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# **Research as an Inter-Ethnic Relation**

**Alf Isak Keskitalo**



**Sámi Instituhtta  
DIEĐUT 7/1994**

**Arctic Centre  
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**Alf Isak Keskitalo**

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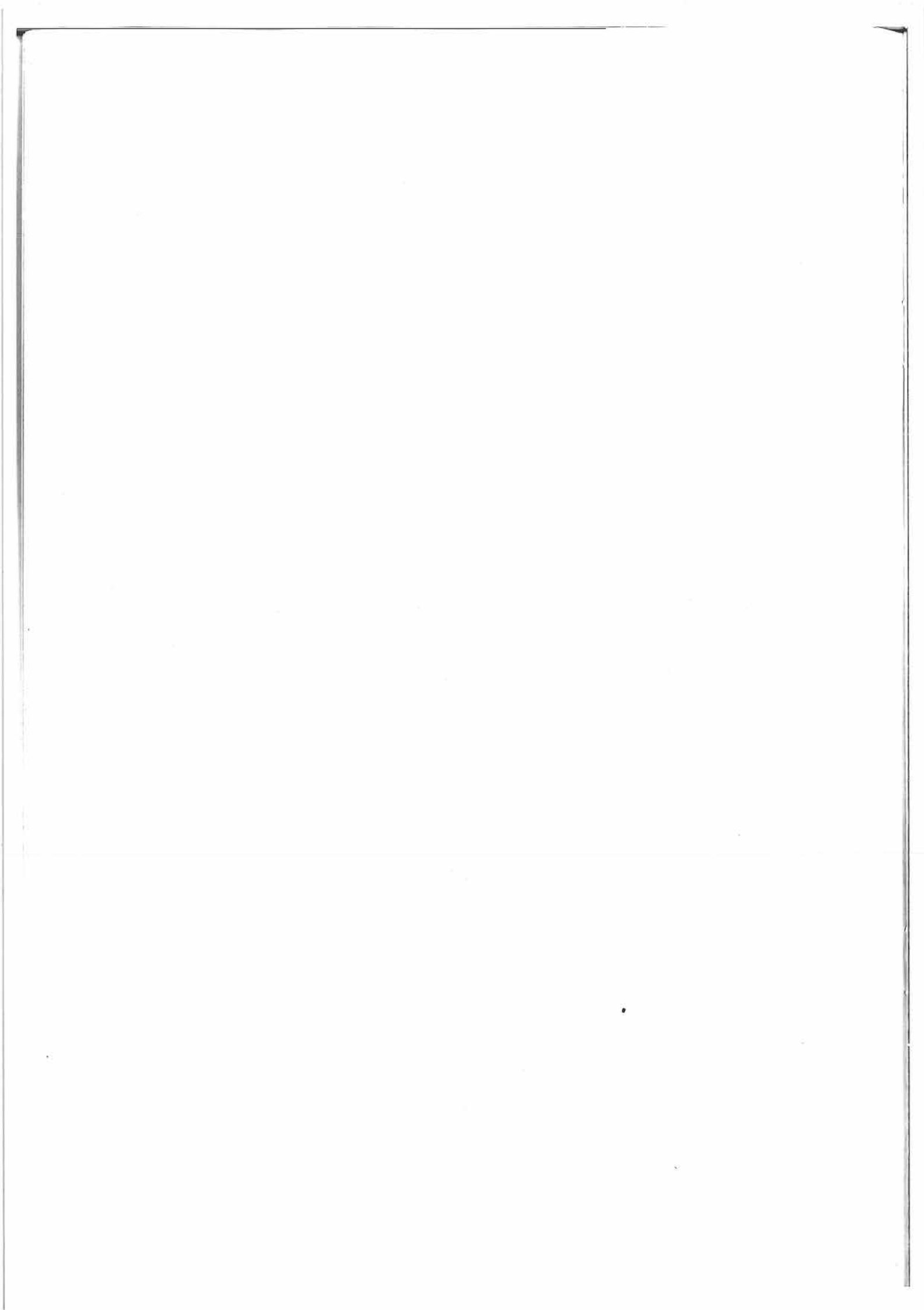
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**Alf Isak Keskitalo**

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## Preface

It might be quite unusual to republish an article that was presented exactly 20 years ago. However, there are compelling reasons to do so! In retrospect, Alf Isak Keskitalo delivered his speech on "Research as an Inter-ethnic Relation" at a crucial time for the development of social sciences and humanities in the Sámi research community. As a scientist at the recently founded Sámi Instituhtta he clearly faced the challenges and threads of the imbalance in minority-majority relations that were pervasive at that time.

In the august forum of the Nordic Ethnographers' Meeting in 1974 his presentation had a strong and lasting influence on many participants. I myself (LMW), attending the conference as a young, foreign social scientist, took Keskitalo's analysis as a direction which has shaped my own research since then. There was undoubtedly a bristling atmosphere when he had completed his presentation. Strong and intensive discussions ensued among the participants at the meeting.

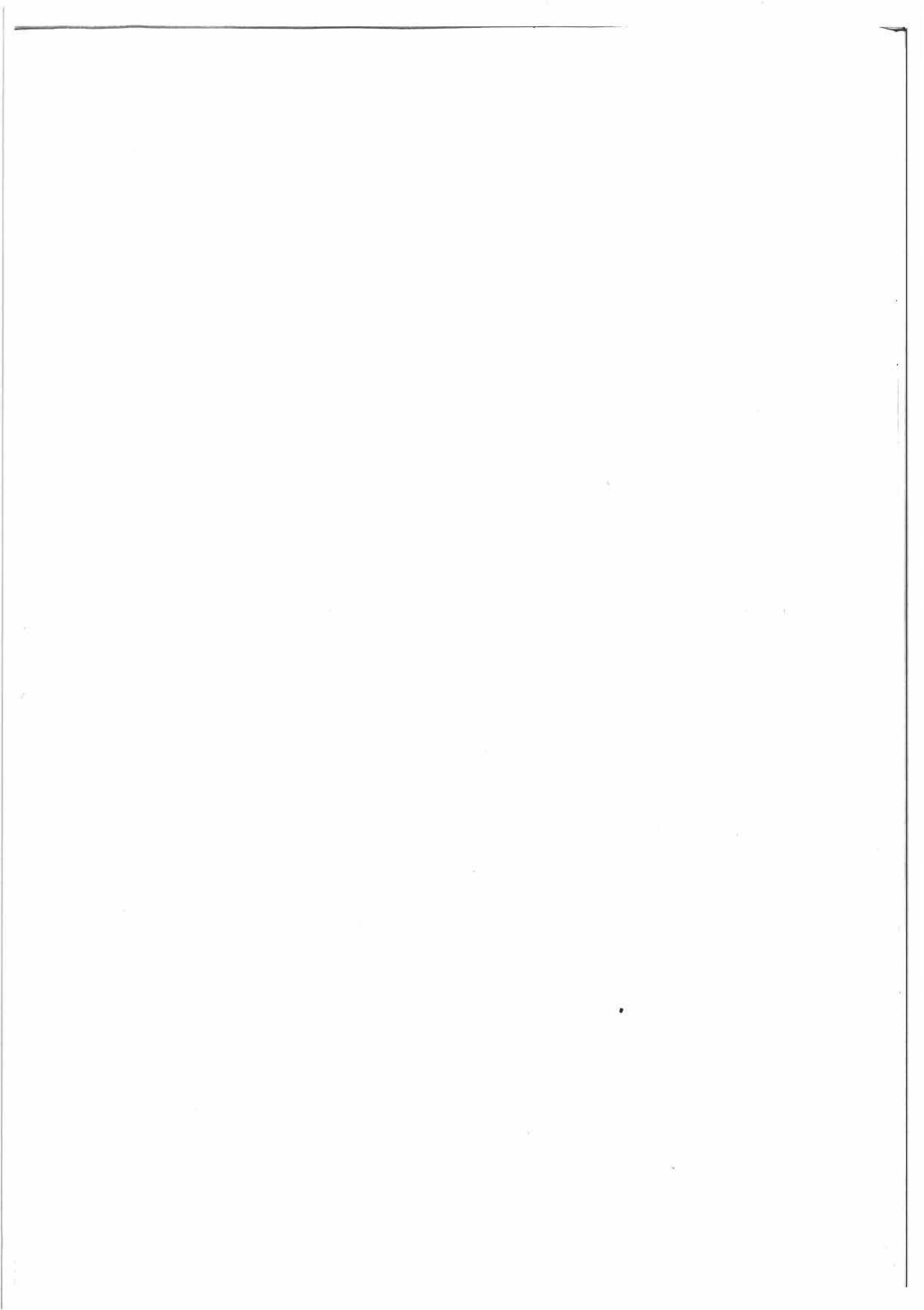
Although Keskitalo's presentation was published in 1976 it did not reach a large audience in international social sciences and so it did not receive the attention that it fully deserved. In the 20 years that have elapsed since publication much has happened in the social sciences and in particular in anthropology ("ethno-science") that has led to cooperation between aboriginal researchers and those coming from outside their societies. Still we believe that Alf Isak Keskitalo's comments and thoughts are yet timely and are needed to further the exchange of ideas and their application to the benefit of both.

