Everyone but me recognized this as it was happening, I later found out. But if the people resembled each other in the beginning of my fieldwork, for sure the dogs did as well.

Months later, when I gave in to Run'ne's affections, I baptized him with a surname: *beana*, for 'dog'. Run'ne-Beana's own adventures have been documented elsewhere (Anderson 1984). Run'ne came to fulfill the peregrinatory aspirations of Saami culture-bearers, following me everywhere and all but emigrating to the U.S. A week after presenting this paper in Tartu, on Saturday, September 25, 2004, one of Run'ne's descendents did just that – by emigrating! I then adopted a puppy having at least a teaspoon of Run'ne Beana's genes, born in Finland on July 31, 2004, and arriving to the U.S. on October 2, 2004. That puppy's name is Muste-Beana. Just as 'Run'ne' is a name suitable only for auburn dogs, 'Muste' is the logical choice for a black dog. These names are not related to the words for red or black, by the way. Then there is Tatter, Muste-Beana's sister, who stowed away in Muste's carrier, or vice versa, and who lives not far from me in West Lafayette, Indiana. Tatter lives on a horsefarm, and reportedly scans the heads of the beasts with hope for any sign of antlers!

One stumble at a time

Back to the social scene in this first household – given the indexical translucence of gestures, I followed instructions to fetch my irrigated belongings into the house. Where to, was not clear. But it did seem a good sign. People of all descriptions kept coming and going, and, within the visible interior of the house, they maintained some kind of Brownian motion. I studied how casually individuals asserted themselves and inserted and reinserted themselves in space. Since I could not speak and scarcely could understand a word, I kept alert by monitoring the choreography unfolding around me. I tried to figure out which persons seemed monolingual in one or another language, which persons were possibly passively bilingual, and which were articulating two if not three languages (Anderson 1978).

Precipitating from these frantic observations and tentative participations – the crux of the ethnographic enterprise – I noted patterns and generated hypotheses, most of which would shatter like so many fractals into others as my observations continued – as they did for another five years just on that first bout of fieldwork, and during several decades since then.

That evening in 1972 when I arrived had matured to night, and I was no longer so much expecting to firm up arrangements for spring migration the following month as just plain hoping against hope for a spot to crash that one night. Both wishes were granted. The bustle subsided; some people left and others disappeared into what I later found was a bedroom and some modest basement alcoves. That left me and four men between about 20 and 60 years of age to colonize the main room. It seemed that these men had been speaking Norwegian instead of Saami. Everyone laid out their bedrolls or sleeping bags, so I did the same after making a trip to the outhouse. I was exhausted and slept through to the next brewing of coffee, presumably morning – although at 70 degrees north latitude, one could never be sure of the time, either, just by looking at the light outside!

I looked around. There were now six, no longer four, bedrolls in the room, some still occupied. I looked around to identify who had come in later that night, and discovered that some of the original four were not even represented. Even this simple inventory defied resolution.

That was my introduction to Saami culture: once again, ‘The carpet, too, is moving under you’ – only there was no carpet!

Who were all those men, perhaps seven or eight of them? They were Norwegian-speaking friends and trading partners of the Saami nomads, more particularly some friends of the wife and some of the husband. They had traveled by snowmobiles over the mountains from the coast on mixed business and pleasure. The pleasure would be obvious if I had once myself experienced the stark late-winter landscape. The business was also pleasurable, to wit, oiling the *verde* host-guest bonds relating these several persons and families. The coastal men had brought with them loads of cod fish, not to sell, but to share. In turn they would eat their fill of reindeer and, if fortunate, take some back with them in a few days.

Later, in fact already in early spring, the Saami nomads would be enjoying the hospitality of these coastal contacts. The nomads would be able to count on

a resting place, with food and shelter, and sometimes transportation by vehicle or by boat, to the next rung on their annual trek with and without their reindeer. Ethnic identity also exhibits a genre of mobility, as it were. Reindeer herders, given the chance, exaggerate the size of their herd, unless around the tax-collector, of course. Sedentaries without any livestock whatsoever will claim, around tourists, to own reindeer, to fulfill the expectations of the Saami stereotype, while otherwise they may identify themselves as non-Saami Norwegians (Anderson 1991).

