

# “ELVELAND” – IRONY AND LAUGHTER AS POWER MEDIA IN SEA SÁMI FOLK-SONG TRADITION

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“Elveland” is both a man and a song. Elveland the man was so zealous in his job as roadman, forester and river attendant that he had the rather dubious honour of having an entire song written about him. The honour was dubious because the song is satirical and ultimately does not leave him with much honour. In fact, the song is a form of revenge on the part of the local community because he would not let them cut as much firewood as they needed, and because he was self-aggrandizing and took advantage of his position of power.

Although much research has been done regarding the *yoik* tradition, there has been very little in the field of Sámi folk-song tradition.<sup>1</sup> The goal of this article is to document the folk-song tradition in one particular Sámi community, and to unite text and context by the use of living informants. The song about Elveland was composed at the beginning of the twentieth century by people in a rural community on the west side of the Porsangerfjord in the county of Finnmark in Northern Norway. The song reflects challenges that the local community had to deal with in a time of poverty and harsh policies of Norwegianization.<sup>2</sup> According to the information I received from informants during my fieldwork, there used to be a rich tradition of composing satirical songs in Porsanger. This tradition has now gone. The informants Jovvna Káre Sofe and Lemet Máret said that there were people who were very good at making songs about people, especially about those who occupied positions of some importance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The song about Elveland is from one of the chapters in my post-graduate thesis in Sámi literature, *Porsáŋgu lávlagat. Mearrasámi lávlunárbevierru ja olmmošlaš reaškinkultuvra* (Songs from Porsanger. Sea Sámi song tradition and popular laughter culture)

<sup>2</sup> Norway gained its independence in 1905. The authorities wanted all the citizens to be “good Norwegians” and instituted quite harsh policies aimed at exterminating the Sámi language and thereby the entire culture. One way of doing this was codified in a law in 1898 that forbade Sámi language usage in schools.

<sup>3</sup> 9/11-1995. I use my informants’ Sámi names. Jovvna Káre Sofe is Sofie Jonskareng and Lemet Máret is Marit Stordahl.

## *“Elveland”*

Here, I have used a version of the “Elveland” song as written by Hans Hansen, based on his own recollections of the song. I also have an oral version that one of my informants, Uhca Nánnáš, sang to me.<sup>4</sup> The song has eleven verses, each verse consisting of four lines. In a Sámi Radio programme about Sea Sámi folk-songs, Káre Peder said that the song originally had eighteen verses, seven of which have now been forgotten.<sup>5</sup> The original writer of the song is unknown, but this is not surprising since an author's anonymity is a common feature of the folk-song tradition. Cuddon (Utsi 1998:46) defines folk-song thus:

This kind of song belongs to oral tradition and is thus passed on from mouth to mouth. It is a communal form of expression and appears to be universal.

In this article, I shall undertake an intertextual analysis of the “Elveland” song and show how irony is used by the local community as an instrument for resistance. The text illustrates identity and power relations, and it includes elements of the inside-out world of the carnival and the carnivalistic laughter culture.<sup>6</sup>

### ***“Elveland”***<sup>7</sup>

1) Elveland, lord of the branches,  
Is the enemy of all birch-burners.  
He himself plundered the State's  
wood

And stole Norway's stone.

3) The commandments of  
devoutness  
He wanted to teach to everyone.  
He ruled with Herod's hate  
And he whipped with hard cuts.

2) He acceded to the post  
In the year nineteen hundred and  
five.

He took his seat in the chair of glory  
And possessed the Crown's iron.

4) When Biret Lemet nosed around  
One autumn day by the path,  
He was counting the guard stones  
And he was missing one of them.

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<sup>4</sup> Nanna Persen, 10/11-1995. Her version does not differ greatly from the written one.

<sup>5</sup> Peder A. Persen in the program "Mearrasámi lávlagat" (Sea Sámi songs) 29/6-1982.

<sup>6</sup> In this context, laughter culture is part of the folk tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Own translation.

5) He used his wiles and asked  
around  
And at last he got to know,  
When the elišiš master confessed  
That the scapegoat was Elveland.

7) When the Sea Sámi begin to  
freeze,  
They start to desire the mountain  
birch.  
They celebrate Elveland,  
And his ability to let poor creatures  
freeze.

9) Elveland might have ruled this  
way,  
But as I'm singing the last verse,  
The local community has sworn  
To squeeze the tar out of him.

11) And still people are asking  
Who invented this song.  
This song came into being all by itself  
And it has followed Elveland.

6) And than Ole Bulja sang out,  
He disclosed all the secrets,  
That Elveland used to steal pine  
trees  
And told his brother to take some  
too.

8) Other people also confirm this –  
Among them dáža Duommát, too –  
Who were also in the war of  
branches,  
And those who had attacked  
Elveland.

10) You are not any devout judge,  
Your own crimes will now  
Judge you for certain.  
Heaven has heard the prayers.

### ***Elveland, lord of the branches***

Irony, so important in the “Elveland” song, is already explicit in the first verse, which begins by proclaiming Elveland as lord of the branches – a title without any real distinction or importance. By using such a title, the locals were stating that they thought he was taking advantage of his position. As a forester, his most important work was to watch over the local wood supply, including birch branches, which were a source of food for animals. However, vital as the branches were as a source of food for animals, they did not represent the most important resource under the supervision of the forester. By choosing to focus on one of Elveland's minor tasks, the people seriously demeaned him. The first and second lines describe a man who has a job and preserves the wood, while the third and fourth lines describe him as a thief.

