

COALITION FOR ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

BACKGROUND PAPER 16

by

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A SHORT EXCURSION TO FINNO-UGRIC WORLD: THE TRADITION OF SACRED GROVES IN MARI EL

December 2008



Background

The limits of our natural resources have become visible, be that energy, metal, land, water etc. But the problem is not only that we are running out of resources to produce those mostly unneeded products or to continue excessive energy consumption but that the main product we are producing today is toxic: super poisons as radioactivity or PCB, dangerous amounts of metals in wrong places like lead or mercury, green house gasses and runner way genetically modified species of plants among others that are circulating around the globe. Right now we are about to poison our planet to death.

We have actually come to a crossroad: if we continue this way, all life on this earth is seriously under threat. If we want to have any future on this planet we have to unlearn our destructive ways of life and actively relearn sustainable ways for a whole society. And

to hold our decision makers responsible for the policies they are executing in our name.

One reason for our destructive way of life is our rootlessness: we have lost our connection to the earth or for any place for that matter. That makes it possible for us to destroy our surroundings and just move on to new places or to rob what is needed from other places. In that process we end up displacing many other people as well who become also rootless. When the end of this road has now become visible, e.g. NASA has already turned its eyes to other planets to continue this rootless (ruthless?) exploitation.

One distinctive feature in indigenous cultures is that they tend to be more democratic than dominant cultures. The respect they have for the nature includes also respect towards people. That can be seen as a key element in sustaining a sustainable way of life. When people are denied real democracy, equality and dignity they will continue to fight that deprivation in any means available from subjugating other people to subjugating nature. That situation is itself disharmony and leads easily to destruction.

At this point we don't have time for centuries of social or scientific experiments any more. But we can still learn from those real existing societies that still have sustainable cultures. One example of sustainable cultures are indigenous people. To be defined as an indigenous culture one has to have a long history in the area, that is roots. Those indigenous cultures that have lost some of their traditions are right now working hard to root their cultures again. Often this happens by reviving their old sacred places: these are places where their history as people and their mythology as world view that is guiding everyday life are maintained.

For the Finnish people the culturally nearest living examples of sustainable cultures are the Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia. They are also some of the few people in Europe that have maintained nature religion alive to this very day. For that purpose let's have a short excursion to Mari El in central Russia and their culture of sacred groves.

The Mari People in Russia

The Mari live pretty much on the same ecological environment as the Finnish do: there is, however, no sea to balance the seasons so accordingly the winter is colder and the summer warmer. They are the oldest known culture in that area their history dating back at least 8000 years. That means that for the last 8000 years they have tested and developed a very delicate balance with the nature and a sustainable way of life there.

The background of their culture is in the gathering, fishing and hunting societies with shamanistic tradition. That means a very keen observation of the nature since the life

depends directly on that. The Mari have though gone through a slow transition to agricultural societies where gathering, fishing and hunting have stayed as supporting sources of livelihood. They have also experienced a slow move from the shamanistic culture to a culture based on special sage or wise people that are chosen to learn the traditions and keep them alive. In Mari they are called kart which is translated as a priest. In Finnish they are called tietäjä, the one who knows. Their task is to learn the traditional oral texts like prayers, charms and songs as well as the history and mythology of the people and organize the ceremonies where these teachings are kept alive.

In the Mari world view the nature is alive: every tree has a spirit, so does the forest, every lake, the sea, stones, even things made by people. The sustainable way of life starts from their connection to this living nature. It starts from the respective attitude towards life: towards nature with all the living creatures in it, towards other people, towards ourselves and towards the gift of life that we have been given.

The nature mothers dating back from the oldest levels of the culture are still well alive in Mari culture. They give respect to e.g. Mother Water, Mother Moon, Mother Star, Mother Sun, Mother Wind, Mother Mist, Mother Frost, Mother Fire and of course the most respected of all, Mother Earth. We still recognize in Finnish language the names of some of these like Maaemo, and that resonates some intuition and possibly warm feeling but we have lost any concrete meaning of that. In western industrialized countries the Earth has been changed first from a mother to a maiden, hunted and explored as e.g. in the earlier metaphors of our science, for just dead matter of today that can be dug or destroyed in any way. Ironically the latin origin for matter, materia, means mater, mother. But this mother is already mostly dead for us.

