



The Legend of Bonki

Sámi People – Sápmi (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia)

Bonki thought that he might be the last *noaidi*, the last shaman of the Sámi tradition, although in truth he had forgotten many of the traditions and rituals that he had seen as a child. He was now old and memory no longer gave him a hand when he wanted one. Besides, preserving the memory of these traditions was made even more difficult because everyone else in his tribe had been converted to Christianity and no longer practiced the ancient beliefs. When was the last time he had attended the bear ritual, so celebrated in his community when he was a child?

For Sámi People, all animals were sacred. However, the most sacred of all was the bear, which they hunted according to complex rituals, entrusting themselves to Lieaibolmmai, god of hunting and wild animals, as well as of adult men. On those rare occasions when the bear was hunted, all the people –elders, men and women, boys and girls–participated in the rituals. This had to be done in a specified, respectful way, to ensure that the bear would be reborn in the other world, in *Sáiva*, able to proudly tell its ancestors of how much honour it had received from humans in its last fight.

Bonki recalled how the women received the men when they returned to the camp, carrying the bear's corpse. They would watch them arrive through a brass ring to protect themselves from the powerful energies of the bear spirit, the *väki*, and spray the men with red alder sap, in honour to Lieaibolmmai, 'the alder man'. He remembered how his mother insisted, during the feast, that he should not break or lose any bear bones, however small. He followed these rules scrupulously,



because his grandfather had told him that neither bears nor humans could receive another body in *Sáiva* unless their skeleton was complete and intact. This also guaranteed the subsequent reincarnation of bears and people on Earth.

But Bonki was not sure anymore that he wanted to reincarnate. Although the living and the deceased were two halves of the same family for the Sámis, he no longer felt anything that would tie him to his living relatives. Within his imaginal vision, he continued to converse with his ancestors in *Sáiva*, but he had lost all contact with his living relatives since Christianity had taken over the region and the hunt for *noaidis* had begun. Many had been accused of doing magic and witchcraft and sentenced to death for resisting conversion to Christianity and the authority of the King, who decreed that all should be converted. Bonki had managed to evade them for years, fleeing into the deepest of the Lemmenjoki forests, populated by wolves, and then taking refuge on the Islet of Bunkholmen, south of the Island of Årøya, in the Lyngen Fjord.

By the time they found him, the bloody fury of the persecutions had passed, although the repression against the 'heathens' continued. Still, they let him be. What harm could be done by a lonely old man, secluded on a small island, far from being able to influence the minds of his neighbours with the insane beliefs he had from Satan?

One day, a new minister arrived to the village of Karnes, on the Lyngen Fjord. He was a fervent young man who was not willing to turn a blind eye to the law that obliged the entire population to attend the Sunday liturgy. When he learned of the existence of old Bonki on the Islet of Bunkholmen, he immediately sent a summons for him to attend Sunday services.

Of course Bonki turned a deaf ear to the messengers who crossed over to his small domain. But he was too old to flee from new persecutions and he no longer wanted to flee. Instead, he wanted to proclaim with pride the beliefs and traditions of his ancestors, even if that would cost him his life, as it had for so many *noaidis* before him.

The young minister, beyond his own fanaticism, thought it would be good to show everyone in the region that a heathen could not have his way before the laws of the King and the Church. So he called the sheriff and demanded that he bring Bonki to him the following Sunday.



When the sheriff landed on his island, Bonki wished that he had been trained as a *gonaga*, a *noaidi* of the past who was capable of transforming himself into a bird, then he could have escaped the sheriff.

For three Sundays in a row, Bonki was brought before the church. Each time that he refused to enter, he was chained to the pillory that stood across the square from the church door, and which served as a warning to criminals. Each time, Bonki faced the shaming and derision of the villagers with the pride he had in being the last *noaidi* of his tribe. No, they could not make him give in; they could not get him to renounce the sacred legacy that his ancestors had transmitted to him: their vision of reality, of life, of the beings and elements that surrounded him, of the Earth.

The night before what was to be his third humiliation in the square of Karnes, Bonki had a dream. Ruohutta, god of disease and death, appeared to him shortly before dawn and told him that his time on Earth was coming to an end. He would be leaving for *Sáiva*, and it would be wise to make preparations for the occasion, as prescribed by his traditions.

The next day, when the sheriff untied Bonki from the pillory and told him that the following Sunday he would be back for him, Bonki replied:

'Now I've been to church enough for my time.'

The sheriff watched him head down to the quay, surprised by the old man's bold response.

That same afternoon, Bonki asked his ancestors for advice on his imaginal vision. Who could he turn to in Karnes? Who would be willing to perform the ancient rituals and burial ceremonies of the Sámi People, which would risk the minister's anger? And, anyway, if no one believed in those traditions anymore, why ask any of them to perform an empty and faithless ritual at his death?

But then he remembered –or his ancestors reminded him– that a few years back, he had discovered on the island, under a rock, the sacred resting place of at least two bears that had gone through the old Sámi ritual. What better place to depart for *Sáiva* than the one where the sacred bears rested, the one from which they had left for the same



world to which he would now travel? Bears would certainly welcome him. He was the last of his race who had revered them as they deserved to be revered.

Thus, he now had the sacred place and the best possible guides for his journey to *Sáiva*. He would perform the rituals and the funeral ceremony himself on his way to his grave.