### ***He acceded to the post***

The second verse begins by describing how Elveland has been elevated to his important position. It states that he became forester in 1905, the year of Norway’s independence. However, this may or may not be factually accurate. According to local Porsanger history, a man named Klemet Hansen from Igeldas was appointed as roadman, ferryman, river supervisor and forester of the west side of the Porsangerfjord in 1909 (Hanssen 1986:359-60). One of my informants, Lemet Máret, said that Klemet Hansen was actually appointed at the end of the nineteenth century, and that when he resigned the post, the county governor of Troms and Finnmark appointed Elveland as forester.<sup>8</sup> However, there is evidence that Elveland got the post before 1907, because in that year he denounced a reindeer Sámi for allowing his reindeer to destroy pine forest in the Stabburs valley (Petterson 1994:49).<sup>9</sup> Another informant, Uhca Nánnáš, says that Elveland was not his real name, but the name of his birthplace.<sup>10</sup> His real name was Klemmá. However, she admitted that although “he had a lot of nicknames” as a result of his job, she could not remember any of them.

The fourth line of this stanza refers to *the Crown’s iron*. Lemet Máret says that this was the mark that the forester knocked into the trees to show the people which ones they could fell.<sup>11</sup> Another informant, Jovvna Lemet Dagny, says that the Crown’s iron was a little axe that the forester used to mark the trees.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The commandments of devoutness***

In the third verse, fairly ceremonious language is used to explain the ways in which Elveland asserted his authority. The first two lines tell how he wanted to be a teacher and enforcer of morals: *The commandments of devoutness/ He wanted to teach to everyone*. In the third and fourth lines, Biblical metaphors emphasize his harsh treatment of the people in the local community: *He ruled with Herod’s hate/ And he whipped with hard cuts*. Herod (ca. 73-4 BC) was a

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<sup>8</sup> Lemet Máret 9/11-1995

<sup>9</sup> The reindeer owner was not convicted because the authorities could not deny him passage through the woods during migration. (Petterson 94:49)

<sup>10</sup> 10/11-1995

<sup>11</sup> 30/10-1998

<sup>12</sup> 9/11-1998

despotic leader who became King of Palestine in about 40 BC. He hated the Jews, ordered many atrocities and exterminated everyone who might be a threat to his position - including one of his own sons. By comparing Herod and Elveland, the people of Porsanger obviously thought that the latter also ruled by tyranny. In addition, they thought that he was peculiar because he was fairly mean with the local resources, despite the fact that they thought there was enough wood for everyone. In the local Porsanger history book, Alfred Bergersen describes a strange old man who watched over the wood and would walk around a lake called Gåradakvann looking for illegally felled trees. Interestingly, Bergersen admits that they used to cut young birches when they set grouse snares, and that this often left ugly stumps (Petterson 1994:47). So perhaps Elveland's vigilance was not completely unfounded after all.

### ***When Biret Lemet nosed around***

Biret Lemet was a road maintenance worker and the father of Jovvna Lemet Dagny. According to Lemet Máret, Biret Lemet was actually Klemet Johnsen, a cousin of her father's. In the song, Biret Lemet was counting guard stones one day and found that one of them was missing. The implication is that someone has taken it, and it is not very difficult to guess the identity of the thief. After all, the first verse of the song says that Elveland stole *Norway's stone*.

### ***He used his wiles and asked around***

The fifth verse says that Biret Lemet was quite a detective and asked around about the missing stone. Finally, the *elišiš* master admits that it is Elveland who has taken the stone. Lemet Máret says that an *elišiš* person is a lively person, and that her father was such a person.<sup>13</sup> Jovvna Lemet Dagny says that an *elišiš* person is a little bit cunning and that the *elišiš* master in the song was Máret Lemet, the father of Lemet Máret.<sup>14</sup> According to local history, Máret Lemet was a politician and member of the school board and, in 1911, became the first chairman of the "Porsango same særve" ("Porsanger Sámi

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<sup>13</sup> 30/10-98

<sup>14</sup> 9/11-1998. Máret Lemet and Lemet Máret are two different persons. Máret Lemet was the father of Lemet Máret. His mother's name was probably Máret, and the Sami way of naming a person was often by using the name of the mother or the father followed by the person's own name.

“Elveland”

association”). An example of his cunning is that sometimes when he went fishing illegally in the river, he first went to see Klemet (Elveland) and told him that he was going to a school board meeting. Then he knew that Klemet would not bother to go and watch the river.<sup>15</sup> I asked Dagny what Elveland might have wanted the stone for, and she said that it could have been to build a house.

### ***And then Ole Bulja sang out***

The sixth verse states that Ole Bulja admitted that Elveland (his father-in-law) used to steal pine trees. At the end of the nineteenth century, a population increase in Porsanger resulted in an increase in the need to cut down more wood. This prompted efforts by the "Porsanger Skogopsyn" (Porsanger Forest Supervision) to preserve pinewood in the 1930s (Pettersen 1994:48, 50).

### ***When the Sea Sámi begin to freeze***

The seventh verse explains why the people needed the firewood: *When the Sea Sámi begin to freeze / They start to desire the mountain birch*. The word *desire* has erotic connotations that point to desire as the source of life. The Sea Sámi desire the birch because without it they would freeze to death. If there is no birch, there is no life. The word *desire* also has a humorous connotation, as used here. Lemet Máret's version of the song mentions fjord people, rather than the Sea Sámi.<sup>16</sup> This is a much more neutral term, which includes both the Sámi and the Norwegians. However, the written version stresses the fact that it was the Sámi, not the Norwegians, who froze when there was not enough firewood.

