



A review of
**By the Fire:
Sami Folktales
and Legends**

Victoria Leslie

The stories collected by the Danish artist and ethnographer Emilie Demant Hatt during her time living among the nomadic Sami in Swedish Sápmi are revived in this new English publication by Barbara Sjöholm. Originally published in 1922, *By the Fire: Sami Folktales and Legends* was the culmination of summers spent with the Talma and the Kareesuando Sami, following the tented communities or *siidas* as they followed the annual reindeer migration and chronicling the tales told to her ‘by the fire’. This new edition not only includes Demant Hatt’s original black-and-white linoleum prints and her field notes but also includes a useful Afterword by Sjöholm. This addendum sheds light on Demant Hatt’s advocacy for Sami culture, her transformation from a seasonal tourist to a self-taught ethnographer – studying the Northern Sami language at the University of Copenhagen in the process – and ultimately her approach to ‘ethnography through immersive living’.

It is this approach which granted her so much time in the company of Sami women while the men were away managing the reindeer herds, and which Sjöholm identifies as separating her from her male contemporaries who were preoccupied with folktale typology and privileging the perspectives of male storytellers. In comparison, the majority of the stories in *By the Fire* are told by women, often emphasising a female point of view. For Sjöholm, Demant Hatt’s focus on women’s lives was due to the fact she was a venturesome ‘New Woman’, advancing into male territory as both an independent traveller and ethnographer.

By the Fire begins with a series of aetiological tales: ‘The Sami Who Weren’t Satisfied with the Moose’ explain how the reindeer came to be the preferred animal of the Sami, while ‘How the Sami Were Given Reindeer and Tents by the Underground Folk and How the Settlers Were Given Farms and Farm Animals’ explain how a union between the Sami and the underground folk gifted the Sami with the tools of their livelihood (their reindeer, tents, lasso and skis). Other tales similarly tell of Sami men entering exogamous marriages, particularly with the daughters of the cannibalistic ogre, Stallo, who is invariably outwitted by the newlyweds after attempting to cause them trouble. In these stories, young, otherworldly brides often represent wealth and prosperity, whereas older women

frequently feature in the collection to represent hardship and adversity. In one tale, an old woman is credited for chasing the reindeer away and thus making herding difficult, while in another, an old woman is responsible for unleashing mosquitoes into the world after tiring of their incessant buzzing while carrying them in a sack on her back.

Though a vast proportion of the stories included in *By the Fire* feature encounters with fantastical foes, stories about mortal enemies, of Scandinavian settlers and Russian *Chudes* (bands of thieves) coveting Sami resources reveal how a history of persecution has found its way into oral tradition. Some of these tales depict the Sami outsmarting their adversaries by, for instance, singeing the hair off a prized reindeer to prevent it from being stolen, or by taking refuge in a cave only to re-emerge three hundred years later when the coast is well and truly clear. However, other stories, such as 'When the Farmers Wanted to Stamp Out the Sami' and 'The Headland of the Murdered' reveal genocidal ambitions directed at the Sami. As Sjöholm relates, together with a long record of Sami rights being systematically eroded and Sami lands appropriated by private landowners and state authorities, the Sami have no word for war. What they have instead is a repertoire of stories about resistance and resilience.

This is particularly evident in the tale 'The Sami Girls Who Escaped the Bandits' in which a Sami girl is kidnapped and detained via her braids. Forced to share a bed with her captors, the sexual threat implicit, she waits for them to fall asleep before cutting off her plaits and escaping into the wilderness, picking her way across a bog that ultimately leads to her pursuers' demise and her survival. The moral of tales of this kind, which sometimes feature a pair of scissors instead of a knife, reasserts the importance of being prepared and necessarily equipped for potential danger. The importance of the knife and the axe in earlier tales in the collection, where the touch of metal has the capacity to control or vanquish otherworldly entities, also adheres to European superstition that iron can repel or contain supernatural forces and adds double weight to their significance in Sami culture.

Whether the stories in *By the Fire* speak of encounters with fantastical entities or people with subhuman motivations, they champion Sami resilience and heroism in the face of adversity and provide a welcome introduction into the world of Sami storytelling. Furthermore, Sjöholm's Afterword provides contextual insight to the stories and the storytellers who Demant Hatt interviewed, fundamentally highlighting the richness of Sami storytelling culture and the work of a much-overlooked pioneer in Scandinavian folklore collecting.

Collector/illustrator: Emilie Demant Hatt. Translator: Barbara Sjöholm.

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