

SÁMI WOMEN. TERRESTRIAL, DIALECTAL, VIGOR, ETHOS

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Sámi women, much like other women of the world, have faced numerous attacks on their ancestral lands, language, health, and culture. Colonization, which spurs on institutions of colonization and oppression, can be seen as the ultimate form of violence against indigenous women. Indigenous women throughout the world share transnational injustices and patriarchal oppression, as patrilineal domination of indigenous women surpasses all boundaries.

KEY WORDS: Sámi women, colonization, patriarchal oppression, transnational violence.

Mujeres Sámi. Tierra, dialecto, vigor, valores

Las mujeres Sámi, como muchas otras mujeres en el mundo, han sufrido diversos ataques sobre sus tierras, lengua, salud y cultura ancestrales. La colonización, que estimula la creación de instituciones de colonización y opresión, puede ser considerada la forma fundamental de violencia contra las mujeres indígenas. Las mujeres indígenas a lo largo y ancho del mundo comparten injusticias y opresión patriarcal transnacionales, ya que la dominación patrilineal de las mujeres indígenas supera todas las fronteras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Mujeres Sámi, colonización, opresión patriarcal, violencia transnacional.

*Joik har større kraft enn krutt, Sámiid Ædnan
Førr en joik tar aldri slutt, oh... Sámiid Ædnan
Sverre Kjelsberg and Mattis Hætta, "Sámiid Ædnan"*

*We the Sámi people walk to the future in the footprints of our ancestors.
If you destroy the footprints then our culture is wiped out.
Stefan Mikaelsson, President of Sámi Parliament, Sametingnet*

Terrestrial

One of the most guttural devastations that can ever befall a people is the loss of their ancestral lands. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha laments the loss of her Korean familial land in *Dictée*, writing: "There is no people without a nation, no people without ancestry. There are other nations no matter how small their land, who have their independence. But our country, even with 5,000 years of history, has

lost it to the Japanese” (2001: 28). Indigenous women throughout the world can relate to each other through their experience of the colonizers pushing them out of their ancient homes, whether they are members of the Cherokee Nation, the Kabyle people, or indigenous Australians, who were coined “Aboriginal Australians” by the British government.

The Sámi people’s lands stretch beyond colonial boundaries, encompassing Northern areas of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. Anne Helene Bolstad Skjelbred describes various assemblages of Sámi people in her work entitled “‘These Stories Will Not Lead You to Heaven’: An Encounter with Two Sámi Narrators”. Sámi people are often divided into four distinct groups, according to settlement patterns and ways of life. The sea-Sámis reside by the Norwegian fjords and participate in fishing and some agriculture. The river- and lake-Sámis are located away from the coasts, alongside waterways in the interior of Northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The forest-Sámis are present in Swedish Lappland (Lappland being a region in Fennoscandia), and engage in farming, in addition to keeping some reindeer. The mountain-Sámis live in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, with their main occupation being reindeer nomadism, moving back and forth between seasonal pastures (Skjelbred, 2001: 48). Sámi people living in Russia also rely on fishing, hunting, and the use of pastureland (Osherenko, 2001: 695).

During the Lappish Codicil of 1751, the monarchs of Denmark-Norway and Sweden-Finland agreed to guarantee the Sámis freedom to move across borders, and to give them right of occupation with their reindeer (Skjelbred, 2001: 49), but this changed after the Kautokeino Rebellion of 1852. The Kautokeino Rebellion (Norway) was a Sámi protest against Norwegian supremacy (Skjelbred, 2001: 49). The rebellion was directed against the clergy—who represented Norwegian colonization through language, style, and content of religion—and against the merchants in Kautokeino, who willingly and freely supplied and pushed hard liquor on the Sámi people (Skjelbred, 2001: 51). At this point in history, there was a pronounced connection between the liquor industry and the state, as well as state religion. Additionally, the sale of liquor caused a litany of social problems, including alcohol abuse. The rebels themselves came from a congregation of Christians, the colonizers’ religion, namely the Levi Laestadius’s congregation (a Lutheran denomination) that utilized the Sámi language (Skjelbred, 2001: 51). The rebellion resulted in the death of a Norwegian merchant, three arrests, and two executions of Sámi rebels (Skjelbred, 2001: 51). The skulls of the men executed in the Kautokeino rebellion were then transported to the Institute of Anatomy at the University of Oslo to be used for physical anthropological research (Skjelbred, 2001: 51). In the 1990s, after years of being used as research material, the relatives of the Sámi men slain in Kautokeino demanded that the skulls be returned so that they may be buried on Sámi land. An extensive and fiery debate between the Norwegian Parliament, the Sámi Parliament, and the University of Oslo followed. Ultimately, the skulls were returned and buried in their home region in a religious ceremony (Skjelbred, 2001: 51). The abduction of the skull