### ***Other people also confirm this***

The controversy regarding who was made to suffer due to the restrictions on cutting firewood seems to be resolved in the eighth verse. Here, it clearly states that Norwegians were also freezing due to a lack of firewood. Dáža Duommát refers to the Norwegian family Thommasen in the village Indre-Billefjord.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jovvna Lemet Dagny 9/11-1998.

<sup>16</sup> 9/11-1995.

<sup>17</sup> Dáža means a non-Sámi person.

***But as I'm singing the last verse***

The ninth verse describes the point at which the local people finally became fed up with the torment that Elveland was constantly inflicting on them. Even though Elveland had certain rules that had to be adhered to, the rules would not last very long in the face of the dire conditions experienced by the local people. The term *local community* tells us that it was a large group of people who believed that Elveland's conduct was untenable.

***You are not any devout judge***

The tenth verse has the same ceremonious language as the third verse, but the two are quite unlike with respect to content. The tenth verse states that Elveland's own crimes will bring down punishment upon him, and that heaven has heard the prayers of the people and will support their stand against him.

***This song came into being all by itself***

Interestingly, the final verse ironically and self-referentially states that no one actually composed it. Rather, it came into being all by itself. This denial of an author is quite common in satirical songs like "Elveland" where the content of the song is more important than the person who created it. In this case, anonymity would have been of vital importance because the song teases and judges a powerful and influential man in a very small community. Luckily, those who knew the origin of the song would never have told Elveland since they would have had very little sympathy for him to begin with.

***The text as a meeting point for dialogues between different voices***

The literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin says that a text is a dialogue between different voices (Tarkka 1993:171). The folklorist Marit Anne Hauan explains this concept by applying it to Dostoevsky's novels:

The diversity of independent and different voices and consciousnesses, a true polyphony of pure voices, constitute the fundamental characteristics in Dostoevsky's novels.  
(Børtnes quotation, Hauan 1998:47)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Own translation.

In respect of how true intertextual analysis works, Lotte Tarkka writes:

True intertextual analysis arises from the understanding of a text as an intersection of multiple texts and discourses: the analysis seeks to single out those significant texts that give the text its meaning – or, a meaning in general. (Tarkka 1993:177)

*Reflexivity*, or how a *self* sees itself in connection to others, is central to the “Elveland” song. “The self”, as G. M. Mead explains, “is a social structure that arises in social relations” (Babcock 1980:1). Mead writes that reflexivity is

the turning-back of experience of the individual upon himself [...] by virtue of this reflexive capacity, the individual is able to understand and adjust to the social process, to modify his future behaviour, and to modify the social process itself. Reflexiveness, then, is the essential condition within the social process for the development of mind” (Mead quotation, Babcock 1980:2).

Here, it makes sense to connect the voices of the song to the social reality of everyday life, to understand the song by discussing the importance of irony, and in so doing place it within a larger context. In this song, irony is crucial to intuiting the voices of the local people. As it happens, irony is not only a central instrument of our time: it has been used in folk culture throughout the ages and is central to Sámi oral tradition. Gaski explains how double communication worked as an oppositional instrument in ancient epic *yoiks*, e.g. “Suola ja noaidi” (“The Thief and the Shaman”). Only those who knew the culture well would perceive the real meaning of the words (Gaski 1987:48-52).<sup>19</sup> This concept may be applied to the “Elveland” song. Since irony works as a popular weapon requiring an intimate knowledge of the language, this song was probably not known outside the local area. This may be why the irony in “Elveland” is more explicit than in a traditional *yoik*. Because the entire local community held the same opinions concerning Elveland, everybody could take part in the criticism since there was little risk of social sanctions. Still, the name of the person who composed the song does not appear, and we are left with a self-

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<sup>19</sup> "Political utterances are almost always meant to be intelligible from one group to another, but within art the main message might be meant to work exclusively within one group " (Gaski 91:34) - own translation.



referential last verse. This lack of overt authorship is found in the oral traditions of other native peoples as well. As Louis Owens (1992:10) writes, a Native American poet does not consider himself the originator of the material, rather its conveyer.

### **Elveland as conservationist: simple thief or metaphor?**

Throughout the song, harsh words are used that put Elveland in a negative light, and this may be interpreted as a critique, not only against Elveland the man, but as a more general indictment of the Norwegianisation policies of that time. In essence, the more explicit (and safer) condemnation of a local political figure is used to mask a more covert and much more dangerous condemnation of a political system. As already mentioned, irony is already explicit in the first stanza of the song, in which Elveland is proclaimed lord of the branches. Branches were used as animal food and were thus a resource, but they were also regarded as bad firewood. Thus, being the lord of some branches is obviously not particularly glorious. The first and second lines are in opposition to the third and fourth lines by first depicting Elveland as a conservationist and representative of the power structure and then accusing him of plundering the state's wood and stealing *Norway's stone*. The local people did not necessarily consider wood and stones to be the property of the state, but they wanted to emphasize how Elveland, as state representative, was exercising his duties. It seemed to them that guarding and protecting the wood were more important to the authorities than the wellbeing of the people.

In the second verse we are told how Elveland obtained the forester post, and that he thought very highly of the job. The third and fourth lines state, ironically, that he sat in the chair of glory. In other words, he had been elevated to a position that was not just for anybody, and had become almost like a king. The first two verses are in opposition, in that they describe the man as both a thief and a king. The comparison with a king is in ironic opposition to the last lines of the first verse, which state that he also turned to illegal activities. Interestingly, it is here in the second verse that we catch our first glimpse of the use of Elveland as a more subtle metaphor for the state. The third verse gives a different picture of Elveland, in which he regards himself as a conservationist and a defender of public morals.

