



The North Before Us

Report on an Excursion to Sápmi (in Finland)
Summer 2026



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This report contains findings and reflections of the students and participants, who participated in the 2026 excursion to Sápmi (in Finland) as part of their study in the “Peace, Trauma, and Religion” (PTR) master’s program of the School of Religion and Theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

All pictures are made by the authors, except mentioned otherwise.

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Introduction

ACRPJ Team

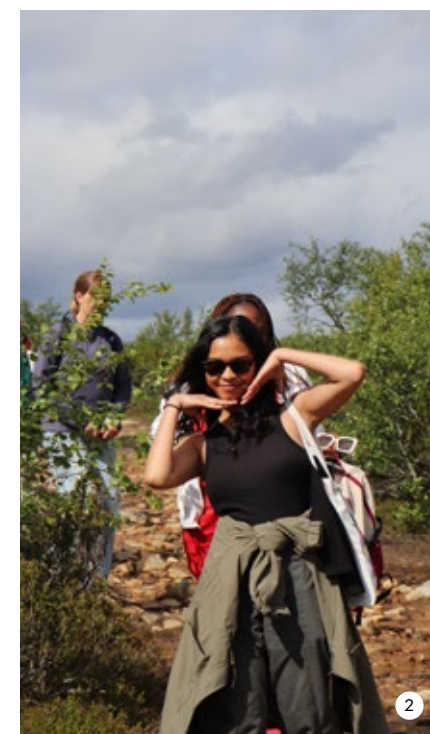
Photo 1

View of a church window from inside Pielpajärvi Wilderness Church.



Photo 2

Hani, one of the PTR Students, posing for a photo during the hike.



Land can never be separated from the life that grows alongside it. Land is a home, a space for culture, identity, and even a source of life. However, at the same time, land can also become a contested commodity. Throughout history, land has continually been a space where different interests are contested. Human history shows how struggles over territory and resources have repeatedly given rise to conflict, displacement, dispossession, and even violence.

Until today, these issues persist, including when development agendas

Photo 3

The PTR Group hiking together after the discussion session.

and the green transition intersect with the survival of communities and ecosystems that depend on the land.

This year, as part of the Master's programme in Peace, Trauma, and Religion (PTR) at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, we wanted to understand and explore the question of ecological justice in relation to Indigenous communities.

We chose Sápmi, the traditional cultural region of the Sámi people, as one of our study contexts, as the presence of the Sámi people



Photo 4

A view of the surrounding landscape during the hike.

also led us to question the assumptions often associated with the term “Indigenous peoples” itself—as if Indigenous peoples were always located far away from Europe. In fact, Indigenous peoples also live in Europe and have a long history there. One such group is the Sámi, whose traditional territories stretch across the northern parts of what are now known as Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia.

Through this excursion, we aimed at listening and learn from the diverse experiences and perspectives within Sámi, while also questioning our own preconceptions and the

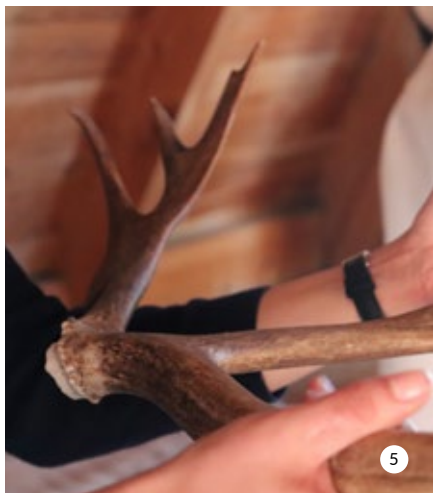
ways in which we understand land, development, language, culture, and the relationship between humans and Mother Nature. At the same time, we also acknowledge our positionality, and with the understanding that what we hear during this journey cannot represent overall of the Sámi community’s experiences.

From the various conversations and encounters, we saw how issues surrounding land are closely connected to reindeer husbandry and other sources of livelihood, while the history of marginalisation is also linked to questions of language, culture, and everyday life. These experiences are not always the same and may even reveal different, and sometimes contrasting, perspectives.

Through this publication, you will find a collection of reflections by PTR

Photo 5

A student observing reindeer antlers brought by Lifu, one of the speakers.



The PTR group posing for a photo together after the hike.

Starting to Connect the Dots:

Visit to the SIIDA Museum

Written by:
Lorena Catalina Bonilla Garcia

After a series of encounters with Sámi people, we had only two days left in our excursion when we visited the SIIDA Museum. The first thing that caught my attention was a large sign in front of the building that read “These Lands are our Children.” Although I had a sense of what the phrase meant, we entered the museum eager to learn more, especially because, from the very beginning of the excursion, we had been collecting questions about identity, whiteness, and the climate crisis, that grew louder after each encounter.

Inside the main exhibition, enormous photographs of the seasons covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Walking through the room felt like moving through the year. We glimpsed how people live and adapt to weather; how they protect natural resources, take only what they need, and follow activities that more than livelihoods are callings. For them, those callings, such as reindeer herding, demand

a lifelong commitment that may not bring financial stability but deepens connection to their roots and traditions.

As we continued, the wonder gave way to stories of discrimination, assimilation, and oppression. Our tour guide described how Sámi children were forced into boarding schools to stop them from speaking their

language, how people wearing traditional clothing have been stigmatized in public, and how activists have received death threats for defending their rights. She also explained how climate-change-driven temperature fluctuations have harmed livelihoods and eroded cultural practices, threatening the very existence of Sámi communities.



Photo 1
A tour guide explaining the number of Sámi language speakers in different areas.

Seeing these realities helped me connect many of the loose threads from previous encounters during our excursion. The museum helped me to clarify processes rather than giving me clear answers, and what I learned revealed an even more complex reality:

1. It is difficult to define who is Sámi, though the Sámi Parliament uses certain criteria to do so.

2. The Sámi do not identify as “white” because their upbringing, spirituality, worldview, traditions, history, and even some physical features set them apart and have resulted in unequal rights and privileges compared with other Finnish or European citizens.