of an indigenous person to be used by the white majority is nothing new. It has long been said that the skull of Geronimo, a leader of the Bedonkohe Apache who fought against Texas and Mexico for encroaching onto his people's lands, is being held captive in New Haven, Connecticut, by Skull and Bones, a secret society located at Yale University (Associated Press, 2009). Originally, the theft of the skull and several bones of Geronimo by Skull and Bones members who visited his tomb in Oklahoma was thought to be a myth. This longstanding legend gained some validity when a letter written by a Skull and Bones member describing the theft in 1918 was discovered (Associated Press, 2009). In 2009, the descendants of Geronimo sued Yale University, demanding that the corporal remains of their ancestor be returned to them, so that "his spirit may be released" (Associated Press, 2009).

After the Kautokeino Rebellion of 1852, Russia, who had ruled Finland since 1809, closed the border between Norway and Finland, mostly as an attempt to keep Norwegian Sámis out (Skjelbred, 2001: 49). The border between Finland and Norway was similarly closed in 1889. Currently, decades of hard work by Sámi activists in Finland have led the Finnish government to identify Sámi people as a recognized minority (Barsh in Minde, 2008: 237). This acknowledgement of the Sámi people by the Finnish government is ensured via legislation of various policies, such as Saamelaiskäräjät, the 1973 act which allowed a Finnish Sámi Parliament to be created. Notably, Finland has failed to ratify the Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, which was created in 1991 as a branch of the United Nations to deal specifically with the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples (International Labour Organization, 1991). Presently, Finland clings to the colonialist belief that Finnish Sámi people must "prove" their land ownership, an idea which clashes with the traditional societal norms of the Sámi people that utilize the land to herd reindeer (Reynolds in Minde, 2008: 133). These policies have effectively allowed the Finnish government to seize land occupied by Sámi people for centuries without compensation, for their own financial gain (Nyyssönen in Minde, 2008: 100).

Today, Russia continues to have subpar policies in place to protect the Sámi people that reside within Russian borders. In April 1999, the Russian Duma passed a law protecting traditional living spaces of indigenous peoples. This law also recognized some limited forms of territory ownership by indigenous peoples (Osherenko, 2001: 713). This law fails not in its content, but in its practice, as there is no way to effectively implement it (Osherenko, 2001: 724) and violations of the rights of indigenous people of Russia continue to occur, particularly when the indigenous people are pitted against corporations (such as mining, commercial fishing or timber cutting) that bring foreign currency to the Russian economy (Osherenko, 2001: 716).

The land that people call home is where they are raised, and where they may choose to rest their bones. What are a people to do when they reside in a place that is no longer truly their own?

Dialectal

Oftentimes, there is a glaring difference in what a native people is called by the colonial culture and what the native people calls itself or its members. The Sámi people are no different. In Norway, the Sámi were known as “Finn”, in Sweden, “Lapp”, and in Finland, “Lappalainen”. The preferred, and officially accepted name throughout the Nordic countries is now Sámi (Corson, 1995: 495). The significance and importance of language should never be underestimated. In an essay entitled “Language Is an Institution of Domination”, Rosario Castellanos aptly penned: “Word is the incarnation of the truth, because language has meaning” (2005: 76). Castellanos focuses on the colonization of the indigenous peoples of the Americas by the Spanish. By teaching the indigenous people of the Americas how to speak Spanish, Spaniards effectively wiped out thousands of years of dialects and native culture. This also happened in lands that the Sámi people lived on. David Corson discusses the history and future of the Sámi language in a journal article entitled “Norway’s ‘Sámi Language Act’: Emancipatory implications for the world’s aboriginal peoples”.