Feeling emboldened by his power, he chooses to exercise his authority with little mercy. He elevates himself to the position of judge, and he punishes those who do not obey the commandments. Elveland’s rule is compared with the rule of another appointed king-like figure: Herod. The third verse highlights the hypocrisy of Elveland, compared with several of the other verses, when he is accused of plundering the State’s wood and stealing *Norway’s stone*. Elveland’s hypocrisy would have been quite apparent in a small community like Porsanger, where it would be nearly impossible to do anything without the rest of the community knowing about it. Another point of irony used here is the fact that the word *steal* is used in the first and sixth verses, to describe what Elveland did when he was providing firewood for himself. This is in direct opposition to the fact that the people would not have considered it stealing when they cut firewood illegally for themselves. They did it simply out of necessity. Here, county governor T. J. Wiel Graff describes the sentiments of the people in 1900: “The wood, people think, is something that Our Lord has created for everyone to use” (Hanssen 1986:312).<sup>20</sup> They used the state’s own term only when referring to what the representative of the state was doing.

Both the regulations and the forester post are depicted ironically in the seventh verse: *they celebrate Elveland/ And his ability to let poor creatures freeze*. They “celebrate” him for doing a good job of protecting all the trees and at the same time for letting the people freeze. The *poor creatures* were obviously the local Sea Sámi, who could not manage without free firewood. Káre Peder said that only five horseloads of wood were permitted to be gathered in the winter at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

The tenth verse is also in ironic opposition to the third verse. The same ceremonious language used to describe Elveland’s over-zealous way of performing his job is also used to condemn him. He is no longer the teacher of *the commandments of devoutness*, now he is *not any devout judge*. He can no longer judge other people because his *own crimes will now/ Judge [him] for certain*. At the time of retribution, the Sea Sámi are even said to have received help from above: *Heaven has heard our prayers*. The forester is now forced to

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<sup>20</sup> Own translation.

<sup>21</sup> Program on Sámi radio, “Mearrsámi lávlagat” (Sea Sami songs) 29/6-82.

feel the bite of his own whip. In the last verse, we learn that because of Elveland's conduct, a whole song has come into being, telling us all about his crimes and teaching us important moral lessons. As the old Sámi saying goes, "don't climb into tall trees, it's easy to fall down".

**"He was an ordinary Sámi man" –  
the political nature of cultural identity**

I asked Uhca Nánnáš who Elveland was, and she answered that "he was an ordinary Sámi man".<sup>22</sup> This answer actually tells us a lot - namely, that the man was really one of them and not an important master. This answer supplies what Pertti J. Anttonen refers to as *cultural identity*, which may be explained in the following way:

Instead of being merely relational, identities are socially constructed categories and as such, constitutive of each other and negotiated in the discursive context of another (Anttonen 1996:17).

Cultural identity is political identity (Anttonen 1996:18). It is founded on the rhetorical and argumentative process of identity; it is founded on morality and is to a great extent dependent on the object of our loyalty. In the construction of loyalty, we emphasize distinctions between "us" and "them". Traditions and collective symbols are important representations of cultural continuity. In the "Elveland" song, the main character may be interpreted as a person who is not loyal to the customs and common practices of the local community. Instead of being on "our" side, he has chosen a job representing "their" way of thinking. Anttonen explains folklore thus:

Instead, folklore is a name for a type or act of communication produced in a situation or process in which groups and collectives are made through interaction and through the exercise of social power (Anttonen 1996:20).

Anttonen thinks that folklorists should study the political dynamics of identity processes and how *conflict potentials* influence these processes. The meaning of the past is not handed down by previous generations. Rather, it is constituted in the present (Anttonen

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<sup>22</sup> 10/11-1995.

1996:21). Both old and new traditions have a selective and political nature. There are no ‘invented’ or ‘authentic’ traditions. The *tradition* conception is a central part of our identity construction. Even war is created through claims about ‘traditional’ values.<sup>23</sup> Cultural identity is political in nature and is an issue of exercising power, creating power and contesting power (Anttonen 1996:24).

People generally consider themselves to be part of a group that works within a given system. In Norway, until the nineteenth century, it was almost impossible for lower-class people to advance into a higher class. People were born into a given class, and the power structure ensured that they remained there. If anyone broke the accepted rules of the class system, they certainly paid the price. Interestingly, it was often ordinary people who criticized abundance or attempts at class-climbing (Hanssen 1986:244). Læstadian Puritan dogmas were part of the process of shaping people’s mindsets in Porsanger.<sup>24</sup> Primary industrial societies had to work within a certain system based on the rhythms and rules dictated by nature, since it was only through hard work and the cycles of life that they were able to survive at all. It is important to note that the written version of the “Elveland” song emphasizes the fact that it was mostly the Sea Sámi, not the Norwegians, who were freezing. This is a clear reference to the class divisions between these two groups and suggests that the “Elveland” song was used to reinforce a sense of “us” versus “them”. It is an example of what Anttonen means when he says that conflict potential influences the creation of identity. This dichotomy is visible throughout the entire “Elveland” song. For example, all the verses describe the fact that Elveland tormented the local people by not allowing them to cut as much firewood as they needed, and that the new rules were in direct conflict with the Sea Sámi’s traditional way of life. Cutting firewood was not only something very necessary in their lives, it was also a very old tradition. This collision between tradition and the rules of a new age helps to reinforce the cultural divide and set up a means by which cultural identity may be measured. According to Anttonen (1996:22-23), *tradition* is an important part of the identity construction. The rules of the authorities and Elveland’s way of exercising his

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<sup>23</sup> Anttonen uses Northern Ireland as an example (Anttonen 96:23).