From the neighboring cultures the Mari have borrowed gods (jumala, god, is a borrowed word in Finno-Ugric languages) to supplement their agricultural needs. The gods are still often in families with a farther, mother, their children and grandchildren though the Sky God is elevated as a main God to compete with the neighboring, dominating cultures. But still he has no control over nature spirits. Actually it is nature that is understood as God and the Mari consider themselves as the daughters and sons of Nature.

Sacred Groves

In the countryside the Mari live pretty much in sustainable villages. Every household has it's potato field, vegetable garden, hens and ducks, maybe sheep and goats and a cow or two. The village is relatively egalitarian. The village or family group co-operates with the bigger tasks of agriculture like ploughing or hay making or harvesting grains. In soviet times many of these tasks were organized through collective farms or kolkhoz and this is often the case

even today, though the role of the collective farms have changed somewhat. Eliminating of villages forced many people to move to the cities, but now when there is again freedom of movement and the money has lost considerably its value, people have started returning to the countryside.

Nature religion is tied with economic survival be that successful hunting or successful harvesting. This is expressed in ceremonies that are usually held in the sacred groves. The ceremonies follow the rhythm of nature. They call people together several times a year e.g. before ploughing in the spring. Its time to pray the ancestors and at least the Mother Earth, probably several other spirits and gods as well for their help in successful ploughing. It's interesting that even in soviet times when the ceremonies were officially forbidden, some leaders of the collective farms actually encouraged them since they had proved in practice to advance the agricultural output.

That kind of ceremony has many aspects. It brings together often the whole village or all related people and tells them that they belong together as one group. It orients them that now it is time to prepare together for a big and crucial effort. It ties this group of people to a certain place: this is where our ancestors have roamed, we belong to this place, and this is where the future of our children is. So there is a strong social meaning besides the economical.

There is also a strong connection to everyday life at home, to raising children and transmitting the tradition. The ceremonies recognize publicly individual cycles of life and the changed status of a person e.g. adulthood or marriage or widowhood. That way every person is given a certain place in a society. For the people these ceremonies give the feeling of belonging to somewhere and meaning and direction to their life.

As sacred groves these places are protected in a special way. They have turned out to be often places of great biological importance to the surrounding area: they have high density of biodiversity, they are the last reserves of rare species of plants and animals and they protect the water table. When these groves are destroyed the result is often erosion. Also when they are left alone, abandoned, destruction will often follow. They have been the first and are often the last nature protection areas.

This deep emotional, social, spiritual and practical unity has made the Mari very strong as a people and capable to defend those places and traditions together against formidable forces through centuries. Sacred groves can be seen as a very delicate technique to preserve the connection of a whole society with nature and that way also a sustainable future.

Some conclusions

The tradition of sacred groves have kept the distinctive Mari culture alive and sustainable to this very day. This sustainable way of life is a very holistic process. It is not a technical fix. It starts from the respective attitude towards nature and other people. It's main arena is the every day life in a family. Women have a central role in maintaining and passing that onwards. It culminates in the celebrations hold in the sacred groves where the whole society comes together to share and continue the tradition. It contradicts the western assumption that nature is preserved best when left alone: on the contrary the nature is preserved best when people are connected to it and know, how to behave there. The sacred groves are also an important political issue in Mari El: the Mari do dare to claim their groves, culture and way of life against the continual rupture of it. By their mere existence the sacred groves question the dominant destructive way of life as the only viable way to continue.

Do we dare to change our mind set from compromised technical fixes to building families, communities and societies with respect towards nature and other people? Are we able to find and build on those roots in our own culture that support real democracy and sustainable ways of life and separate them from those that have led to destruction? Are we going to hold our decision makers responsible for the politics they are implementing? Are we going to be part of the problem or part of the solution?