Bonki took his ceremonial drum and decorated it all over with brass rings and chains to protect himself from the *väki* of bears and as a symbol of purity. He decorated his humble cabin with spruce branches, inside and outside, and then went to the cave where the bears were resting to prepare the place of his last rest.

After performing a brief ritual of appreciation and gratitude to the bears buried there, he decorated the cave with interwoven rings of Lapland shoe grass, just as would have been done for the wooden sheds where bear carcasses were ritually torn apart in the past. Then, he made a bed of tender birch twigs next to the bones of the sacred animals. He placed a pair of skis and a Sámi knife to the right of the bed, knowing that he would need them in *Sáiva*. Above the place where he would rest his head, he placed a birch bark cone filled with alder-tree bark. He thought that, like the bears of the Sámi rituals, he would not be able to count on his fellows to bury him; so why not give himself the ritual that was given to the sacred bears?

On Thursday, three days before the sheriff would come for him again, Ruohutta, the god of death, came to him in a dream to tell him that the day of his death had arrived. After taking a ritual purifying bath in the fjord waters, Bonki washed himself with a strong lye made from birch ash and then daubed his naked body with red alder sap. Later, he hung strings of brass rings and chains around his body and on his head and neck. He put on his four-pointed hat, the hallmark of the bear hunter and the *noaidi*, forbidden for years as a pagan symbol. Finally, he made his way to his grave, naked, chewing alder bark and singing his own funeral song to the rhythm of his drum:

'I paha talkev ådtjo, I paha talkev faronis ...'

'He will not have bad weather; he will not bring bad weather with him ...'



When he reached the cave, he prostrated himself before the bones of the bears, asking their permission to sleep next to them. He lay down on his left side on the bed of birch twigs, placed his ritual drum on his hip and closed his eyes, entrusting himself to Beaivi, goddess of the Sun and mother of humanity. Less than an hour later, Bonki's old body lay lifeless in the cave. □

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Comments

In the summer of 1961, archaeologist Povl Simonsen, a professor at the University of Tromsø, started an excavation on the Bunkholmen Islet, south of Årøya Island, in the Lyngen Fjord. There, in a kind of cave under a large rock, he found what looked like the skeleton of a bear next to the skeleton of a human being, who was lying on its left side. Except for the skull, the human skeleton was complete.

The osteological examination showed that there were remains of three bears in the cave, dated to carbon 14 between 650 and 780 C.E. These remains are currently in the Tromsø Museum, although what happened to the remains of the human being lying with them is not known.

Interestingly, according to Professor Povl Simonsen, there is a legend associated with the Bunkholmen Islet. According to a worker in the area,

Bonki was a Sámi, and lived like an old man alone on his islet. It was at that time when the church stood at Karnes (1730s) and in front of the church door stood the pillory. Back then it was compulsory to attend church on Sunday. Bonki was a heathen and obviously did not attend church. The priest sent him several times without any help. Then the priest sent the sheriff, and he took Bonki to the church on Sunday, and left it in the stake. This was repeated three Sundays in a row. Then Bonki said 'Now I've been to church enough for my time', and he went home to his islet, and people left him alone. Sometime later, Bonki knew that he would



soon die. No one in Lyngen could or would bury him according to the rites of his faith. Bonki then decorated his own grave, and as he felt death approaching, he lay down in the grave and there he died and lay (Myrstad, 1996, pp. 34-35).

We know, thanks to historians, that with the arrival of Christianity (Lutheran and Orthodox churches) to Sápmi –formerly called Lapland– Lutheran pastors were given the order to make a record of the magic and idolatry of the Sámi People, giving them the order not to chase the Sámi shamans. However, in the 17th century, the time came ‘to burn drums or hide them in the ground’ (Pentikäinen, 2015, p. 123). We also know that, shortly before the 1730s, Sámi ‘sorcerers’ received the death penalty.

In 1726, Norway abolished the death penalty for ‘Sámi “sorcery”’, though Sámis were by no means immune to harsh punishment, especially for ‘witchcraft’, ‘superstition’, and not attending a minimum number of church services. Many Sámi simply escaped the Church’s clutches by moving farther away into the wilderness (Holloway, 2015).

So, it seems that the Legend of Bonki may well be based on real events.

As for the Sámi’s beliefs –or should we say better ‘Sámi worldview’– we know that it was deeply animistic and polytheistic, based on shamanism, like many ancestral indigenous cultures. In many of these cultures in the northern hemisphere, the bear was held as the archetypal messenger from the supernatural world, representing a high-ranking deity.

Some authors argue that, on a psychological level, among these hunter-gatherer cultures there was a certain guilty feeling associated with the fact of killing animals –all the more so with an animal so similar to humans– hence the need for ceremonies of appeasement of the spirit of these beings, for fear of their revenge (Bledsoe, 2008). For the Sámis, the bear was the mediator between gods and humans, because they believed that the bear soul could move freely between this world and the other one, *Sáiva*.

As for the adaptation of this legend, we must say that everything that is stated in it regarding the beliefs, ritual objects and ceremonies



carried out by Bonki is consistent with what is stated in academic studies about the Sámi culture. In any case, if any keeper of Sámi traditions or academic expert in Sámi culture finds in this adaptation any detail that does not correspond to the reality or knowledge that is available about the Sámis, we ask you, please, to contact us and let us know, in order to adjust the Legend of Bonki as closely as possible to reality. Thank you.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 12a: Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.



Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 12b: Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.

The Way Forward: Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.