<sup>24</sup> Læstadianism: an ecstatic religious movement formed by the Swedish priest and botanist Lars Levi Læstadius in the middle of the nineteenth century.

position posed a threat, both to the Sea Sámi's needs and to their traditions. Elveland was not loyal to the local traditions: he transgressed the rules of the local community in favour of new rules, and the local people no longer considered him a loyal Sea Sámi. He lost his identity and felt no intra-group loyalty after obtaining the forester post. In the song, the local people assess themselves and their way of life by comparing themselves with Elveland and a set of social constructs propagated by him and through his work. The local people represent the collective, the group, while Elveland becomes an outsider who represents alien values and a foreign culture.

Anthony Giddens writes about the influence of the development of society. Modernity is the opposite of tradition. The reasons we act the way we do are an integrated part of all our actions. This is what Giddens calls *reflexive action surveillance* (Giddens 1997:34). People's actions are the result of a constant surveillance of conduct and its context. Traditional cultures tend to preserve traditional customs. The use of symbols transmits knowledge to future generations. Anna Leena Siikala (1998) states that the interpretation and understanding of the *tradition* concept has changed in the field of folklore. Until the 1960s, the concept was often used to explain the European national states' restoration projects. Often, this research consisted of static synchronous investigations. Since the 1960s, researchers have started to place emphasis on tradition, and have started to look at this concept as a diachronous process incorporating a course of action and a series of fast changes. The researcher, according to Siikala, wants to look behind tradition and the functions that create and sustain tradition (Siikala 1998:5). Tradition is not objective; it is shaped by contemporaneous generations. Siikala call this *the reflexivity of tradition process* (Siikala 1998:8). We may choose previous traditions as a deliberate model for contemporary living. This is what many indigenous peoples do in their search for identity. The concept is enacted between Western analytical consciousness and anti-colonial resistance. Traditions arise and disappear, and they are used for different purposes (Siikala 1998:9). In "Elveland", we see how people suffer because of new rules, and how they co-operate and use their intra-group loyalty to solve the problems. They unite and maintain the community's practice, knowledge and values. In this way they honour their own culture.

## “Elveland”

The “Elveland” song reflects a community where reflexive action surveillance has taken place. Elveland’s conduct does not correspond to the community’s integrated customs. People simply could not trust him. It was Elveland’s job to preserve the wood, but he plundered it himself and thereby violated the rules he was supposed to uphold.

In the ninth verse, the community’s *group identity* is visible. The local community has sworn *to squeeze the tar out of him*. In the Sámi newspaper *Sagai Muittalægje* 1/10 1908, someone who calling himself “A Fisherman” wrote a letter to the editor about the previous municipal government election. It seems that one of the candidates was a man named Sivert Andersen, and K. Hansen (Elveland) opposed his candidacy. “A Fisherman” seems to have supported Sivert Andersen, and he wrote the following about K. Hansen: “...he couldn’t realize that Sivert has a head and a hat fit for a chairman”.<sup>25</sup> He went on to suggest that K. Hansen would like to be the chairman himself, but did not become chairman because he would not nominate himself. In conclusion, “A Fisherman” wrote:

I don’t think his head would be any better for this position. ... In a way he is better off than Sivert, as he has got a piece of wood that he watches over, but he hasn’t been very eager in using the Crown’s iron.

In mentioning *the Crown’s iron*, the axe that the forester used to mark the trees that people were allowed to fell, “A Fisherman” reminds the reader that Elveland was not very eager to mark the trees, and thereby caused them all to suffer. At the same time, he voiced opinions common to many within the local community regarding both the forester and the authorities. Elveland thought highly of himself because of his position and this is reflected in the feelings of superiority shared by the Norwegian power structure. Lemet Máret explains:

There was both great poverty and enormous wealth at the same time. The Norwegians had these big castles... The Sámi also wanted to have such houses, and a competitive spirit arose that made them disregard their language, their lifestyles and everything. Many even stopped making crafts just to become more like the Norwegians.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Own translation.

<sup>26</sup> 9/11-1995. Own translation.

In the “Elveland” song, the local people do not look down on their own identity or culture. On the contrary, they make fun of the Norwegian rules, and “Elveland” actually ends up strengthening the community’s group identity. When we identify ourselves, we also identify others. It is through a comparison of differences that we can see who we are and which values we have.

Gudleiv Bø (1981:39) states that anonymity is so central and determinant in the folk-song tradition that the author becomes totally uninteresting. The author’s own voice is absent in this genre. In the case of the “Elveland” song, the first-person voice is missing completely. Instead, we hear the collective voice of the community as a whole. The song represents the individual members of the community as a collective. As Louis Owens (1992:9) puts it: “[f]or the traditional storyteller, each story originates with and serves to define the people as a whole, the community”.

### **Power relations: the Sámi-Norwegian dichotomy**

The Sámi-Norwegian dichotomy is a good example of cultural identity with a political component. In “Elveland”, this is not expressed explicitly in the text, but it is implied by the historical context. Together with the double significations in the text, the historical context indicates that, on one level of interpretation, the forester post is meant to represent Norwegian society in general. This, in turn, collides with the values of the community and with the Sámi culture. In the song, “us/them” positions are reflected in the dissensions between Elveland and the local community. Arnold Krupat (1992) shows how the “us/them” position reflected power relations that arose in America when the European settlers colonized areas inhabited by the indigenous people. The Sámi experience has been remarkably similar, with the major difference that no wars occurred between the Norwegians and the Sámi. In “Elveland”, we see that the Norwegian authorities did not recognize the validity of local Sámi traditions and knowledge. The Norwegian understanding of reality was very different from that of the Sámi, and they governed by power politics – a system alien to the Sámi way of life. In his research on indigenous Americans, Owens (1992:8) has found that they also had their own “Indian” ways of thinking and understanding reality: “[...] worldviews that are almost always in direct conflict with the dominant *ideologemes* of

Euroamerica”. Krupat (1992:25) wants to see the end of “the majority/minority dichotomy without, however, denying the differential relations of power it seeks to name”.