Finding pulses in time and patterns in space

The above outline of migration and inter-migration host-guest relations drastically simplifies the units of analysis, however. On either end of the spring and fall migrations' trajectories, neither nuclear nor extended families would stay in focus among the nomads. The sedentaries also seemed to lead a fluid existence, coming and going on shorter and longer trips for one reason or another, entering and exiting each others' houses and tents, as did the nomads on the tundra in winter and at the coast in summer. While storage buildings are locked, no dwelling is secured against entry. Nor does one knock. However, dwellings are symbolically locked when no one at all is at home, when it is inappropriate to enter them if the tent flap is inside-out, or if a broom rests against the door of a house.

Eventually, after much scrutiny, I concluded that the only unit of analysis among the Saami would be an individual of any age or sex with his or her herding dog or dogs. Yes, that held up well, and still does among those who have not totally capitulated to a sedentary way of life. Even toddlers venture out alone or with a dog on rotation, to visit neighboring houses or tents, where they will certainly drink coffee, perhaps eat, and sometimes sleep. Then I noted that these children served as information conduits as much as adults and even ignorant outsiders. Children exercise their own rendition of Saami culture, even uniquely recognizing and naming distinct elements in their natural surround (Anderson 2000). Adults pay little attention to the culture of their children, such that child-culture remains unedited. However, adults respect these same children's observations of the comings and goings of others, which are accepted at face value. Like the Inuit mentioned by Tim Ingold in the original *Culture, Nature, Semiotics: Locations IV* conference, Saami read tracks and traces on the landscape, but they depend on and revel in stories involving humans, to which store of self-organizing knowledge children contribute as well.

On encountering one another, a Saami will routinely ask the visitor where he or she came from, and further, what was seen, sensed, or suspected about what was going on between source and destination (Anderson 1977). Children feel important to be able to report on a human figure silhouetted on a distant hilltop. Persons consume all shreds of data coming their way, before evaluating and acting on it. Conversation dwells on comings and goings, pure and simple. People are more interesting than reindeer, reindeer more interesting than other creatures, and animals infinitely more interesting than plants, even forage plants. The latter observation pretty much undercut one ecological feature I was eager to study, the classificatory attention afforded forage and other useful plants compared with the rest of local flora. Plants in general are sessile, as were the sedentary neighbors of the nomads; both might as well be clumped together, as *ras'si*, or 'weeds' – the plants are ignored and the sedentaries pitied, even regarded with disdain when not involved in some useful transaction (Anderson 1986).

Complementing the greeting inquiring about where one is coming from at the inception of a meeting, upon separating, Saami extend their respects to 'depart well' or 'stay (behind) well'. Everything is predicated on mobility.

Various groups of Saami, including individual Saami, do follow-cum-constrain reindeer, themselves coming in various aggregations: combined or sex-segregated herds, nursery herd-segments, strays. Especially on spring migration and summer earmarking roundups, the Saami may appear as families, but never as intact ones. These congregations of folk will be fuzzy around the edges, again, for any number of reasons. Some members of the family may be on the range surveying other herd-segments, seeking lost livestock, or visiting other *sii'da* herding groups. The *sii'da* consists of all the people and animals together with their landscape substrate. Besides meandering within the constraints of transhumance, the *sii'da* waxes and wanes seasonally and for other reasons. Some aggregations may be linked by close consanguineous and affinal ties, others not.

Pinning down people, dogs, and reindeer

While nomads may interrelate and interact, interdependently, with their livestock and landscape and meteorological conditions and trading partners, they also in a way mimic the reindeer on a smaller scale and in a different tempo in their daily lives off the range. As I observed that very first evening, people come and go and actively mill around when enclosed, much as the reindeer will move

counter-clockwise in a corral. It would be nice to report that people also circle counter-clockwise in a room, but that space is too limited to permit anything close to that fluidity. What does occur, however, is that the material culture becomes as animated as the people and dogs (and the occasional cat or reindeer that might be in a house or tent).

In a tent, which is even smaller than a room in a house, any exchange of places is less apt to occur, and certain slots in the back of the tent are pretty much reserved to the presiding family members. In a room, however, not only do people sit down on chairs that may reasonably be claimed, but the seating itself gets moved around as well. Sitting on a seat asserts a temporary claim at best. Musical chairs is a continuous routine, and whenever the scene seems too sedentary or boring, someone will break the tenuous symmetry by relocating either himself, his chair, or both, scattering other items in his wake like so many colors in a kaleidoscope.