We feel that the republication of his article by both the Sámi Instituhtta and the Arctic Centre at the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Sámi Instiuhitta and at "Skábmadiggi" is appropriate to honor Alf Isak Keskitalo's contribution to the philosophy of science. It is with the hope of enhancing future research and cooperation that we present this publication.

*November 1994*

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# Research as an Inter-Ethnic Relation

*Alf Isak Keskitalo*

Before I proceed, I should like to make a remark on terminology. The term "Sámi" is substituted for the commonly known and used word "Lappish". "Sámi" is the genitive and accusative case of "Sábmi", the general concrete and abstract concept referring to our people, land and spirit - in our own language. This term will be used from now on.

## **1. Preliminary Remarks**

The pursuit of the subject indicated by the title of this paper must obviously lead to self-reflection. In order to avoid referential opacity and paradoxes of self-reference, I shall preliminarily concentrate on a few examples which bear on the factual context of this conference, this presentation, and the perspective I have used in preparing this paper. The following reflections are important in order to expose a few underlying presuppositions, which - when unmentioned - could obscure the theme and purpose of this meeting, as well as the presence of some of the persons in this audience, including the present speaker.

### *1.1 Language of this Presentation*

The first compulsory and unavoidable reflection concerns the choice of language for this presentation. The fact that there were real alternatives, and that a choice seemed necessary, may be taken as an indication that our field of discourse is not in equilibrium, and that the question of language might be some sort of an isomorphism to our problem at large. I shall recapitulate very simply why I chose to present these pages in English, not in Norwegian, not even in the Sámi language.

It would have been quite legitimate to present these thoughts in Sámi words - there would have been both audience, terminology and possibili-

ties of a serious and internal discussion as well as of publication and pedagogical applications. Not using the Sámi language can be regarded as some sort of a sacrifice, particularly when most of this audience unreflectedly and predictably would use their mother tongue here at the conference in the discourse of this problem.

This unreflected linguistic consciousness is - especially when both parties (both poles of the relation) are present - a strong sign that "research as an inter-ethnic relation", in a very fundamental and commonplace sense, has an asymmetric character. Thus, to stress the immediate legitimacy of using the Sámi language would - apart from making this speech unintelligible for most of you - place the present asymmetry of the discussed relation at the wrong pole of the structure of research and ethnicity. It would cover the fact that this asymmetry originates elsewhere as far as linguistic phenomena are concerned - namely in the second possible approach, in this case, to write in and speak Norwegian, the majority language. I therefore refrain from the Sámi language at this occasion. But these remarks should also predict that Sámi scientific literature will occur, thus increasing requirements to those wanting to make a scientific contribution relevant to Sámi and minority matters generally.

The reasons for me not speaking Norwegian are then obvious. The naive and sensational aspect of revenge from the minority shall be mentioned, but is surely a highly superficial argument, however applicable in structurally similar "political" or "confrontational" situations in this our most un-plural society.

But my main point is this: It would have been quite possible to mention the linguistic asymmetry we are talking about - in Norwegian. The result would then be a merely hypothetical remark, a hypothesis with a self-referential character and an atmosphere of unreality - nothing but a word game. It would further just hide, strengthen and conserve the asymmetry, by fixing the very theory of the problem at the "Norwegian" majority pole, structurally speaking. It is vital for our problem that it be both formulated and practically demonstrated, because the eventual solution of it must have a practical character, like the agreement on a predetermined language of communication together with the premises of choice.

These remarks should suffice to establish the feasibility and adequacy of settling on English as the language for this paper. But this is, of course, only a partial and ad hoc solution, since English generally in other bilateral inter-ethnic relationships is likely to lose the seemingly neutral aura it has in our case.

So much for "linguistics". I hope, by these remarks, to have argued for the relevance of language to our problem as well as to have shown part of its general form.

### *1.2 The Scope of Inquiry*

I assume that research or science can be constituted as an inter-ethnic relation with significance between ethnic groups, only when research as a phenomenon is strongly accumulated in one of the groups, and when it has a substantial and directional bearing on the other group. Thus it will hold primarily between groups of highly different "levels" of cultural organization. This will especially hold in ethnic majority-minority situations. It especially holds in the Nordic-Sámi relationship, where the majority, for several reasons, has privileged access to education and science, and where these in fact constitute part of the majority status. They are, so to say, "majority phenomena". I shall concentrate on this Nordic-Sámi relationship, since it is our concern, and since it is and will continue to be one of the classic cases.

I further assume that the group of sciences which most relevantly are involved in this relation are those we could call the "ethno-sciences" comprising the somewhat confusing body of ethnology, ethnography, social anthropology and parts of sociology, leaving the difficulties of definition aside. Admittedly other sciences, too, can be included, thus, medicine, biology, psychology, and others, when they have explicit or implicit ethnic perspectives. This involvement is, of course, due to the specific subject matter of these sciences plus the self referential attempt to treat involvement within the scope of the sciences themselves, as for instance in discussions to improve techniques of field research.

This paper can then be regarded as a discussion of the involvement of ethno-science in inter-ethnic relations. Its fundamental context is its presentation by a minority representative at a congress of ethno-scientists complementing the majority.

I know that this last remark is a rather unusual one at a scientific meeting, except perhaps in philosophical circles. However, hope you will excuse me when considering the following.

The discussion in this presentation cannot be limited to the scope, theory, and terminology of the ethno-sciences. In the first place, I have no formal education of this kind, which perhaps is a lucky fact. Secondly, the reflective character of the problem must lead to a meta- scientific view, comprising even semi-logical, ethical and perhaps psychological consider-

ations. Thirdly, a more or less obligatory limitation to the scope and analytic concepts of ethno-science would, in fact, once more be an amplification of asymmetry and of the cumulative character of science as a resource of the majority. In fact, a tacit presupposition that even the minority must keep within disciplinary boundaries when theorizing is a very subtle form of majority-minority relationship with a nearly oppressive function, besides being theoretically untenable for the aforementioned reasons.