In the first verse of “Elveland”, we see how the forester took advantage of his position from the start. He watched over the wood like a conservationist, and at the same time *He himself plundered the State’s wood*. In the third verse, the emphasis is placed on how seriously he did his job, and how hard he punished those who broke *the commandments of devoutness*. In the fifth and sixth verses, we hear how the forester committed crimes and abused the power given to him by his position. Those nearest to him also benefited from his position: *And told his brother to take some too*. However, this does not mean that the people were completely powerless. To the local community, the problem was the fact that Elveland was in a position of political power and they could do little to punish him for his misconduct. Instead, they used the power media available to them – language and song – to cause their tormentor to suffer.

The post of forester is something belonging to modern times. Until only recently, Sámi people were accustomed to administering nature according to their own knowledge. Erik Solem (1970:29) comments on Leopold von Buch’s account of how the Sámi in Porsanger used to live. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Sámi in Porsanger had three settlements – one for each of three seasons (summer, autumn and winter). In the summer they stayed along the fjord, and in the winter they stayed in the birchwood forest. When they ran out of firewood in one winter settlement they would simply move to another. This nomadic way of life gradually stopped. One likely contributory factor to this decline is the fact that the Norwegian state started to assert its land ownership rights. The state early on considered itself the owner of all the land in Finnmark county (Solem 1970:35), and the forester post was established largely to reduce what was considered to be excessive illegal woodcutting (Hanssen 1986:216). This nature conservation ideology radically changed the way in which the entire Porsanger community functioned, and would have had a significant impact on the economics of the region. With this in mind, we may perhaps begin to understand why Elveland chose to take the forester position in the first place – it would



have provided him with a source of income not available to most of the others in the community. Lemet Máret said that

[t]he foresters didn't get paid in money, but they got land. They were also allowed to fine and denounce people, and that's why they were so eager to watch over the river and every single tree.<sup>27</sup>

Jovvna Lemet Dagny said that her brother had worked as a forester, and although he was paid in money, it was not very much.<sup>28</sup> Káre Peder said that people also got fined when they set a snare for grouse.<sup>29</sup> These accounts may help to explain Elveland's zeal in exercising his duties as forester: it would have improved his financial situation, at a time when poverty was the norm within the community.

The seventh verse of the "*Elveland*" song emphasizes the fact that the Sea Sámi – the majority of the community – are freezing. This statement tells us that the song is not merely about the importance of preserving old traditions or about general opinions regarding the laws. Rather, it states that the people had a genuine need. As Uhca Nánnáš said, Elveland was "an ordinary Sámi man", but rather than suffer the fate of his community, he *took his seat in the chair of glory* and administered the dictates of the Norwegian state.

In 1867, two men from the community were denounced for cutting wood illegally. Although the lower judicial authorities did not convict them, the Supreme Court did (Hanssen 1986:311). This demonstrates that not only was the law interpreted differently by ordinary people and by the authorities, there were also differences of opinion within the legal system itself.

The Sámi-Norwegian distinctions are not emphasized in the eighth verse, where Elveland is said to be hard on the local Norwegians too. Rather, this verse demonstrates how the lines of opposition within the community were more practical than racial. Jovvna Lemet Dagny describes how people used to gather firewood for themselves:

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<sup>27</sup> 9/11-1995.

<sup>28</sup> 9/11-1998.

<sup>29</sup> Program on Sámi radio, "Mearrasámi lávlagat" 29/6-82.

“Elveland”

People would make sleighs which they would use when stealing firewood in the forest. When they got home, they had to hide the sleighs well so that Elveland would not find them. He used to go into people's barns looking for sleighs.<sup>30</sup>

In the eighth verse, the fourth line mentions *those who had attacked Elveland*. This refers to a confrontation between Elveland and two young Sámi men who were fishing illegally along the Stabburs river. Elveland happened to pass by that day and discovered them. He wanted to denounce them and confiscate their fishing nets, but instead he encountered a minor rebellion. The two angry men dressed him in an old reindeer coat, tied his hands, hung a heavy stone around his neck and towed him through the cold water behind their boat. At first they thought they would drown him in the river, but he begged them not to, and promised he would not denounce them. Instead of drowning him, the men rowed to the other side of the river, cut a branch from a tree to put through the sleeves of the wet coat so that Elveland could not move his arms and rowed back to the other side of the river. This left Elveland stranded on the wrong side of the river, having to find a way home while wearing heavy, water-logged clothes and not being able to move his arms. It is easy to imagine the difficult time he had, including not even being able to relieve himself properly! To add insult to injury, he received no help or sympathy from the inhabitants of the first house he encountered along the way.<sup>31</sup> In oral traditions, there are many stories about heroes. A hero is a role model for other people, and becomes a symbol for the whole group (Holbek/Swahn 1995:15). In this song, the young men who dared to fight back against the community's great tormenter stand out as heroes, whereas Elveland is more of an *anti-hero*.

An example of the conflict between Sámi traditions and the Norwegianization process, and of the impact the new system had on the opinions of the local population, is to be found in a couple of letters stating opposing views that were addressed to the editor of the local Sámi newspaper. At the beginning of the twentieth century the authorities built boarding schools, as part of the Norwegianization effort. This elicited many heated debates, both across the Sámi-Norwegian cultural line and within the Sámi community. Many children

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<sup>30</sup> 28/9-1998. Own translation.