If there is an irritating ambient sound – a fussy baby or Norwegian language on the radio – one might yoik to drown it out. Noisily washing dishes might also be easier than tending the baby or turning off the radio following the weather report in Saami. The yoik, a chant and the primary vocal art of the Saami, further mirrors the culture as a whole. Even when several persons yoik simultaneously, the yoikers are individual performers. There is no beginning or end for a yoik, and with or without words, the yoik is emphatically not about a subject, it simply is. The yoik flows between the jerks of starting and stopping, an aural icon of the nomadic culture as a whole (Anderson 2005).

The yoik, once most associated with movement on the landscape outdoors and with inebriation indoors, now can be heard on the radio, along with jazz, rock, and choral renditions. The recorded yoiks are commodities consumed, not listened to; nor are recordings used to drown out other noises, nor do they inspire either more yoiking or conversation. Even when the recording includes sounds from reindeer, dogs, and crunching snow, the yoik no longer has landscape as its substrate, especially when it is played indoors.

Contemporary twists and turns

The times they are a-changing, though. In the past couple of decades as winter dwellings became subsidized and standardized, special-purpose rooms hived off of the kitchen and parlor, and the parlor evolved to be what we could call

a 'living room'. Shortly after this development, commercial furniture purveyors would come to town, and help homeowners fill up these living rooms with solid pieces of furniture. The most radically distinctive of such furniture is the sofa or davenport, which quickly evolved to be a curved three-piece contraption covered in fake leather. In many cases, these might be about four feet on one length and six on the other. If people then nest a coffee table in front of this L-shaped sofa, getting in and out is compromised and changing places almost impossible.

This rigor mortis in interior design has not trickled up to inhibit the movements of whole buildings, however. Many smaller buildings continue to be subjected to multiple relocations, from minor adjustments on one piece of property to long-distance moves. Contemporary houses with foundations are less apt to be relocated, but they can be transformed by vertical and horizontal additions and internal functional rearrangements by adding and subtracting walls. In these structural projects, some elements will be recycled and others replaced. Seldom, though, are the replaced elements discarded. Instead, these go into another of the family's dwellings or the next cabin, perhaps right outside the back door.

The kitchen, though, retains the microcosmic pulse of the nomad experience. Meals are analogue affairs, seldom digital ones. One person of any age and either sex may set something on to cook, another take up the slack to remove it from the heat, and still another come along to taste or to eat. Coffee-drinking lends itself to musical-chair behavior, as people drink so much coffee that often there will be several persons there at the same time. Food, though, may be consumed alone and serially. Some food may be prepared in such a quantity that it lasts for a number of family members and passers-by. Either very soon, or later, excess food may be passed to household working dogs, some few pet dogs, and the occasional cat. To my initial astonishment (Anderson 1994), much food is simply discarded.

Recapitulating space and time

As data points, two of the three dwellings I rented in Norwegian Lapland between 1972 and 1980 have been relocated several times; the third is in place but never re-occupied. On shorter fieldtrips nowadays, I simply stay with friends, still fascinated how all the houses, huts, sheds, and tents amble about the landscape.

Once accepting that Saami both experience and create an environment in flux, it is compelling to inquire about what, for them, constitutes location and

how those relations enable identity. It is, in a word, process. Space and time collapse in the moment. Spontaneity and serendipity are siblings. Toddlers are still free agents, households self-organize around anyone who happens to be home and awake, the ambulatory elderly are admired for their stamina, and lovers still risk pot-luck. That is, lovers find that trusting their intersection to the vagaries of Brownian motion pays off better than pretending to be able to specify particular times and places for trysts, when none of the above is under anyone's prediction or control.

Despite continual endogenous change and the impact of the exogenous – contact with other people, cultures, and languages, together with global media – Saami thrive. The nomadism of reindeer-management never characterized the lifeway of a majority of Saami, yet mobility permeates the culture as a whole to this day. Motion is the habit in the deep structure of persons and culture. Physical space of tundra and tent in conjunction with the virtual space embodied as habit combines to maintain a recognizable Saami culture and society.

The various Saami dialects have become more familiar to everyone, even to those who haven't learned Saami as a first language. If and when these dialects afford any degree of mutual intelligibility, we can thank the media and mobility beyond that associated with reindeer nomadism. The various dialects are heard on the radio, witnessed on the television, exhibited along with museum installations, and encountered when venturing to other Saami and national centers for educational opportunities.

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