Norway is home to the largest population of Sámi people. Of the 25,000 (and growing) Sámi speakers in Norway, most speak Northern Sámi, which is the largest of the nine Sámi languages (Corson, 1995: 495). Two other variants of the Sámi language are spoken in Norway, Southern Sámi and Lule (Corson, 1995: 495). The dissimilarities between the triad of languages are significant. Lule speakers can understand the other two languages with a moderate amount of effort (similarly to native speakers of Norwegian being able to understand Swedish), but Northern Sámi speakers and Southern Sámi speakers cannot communicate directly with one another (Corson, 1995: 495). Early missionaries to Sámi lands encouraged the Sámi to drop their own languages in order to speak the colonizers’ for religious purposes; this act correlates to French or English missionaries in parts of North America (Corson, 1995: 495). The government of Norway, like other Nordic governments, thought that “the need for education and social welfare could be fulfilled only through learning the majority language of the governing country” (Kuokkanen, 2009: 500). In Norway, “teachers were paid a bonus if they succeeded in teaching Norwegian to Sámi students” (Kuokkanen, 2009: 500). In 1902, a law was passed mandating that only citizens who both knew and used Norwegian could own land (Kuokkanen, 2009: 500).

Pressure for total erasure of the Sámi language continued as late as the 1970s, as Sámi children were forbidden from using their languages in schools, even when they knew no other (Corson, 1995: 495). This connects with similar policies regarding Native American children in the school system of the United States, with policies—in effect until the 1970s— forbidding Native children from

speaking their mother tongues in school. These procedures were in place for indigenous Australians in the Australian school system until the 1990s (Corson, 1995: 491).

Sámi languages were tentatively introduced to several primary schools in Norway in 1967. The first Sámi-language senior secondary school opened at Karasjok in 1969 (Corson, 1995: 499). Things changed drastically for Sámi language speakers, students and educators in Norway in 1992, as legislation giving major language and cultural rights to Norway's Sámi people was enacted (Corson, 1995: 493). This legislation, stemming from the International Labour Office (ILO) convention on indigenous peoples in 1990, caused the Norwegian Government to strengthen the official use of Sámi (Corson, 1995: 500). From then on, Norwegian and Sámi were viewed as equal languages with equal status. In addition to preserving the Sámi language, this legislation allowed the Sámi to create a parliament, an equal but parallel house of legislation, courts of laws themselves, and to pass laws on education (Corson, 1995: 500).

The administrative surface for Sámi areas spans through six municipalities in Northern Norway (Corson, 1995: 500). The training of Sámi teachers is based in three different centers: Trodheim (Southern Sámi), Bodø (Lule), and Kautokeino (Northern Sámi) (Corson, 1995: 499). Language maintenance and planning for every center is overseen by the Sámi Education Council (Corson, Dec., 1995). Sámi women conspicuously outnumber men in obtaining an education, as young Sámi women are now the highest educated social group in Norway (Corson, 1995: 497). In turn, this leads Sámi women to become involved in administrative and "professional" positions, causing them to edge away from traditional occupations (Corson, 1995: 497). Regardless, Sámi school curriculum includes books in the Sámi language, with their content including a relevant insertion of Sámi culture (Corson, 1995: 502).

Regardless of their immersion in Sámi language and culture, many Sámi children grow to use the Norwegian language as a language of play as they grow older (Corson, 1995: 507). The influence of television may contribute to this as an overwhelming majority of programs are presented in Norwegian. There are currently no Sámi television programs pitched at teenagers, although a teen magazine is available for Sámi teens to read (Corson, 1995: 505).

Group educational policies have throughout the centuries been a favorite form of domination by colonizers. The discriminating impact of such policies reverberates through generations of indigenous children. They are made to feel like "the other", like their language is not valid, that they do not belong. Only now are certain countries, like Norway, amending centuries of annihilation of culture and identity.

Vigor

Access to quality healthcare is arguably one of the most basic of human rights. That right has been and was consistently denied to indigenous people throughout the world for centuries. Relevant examples can be found in both Native American tribes in the United States and in Sámi tribes in Northern Finland.

One common tie is exposure to radiation. Author Andrea Smith discusses this somber fact in depth in *Conquest: Sexual Violence and the American Indian Genocide* (2005). Environmental factors caused by colonialists have had distressing effects for generations on Native tribes. In the United States of America, reservations are disproportionately the sites for nuclear testing, mining for radioactive materials, and waste dumps. “Women of color are suffering not only from environmental racism but environmental sexism”, as environmental factors directly impact the health of women, thereby impacting reproduction and families (Smith, 2005: 69). As Smith aptly documents, Native women suffer from disproportionately high rates of ovarian cancer, miscarriage, and stillbirths. In addition, Native children face a higher rate of birth abnormalities. This can all be in correlation to the United States Government’s repeated decisions to undertake environmental devastation on Native American tribal lands.