<sup>31</sup> Uhca Nánnáš 10/11-1995, Jovvna Lemet Dagny 28/9-1998, Petterson 1994:47.

were separated from their family and loved ones for long periods of time, and some of the parents did not support the school system. In 1911, *Sagai Muittalægje* (1/3 1911) published a letter from Ante Sivvar, in which he wrote that Sámi children were being treated badly at the boarding school in Lakselv, Porsanger. Sivvar stated that the people who supported the school system

have no understanding and far from any family feeling or love, they truly live in absolute darkness [...] As it has been, and still is, some 10-20 Norwegians in Porsanger do exactly what they want and torment approximately 2000 Porsanger Sámi.<sup>32</sup>

Sivvar obviously has a strong sense of Sámi identity and pride, and cannot understand those who do not value their own culture. There is no sense of inferiority complex in this letter. Rather, he honestly describes how some people felt about the distinctions between the Sámi and the Norwegians in Porsanger at the time. This is not to say that every Sámi agreed with his point of view. On 1 May 1911, an anonymous writer calling himself "Someone" criticizes Sivvar for trying to create hatred between Norwegians and the Sámi in Porsanger. This person writes:

You have no understanding, family feeling or love, and you live in absolute darkness when you are not grateful or thankful. Instead, you are scolding when the children in and around Lakselv have the best school in our municipality, and get away from hunger and dirt for three months of the year. They are being raised in cleanliness and love, and they get enough food for both body and soul. Shame on you!<sup>33</sup>

In this reader's letter we see that not everyone supported the criticisms levelled at the Norwegianization policies of the time. Those who supported the use of Norwegian in schools emphasized the advantages to children of learning Norwegian. Not only did they receive an education, they also had better opportunities when school was finished. In other words, they had a way out of poverty. On the other hand, Sámi politicians did not want to be Norwegianized by force in the way that the authorities intended. They valued their own culture

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<sup>32</sup> Own translation.

<sup>33</sup> Own translation.

“Elveland”

and resented the imposition of another culture upon them. They wanted their children to be taught in their mother tongue because they did not consider the Sámi language to be inferior to Norwegian. Most importantly, they realized that many of the children did not understand what the teacher was trying to teach them because of the language barrier. What was the good of talking about the potential benefits of an educational system when the children could not understand the language of instruction?

### **Language as a medium of power**

Language is a principal identity criterion. As James Clifton points out,

[o]riginally, no Native American society subscribed to the idea of biological determination of identity or behaviour. Indeed, the most common identity question asked of strangers was not "What nation do you belong to?" or "Of what race are you?" Instead, when confronting unknown people, they typically asked, "What language do you speak?" (Krupat 1992:17)

Krupat states that language is not only determinant in defining identity, but also serves as a cultural model (1992:17-18). Language is never something that belongs only to *you*. Society is a pluralistic construct, and the language used always operates between oneself and others. Bakhtin says:

Language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's.... the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!) but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own. (Krupat 1992:19)

Sámi people wrote the song about Elveland, and both Elveland and the local Sámi community were recipients of its content. It has a double meaning, in that it makes fun of Elveland but also serves to maintain the Sámi community identity. Since most government officials in Porsanger at that time did not understand the Sámi language, it is unlikely that anyone other than the local Sámi heard the song; it was intended to be a means of intra-group address. Interestingly, Elveland

lived and worked in this community and he understood its language and codes. Therefore, he would have understood both the more explicit and personal criticism and the more covert criticism of the system with which he chose to associate. This use of language as a medium of power is often found in situations where there is a conflict between colonists and the majority society. Owens writes that

language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order' and 'reality' become established (Owens 1992:8).

In “Elveland”, the language serves as a medium of power from “the other” side. The tormented Sámi community used the Sámi language as a weapon of revenge against their tormentor and as a means of establishing political unity against an oppressive system. The mother tongue, which was supposed to be Elveland’s most important identity mark, was used against him, and the language of the politically weak was used against the powerful. Babcock (1980:1) states that “[l]anguage is the important mirror in which the self is created and reflected”. As a Sámi-speaking person from the local community Elveland stands on the inside, but as a representative of the Norwegian state he stands on the outside.

In two local history books written about Porsanger,<sup>34</sup> and in the newspaper *Finnmarksposten*,<sup>35</sup> we find descriptions of the scarcity of wood as a resource at the beginning of the twentieth century. Furthermore, we find descriptions of greedy and unseemly cutting of trees. However, a surveyor claimed in 1925 that the reindeer herding Sámi and other local people were not solely to blame for the sad condition of the forest. He said that the most important reason for the decline was probably that the area was in an “intra-wood period”. In other words, there were natural causes (Petterson 1994:48).

The “Elveland” song, together with other sources (both oral and written), serves as a mirror reflecting the local Sámi community’s point of view regarding their own living situation and the social difficulties of everyday life. The text mirrors society, as did many of the ancient *yoik*

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<sup>34</sup> Hanssen 1986, Petterson 1994.

<sup>35</sup> *Finnmarksposten* 15/7 and 19/7 1898.

*“Elveland”*

texts (Gaski 1991:35). Gry Heggli quotes Anne Eriksen and Birgit Hertzberg Johnsen in stating that

[m]uch of the content in oral sources is the result of oral communication of common experiences. Such oral sources describe people’s understanding and evaluations of their own or other people’s situations, and they are created in intercourse between people of the same cultural unity. (Heggli 1998:13)<sup>36</sup>

Heggli also writes (ibid):

By looking at traditions or folklore as a source of reconstruction of historical societies, cultural utterances become a way into something else, into something behind, to a reality accessible through remnants. ( Cf. Alver 1962:110.)