With these preliminary remarks, I hope that I have clearly stated my own perspective, tracing the outline of our problem, a problem which in many respects resembles the traits in Sámi problems generally, reminding us that human theoretical activity is always embedded in a comprehensive perspective.

## **2. Asymmetry of Ethno-Science in Practical Contexts**

Why is "research as an inter-ethnic relation" asymmetric, directional, and even accumulative? Is it intrinsically or essentially so, or merely by virtue of practical irregularities? Is then symmetry in ethno-science possible, and by what costs? It would be totally naive to propose or attempt an answer to this problem. All I can do is to expose certain traits which are symptomatic for the "crisis of anthropology", as it is sometimes termed. In a medical sense, symptoms are easy to suppress or remedy. Whether the patient will recover or not, depends on inner strength and integrity, partly on willingness to pay heed to the symptoms. Nevertheless, the critical situation can go on existing indefinitely, like a chronic disease, creating stress on other members of the household, in this case, minorities and so-called "primitive" peoples.

I shall consider the phenomenon of asymmetry first in a practical, then in a theoretical mode. That such a dichotomy is convenient, is partly due to the historically evolved understanding in the ethno-sciences, partly due to the critical attitude on behalf of the groups under study departing from practical irregularities. This has resulted in a theoretically formulated understanding. In a certain sense, I shall therefore recapitulate certain aspects of the development of critique, which in fact also is the history of my own thoughts and experiences concerning this problem.

## *2.1 Field Work*

The presence of the ethno-scientist in a local population is undoubtedly a disturbance and a pressure on the people in question. Only in very infrequent cases will the field worker be able to establish personal and social relationships in the group before arriving, so that the presence is given a reciprocal value and appreciation, at least in the concluding stages. In some cases, the pressure of the field worker's presence can reach symmetry by curiosity and novelty satisfaction, on this level yielding a kind of "research balance". "He was the first white man they ever saw. He caused great wonder and deep discussions." The aspect of novelty, however, may wear off when waves of inexperienced field workers follow. In fact, this is what is causing subdued distress and exasperation in the Sámi population.

The asymmetry is further strengthened by some intrinsic aspects of field work, for instance, in social anthropology. Even if field workers could overcome difficulties of language and terminology, they could not effectively and intuitively communicate their real motives and methods of research, unless the chance of discovering variables and "structures" be diminished, of course, by arousing suspicion, deliberate constructions, activating suppressive social mechanism, and decision procedures blocking the field worker's access to important themes and phenomena. Such difficulties could undoubtedly be overcome by an ingenious and determined field worker, but there is always a limit to the tolerance of the people studied to field work, which, when exceeded, can have a very serious effect, notably a blockade of similar research by members of the people themselves. This is, in fact, a phenomenon I have experienced rudimentarily myself.

Further, should members of the people studied wish to establish a balanced and symmetric relationship with the ethno-scientist, this cannot succeed for the obvious reason that they mostly will not have access to the researcher's social setting. Their inquiries to the researcher would be limited to a personal and psychological sphere, and the people would even risk that their attempt at a reciprocating inquiry be interpreted by the field worker as an element of the people's institutional habits: "They are highly inquisitive and curious". The researcher will thus always keep the upper hand.

All these shortcomings could possibly be remedied through careful design of field techniques and approaches - at least in so-called "primitive" societies, with possibly transparent organization and a low degree of

differentiation, where the researcher's presence could have a high pay-off value. But not all peoples studied are of this kind. It is essential for majority-minority relations that majority scientists tend to fix attention on the more archaic aspects of the minority group, and thus underestimate its complexity and differentiation, even its methods of sanction and reward. This is especially the case for the Sámi people, who, in some areas today, constitute a semi-industrial society with highly differentiated functions, lately also with academic institutions and what could be termed an "emergency and innovation group" with academic education and training as a result of organizational processes.

These processes and these facts seem to have passed more or less unnoticed by ethno-scientists, especially by foreign researchers. Moreover, when recorded, this has happened only in an extended mode without perception of the full significance and consequences. I shall, for the moment, only mention the practical relation of field work to this process, leaving theory for later inquiry.

Failure of the field worker to grasp the complexity of Sámi society, defining its borders inappropriately, has a paradoxical effect on the educated Sámi, sometimes confronting us with the dilemma in formulating policy.

Often the field worker seems to expect us, even if totally unacquainted and "unread", to function as mediators and introduce the researcher to the society. This often happens even after explanations of the resistance mechanism in question, thus, in some cases, pressing us to execute a role in our own society which we know is drawing on our credit of social sanction within the group. Lately, this pressure seems to be extended into comparatively new fields of ethno-science, notably ethnomusicology and esthetics, fields with highly sensitive and vulnerable social characteristics.

The very presence of the field worker has a paradoxical air in our case. Knowing that the researcher tries to grasp phenomena of which we already have cognitive and theoretical mastery, gives this presence a tinge of luxury and superfluousness, which mitigates the possible inconvenience the field worker causes. This further may lead to disturbances of work priorities in the Sámi society, perhaps leading somebody to try to cover certain fields of inquiry before being invaded by outsiders, thus disturbing a more organic distribution of cultural work and research.

A remarkable trait, resembling the field situation, is the frequent presence of ethno-scientists of different types at Sámi organizational occasions. At an early stage of the development one could even hear attempts at "counseling" organizational policy and procedures, and I

suspect that this urge is not altogether unknown still. I regard such tendencies as a result of a failure to grasp the dynamics of majority-minority relationships, that the minority turns from defensive to offensive position, and that in such a circumstance any unreflected infiltration from a majority member can turn out to slow down or confuse this offensive process.

Conclusively, I could mention the frequently observed absence of an effective feed-back of results from research, not only in the form of scientific publications, but also as popularized works in accessible languages.

The practically constituted asymmetry of field work has, in the case of relations such as between the Nordic and Sámi societies, an additional character of pressure on the academic level, resulting from different definitions of complexity and group borders. The possibility of a practical reciprocity on behalf of Sámi interests is materially prevented by differing priorities and interests, and, of course, also to qualitative and quantitative resources. The situation could be presented thus: even if we perceive the asymmetry we cannot execute a parallel activity directed on the Nordic society, since we have other work to do, and since we lack the interest and zeal to inquire into Nordic conditions on an ethnic basis. Theoretical limitations to this are then optional.

## *2.2 Political Aspects*

The political role of the ethno-scientist is very opaque, especially when the concept "politics" is understood in a broader sense as the covert and overt participation in decision and policy making procedures in the society. What interests us here is, of course, not the more or less frequent participation in day-to-day politics, but the political function of personal engagement by the ethno-scientist in individual activity as writer and expert or in an organizational body of colleagues. Besides there is the impact of ethno-science and related areas through institutionalized research, on which I shall try to comment later.

One can obviously distinguish between two highly different forms of political participation on behalf of ethno-science. The first is the essentially foreign interference into the relation between majority ruling groups and minority or powerless ethnic groups subjected to outright genocide or the more subtle forms of economic, cultural and social extermination. This type of activity is exemplified by IWGIA (International Working Group on

Indigenous Affairs). I do not know very much about the concrete procedures and results of IWGIA, but I assume that such work can be extremely valuable and important, provided that the client group in question factually expresses demand for help, or that its situation is so desperate that no such demand can be formulated or expressed to the outside.