3. Their traditional livelihoods like salmon fishing and reindeer herding, are especially at risk due to temperature fluctuations that alter ecosystems.

Finally, when the guided tour ended, we had time to explore the museum on our own. I moved slowly, mostly silent, reflecting on the complexity of Sámi lives and history. Eventually I read a wall text that finally connected me back to the sign we had seen at the entrance. It said:

“My ancestors stayed here. Lived, fished and hunted birds. Kept reindeer tied up. A place name is a sign of life; a piece of history. The name is nothing special. Someone named the bay and its sandy shores, but this is how you name a person, too. A father gives a name to his daughter. A mother to her son. These places are older than any person. These lands are our children.”

Those words stayed with me while I walked away from the museum, leaving me with a deeper awareness of the Sámi people’s history, ways of

life, and ongoing struggles. I recognized the central role the land plays in their culture and how essential its protection is to their survival. I hope to continue engaging with difficult and uncomfortable questions, not only to deepen my understanding of the Sámi, but also to stand in solidarity with Indigenous communities worldwide who face oppression for preserving their traditions and protecting the lands they inhabit.

Photo 2

A Siida Museum display showing the use of snowmobiles in Sámi reindeer husbandry.



These lands are Our Children

Written by:
Evy Beijen

“Enâneh láá mii párnáh.” This sentence in Inari Sámi is from a poem by Matti Morottaja and translates to: “These lands are our children.”

This short sentence was the title of the main exhibition at the Sámi museum Siida that we visited in Inari. We were guided through the exhibition by Taija Aikio, who taught us about Sámi people’s connection to the lands of Sápmi through stories, images, and objects. The title of the exhibition stayed with me during the trip as a compelling expression of this deep connection.

“These lands are our children,” in my interpretation, speaks to an attitude of love and care towards these lands that inspired me. Earlier during the trip, Pigga Keskitalo, a professor in Sámi education,

explained how “care thinking” is crucial to Sámi pedagogy. This reminded me of care ethics, an ethical perspective I was introduced to in a course on ecology and spirituality, which positions care as fundamental to both morality and society. Reflecting on this, I wondered what would happen if more people, including myself, saw caring for the lands they live on as fundamental to their lives. What if more of us took care of the lands we live on as our children?

On the last day of the excursion, we visited Sajos, a center for Sámi culture as well as the home of the Sámi parliament. In the gift shop, I



found a beautiful book by Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää titled *The Earth, My Mother*, with poems, photographs, and artworks expressing indigenous peoples’ voices. The image of the earth as one’s mother struck me, especially alongside the image of the lands as one’s children, which we had encountered earlier at Siida. Using the language of family bonds to describe one’s relationship to earth or lands expresses a profound intimacy, in my view. While the image of the earth as mother highlights her sustaining and nurturing power, as well as humans’ dependence on her, the image of lands as one’s children highlights a caring and nurturing role for humans themselves.

I found myself reflecting on both images in the aftermath

of the trip. In my view, these images offer a glimpse of the relationship of dependence and care with the lands of Sápmi—and all (living) beings on those lands—that the people we met expressed. To be honest, I found this relationship difficult to fully grasp, perhaps limited by my own anthropocentric biases. While I might know on a cognitive level that humans and other beings are interconnected and dependent, the connection to the land and other creatures expressed by the people we met seemed to go far—or perhaps deep—beyond that level. Reflecting on this, I wonder if this connection might be called spiritual, in the sense that it concerns the spirit more than the mind. And if so, can an attitude of dependence on and care for the earth perhaps be cultivated through

Photo 1
PTR students listening to the museum guide.
spiritual exercise?

I left Inari inspired but also carrying a sadness, particularly over the ecological damage in Sápmi. At Siida, Taija Aikio told us about the effects of climate change on the lands, the animals, and the people living in Sápmi. She explained, for instance, that in winter it is no longer possible for reindeer to feed from the ground. Because of temperature fluctuations, the snow now partly turns to ice, preventing the reindeer from reaching the ground, whereas a number of years ago they still could. This not only affects the reindeer, but also the herders, as they now have to get supplemental feed and distribute it to the reindeer, causing financial difficulties.



2

Hearing such stories made me aware of the many layers of loss caused by climate change. Earlier in the trip, we were told that these losses are linked to high suicide rates among Sámi people, which further highlights the devastating impact.

We talked about the effects of climate change with many of the people we met, including Lifu Terrika, the daughter of a Sámi reindeer herding family and currently studying law. One thing she said will stay with me in particular: “Even if humans can’t survive here, I hope at least the animals will find ways to adapt and survive.” To me, this remark shows so much of the caring

connection Lifu expressed towards the animals and the lands. This inspired me as well as confronted me with my own anthropocentric biases that I aim to keep deconstructing, which might—at least in part—be a spiritual exercise.



3



4



5

Photo 2

The entrance area before entering Siida Museum.

Photo 3

A temporary exhibition highlighting concerns about melting glaciers.

Photo 4

A PTR student at the museum entrance.

Photo 5

A display featuring cloudberries in Northern Finland

Visiting the Sieida: A reflective journey of connection

Written by:
Kirsten van Beek

Today we had a visit with Pigga Keskitalo, member of the Sámi parliament and professor at the University of Lapland, and her family. She invited us to their café, close to their home near Enontekiö, where they prepared a lovely lunch for us.

After lunch, Pigga and her husband took us into the woods behind the café to see the Sieidi located there. A Sieidi is a sacred place for the Sámi; it is a big stone with an unusual shape, which stands out from all the other stones. Traditionally, the Sámi sacrificed reindeer meat and bones here to have good luck with hunting or reindeer herding. For many Sámi, the Sieidi is still sacred and special, with many people still offering things for good luck. On top of this Sieidi you could see Reindeer bones and remains, but also coins.