The “Elveland” song and other sources also reflect the gap between Norwegian and Sámi culture of the time. The Norwegians living in Porsanger were mostly educated and had important positions, and economically they were much better off than the Sámi. This caused many Sámi people to feel inferior and gave them a bad self-image. However, it is clear that the “Elveland” song does not reflect a bad self-image. On the contrary, we find that reading between the lines it reveals rather a strong self-image and a situation in which the powerful Norwegian state is mocked. It might be that Elveland tried to hide his Sámi/local identity and became Norwegianized in taking the forester job, but others in the community certainly maintained a desire to keep their cultural identity, their traditions and their way of life, as it had been for thousands of years.

The most important thing about oral traditions is to remember them and pass them on to future generations (Alver 1962:111). Alver claims that there has been competition among stories throughout the ages. For people to have been sufficiently interested in the “Elveland” song to remember it down the years, it was important that they liked it and that it resonated with their point of view. By creating an opposition between Elveland and the rest of the local community, everybody who suffered because of insufficient firewood – i.e. practically the whole community – could easily identify with the song. Alver (1962:102-103)

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<sup>36</sup> Own translation.

states that the version of a subject remembered by people may diverge significantly from the historical sources. With respect to the “Elveland” song, there are many facts that cannot be verified by other sources. The song gives us an authentic picture of what people’s lives were like, and a good idea of what they thought about their political situation, but it cannot give us an authentic picture of Elveland’s own situation. Alver (1962:112) says that public sources do not always tell “objective truth”. The same may be said of popular narrative traditions. The epic form of the song reflects ordinary people’s reactions and thoughts, and their interpretations of various situations.

### **Popular laughter culture – carnivalization at 70° N**

Satirical songs have great value as *entertainment*. Both Lemet Máret and Jovnna Káre Sofe recount a song that was made sometime before 1920: *In Skinden valley under the headland hill/ Bought lace and sold trousers*.<sup>37</sup> This refers to the fact that people used to tease young girls who bought slips with very broad lace, since only a little bit of the lace should be visible under the traditional *gákti* costume.

Jovnna Lemet Dagny said there was a song named *Kuardin*, composed circa 1950-52, consisting of many verses, with a nice melody and a funny text.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, she did not remember the text. However, the song was about a couple, Peder and Gyda Vonheim, who owned a café named “Sorgenfri” (Carefree). Some young men created the song as a form of revenge because they were once denied entrance to the café when there was a party with music. Gyda denounced them, but since she did not really know who they were, nothing more happened.

In the second verse of the “Elveland” song, it is said that Elveland *took his seat in the chair of glory* – almost like a king – and that he possessed the Crown’s iron. Bakhtin investigates the significance of the carnival in European literary history in *Rabelais and His World*. The carnivalistic laughter culture described in Bakhtin’s investigations is in opposition to the medieval public culture (Børtnes 1993:124). Børtnes (1993:118) emphasizes the significance of the historical perspective in Bakhtin’s contextual analysis of Rabelais’ literary world. The understanding of reality inside the carnival is a very

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<sup>37</sup> 9/11-1995. Own translation.

<sup>38</sup> 28/9-1998

## “Elveland”

different one from that of the “real” world. Bakhtin writes (1984:24): “Under this ritual act of decrowning the king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world – *the pathos of shift and changes, of death and renewal.*” The inside-out world of the carnival begins the moment the fool is crowned as king. Both the power symbols and the clothing belonging to the crowning ritual become ritual stage props. In the non-carnival world, these are genuine symbols of power: precise, weighty and monolithically serious. In the carnival, the symbols reflect the joyful relativity of the power positions. They describe the dethroning and the actual process of change. The symbols of carnival always contain an aspect of negation: “Birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth” (ibid:125).

The second verse of the “Elveland” song may be described in terms of the carnival crowning ritual. Ceremonious language emphasizes the seriousness of the ritual, but it is Elveland, not a king, who takes the throne. The explicit irony of not just this verse but the entire song is used to make him even more of a fool than a typical fool. One important difference between reality and the carnival is that the carnival fool knows that he is a fool but Elveland, according to the song, did not see himself as such. He really believed that he was something of a king, and that he possessed the Crown’s iron in the way a king possesses a sceptre. Everybody was making fun of him and he did not even notice. The second and third verses describe the crowning process. The other verses represent the dethroning, which is completed in the tenth verse. The second and tenth verses make up a pair of oppositions. Here, Elveland is pictured as a representative of public society: a fool and a thief.

## Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have aimed to reveal how a simple Sámi folk-song, “Elveland”, reflects the socio-political interactions of a small Sámi community. Though the text is humourous, reading between the lines we find that (group) identity, cultural collisions, power relations and hard critique of the Norwegian authorities’ politics are crucial elements in the song. The opposition pairs *king/fool* and *king/thief* are subtle manifestations of irony as a medium for resistance and protest. It is interesting how people in a small Sámi community have juxtaposed the *king/fool* position; whether or not they were aware of



the carnival function, they have nevertheless used the metaphors to create this social satire, to state the same social conflicts and hierarchy that we find in other indigenous cultures all over the world. The Sámi strategy was not to be the biggest or the strongest, but to be cunning and to use available ammunition at the appropriate moment. Using language as a weapon was an ingenious way of claiming their long-established rights, and it served as a medium of power in the popular laughter culture of the Sea Sámi community in Porsanger.

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