The opinion of the parallel majority, in my view, is quite irrelevant in such cases. Neither do I know to what degree the mentioned and other similar organizations distribute their efforts according to geography and ideology of the suppressing majorities. As we know, the stated ideology is seldom relevant to the facts of cultural extinction, so this has to be an open question. In any case, I think that activities such as IWGIA's eventually should and will be taken care of by multilateral inter-minority organizations. It is on this level that ethno-scientists will have to be careful, not to assert asymmetric pressures on these minorities, a process that will recapitulate the possible drawbacks of the situation I am going to mention next.

The second form of political role taken by ethno-science and individual scientists is of a much less transparent type than undoubtedly humanitarian assistance to suppressed groups outside the society to which the scientist belongs. The opaqueness of this second form is due to the fact that it is directly constitutive to the majority-minority relationship in societies where both groups more or less voluntarily and deliberately share institutions and political procedures, and where the researcher fundamentally is a member of the majority, whether he or she wants it or not. In such cases the phenomenon of assistance exposes its very practical aspects. I shall try to illustrate by a few examples. But first I want to stress this: even if the following remarks should concern persons present here today, I hope they realize that the points made here had to be formulated sooner or later as factual descriptions, of course, not as accusations, especially when much of the situation has improved thanks to reasonable communication and persistent minority policy.

It is evident that in a dynamic majority-minority relationship such as Nordic-Sámi relations, or more exactly in the transition from a static to a dynamic stage (a transition which in our case seems to have taken place during the last twenty years), there will be a strong quest for know-how and experts to handle and analyze the processes taking place. This especially will be the case in majority institutions, for instance, governmental administration committees, research groups, etc. This is due to the fact that these institutions are not structured to take care of the new



dynamics created by minority actions and demands.

If the authorities in such situations have not established procedures for selecting the needed know-how, this will happen in a most haphazard manner; there is an archaic notion that the minority itself cannot provide the experts or the know-how needed. This may be partly true, especially when the knowledge should be formulated to the exact bureaucratic measures of majority procedures. However, it seems to be the case that we also here can trace the "law of underestimation of minority resources" that will expose itself now and again.

It is evident that the ethno-scientist will play an important role in such circumstances, both as a result of factual involvement in minority matters, which has been a frequent fact in the Nordic-Sámi relation and as a formal expert in formulating problems and suggesting solutions. The mere fact of being an expert is, of course, not in itself blameworthy, and the resulting work can turn out, and indeed has in many cases turned out to be very valuable and constructive, but there are several important constitutive asymmetries to note at this early stage of a dynamic development.

First, we have to note the fact that the dynamic processes, at least partly, would not have been triggered if not catalyzed and expressed by the minority itself. It is thus a continuous paradox that the minority should not possess the personnel to formulate an acceptable solution to problems of conscious and active concern to the minority. Even today the result has been a token minority representation if any in public organs that bear on the minority situation. The rest of the seats are then occupied by majority representatives, frequently by ethno-scientists and other academic experts. This is clearly an asymmetric situation in which the expert, mostly through formal knowledge, executes know-how according to majority rules while possible minority representatives with substantial and applied knowledge have to transform that knowledge into a more or less unknown form. I can perceive that many ethno-scientists must be criticized for not having understood or articulated this asymmetry in a more persistent way, and at a later stage, when minority representatives answering both majority and minority requirements were available, for not pointing to this fact.

In a certain sense, I can understand the situation of majority ethno-scientists and their corresponding dilemma. It seems to be a law of nature that the actions of the majority's authorities in minority matters are either premature or archaic. Premature in the sense that the decision procedures in the minority have not reached a conclusive stage as to external and internal policy. This is extremely important in the Sámi case where the

decision procedures are of an immensely opaque and inaccessible kind to non-members. The result can be (a) a disturbance of minority priorities such as, for instance, how, where, when and which institutions and special programmes should be erected or issued, and (b) an asymmetric access to policy formulation from which correspondingly qualified minority representatives are excluded by their loyalty to minority pace, theme and technology.

The idea of archaic political action is of importance, too. By this I understand the issuing of more or less outdated projects by public or semi-public institutions and offices. This happens either when an idea, popularly speaking, occurred all too late for the project to be effective, or when the underlying phenomenon had long since been transformed. An example of the latter is when University A proposes to issue a project on "juoigan", Sámi folk music, applying ethno-musicological methods, even comprising a "development programme", ignoring or being ignorant of the fact, that this form of music has lately been in an accelerated development, and that by its very nature and social setting it is almost inaccessible to external scrutiny and certainly inaccessible to external "development".

The important aspect of practical asymmetry in such projects is that they administer public money, often in parallel competition with projects supported by the minority. In a sense they are simultaneously both premature and archaic and, having a political aim on development, they will create, besides immensely strong pressures in field work, what could be termed a "positivistic" effect, unnaturally fixing and distorting the role and character of the phenomenon investigated in the eyes of its proprietary group. Ethno-scientists are, of course, intrinsically responsible for the existence of such projects and for putting minority mediators into severe dilemmas for accepting or denying policy.

One further example of the asymmetry of the expert's function has to be mentioned. This concerns miscalculations which the expert is more or less bound to make, specifically based on the formal type of knowledge, mistakes which the corresponding minority representative is more likely or almost certain to avoid. To illustrate this I shall briefly mention that in the planning of Sámi Institut'ta most scientific experts consulted held that its ideal location would be a university campus, arguing with the supposition that academics were unlikely to settle in a remote Sámi village without an academic milieu. This turned out to be a faulty argument for two important reasons. In the first place, this was a clear case of the "underestimation" principle, in that it turned out that there were Sámi

personnel resources sufficient both to plan and to run the institute. Those people certainly did not consider a Sámi village either "remote" or lacking in milieu. In the second place, this might be taken as a typical example of internalization and conversion of a majority type institution, possibly at an earlier stage than most ethno-scientists would have expected. This can be formally described as an essential blindness to the asymmetric status of their science, obscuring the possibility of a redefinition of "ethno-science" and the possibility of a scientific perspective by the minority. The case of Sámi Institut'ta can be termed as a clear political case in the broad sense, and shows that the asymmetry of ethno-science as a dogma could have attained considerable political import that could have had a decisive effect in this very important case, had not the asymmetry been clearly perceived and defined by Sámi thought.

I shall now turn to another type of political engagement which, in fact, is "political" more in accordance with traditional usage of the term. Once, twice or thrice have there been printed works primarily dedicated to a historical description of the Sámi situation. This is in itself a praiseworthy undertaking within certain limits, essentially the limits that should prevent the Sámi people from being analyzed as an historical phenomenon, understandable through current ideologies more or less irrelevant to majority-minority relations. I am explicitly aiming at attempts to interpret the Sámi minority situation in a left-right political dimension.

This comment would need considerable theoretical elaboration, but since I am now concentrating on practical aspects, I shall merely state the extended effect on the Sámi movement and minority situation at large. The result could have been an early cleavage or even disintegration of the Sámi organizational process. That this did not happen I personally regard as - not an accidental - but an essential trait of Sámi ideology itself. But side effects of such publications nonetheless occur as heated discussions and accusations in more peripheral Sámi circles and in the surrounding Nordic societies.

I think this tendency to politics on behalf of the Sámi people is the most serious kind of asymmetric blindness that can occur with ethno-scientists; I am inclined to call it scientific astigmatism by metaphor. To be sure, there also have been attempts to deliver parallel interpretations utilizing dimensions like centralism - populism and violence - non-violence, but I hold that these are equally irrelevant for the Sámi situation at large and can but obscure internal discussions and give false impressions externally.