When Christian missionaries arrived in Sápmi, traditional Sámi beliefs were seen as 'devilish,' 'demonic,' and 'occult,' and many Sieidi were destroyed. Pigga and her husband told us about the attempt to destroy this particular Sieidi by a Lutheran priest. While a big part of the Sieidi remains, some parts were cut off. The nails used by the priest to cut the stone off is still visible.

Being at this sacred place, surrounded by the most beautiful nature, I tried to remember what it looked

like all those years ago. What the rituals looked like before Christian missionaries came, all the knowledge that was lost. Being in the middle of the woods, hearing only the mosquitoes and the birds, seeing the lake in the distance, it all felt so serene. Yet there is a dark history here.

The nails symbolize all the violence the Sámi had to endure in the last centuries, and the violence and oppression they are still enduring, the demonization of their culture and beliefs, which even until now is happening. Pigga and

Photo 1

Pigga welcomes the PTR group at her restaurant.





Photo 1

her husband, members of the Lutheran church, were told by their local priest that if they continued visiting the Sieida, they would go straight to hell. Centuries after this Lutheran priest destroyed this sacred Sieidi, the church still holds on to these views that Sámi spirituality is a sin.

Not only when it comes to the Sieida, but also other elements. When Pigga's daughter got baptized, her husband brought water from the lake next to the forest. He had a special connection to the water from the lake, which is considered sacred. When the priest found out that he brought this water, he asked him to throw it out, since this was not allowed within the church.

After listening to these personal stories and learning about history, spirituality, nature, and land borders, Pigga invited us to come to the Sieidi, put our hands there, and pray to our own personal God and connect with our ancestors. I found it incredibly beautiful, and I am so grateful that they invited us to join in this ritual and connect this with our own personal beliefs. Even though I am still figuring out my relationship to God, faith, and spirituality, I chose to pray to God while touching the Sieidi. This moment, to me, was a moment of connection with each other, with this sacred site in nature, and with God's creation.

But at the same time, for me personally, some conflicting feelings arose, rooted in my own history with faith and the church. I am on a journey of rediscovering and reconstructing my own faith outside of these traditional boundaries the church set for me growing up, trying to break free from all these strict rules that decide when you are a good enough Christian and 'get to go to heaven', and when your faith is not strong enough, and you are 'destined for hell.' This may seem a bit harsh and oversimplified, but growing up in a strong Calvinist community, faith truly felt like that for me.

While praying at the Sieidi, I had these recurring thoughts about how what I was doing was 'sinful,' something that

Photo 2

Pigga shares the story of the sacred stone passed down through generations.

Photo 3

A nail is embedded in the sacred stone.



would have been considered 'pagan' and 'demonic' in my church and environment. I felt extremely guilty about having these thoughts during such a beautiful moment, especially after hearing the stories Pigga and her husband just told us. How could I have been offended and shocked when hearing these stories, but then moments later have the same thoughts pop up in my head? I keep thinking that I have broken away from this type of thinking and have deconstructed my faith and upbringing completely, but then moments like this happen, and I am confronted with the fact that this type of thinking still has a hold on me.

It almost feels impossible to let go of these church teachings. This tension between what you now know, what you feel, and what you have been taught growing up keeps coming back. In a way, without saying our experiences are the same, I can imagine the difficulty most Sámi people must feel, wanting to reconnect with their ancient spirituality, but growing up in an environment that completely disregards this as sinful and demonic.

While today, most churches accept Sámi Regalia, the Sámi language, and other cultural aspects, there is still a taboo on reconnecting with Sámi ancient spirituality. The message that these priests brought so many

years ago is still so much ingrained in people's heads. I know how difficult it is to break free from this type of thinking and the conflicting feelings that come with this. Even as I am writing this story, I am constantly thinking about whether I can say these things, or if it is 'unbiblical' and 'sinful'.

With all these thoughts and feelings in my head, I was truly amazed by the way Pigga and her husband spoke about their faith and experiences with church. For example, talking about the priest that told them they would go to hell if they continued praying at the Sieidi, I did not sense any anger or resentment. I remember them saying something along the lines of 'she is just doing her job'. Even talking about the baptism story and they joked about it.

While still being active members in Church and identifying as Christians, Pigga and her husband are also very much in touch with their Sámi roots and the spirituality of their ancestors. They are living their lives as Sámi Christians, baptizing their Children with sacred water from their home, visiting the Sieidi, placing offerings, as their ancestors

Photo 4

A bowl of reindeer soup served by Piga for lunch.

did, connecting with God's creation. And we got to have a little taste of this when we were invited to join them in the ritual at the Sieidi. Because of this, this day really stood out to me and will be a pillar and a moment of growth and reflection within my personal journey with faith, spirituality, and the church.



Meet Lifu Terikka: Between Reindeer Herding, Law, and Sámi Life

Written by:
Tom Hanemaaijer



On Saturday evening, we met Lifu Terikka around the campfire. She spoke to us about reindeer husbandry, Sámi culture, and the work she did with the Sámi Parliament in Finland. While it might sound logical that a Sámi woman has explained to us about Sámi life and why certain shoes and clothes were used, it is indeed a special development. Namely, the Sámi people have encountered many assimilation policies, and for example, Lifu's mother grew up in a Finnish boarding school. The children there were not allowed to speak Sámi anymore, and the Finnish government wanted to banish

Sámi culture completely. It is such a strong testimony of resistance that Lifu's mother did not accept the fact that she was not allowed to teach her children the Sámi language. Although Lifu's mother was forbidden to speak the Sámi language at school, she indeed decided to teach her children the language.

