

Barbara Helen Miller, ed. 2015. *Idioms of Sámi Health and Healing*. Patterns of Northern Traditional Healing Series. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press. 320 pages. ISBN: 978-1-77212-088-2.

Barbara Helen Miller's new edited collection, *Idioms of Sámi Health and Healing*, brings together a number of interdisciplinary scholars who have done research on contemporary vernacular and religious healing traditions in Sápmi, the Sámi homeland region. Part of a series of scholarly books on northern and circumpolar health traditions, this work is based upon a set of presentations given at a symposium at the University of Tromsø in 2010. Aiming to cultivate more effective and culturally responsive health care in Sámi communities, the volume's contributors draw upon their own profoundly rich ethnographic work, their own diverse theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds, and their own experiences as community insiders. In addition to the religious psychologist Miller, contributors include folklorist Stein R. Mathisen, social anthropologist Marit Myrvoll, medical anthropologists Mona Anita Kiil and Trine Kvitberg, Sámi scholar Anne Karen Hætta, postcolonial theorist Britt Kramvig, psychotherapist Kjell Birkely Andersen, civil engineer and traditional "helper" Sigvald Persen, and nursing studies scholar Randi Nymo.

Idioms of Sámi Health and Healing offers a valuable scholarly contribution in a number of critical topics within the health sciences, including the lived contemporary reality of Sámi traditional healing, the effective provision of Western health care in Indigenous communities, and the importance of belief and cultural worldview in health care. The collection includes postcolonial critiques of representations of Sámi healing traditions in colonial scholarship (Mathisen), surveys of principles and techniques involved in Sámi traditional healing (Hætta; Myrvoll; Miller; Kramvig), and depictions of the sometimes tense relationship between allopathic and traditional healing in Sámi communities today (Andersen, Persen, and Miller; Kvitberg; Kiil). Particular emphasis is paid to patient narratives and their experiences negotiating co-existing traditional and Western medical systems, the stigmatization of traditional healing by the medical establishment, and the social and cultural protocols that work around the complexes of traditional healing.

Such a compiled ethnographic work on contemporary Sámi healing traditions is long overdue, and it complements re-emerging scholarly and popular interest in Sámi traditional healing that has grown in tandem with the rise of decolonization theory. Miller's collection represents an important step in cultivating dialogue within the professional and academic spheres about cultural responsiveness in health care. As many of the contributors note, open discussion of traditional healing practice has been held underground for a variety of reasons, from the criminalization of traditional religious healing practices in the 17th and

18th centuries, to more recent medical quackery laws banning anyone other than licensed doctors and dentists from treating health problems. Still enforced in Sweden, and repealed in Norway only in 2003, these quackery laws are inclusive of Sámi traditional healing along with a number of alternative medicines. Whereas some Indigenous communities are now working to place traditional healers into clinical settings in locations such as Alaska or New Mexico, many Sámi patients still do not dare discuss traditional healing with Western doctors. Numerous stories recounted in this collection tell of doctors who deride traditional healing and belittle their patients for consulting Sámi healers, damaging doctor-patient relations and ultimately serving as a detriment to administering effective health care.

Because the project takes root from a symposium, the individual chapters are self-professedly a bit “untidy” (x), presenting many separate snapshots and case studies, sometimes with substantial overlap, instead of a collective whole. While this approach works well in letting the individual scholars’ best ethnographic work shine, it also somewhat marginalizes certain important aspects to Sámi conceptions of health and healthful living. For example, the majority of the ethnographic works focus on contemporary Læstadian religious healing traditions—through prayer, reading incantations, and other ritual magic. Yet there is little mention of ethnobotanical and zootherapeutic medicine, also of great historical importance and still in use today, nor of varieties of home remedies and practical vernacular conceptions of healthy and unhealthy lifeways, which constitute a large percentage of health care administered in any cultural setting. Collectively, the emphasis on Læstadian healing also marginalizes the enduring and long-term subcultural resistance to missionization practiced by individuals or in small groups and the emerging and controversial Sámi neo-shamanic community that also does healing work for their Sámi and non-Sámi constituents. Although the narrowed focus is appropriately rationalized as being representative of the most common Sámi healing traditions, it unfortunately closes doors on some of the cultural revitalization and decolonization efforts that have proved effective elsewhere in restoring lost traditional Indigenous healing practices.

The work is definitively Nordic in nature with rich ethnographic background and positivistic theoretical approach. Unfortunately, Nordic universities have been slow to embrace the numerous postcolonial critiques of positivistic research, and for this reason the contributors are somewhat limited by their ability to fully engage with the last fifteen years of scholarship in the field of Indigenous studies. Instead, several contributors turn toward social and cultural theory now several decades old, in order to do the difficult labour—to invoke Audre Lorde—of using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house. Such challenges are indicative of the racism found in Nordic universities, wherein Western cultural assumptions and methodologies are unchallenged as objective and factual and Indigenous ones are held to be subjective and ideological.

This tone is established even in Earle Waugh's preface, in which several reasons are given to justify the study of Sámi healing traditions (i.e., to use traditional medicine to improve allopathic medicine; to "assist cultural change" (xiv) before traditional life ways are lost to colonial domination). None of these reasons openly concede the efficacy of Sámi traditional healing practice, despite the fact the following ethnographic chapters detail countless examples of its successful uses. Likewise, these reasons also fail to mention that Sámi traditional healing is a legitimate and complex Indigenous science that has been developed over the course of millennia through processes of experimentation and knowledge production. Recent ethnobotanical scholarship has, for instance, demonstrated the clinical effectiveness of medical remedies found in the writings of Johan Turi (Dubois and Lang). Indigenous health scholarship will grow by leaps and bounds when it no longer needs to apologize for and defend its own legitimacy and when it can be accepted with equal station to allopathic medicine.

Although much work still needs to be done in order to decolonize the way scholars conceptualize and write about health care, Miller's collection offers an important accomplishment in challenging racism in Nordic health care and in offering groundbreaking contemporary ethnographic work to a wide English-speaking audience. Most of the chapters work excellently as standalone pieces suitable for undergraduate and graduate courses, and the work will be of particular value for those researchers working in Arctic studies, circumpolar development or sustainability studies, and for those working to improve culturally responsive care in contemporary clinical settings.

Tim Frandy
Northland College

REFERENCES

- DuBois, Thomas A., and Jonathan F. Lang. 2013. "Johan Turi's Animal, Mineral, Vegetable Cures and Healing Practices: An in-Depth Analysis of Sami (Saami) Folk Healing One Hundred Years Ago." *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 9 (2013): 57. PMC. Accessed 15 July 2016. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23941666>.