In my view, the pressure of a majority upon an ethnic minority is as much of an ideological type as anything else; it will have a totally

disintegrating effect regardless of the average ideas of the majority, provided the minority is small and powerless enough.

It seems evident that an ethnic group in a minority position can adopt ideologies which definitely resemble ideologies found in the majority society only when such an ideology is based on the very constitutive phenomena that make it an ethnic group. This seems to hold true empirically in the Sámi case, exactly in non-assimilated areas, where the abandonment of traditional party politics and the definitions of traditional dimensions accelerate in favour of ethnic policy. Especially ethno-scientists should bear this non-translatibility of political dimensions in mind, and thus the unpredictability of the minority's political behaviour. Whether this unpredictability is accidental or essential for each minority in question can only be factually confirmed by the minority's action itself and not by external theorizing. This fact is perhaps the formal aspect of the asymmetry of ethno-science in a practical mode which might give us some clues to a theoretical understanding of the asymmetry. But before we try to make the transition to purely theoretical remarks, there are some additional points to be made here.

### *2.3 Ethno-Science as Institutional Research*

The practical importance of institutionalized ethno-science in a majority-minority relation which has reached a dynamic stage is, first of all, and not surprisingly, of economic character. When a scientist arrives in an ethnic group from across the ocean or from behind unknown mountains and valleys, it is mostly of little interest to the group what type of institution sent him or how much money it spent. The situation is, however, quite different when, as in the Nordic-Sámi case, the minority itself has erected institutions on a somewhat parallel scale to those of the majority. There obviously arises a competitive situation between different applicants for financial support and sponsoring. It is a fact that the number of majority research and scientific institutions bearing on the Sámi situation far outnumbers the institutions with an internal position and controlled by the minority itself. The majority institutions comprise, for instance, museums with special Sámi departments, partly with research responsibilities. One could also count linguistic and biological institutions as competitive counterparts to applications from Sámi institutions.

This is an asymmetrical situation with a somewhat paradoxical air. The Sámi institutions work within very narrow financial frameworks, even

when they are able to document concrete needs in connection to projects untouched by research. When applying for extended financial support, these internal minority institutions are met by the ubiquitous argument from authorities that corresponding majority institutions already cover the field, pointing, for instance, to ethno-scientific institutions said to be executing parallel functions. This argument is a clear misunderstanding of the status of minority institutions internally described. In fact, there is no clear parallel between majority institutions working on an ethno-scientific base and minority institutions that superficially cover the same field.

There is, for instance, considerable difference between an ethnographic museum with Sámi exhibitions in a university city and a Sámi museum in the central Sámi area with highly internal functions in esthetics, education, social activity and local cultural undertakings. There is also a substantial difference between a study group for Sámi affairs at a university and for instance Sámi Institut'ta; while the former per definition is bound to work within the fields of ethno-science and social science, the latter is bound to non-formal handling of the substances of the problems at hand. Thus there is only a superficial resemblance of the scope of these institutions, the one executing ethno-science, the other what could be called ethnic science and practical application. As for Sámi Institut'ta the situation is still worse because it is essentially prevented from applying for project moneys from the national budget. It has to rely on meager financing through the Nordic Cultural Agreement and Nordic Cultural Fund, while corresponding ethno-scientific institutions compete both in the Nordic market and for national budget funds. This is a clear case of practical asymmetry of ethno-science in a political frame which constitutes a legitimate reason for authorities not to refuse the financial base for internal minority institutions, which simultaneously area competitive in the free market, and which even in some cases function as expert reference groups for the decision of the authorities' financial policy towards minority institutions.

I do not, of course, imply that majority institutions should not get financial support from the public, rather these institutions must be taken for what they are, notably specifically directed at ethno-science and not at internal minority work. I think these institutions have a great responsibility to point out this fact to the financial authorities, and simultaneously to reflect this in their own project policy. It is intrinsic to minority policy and, of course, for Sámi policy, too, that it will strive to erect autonomous institutions in every field regardless of superficial coverage by majority institutions. This is, in fact, explicitly mentioned in the program for cultural

autonomy issued by the Nordic Sámi organizational body.

Even disregarding the competitive situation between minority and majority institutions bearing on Sámi affairs, there are internal irregularities in the majority institutions, which are the results of the asymmetric status of ethno-science. This asymmetry reveals itself through priorities in internal organizational structure which view the perspective of ethno-science as more important than possible priorities expressed by the minority in question. I shall illustrate this by the following example. University B, which is a quite new institution with possibilities to develop its structure heeding a large range of considerations, decided to establish a special group for Sámi studies with a typical ethno-scientific perspective. This group was ascribed a high internal status and given considerable resources. At the same time, the plans for study and education in Sámi language were given much lower status in the university structure, both as to organizational independence and recruitment.

The argument for this meager plan for Sámi must supposedly have been fear of duplication of language services rendered by the main university of the country. It is surprising that the fear of duplication did not occur in the ethno-scientific field, where the reality of such a process was much more evident. From a Sámi viewpoint, the study and education in their language must be considered more important than a further expansion of ethno-scientific research, especially when Sámi organizations have had little or no say in the matter. This is an indication that ethno-science regards itself as having some kind of privileged access to Sámi problems. But, in fact, this holistic perspective is untenable in a dynamic majority-minority relationship. It is evident that the minority, in fact, could demand research in fields such as music, esthetics, and architecture - those fields being as relevant for the progress of minority autonomy as is purely socially oriented research. The consequence of disregarding such possibilities is an amplified urge in the minority to cover all these fields in autonomous institutions, which then must compete with exterior priorities. This is truly a paradoxical situation, which I suspect to be intrinsically unsolvable in a majority university model, since it either presupposes a total conversion of university decision procedures and thus a repriorization or an optimal wish by the minority to make all possible academic functions autonomous.

Institutionalization as resource for the majority might take many forms in its relation to the minority. Usually linguistics and language education is not regarded as ethno-science but in certain important aspects they acquire similar asymmetries, due to their factual role in handling minority

languages. A clear case is the teaching and exam criteria in academic administration of the Sámi language at Nordic universities. It seems to have been a practical dogma that the Sámi language is dead, just as dead as Latin and classic Greek. This is shown by the fact that the practical mastery of spoken Sámi has not been a significant exam criterion nor subject to purposeful teaching. The result is that no special merit is given to complete and artful speech or even to written style; these have always been important in teaching and examination of other foreign languages. Thus the exam itself favours those with a merely formal knowledge of the language, besides influencing students' work mostly in this formal direction. Such practice is especially dubious in a minority situation where the very existence of the language is at stake, and where the token language exam might be a basis for infiltration into the minority.

I suspect that a parallel tendency can be traced in pure ethno-science, that practical knowledge and factual mastery of language is not usually rewarded in the same scale as formal or theoretical learning. This then will obviously have the effect that more or less qualified students spread out in the field executing a token know-how, adding a special irritating pressure effect in the field situation. The final outcome of such educational practices is a clear drawback for minority members in the academic qualification process by not being equally rewarded for equal and symmetric qualifications.