While it is a fact that a large part of the Sámi youth did not know the Sámi language, many young people want to learn this language again. Lifu can also be seen as a representative of the Sámi youth who see their own Sámi culture and language as very important

Photo 1

Several participants observe items brought by Lifu.

and who want to advocate for the rights of the Sámi people. Lifu has worked with the Sámi Parliament, and she currently studies law. Hopefully, she can fight for Sámi rights and for the rights of other indigenous people, and encourage people to take care of nature in her professional work life.

Lifu grew up in reindeer husbandry, and it was amazing to hear about her experiences. Experiencing winters of, for example, minus 30 degrees as a Sámi kid, she has definitely



Photo 2

Lifu shows a pair of reindeer-leather shoes used during winter.

learned to live in very tough circumstances. While I already feel very cold when it is minus 4 degrees in the Netherlands, I am just amazed by hearing that the Sámi people sometimes experience winter days of minus 50 degrees. Lifu showed us some boots that the Sámi people wore during very cold winter days. The technique and the reasoning why the boots were made in certain ways were very great and interesting to see.

It is a saying that the Sámi people take care of the lands as if those are their children. Therefore, it is definitely great to learn from them. While Lifu told so passionately about reindeer herding, we also heard that it is now getting more and more difficult for Sámi people to continue this lifestyle of reindeer herding. Normally in

the winter, it was never above zero degrees, but it is now sometimes plus 5 degrees for a day in the winter. This is because of climate change, and this is a drastic change. Namely, when one layer of snow starts to melt when it is, for example, plus 5 degrees, this layer freezes when it is minus 20 degrees on the next day. The reindeer, who normally have to find their food at the bottoms of all the layers of snow, can not find their food anymore in this way. The reindeer herders then have to buy a lot of food for the reindeer. As a result of this development, it is now less likely to make a profit as a reindeer herder. Many young Sámi people (especially men) were raised with the idea that becoming a reindeer herder would be the only option in their future life. That this future is now becoming more

and more uncertain is very sad, and I have heard rumors that many young Sámi men suffer from mental problems and that the suicide rates among this group are very high.

Lifu was for me a great and inspiring example of someone who, on the one hand, admires her own culture and language very much and, on the other hand, tries to use her full potential by adapting to other languages and cultures and by studying law. While assimilation and thus almost

losing the culture and language has been terrible, Lifu still tries to take the positive out of it, to take the benefits that she has learned English and that she is now able to study. I hope that she will be a great inspiration for many people and that, even if she becomes a famous person in the future, she will never forget where she comes from and that she will always try to fight for Sámi rights!

Photo 3

Catalina, one of the PTR Students, tastes dried reindeer meat brought by Lifu.



The Lutheran Church Custodian

Written by:
Linda Etandip

The Lutheran Sámi Church in the village of Inari, Finland, carries a history that is both ecclesiastical and deeply political. The first church in the Inari area was built in 1642, marking the arrival of Christianity among

Photo 1

Interior view of the Lutheran Church in Inari.

the Inari Sámi, a people whose spiritual world had long been structured around their own distinct beliefs, sacred sites, and relationship with the natural environment. The current building was completed in 1951, constructed to replace the former church destroyed during the Second World War in 1940. It is the only Sámi church in Finland in continuous use. Lutheranism arrived in Finland through the Reformation and became the dominant faith (state-church). A faith that, over centuries, played a complex and often painful role in the assimilation of the Sámi people, suppressing their language, their joik singing, and their spiritual traditions in favor of

a Finnish European Christian identity. Standing inside this building is therefore to stand inside a layered history: of faith, of cultural erasure, and of a community that has survived both.

The Painting

The altarpiece inside the church immediately drew attention. Painted in 1938 by Väinö Saikko, it depicts Christ revealing himself to a Sámi family: a Sámi woman carrying a baby, and a figure in white (see Photo 2). What struck me was not only the image itself but the significance of its presence: a church that historically participated in the suppression of Sámi identity now holds a painting that places a Sámi woman and child at the center of a sacred moment. Matti, our guide and the church custodian, noted



Photo 2

Painted in 1938 by Väinö Saikko, this work portrays Christ revealing appearing to a Sámi family.

Photo 3

PTR students are listening to an introduction about the Lutheran Church presented by Matti.





Photo 4

Matti shares his knowledge about the Lutheran Church in Inari.

Photo 5

Students engage in the session with Matti inside the church.

with quiet satisfaction that this representation mattered; seeing Sámi faces in a place of worship was not a small thing. It is a gesture of recognition, however partial, within an institution whose history with this community is unresolved. The painting does not undo that history. But it witnesses something that the Sámi presence in this land has always deserved to have witnessed.

Matti Sotaniemi

Of everything encountered during this visit, it was Matti who stayed with me for the

longest time. He is the church custodian responsible for its maintenance and upkeep, like a father, and, as he revealed without drama, someone who recently discovered he has Sámi roots. He has not yet fully come to terms with this knowledge. There was no performance of identity in how he spoke about it; no claim to belong to something he has not yet fully entered. His daily life, he said, is unremarkable: the work of a father, the work of maintaining a building. Sunday attendance is around “twenty-five people” in a space



built for a hundred and fifty. Life in winter, he explained, responding to a question about what the community does during the long Arctic season, is simply slower. Nothing stops. It just slows down.

That answer remained with me for a long time after leaving. Coming from the Netherlands, and from work with migrant communities where there is relentless pressure to arrive on time, to integrate on schedule, to perform productivity regardless of season or circumstance, Matti’s words

offered an unexpected contrast. Finland is among the wealthiest and reportedly happiest countries in the world. And yet here, in one of its northernmost communities, the prevailing attitude toward winter was not anxiety but acceptance: things slow down, and that is acceptable. The question I left with and have not yet answered is this: why, on the other side of the world, is slowing down treated as failure? What is the cost of the relentless pace that is imposed on communities who are already navigating the weight

of displacement, uncertainty, and belonging? Matti did not set out to ask these questions. But he answered them anyway.