People residing in the Arctic regions of the Nordic countries (including, but not limited to, the Sámi people, as this is the location of their ancestral lands) are one of the most heavily exposed populations to global radiation fallouts from the atmospheric atomic bomb testing of the 1950s and 1960s, with the highest global fallout rates occurring in the early 1960s (Kurttio *et al.*, 2010: 738). The persistence of radiation exposure in the Arctic environment can be explained due to the slow turnover rate in Northern ecosystems. The main route of exposure among the Arctic population is through intake of food with elevated radioactivity (reindeer eat radioactive lichen, then humans eat the reindeer), which then in turn results in protracted internal exposure. As people living on Sámi ancestral lands tend to eat more reindeer meat than the general population, the radiation they are exposed to is often higher. The study by Päivi Kurttio on which this part of the essay is based showed that in the years spanning from 1955 to 1965, the average annual dose from the fallout received by a male reindeer herder was ten times higher than for the rest of the Finnish population. The scientists who implemented the study implore readers to interpret the findings with caution, as the results may be random variations due to chance. The study also indicates that although it is not possible to associate lifetime cumulative radiation exposure and cancer incidence, there is some indication of increased cancer risk associated with radiation exposure received during childhood (Kurttio *et al.*, 2010: 740).

Even if there only is, so far, a singular and cautionary study on the matter, it is undoubtedly true that indigenous peoples face the brunt of the burden when it comes to the advancement of nuclear physics. The vigor of indigenous peoples has been sacrificed for the benefit of their colonizers.

Ethos

The effects of the erasure of culture can be crippling. Colonialists have long shattered traditional economies, religion, and various other ways of life. Sámi women's place in traditional economies has been jeopardized by governmental sanctions on reindeer herding. Customarily, Sámi women and Sámi men owned separate properties, managed their own loans, and inherited property on an equal basis (Kuokkanen, 2009: 500). The insertion of a patriarchal ethos and its laws have changed traditional gender roles in Sámi society in many ways, particularly in what refers to reindeer herding (Kuokkanen, 2009: 501). Beginning in 1945, policies began to be put into effect that have made Sámi women invisible and have pushed them to the sidelines of a livelihood in which they had consistently played a major role (Kuokkanen, 2009: 501). Government policies have erased women's traditional right of reindeer ownership. Since 1978, official records show reindeer-owning Sámi women as being registered under their husband's names. By not being registered, women reindeer-herders have no representation in the organizational unit for reindeer herding either (Kuokkanen, 2009: 501). There are severe ramifications to not being registered, ranging from who receives subsidies and grants to the recognition of women in a livelihood that is considered by many to be a major mark of Sámi culture and Sámi identity (Kuokkanen, 2009: 501). These patriarchal laws, such as the Norway Reindeer Herding Act, also have severe implications in cases of divorce, or of the death of a Sámi husband (Kuokkanen, 2009: 501). Sámi female politicians brought this to the attention of other policy makers in Norway, causing the act to be amended in 1996, extending reindeer ownership rights to the spouse of the owner (Kuokkanen, 2009: 501). A recent case indicates that this amendment failed to protect an older Sámi woman who, together with her son, was seeking to bring her reindeer to her family summer pasture after the death of her husband. The Reindeer Herding Act mandates reindeer herders to migrate to such areas. This older woman's pasture was seized by other reindeer herders of the area, making it impossible for the widow and her son to partake on the annual summer migration (Kuokkanen, 2009: 502). Because the widow and her son were technically non-compliant to the mandated summer migration policy, the Reindeer Herding Administration threatened the family with the forced slaughter of their herd (Kuokkanen, 2009: 502).

These laws still fail to protect Sámi reindeer herders in cases of divorce. One Norwegian Sámi woman who separated from her husband lost her share of reindeer herding subsidies (even though her portion of the reindeer were branded with her own reindeer mark) because the Reindeer Herding Act in Norway does not indicate how subsidies ought to be distributed (Kuokkanen, 2009: 501).

Women's erasure from a traditional economy may also be why so many Sámi women have turned to education to open further occupational doors. Sámi women conspicuously outnumber Sámi men in senior administrative and profes-

sional positions (Corson, 1995: 497). In turn, Sámi men tend to stick to traditional occupations. This could be correlated to the deletion of women's autonomy within reindeer herding by various Nordic governments.

The personal is political. Though indigenous women may come from different tribes and different backgrounds, the demoralizing effects of colonization can be felt by each group. It is up to current and future generations of feminists to amend the brutal legacy of colonization. Only by doing so can all of humanity stand in solidarity beside indigenous women and peoples.

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