At last, I shall have to say a few words about museums as ethno-scientific institutions. It is obvious that the existence of ethnographic museums is of great importance also to the ethnic groups concerned with ethnographic documentation and conservation. The intensive and exhaustive documentation of past economic and cultural phenomena can turn out to be of increasing and perhaps decisive value in a final determination of minority rights and values. However, there are several important points that such museums should consciously heed. In the first place, museums should be careful not to create a "positivistic" effect concerning the material cultural possessions of a particular group. In the Sámi situation, where several concrete cultural elements, such as clothing, are internally evolving, it is important that museums do not function as normative instances according to design and use, which seems to be the case in more or less static "folkloristic" circumstances, such as in the case of the Norwegian "bunad". In a certain sense, there is nothing folkloristic about Sámi clothing at all, but ethno-scientific institutions by treating it as a folkloristic phenomenon, indeed can contribute to a process leading to folklorism, understood as a perspective regarding cultural phenomena as

historically completed and fully analyzable units.

Finally, disputes are bound to occur over ownership of artifacts and ethnographica in the possession of museums. It is a fact that in certain historical periods, private and public collectors have been more or less legally able to confiscate or otherwise obtain artifacts which now can be regarded as precious heritage of the Sámi people. This is the case with the shaman drums now largely in the possession of central museums. It should be explicitly stated that these artifacts indeed are the property of the Sámi people, and accordingly should be placed more in accordance with this fact. This is a striking parallel to the case of Icelandic manuscripts and the dispute over their ownerships and location.

As a conclusion to these remarks about institutionalized science entangled in inter-ethnic problems one could say: it is not the case that the mere existence of ethno-scientific institutions ensures the minority a right to an academic form of activity. Quite the contrary, if their existence and structure is presented as a surrogate for the minority's own activities, one will finally achieve institutionalization of the asymmetry itself, eventually choking off any the relationship that exists, just by the vanishing of the minority pole resulting from all types of disintegrating pressure.

### **3. Dynamics of Knowledge and Understanding**

In a way we could have stopped here. In a very important sense, the above comments about the practical asymmetry of ethno-science are all that can be said about research as an inter-ethnic relation. I suspect that any theory about this relation is neither capable of being verified nor falsified, since it seems compelled to take the form of a historical hypothesis anchored both in the past and in the future, and as such could be subject to constant reinterpretation. However, I feel obliged to add some further remarks with a theoretical air, since such remarks could possibly contribute to at least a part of the solution of what is undeniably an untenable situation. Still these remarks are too superficial, but could possibly be elaborated in an effective way.

#### *3.1 Chronological Limitations of Inter-Ethnic Relations*

It will doubtless seem that I have chosen too narrow a scope for this paper, research as an inter-ethnic relation being more than ethno-science with



regard to a majority-minority perspective. It is certainly more, but this seems to be a very trivial relation. The role of science and especially of ethno-science is, for instance, very uninteresting in the ethnic relation between Norway and Great Britain, in this and other cases being overwhelmed by other types of relations between these nations considered as ethnic groups. When such relations are more or less institutionalized, as for instance through this conference viewed as an established relation of certain aspects of life in the larger pan-Nordic scene, it loses all character of asymmetry, and acquires the characteristics of cooperation, the "inter"-aspect thus vanishing in a subtle way.

Neither is the relation particularly interesting when established between ethno-scientists and a remote group with no possible means of effective re-action or articulation. In such cases the contact is usually of very temporary character. I know, however, that more could be said for assistance activities by groups such as IWGIA, but in a way they are extra-scientific activities, and other people would have to discuss them.

It is evident to me that the most important aspect of the relation is the contrast between the majority and the minority perspective. This is especially evident when the relation is in a stage of dynamic development, and this has a chronological perspective. I have the following picture of this chronology as a historic possibility, partly as a historic fact.

At first, there was a thorough one-way relationship; Nordic ethno-scientists studied the Sami people and accumulated knowledge. In this stage there was no question of any critique or reaction from the studied group, and any such reaction doubtless would have been interpreted as mere common savageness in a primitive tribe. Anthropologists are known to be very brave people in such cases.

Later, the relationship reached the dynamic stage, introduced by the birth of the Sami movement and the first foundations of Sami institutions, partly assisted by ethno-scientists and aid, which, at a later stage, could partly be criticized as too strong an involvement. At that point, one could clearly trace the contours of the asymmetric nature of the relation, the scientists trying to get a grasp of the very development, and the establishment of reflected critique on behalf of the majority and from the minority itself.

It is thus very important to remember that this now is not a relation between "those studying and the group being studied", but that the subject group is capable of taking measures, if needed, to convert the study relation completely and to launch a study program on external ethno-scientists. I suspect, however, that that will not be done, but that the

asymmetry will vanish naturally, the relation developing into a trivial cooperative relationship. The other natural way it can vanish is by the extermination of the Sami people as an ethnic group. In my view, full self-determination for the minority or its eventual disappearance are the only possible developments. A minority is a highly unstable group, its dynamics always accelerating in one or another direction. This, then, is the chronological perspective in which our further theoretical remarks have to be considered.

Can the asymmetry be resolved then? Not as a static phenomenon, I think. It cannot be resolved by an unmodified institutional and theoretical perspective, by sticking to dogmas. Ethno-science as such must be willing to change some views. In order to preserve working conditions for itself and for the minority in question, and to gain what can be called its "theoretical autonomy", which is the freedom to be the last and single arbiter of knowledge about itself. This can truly be achieved only when ethno-scientists give up the scheme of making holistic programmes for the exhaustive theoretical understanding of the minority, thus establishing a monopoly of knowledge, to which the minority itself has to refer.

I shall use the rest of this paper to trace the possibility of avoiding such a monopoly, and very briefly to indicate what theoretical modifications are necessary from a minority viewpoint.

### *3.2 Cognitive and Social Opacity*

It is important to note that theoretical modifications have to start at the point where the practical critique departs, notably at the field work level. Of course, it should be stated that the prerequisite of a personal obligation - not transmitting this to mediators - must be fulfilled before there can be any question of field work. One cannot, for example, expect Sámi institutions to introduce majority ethno-scientists into the society when that is not within the explicitly stated programme of the institution. Once the student may have achieved a personal and unproblematic setting in the field (this is usually not to be expected), I should like to point out that then is the moment to renounce the anthropological dogma of social and cognitive transparency, and replace it by that of an essential opacity.

Excepting obvious linguistic and social barriers that are trivial to point out here, there certainly are phenomena which per se can be significantly studied and described only by members of the group themselves. In fact, there are significant phenomena that will never be divulged to non-members,

either practically in the field or through minority theory, the attempted study of which is certain to increase the critique of ethno-science. To illustrate, I shall mention a case related to the Wittgensteinian black box. Somebody shows a black box to a stranger, saying: "This box contains "sisdoallo", thereafter opening the lid and asking whether the stranger can see something. The box is empty, so the stranger answers negatively, but asks the keeper of the box what "sisdoallo" is. Whereupon the latter answer that it is the inside of the box, after which the stranger is well informed but still wondering about the very purpose of the box. This example might show two points.

a. When the Sámi people have entered the dynamic minority stage, they can no longer be expected to give away cognitive and theoretical knowledge about themselves; and even when trying to show the content of this knowledge to strangers, the latter will be surprised at the formal character of the knowledge, being just an "inside" where they expected to find "content", not seeing, in fact, that the whole box and its mechanism and application is a conscious creation.

b. An attempt to reach beyond a formal understanding might upset the theoretical mechanism of the minority, and minority members will be able to explain even formal aspects in a context not accessible to strangers. A clear example of this field and theory mechanism is in the case of Sámi music, an understanding of which not only implies the ability to analyze a tune and chant it, but also the competence to create a tune and select the appropriate person to which it should be dedicated, and consequently a full-fledged theoretical understanding of its social role. In fact, Sámi music has its own self-defending irony mechanism, highly opaque to non-members, thus making the whole musical system and its development a closed, almost cybernetic system. Such considerations hold for several other mechanisms of prior interest to ethno-science, such as identity management and definition, long-term decision procedures, internal judicial management, child raising and education, establishment of social contacts, and synthetic social and practical action (a highly important concept in a minority situation). It is evident that exterior description of all these and several other phenomena have to be but superficial approximations creating asymmetries in a field of knowledge which has a different priority internally.