Pyhän Nikolaoksen Kirkko Visit: Mother of the Church, Daughter of Sápmi

Written by:
Hani Yopita Setiawan

The story on June 26th began in Ivalo with a beautiful, cold, sunny day. It was a pleasure to visit an Orthodox Church, Saint Nicholas Church (Pyhän Nikolaoksen Kirkko). My impression started when we arrived early in front of the church. There, I met an old lady with busy hands carrying two baskets. And I did not know who this old lady was or what was

inside the baskets she carried. However, since I saw her trying to go inside the church, I helped her immediately to open the church gate, as both her hands were occupied. At that moment, I then realized that it was an encounter with one of the church members in the Saint Nicholas Church congregation.



Photo 1
Father (Fr.) Kalevi is having a conversation with Eline before lunch.



Photo 2
Lunch provided by the church, shared together with PTR students and members of the congregation.

As we visited the parish, of course, we participated in celebrating Saint John the Baptist's day mass. To me, the mass was mystical, as it was rich in theological content. During the mass, the priest, Fr. Kalevi invited the congregation to receive the Holy Communion—yes, only the congregation. Beautifully, the priest also invited us to take the same Holy Communion afterward, but still during the mass. In my observation, this was the sign of welcoming the strangers as the one body of Christ. Moreover, not only Fr. Kalevi who embraced our presence, but also the lady who managed the step-by-step for the most part in the mass, led the songs, and wrote a communal response in English on a piece of white paper (the service was in Finnish).

After the mass, we moved into another building beside the church for coffee, tea, snacks, and lunch. By my own account, I arrived there earlier than other friends, with the intention of helping anyone who was preparing the hospitality. There, again, I met the same old lady who was busy preparing tea, coffee, snacks, and lunch. Without thinking twice, I offered her some help, and during this conversation, she told me that she had prepared the snacks and lunch by herself since the day before. After a few moments of chill conversation, she gave her presentation in English, both in PowerPoint and in her monologue. From this agenda, I knew her name was Irja Jefremoff.



Sámi children were mostly educated in Finnish instead of their mother tongue, which made teachers like Saije very important.

In my observation, a church lady like Irja needs our recognition more, as she is the face of hospitality. From this reflection, I purposely highlighted Irja's roles in preparing food and drinks, as well as illuminating us with her presentation of Sámi identity, history, and Sápmi. This is my way to appreciate the women's subtle roles that are often overlooked in the church context. Mirroring Irja's presentation that addressed Saije as a mother of the Sámi language, I also addressed Irja as a mother of Pyhän Nikolaoksen kirkko, for she embraced us peacefully and warmly with her hospitality, care, and intelligence.

Furthermore, in this reflection, I also aim to mention briefly about the priest, Fr. Kalevi. As a priest, he could not care less about the hierarchy when it came to relationships between people. In my observation, he spoke to almost all people from our group. The fact that he made us receive the Holy Communion also indicated that the grace was meant for everyone, regardless of their status. He broke the hierarchy, not only within the church as a building, but also within the church as people and other creation. This reminds me of the topic of the Mennonite World Conference in 2022, which was Love Across the Barrier. Only the love of Christ can encourage people to cross every barrier that is made by human beings to segregate and discriminate. When several priests, ministers, or pastors in Finland banned the

Photo 3

Irene is giving a presentation about Sámi

Photo 4

Hani and two other PTR students are seen listening to the presentation.

In her presentation, she talked about the history of the Sámi in Southeastern Finland. She explained that the borders were drawn by outside powers, such as Sweden, Norway, and Russia, without asking the Finnish or Sámi people. The 1826 border between Norway and Russia divided Sámi areas, which affected their way of life. Finland became independent in 1917, and later in 1955 the land was given to the Sámi people. Reindeer herding and fishing are especially important traditional livelihoods for both Finnish and Sámi communities. She also discussed religion

and education. Most Finnish students were Lutheran, while many Sámi students were Orthodox. In the 1970s and 1980s, some Finnish students were Orthodox too, but later became Lutheran. Even in Orthodox schools, Sámi children often were not taught the Sámi language properly; instead, they learned Finnish, sometimes only a little and without correct grammar for the Sámi language.

Irja's presentation highlighted the role of Sámi language education. She mentioned Saije, a teacher in a Finnish

state school, who taught Sámi students their own language and even created her own teaching materials because there were not enough available sources. Due to this work, she became known as an important figure, a mother of the Sámi language for the Sámi community. This was especially meaningful, as for many years after World War II, the state had restricted or discouraged the use of the Sámi language in schools. Her work helped preserve the language and support Sámi identity. The history of school language policy in Finland shows that





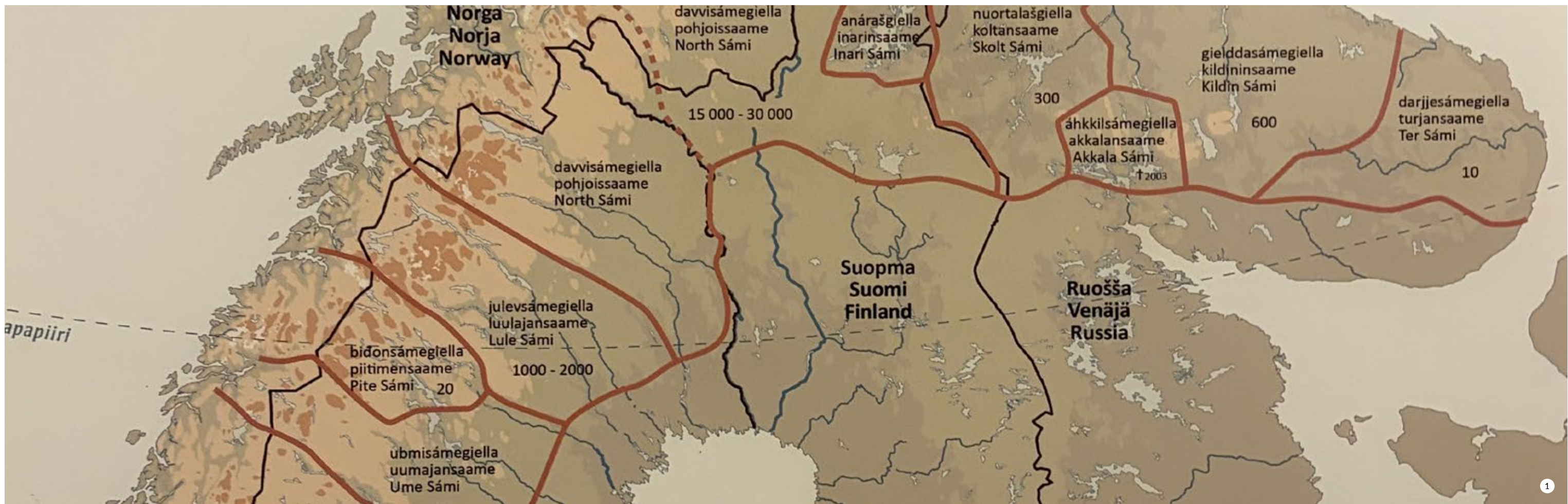
Sámi spirituality, Fr. Kalevi embraced it.

