



- STORYTELLING -

Winter myths across Sápmi

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The nature surrounding us is filled with myths. We have listened to the stories since we were children. Stories about different animals, birds, plants and mountains passed down from generation to generation.

Will we continue telling the stories nowadays or how has our changed lifestyle affected us? And what can you find about Sámi winter myths at Ájtte, Swedish Mountain and Saami museum and around Jokkmokk?

Heimo Semenoff, Sevettijärvi: "When I was a child, there was no need for TV, living with my grandma and grandpa. Grandma told her own stories every night. Long and exciting stories. It was a bit like watching a film on TV these days. You just listened to it, and then you saw the pictures in your imagination and fell asleep thinking about it. Yes, there were always different stories. Sometimes if you wanted to hear something really good once again, then you had to ask and beg a little bit. Here are some of the stories that I remember."



Heimo Semenoff with his
grandfather Evvan Semenoff

Jåffaž da Evvan
Semenoff, Njölljäu'rr,
1976

Joffas and Evvan
Semenoff, Nilijärvi 1976

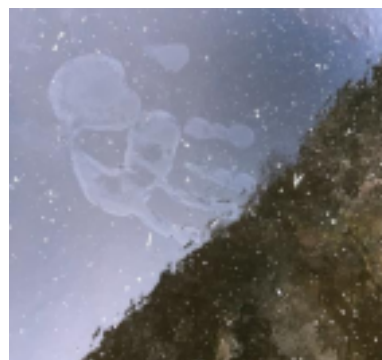


HEIMO'S STORIES

The iceman is waiting

In the autumn, when the lake froze to ice, grandma and grandpa warned me not to go on the ice. They told me there was an iceman with a big axe waiting. When he hits under your feet, the ice starts to crack.

I didn't believe it of course. Later, when I went outside, I immediately ran out onto the ice. I didn't get far when the ice started to crack. I didn't go through the ice, but the ice cracks when it gets frosty, that's how the ice strengthens, so of course I thought it was the iceman. It wasn't long before I ran inside and didn't want to go on the ice. I told grandma that the iceman had been there splitting the ice with a big axe. Grandma just asked "Well, now do you believe me?"



Vie'rmääkkaž bag

Late in the evening, you weren't allowed to play or go by sledge downhill. *Vie'rummääkaž* waited with a big bag under the hill. If it caught you, it would take you to the woods and put you in a boiling pot.

If my grandparents would have said that we shouldn't go sledding so late, we wouldn't have listened as much as when they frightened us with that story of *Vie'rmääkkaž*. We really didn't dare to go – what if it was real? These old stories must have existed for a long time. relaxing. When the sparks gathered at the wall of the fireplace grandpa always said "*There goes the reindeer herd – aah, there it is now!*" He appeared to know where the reindeers were! He told me that he could see

The sparks will show you the reindeers



When we made a fire in the fireplace, we always looked into it for a long time. Staring at the flames was many reindeers. The sparks were moving upwards all the time. When he spotted some sparks lower down, he told me it was the reindeer herders, my uncles.

The stories have stayed in my mind, even now when I see fire in a fireplace, I always look for sparks gathering at the back. They always do. Nowadays I'm making a joke saying *"Look, you can see the lights from the Skidoo (snowmobile) behind!"*

Don't call a place strange

When I learned reindeer herding in the forest, Grandpa and Grandma told me that if I arrived at a strange place, I should never say out loud that I thought so. I shouldn't talk about that a hill was ugly or that some rock was strange. If you did that - a blizzard or bad weather would come and you'd get lost in the woods!

So, until this day, I never say something like that.

Rowing on snowy water

Once my grandmother was anxious when my grandfather and I went on the lake with our wooden boat. The lake is just 300 meters wide, but during that trip the snowfall was so heavy that the boat started to leave a track behind. The oars left traces too. Grandmother got so anxious that she was waiting with a lasso on the shore. Grandfather kept rowing all the way, without resting! There was not enough time for the snow to pile up on the bottom of the boat.



The snow will pile up in front of the wooden boat. When it gets too much it turns the whole boat around in no time!

THE FUTURE OF STORYTELLING

According to Heimo, media has impacted storytelling. He also believes that the stories do not come out when you are alone. Remembering and telling a story requires a listener.

The Săi'mm network participants had a conversation about how the Covid pandemic

affected storytelling. It seemed that people had more time to reflect, remember and recall stories. Now that people are meeting again, stories are being told again. Arranging storytelling events might help the tradition of storytelling to survive and to remember stories in common.

STORYTELLING AT THE SAAMI MUSEUM ÁJTTE

Ájtte, Swedish Mountain- and Sami museum is the main museum for Sámi culture in Sweden. In the museum there is a special part of the exhibition devoted to myths around the well known mythological creature Stállo. There also are myths about other things, like the stars, the bear or the creation of the world in other places at the museum.

During the dark winter nights families and friends would gather around the fire – the perfect place for storytelling. Stállo is the main character in many of our children's stories. He is a mean giant who's favourite meal is small Sámi children. The good thing about him is that he



is a bit stupid and quite easy to trick. Even if the stories are raw and scary they most of the time have a happy ending, for the children that is. Stállo most of the time gets fooled or even killed. Many times the stories teach the children to stay close to their home, not to stroll away too far by themselves and watch out for dangerous places in nature, like water or thin ice. To behave well and stay safe.

The days around Christmas were seen as a time when many scary things moved around close to us. Our old relatives, no longer alive, were around again. Not always friendly if you didn't behave well! We were extra careful not

to annoy any of them. Perhaps we gave them some sacrifices, like parts of the meal we were having.

We have some stories about Stállo arriving at Christmas Eve. He was passing by with a sledge drawn by lemmings and you wouldn't like him to get caught in some wooden sticks litter around – then things could go terrible wrong. Everything had to be clean and tidy, quiet and calm.

One of the Christmas stories has quite a sad ending. It is about some children that were left with a young nanny while their parents visited the church during the Christmas days. They knew that it was dangerous to be wild and noisy but they



didn't listen. They screamed and whistled under the northern lights and managed to make the moon angry. So it came down, turned into Stállo and killed every last one of them.

In this story, like in some others, the moon plays a role. Some of our elders have told about that people in the old days made rings out of tree twigs or ice to honour the moon and keep it in a good mood. The moon, the Nordic light and the stars are of course very visible in the dark winter, and the stories around them are many.

BIRDS IN SAAMI MYTHS

Some myths are connected to birds. Today they are not well known, but they probably were in the old days, when we lived closer to nature. During the winter time there are fewer birds around, most of them leave for warmer countries, but some stay all year around.



One of them is the Ptarmigan. By listening to it you can get to know what the weather will be like the following day.

When stormy weather with snow and wind is arriving the Ptarmigan will warn you. Then it laughs when the sun goes down. If it only makes a quiet sound there will only be snow and no wind.

PHOTOS & ILLUSTRATIONS

*Photos: Jorma Puranen (Joffas and Evvan Semenoff),
Elina Nygård (Ice, Fire), Ida Landström (Fishing net)
Illustrations: Tanja Öhman (Stállo), Elina Nygård (Ptarmigan)*