Thus the scope of ethno-science should have a very definite limit already at a very elementary level. It can in an important sense never do more than transform knowledge into its own form. I cannot help appealing to the notion of universal comparative theory; a comparison

necessitates equally precise knowledge of both poles, so that this type of activity, is nothing but a formal life-form in societies that are intensely occupied with comparing others. Stated polemically: because of the internal complexity of their own society, they try to develop methods for externalizing their urge for general understanding. This then clearly is a theoretical asymmetry of ethno-science that it assumes an a priori simplicity and transparency, which, when actually found in some societies, cannot be transferred as a trait to a majority-minority relationship, especially not when the science itself is a complicating element of the relation and is understood in minority theory as a type of majority pressure.

I cannot but briefly conclude that this must be considered both as an important part of field research, and as a necessary element in further education in ethno-science.

### *3.3 Description and Articulation of Minority Policy*

What has been said above concerns traditional problems of ethno-science. There has, however, been an increase in research concerning the very management of minority policy, as well as attempts to describe the theory of the minority. I suspect that ethno-scientists might try an extensive description of every form of minority action, including reflected academic activity in the minority on the phenomenon of this external description itself, an activity such as the presentation of this paper.

This is a very complicated field, and I should wish to treat it in a more formal and logical manner, but this is not the time and place for that. I can think of at least one semi-arithmetical model for the dynamics of knowledge and theory transformation in a majority-minority relationship. It contains a three dimensional continuum with parameter axes constituted by concept pairs like opaqueness - transparency, membership - nonmembership and action -passivity. This, however, would be an attempt to analyze a factually unstable phenomenon; indeed it would be a luxury undertaking that has to take second priority.

I shall here concentrate on the more urgent and evident case of the description of minority policy management as it relates to the Sámi case. It is a fact that, from a Sámi viewpoint, it is more important to create a political action programme, tactics and strategy, than to exhibit this in a theoretical mode. Such an exhibition could, in fact, reduce the possibility of the success of those programmes. In practical policy such programmes will originate as new forms, perhaps as unique and surprising policies in

majority-minority relations. Such programmes are then highly attractive subjects for ethno-scientific study, together with the result they might create. The paradox here is that by describing possible innovations, the ethno-scientific procedure might easily create the impression that the formal and thus real understanding of events takes place within the ethno-science, and that the factual policy on the minority plane is just a practical application of a universal principle. What is forgotten is that the minority would equally well be able to give a theoretical formulation of its policy according to academic measures, but there is simply no time, or has hitherto not been time, to do so. By such a process, it is easy to see how asymmetric expert functions can take place. This process might be considered to have ethical disadvantages, however, being theoretically sound. But I shall try to show that the theoretical soundness is far from being complete.

A plausible drawback of external policy description is that it tends to confuse extentional and intentional phenomena. By "extentional" I am thinking of a primarily instrumental viewpoint, "intentional" primarily as a communicative perspective. Viewing a particular congress communique as a protest or as having a function of protest with nothing more to it is an example of an extentional viewpoint. Paying heed to its content as such, thus discovering that it possibly might not be a protest after all, but perhaps a constructive proposal, is an intentional perspective.

A scientific description tends to be disproportionately extentional. Thus, for instance, by being able to refer to theoretically formulated statements merely as political or social phenomena they may accordingly be suppressed from an intentional to an extentional level, in a sense rendering them ineffective as statements, and at the same time forgetting that the scientific description might be constructed as a transition of knowledge from the minority to the majority. To insist on the validity of extentional descriptions in the theory formulated by the minority, is to start a theoretical war as to who is the best extentionalist. In this war the ethno-scientist eventually is bound to lose because his relations to the minority are essential to his work, whereas the converse is not the case.

A further theoretical drawback of external description with a holistic viewpoint is an exaggerated concept of synchronicity. I do not deny that it is possible to formulate synchronic perspectives on a whole range of ethnic phenomena. However, I doubt whether this is possible concerning long-range political planning and internal minority policy. In the first place, it is highly dubious whether any observer will gain access to all aspects of the minority planning; thus they will fail to obtain the historical

interpretation of seemingly synchronic phenomena, or to acquire the accurate evaluation of the relevant data.

I suspect that, by extending too far into the field of policy description, ethno-science exceeds the power of its own analytic concepts, crossing the border to pure political science, which is quite another matter - or else making its own results trivial, with nothing more than a repetition of what the policy-makers themselves would have expressed when speaking in theoretical circumstances, creating an artificial break between policy innovation and its theoretical formulation.

Last in this section, I shall say a few words about the likely concept formation in ethno-science in connection with a dynamic majority-minority relation. It seems clear to me that the discussion of majority-minority relations and of the role of science in such relations will take place in two different spheres. Primarily, there will be an internal minority discussion, the content and results of which will not be spontaneously communicated. Secondly, there will be a discussion within ethno-science itself, from which minority members, by the very nature of the problem, cannot be excluded unless asymmetric scientific pressure groups are created.

The internal minority discussion will proceed from substantial understanding to formalized theory of its own problems and external relations, while the ethno-scientific discussion must proceed in another direction, from its own formal structure to an understanding of its content. In this sense, minority and majority discussions take two entirely different directions, finally confirming that ethno-science, as such, cannot treat the universal features or the precise content of minority theory. Neither must it, for obvious reasons, degenerate into a theory about its own activity, such theories being neither ethno-scientific nor strictly scientific problems.

#### **4. What Can Ethno-Science Do?**

I do not want to launch statements that are too general, nor express promises or demands, which I am, in fact, not entitled to do. What I can do is to present a personal view concerning the limits of ethno-science.

I think that the so-called "crisis of anthropology" in a popular sense can be understood as follows. Anthropology cannot be what it dreamt - the saviour and counsellor of small ethnic groups and minorities on the practical level, and on the theoretical level the science for the full understanding of these groups. And the simple reason for this is that when

the groups start to act on their own situation, and to understand it reflectively, it is no longer possible to act or theorize on their behalf.

#### *4.1 What are the Theoretical Consequences?*

There are theoretical consequences. It must be understood that a critique of ethno-science could not have arisen in an effective way within the science itself. Of course, the scientists have thought and written about it. However, without the factual interference and formulation of minority opinion, these thoughts would have been merely "not-yet-confirmed" hypotheses with no special practical urgency. It must be understood that such a critique is part of minority theory, and that to understand it is equivalent to seeing it as minority property. It belongs to the minority itself to deliver the final theory of its own problems and relations. Denying this is a permanent confirmation of ethno-science as an asymmetric majority phenomenon.

There is no sense in appealing to the freedom of science here, because this argument can be used versus the minority, with considerably more impact, in reference to its own projects. In fact, such denial of scientific universalism should be a relief to ethno-science, easing its burden of providing the total explanation. History shows that each attempt to regard a particular science as the science is doomed to failure, and that some very important aspects always get out of hand.