Last but not least, as a conclusion, I am happy to remark on one statement of Irja, which was encouraging us not to disturb Mother Earth by ending the work at 6 PM. Her words carried a deep sense of respect towards nature, balance, and the responsibility humans have toward the land that sustains them. As Fr. Kalevi also noted, we seem to have lost some of this value today, because modern life often pushes us to keep working without pause, even when rest and harmony with nature would be wiser. In that sense, Irja's remark was not only practical but also symbolic:

it reminded us that caring for the earth means learning when to stop, listen, and live with greater humility. The idea also resonates with Sámi values of taking only what is needed and living in a respectful relationship with nature.

Photo 5

Front view of Orthodox Church, Saint Nicholas Church (Pyhän Nikolaoksen Kirkko).



The Silence and Resilience of Sámi Languages

Written by:
Tosca Berkhout

Going into the workweek, we had quite a diverse group of master's students and teachers. To find common ground within these differences, we all spoke English as the main language to converse with one another.

However, what I noticed was that the moment two people with the same mother tongue entered into a conversation, they immediately switched from English to their language.

I did too, and even though I master the English language quite well, I find that I can express myself best in my mother tongue, Dutch. Some words we have in our language

are difficult to translate into another language while keeping the exact meaning of the word intact.

Language has been a central theme throughout our workweek in Sápmi. Everyone we spoke to during our trip brought up the Sámi languages; some shared the pain of losing their traditional languages, others recalled the assimilation process with Finnish, which brought up painful memories. Yet, they also showcased empowering ways the Sámi are reclaiming their linguistic heritage.

After all, the Sámi do not have just one language but many, each unique to its region. I still remember the moment our tour guide from the Siida museum showed us a map of all the different Sámi languages

spoken across Sápmi with the numbers of current speakers. I was shocked to read how some Sámi languages had completely gone extinct or only had a couple of tens to hundreds of native speakers left.

The main reason behind the extinction of a Sámi language in Finland is the colonialist assimilation processes by the Finnish authorities, which subjected the Sámi to systematic oppression, forcing them to speak Finnish and view their native language as shameful. Over the years, the silencing of their native languages resulted in a deep wound that prevented elders and parents from even daring to speak their own language at home or teach it to their children.

As Sámi culture is rooted in oral traditions, the language

Photo 1

The map shows the distribution of local populations who still speak Sámi languages.

had never been properly documented. Thus, as its speakers slowly faded away, so did the language. Their languages are far richer than we are used to; for example, where we have only one word for "snow," the Sámi have over 300 words. Their languages also carry countless stories passed down for centuries, each word holding an entire tradition within it.

Nowadays, the Sámi face additional difficulties due to the drastic climate change that disrupts their traditional livelihood practices. When practices like salmon fishing become difficult as the salmon disappear from the rivers,

• *Ķiõl nââneei*

"Ķiõll lij tõt, kââ'tt čâânn mi'jjid õ'htte." Mä'htt se'rdded Ķiõl ooudârra?
Päärnai hâiddpaai'kin da škooulâst leät Ķiõlõddâm raajjâd jiijjâz Ķiõl
âânnmõ'sše sme'llkõ'tti da kulttuurtäidaid lââ'zzteei pirrõõzz.

Kielen voimaannuttajat

"Kieli on se, joka sitoo meidän yhteen." Miten siirtää kieltä eteenpäin? Lasten hoitopaikoista ja koulusta on pyritty luomaan oman kielen käyttöön kannustava ja kulttuuritaitoja kartuttava ympäristö.

Empowering language

"Language is what binds us together." How can language be passed on? Efforts have been made to turn child-care places and schools into environments that encourage children to use their own language and build their cultural skills with arts.

the language tied to those practices fades as well. The loss of the practice means the loss of the words and, with them, a part of Sámi culture.

It is difficult for me to grasp the idea of losing one's own language, especially in cases where the Sámi cannot restore what is lost as no records of it remain. All that is left is a literal silence. In turn, one might protest by only speaking their own Sámi language and refusing to speak any Finnish at all, but what remains then?

We were told that many Sámi had to adopt the Finnish language, as it was the only way to secure a job or gain an education. Luckily, nowadays steps have been taken by the Finnish government to make it possible to study Sámi languages within some Finnish universities. The younger Sámi generation is moving away

from the painful past and turning it into their strength, an eagerness to learn, speak, and reclaim their own Sámi language.

The Sámi people are a powerful example of how deep colonial wounds can be healed and reclaimed through the use of language. For the Sámi, it serves as a visible indigenous marker, one that tells their story and embodies their resistance against the Finnish government.



