Obituary: Louise Bäckman (1926–2021)

A long life dedicated to studying, teaching, and research came to an end when Professor Louise Bäckman passed away on October 4, 2021. Although an honorary life member of the IAHR and an internationally highly respected scholar, her background was very different from most of her colleagues.

During her childhood, the reindeer-herding Sami in Sweden were forbidden to live in houses, since doing so would – according to the powers that were – have alienated them from their traditional economy. At school, Louise and her schoolmates were punished if they spoke Sami, their mother tongue. Despite these experiences, she continued her studies after finishing elementary school, first by correspondence courses, then by attending evening classes, until she was able to matriculate at Stockholm University. After initially studying literature studies and ethnography, she found her academic home at the Department of Comparative Religion.

Even as a university student, she encountered prejudices similar to those she had experienced as a child, the only difference being that they were now dressed in academic language. As a Sami, she found it degrading to study ethnography (which later became anthropology) and religions at university level in the 1960s. Her own culture was still labeled “primitive” in research literature, the main ritual specialist of indigenous Sami religion was referred to as a “sorcerer,” and many of the researchers who studied indigenous cultures and religions and were regarded “experts” had only scant knowledge of the languages of the cultures they studied. Overcoming these derogatory attitudes was no easy task, yet she was not alone in fighting for a change. Like many among the growing cohort of scholars from minority cultures, she spoke openly and wrote, becoming an important figure for new perspectives. She had to overcome many difficulties, often in conflict with colleagues who did not realize how offensive their words sometimes were, and it grieved her deeply when – even much later – she noticed prejudices and colonial attitudes among colleagues and students.

In 1986 Louise Bäckman was appointed Professor of Comparative Religion at Stockholm University. It was an advancement that made her not only one of an infinitesimal number of female professors but also the very first Sami to hold a professorial chair. Her personal and cultural background helped to define the principles of her work, for example, by emphasizing the importance of cultural
and linguistic competence for anyone wishing to study the religions of the Sami or other minority populations. She herself set a good example, for instance, in her careful analysis of the Sami words used by the nineteenth-century Sami Kristoffer Sjulsson in a manuscript she edited together with Rolf Kjellström and published in 1979. Language is an important source of information in many of her other studies as well. In this and many other ways, she practiced her own version of indigenous methodologies long before that term became current.

Bäckman’s work fundamentally changed our perception of indigenous Sami religion. When she began her studies, the dominant model of interpretation revolved around questions of origin. Nearly everything in Sami religion was regarded as having been borrowed from the Scandinavians. One of her most important contributions was to show that the relationship between these two religious cultures was more complex than it was assumed. By comparing Sami religious traditions with similar traditions among more eastern peoples in northern Eurasia, she was able to show, for example, that the Sami belonged to a North Eurasian cultural sphere.

As a historian of religions, she put indigenous informants and sources in the forefront and sought to base her studies on sources that represented first-hand knowledge. It was therefore natural that she found a kinsman in Nicolaus Lundius, a Sami scholar who in the 1670s had written a manuscript in which he compared aspects of the indigenous religion in two Sami regions. For Bäckman, Lundius’s text, hitherto regarded as unstructured and difficult to understand, became the most important written source about indigenous Sami religion from the seventeenth century. In the way Lundius presented religion Bäckman recognized some of her own experiences, when in her youth she had interviewed older members of her community about what they knew of Sami religious traditions.

The study and comparison of local religious traditions became a focus of her research. Her interests alternated between her own South Sami culture, other Sami areas, and the cultures of Siberian peoples like the Buryat and the Sakha, in addition to Old Scandinavian and Christian traditions. Bäckman’s dissertation dealt with a category of invisible beings of central importance in the South Sami area, the so-called saajvh (sing. saajve). Earlier researchers had regarded these beings as belonging to the deceased, but Bäckman was able to show that the world of the deceased and that of the saajvh were separate. The traditional conceptions of death and the deceased was a theme she returned to in several texts. She noted among other things that there seems to have been two very different conceptions of death, on the one hand as something frightening and on the other as a benign continuation of temporal existence.
In her studies of female divinities, whom earlier research had compared to Scandinavian ideas about gnomes or the Norns, she showed that these beings were indigenous and more similar to beings related to the house among peoples in central and eastern North Eurasia than to Scandinavian parallels. She regarded Maadteraahka to be an example of the Great Mother who was worshipped as Mother Earth, and Saaraahka as corresponding to Mother Fire, who not only protected the fire but also helped women during childbirth and gave girls their female sex, although one interesting difference was that Saaraahka protected both women and men. According to Bäckman, Saaraahka, alone or together with Maadteraahka, had also been worshipped in rituals directed toward the Virgin Mary, which survived in some Sami areas well into the eighteenth century.

In several texts Bäckman returned to the nåejtie, the most important ritual specialist of the Sami. She combined local studies of the functions of the nåejtie in different Sami areas and broad comparative studies of the different roles of shamans in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic areas of northern Eurasia. In an interesting contribution to Studies in Lapp Shamanism, a book she published in 1978 together with her former supervisor, Åke Hultkrantz, she discussed different ways of typologizing shamans, and noted that earlier typologies were based on the different researchers’ points of view, ignoring the ways the peoples under study themselves regarded their shamans. One of the research tasks Bäckman undertook was to develop a picture of the nåejtie that was more neutral than the biased stereotypes that still dominated the research. Among other things, she showed how little both Scandinavian folk traditions and most research texts pertaining to the nåejtie corresponded to the ways this ritual functionary was traditionally conceptualized by the Sami themselves. Her descriptions, based on critical readings of the sources, focused especially on the roles of the nåejtie as a cultural guide and agent of social stability.

Louise Bäckman was a source of inspiration in many circles, as a woman and a Sami, a teacher and a researcher. She inspired many young women to continue studying and many young Sami to embark on an academic career. She was also a pioneer when it came to including the perspectives of women in research and teaching. Her sharp analytical talent, her thirst for knowledge, and her profusion of ideas were as amazing as they were inspiring. For those of us who had the privilege to know her, she lives on as an example to follow in many respects. We remember her with gratitude!

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