#### *4.2 What Remains for Ethno-Science?*

I think very much, if the science as such accepts the minority's claim to theoretical and practical autonomy as far as science is concerned, and if it is interested in dissolving its own asymmetric character as a majority phenomenon, then, from a minority viewpoint, there are at least two priorities of research.

a. It is vital for an ethnic group in a minority situation that it be able to legitimate its policy and claims through scientific documentation of its own history and rights. This can only be achieved through very exact and painstaking research. I think that modern ethno-science has underestimated the minority evaluation of a historical confirmation and the immense extension and complexity of such work. The obvious policy in such research is a broad-scale coordination of efforts and resources and

a consultative attitude to minority priorities. It should be superfluous to state that it is necessary to consider revision of student education and motivation and a clear restriction of "wild" research carried out by uninformed institutions and individuals.

b. It is a surprising fact that very little work has been done in order to grasp the internal mechanisms of majority dynamics. By this I do not mean explicit relations to the minority, but rather the potential and inherent structures of the majority society which, when brought into play in contact situations with the minority, tend to acquire a suppressive or distortive function - in other words, an internal and reflected anthropology.

It is almost impossible to draw an exact line as to what is legitimate ethno-science and what is not. I cannot say I am satisfied with what I have been able to say in this presentation. Doubtless it will be said that I have drawn a too restrictive picture of ethno-science, but it must be remembered that an even far more restrictive perspective could have been possible. It must even be remembered that it belongs to the facts of life of the minority that it carries a Kafka-like sense of guilt in confrontation with the majority, a strange sense of disbelief in its own possibility of being right.

In an emotional sense, it has been very difficult for me to prepare and read this paper, although I knew cognitively that it was a plausible project. I may not have formulated the problems very well, but I am convinced that they are real and have to be solved somehow. The structure of the problem presented here is equivalent to those of most Sámi problems in relation to the majority people, such as in economics, politics, esthetics and so on. It is a sorry fact that, if the minority is to gain the possibility of continued existence, these problems can be solved only by the majority sacrificing something. The Sámi people cannot ask to be excused that they exist and that they try to understand themselves.



## Postscript 1994

Gratefully having observed that Ludger Müller-Wille (McGill University, Montréal, Canada / Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland) wanted to republish the above article, presented in 1974 and published 1976, the author felt inclined to add a postscript emphasizing research views in the current environment.

First of all, I feel that a focus on long-term research programs tends to be rewarding for a closer understanding of ethnic groups and relations. The research by Professor Ørnulv Vorren, for instance, into the transition from hunting society to reindeer nomadism and sedentary settlement gives considerable understanding of contemporary phenomena and of the dynamics of research and science as a form of life.

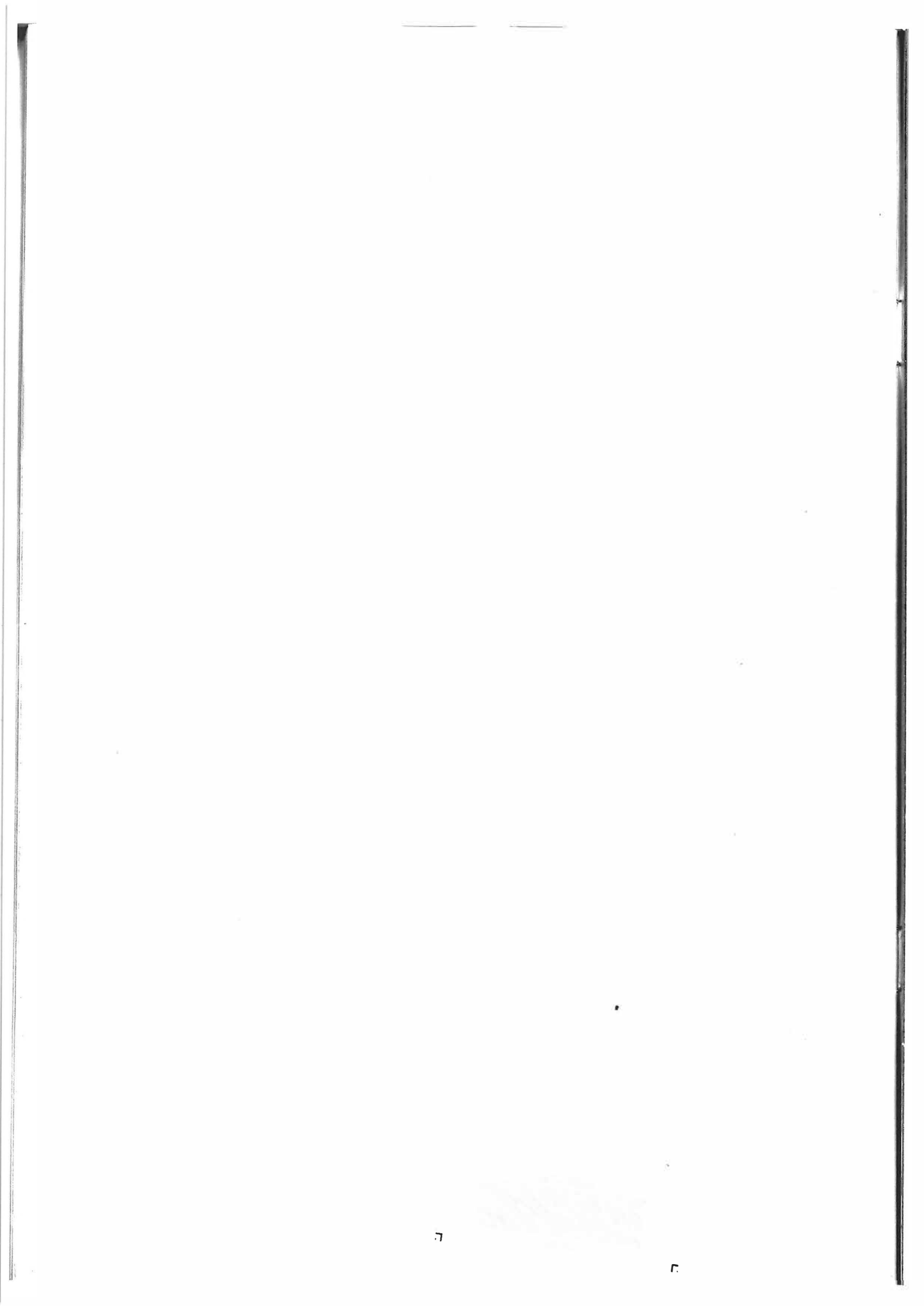
The capability of the human mind to universalize theories and observations from limited areas of reality into larger spheres of investigation has come forth, for instance, in the realization of differences and similarities in arctic and subarctic cultures which, in fact, are global in their specificity. We thus, perhaps slowly, gain a closer understanding of the relationship between human reasoning as such and the human environment as well as the conditions of biotopes and biospheres.

These seemingly abstract statements are meant to elucidate that research takes time. Sometimes a period of decades is necessary to assess even small changes in culture and environment. That I can call this a philosophical truth is hardly a matter of debate.

Whether small ethnic minority groups can, in fact, develop a system of scientific institutionalization, at least to some degree, remains to be seen. One should think that the use of language, both native and inter-ethnic, is to some extent a prerequisite. Since I think, oppositely to what often seems to be en vogue, that scholarly and scientific research begins with theory, then in any case, some sort of equal exchange of ideas is possible. Leibniz already foresaw that there is a kind of prestabilized harmony of knowledge in almost any case.

*Guovdageatdnu, October 1994*

*Alf Isak Keskitalo*



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