Photo 2

One of the exhibitions shows a protest by the Sámi people concerning their right to use their own language.

Listening to the Quiet at Sajos

Written by:
Sara Figueiredo Pôncio

“Let’s stay and listen to the quiet.”

Our guide said this as we entered one of the rooms at Sajos, the Sámi Cultural Centre and Parliament building in Inari. It was an unexpected invitation. We had come to ask questions, to look at objects and

spaces, and to listen to stories. Yet here we were being asked to do something else: to be quiet.

I kept returning to that moment throughout our visit because Sajos itself seemed to invite a different kind of attention. The building’s shape is inspired by Sámi handicraft and, depending on how one looks at it, can resemble either a reindeer skin or Sámi men’s



headgear. Its large windows open onto the surrounding landscape, allowing the changing seasons to become part of the building. Even the name, Sajos, carries the meaning in Inari Sámi of a place where people stay for a longer time, a place to return to after hunting or fishing. In that sense, the building offered shelter while remaining connected to the environment and to those that return to it.

This became particularly striking when we entered Solju, the Parliament Hall. Solju is a Northern Sámi word referring to the risku, a traditional piece of Sámi jewellery. Our guide told

us, “We keep politics inside the room.” The sentence was simple, but it made me think about what a parliament represents. Politics is usually imagined as something that happens in institutions, through procedures, elections and laws. At Sajos, however, the political coexisted with a much larger story of belonging.

The wall behind the speaker’s stand made this connection tangible. The wall relief by the artist Outi Pieski, titled “Eatnu, eadni, eana”, meaning “river, mother, land”, consists of numerous gold-plated and white-gold-plated steel plates that form a multi-level, sparkling stream

Photo 1

Front view of the Sámi Parliament building.

across the wall. In Northern Sámi, the words for a big river, mother, and land are closely related, and Pieski uses this connection to reflect on the flow of generations, strong Sámi women, and the Sámi land. The work is entirely handmade, making craftsmanship itself part of its meaning and linking the political space to one of the traditions through which Sámi culture is maintained. The flowing form of the work also seemed to echo the way our guide had spoken about Sámi identity: carried through generations and continually reshaped in the



Photo 2

Inside the Sámi Parliament meeting room

Photo 3

Wall decorations displayed in the Sámi Parliament meeting room.

present.

Our guide also spoke about what it means to belong to the Sámi community. The electoral roll has specific legal criteria, including a language criterion: an individual qualifies if they, or at least one parent or grandparent, spoke Sámi as their first language. Yet she explained that belonging cannot be reduced to paperwork. When we asked how one could prove that a relative several generations back had spoken Sámi as their first language, she answered simply: “We know everybody.” Throughout our time in Inari, we heard variations of this idea: the community knows itself.

She described relatives as remaining part of us even when we disagree with them. “We carry our relatives in our necks,” she told us. I found myself thinking about this phrase long after the tour. My own experience of family has made me aware of how much of who we are is shaped by those who came before us, but I had

rarely thought of this inheritance as something we physically carry. In much of modern life, identity can be presented as something individual, something we choose and construct for ourselves. Here, identity appeared much more relational. We inherit not only names and languages, but also stories, characteristics, responsibilities and memories. We carry people who came before us.

This way of understanding belonging also appeared in the stories she told us. She sang a yoik for us and shared how yoiking had been, and in some contexts still was, considered sinful by Christian churches because of its association with noaidi and practices labelled as witchcraft. But she also explained that people yoik for many things: good dogs, lost loves, rain, or the absence of it. The practice was simply part of everyday Sámi life.

There was something moving in the fact that our guide would tell these stories while carefully



naming the people involved. She had a background in theatre, and it truly showed in her remarkable storytelling. Names were never incidental. They located stories within relationships and generations. At times, I felt that she was not simply telling us about Sámi culture but demonstrating a way of remembering.

This made me think differently about the relationship between memory and cultural survival. Our guide spoke about making traditional Sámi clothing “fashion” for younger generations, so that it becomes something they want to wear because it is beautiful and meaningful, rather than something associated only with the past. She also showed us traditional objects and explained their practical uses, from reindeer-skin lassos and shoes designed for different kinds

of snow to the gietkka, a traditional cradle. All of the objects were connected to practices, stories, and ways of understanding the world. I left Sajos thinking about how easily cultural traditions can become something to put behind glass, document, or study. Yet what I encountered there suggested that culture survives not only when it is preserved, but when it continues to be lived, adapted and desired.

In Sajos, I encountered memory through names, clothing, jewellery, language, stories, land and relationships. That may be why I still remember being asked to listen to the quiet. In a place where so much was communicated through both words and material forms, silence became a way of paying attention. I am still wondering what it means to listen in this way: to notice not only what is

spoken, but also the relationships, histories and landscapes that give those words their context. Perhaps the challenge is to allow a place to reveal itself on its own terms, and to stay attentive to what might otherwise remain unheard.

Photo 4

Sara is engaging with the tour guide during the visit.

Photo 5

The green area behind the Sámi Parliament building.



Being “Strangers” in One’s Own Land

Written by:
Mikhael Ardiyanto

Home should be a safe place. A place where we can be ourselves, speak our own language, and live with our own customs without constantly feeling that we need to change something just to be accepted. So how is it possible to feel like a stranger in your own home, to a point where you cannot even “be yourself” there?

That question kept coming back to me during the excursion, especially whenever I heard more stories about the Sámi. But the more I listened, the more I started to question the way I had been putting it into words. Was “feeling like a stranger” really the right way to describe it? Was “stranger” even the right word?



The Sámi people themselves have not gone anywhere. They had already lived in the region that is now divided between Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia long before those national borders existed. It was the world around them that changed: national borders, languages, ideas about which traditions and ways of life were considered acceptable, and even the way their land was managed.

So maybe the point here is not simply that they “became” strangers, as if that feeling

appeared by itself. Maybe they were made to be “strangers.” And even if that is the case, then the next question is: by whom, and in what ways?

One example is the history of Sámi languages. Under assimilation policies, Sámi children were discouraged from speaking their own language at school and, in many documented cases, were physically punished for doing so. The language they used at home with their parents and family was suddenly not something they could freely

Photo 1

Front view of Pielpajärvi Church, a historic 18th-century wooden church in Inari, Finland, traditionally used by the local Sámi community.

Photo 2

A Changing Climate, exhibition at Siida Museum, highlighting the impacts of climate change on Arctic nature.



use at school. It was like they had to leave part of themselves at home.

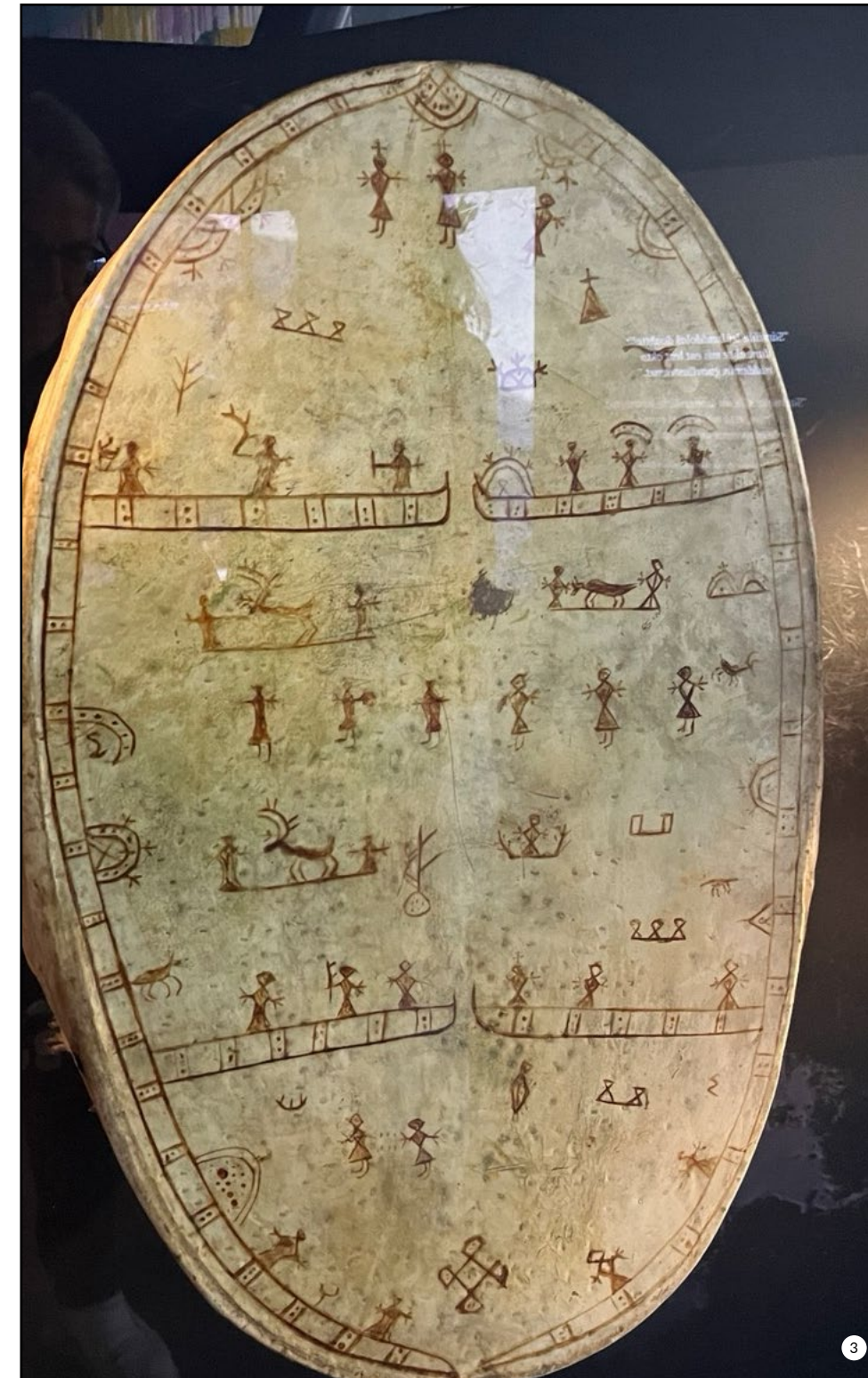
A similar thing can also be seen in the history of Christianity among the Sámi people. Throughout history, we hear of many things: certain practices being forbidden, drums being confiscated or destroyed, and some traditions gradually faded under the pressure of church and state. However, at the same time, I do not think every change should automatically be read as a loss. Many Sámi people today are Christians. Culture also changes, and people within a culture obviously have the right to decide for themselves what they want to preserve and what they want to leave behind. But, I still find it rather difficult to fully separate today's choices from the fact that, for a long time, it was the church and the state who decided what counted as acceptable belief and practice. What happened in the past did happen, and it had consequences. At the same time, I don't want to assume every choice Sámi people make today can be explained only by that history.

I felt this tension also at the Siida museum, where we learned that reindeer today

are struggling to find food in a way they were not before. Reindeer normally dig through snow in winter to reach lichen underneath. But climate change is making temperatures far less predictable. When it warms, snow melts or turns to rain, and when temperature drops again, that melt water freezes into a layer of ice over the ground. So, in that case, the reindeer can no longer break through to the lichen beneath it. On top of that, wind farms and other new infrastructure interfere with the routes reindeer use to move and navigate. In the end, Sámi herders often have to work harder to help the reindeer survive.

Yes, climate change is real, and of course society does need to think seriously about alternative energy sources. But what does development mean if the progress of one group comes with less and less space for another group to live as they have been living?

If a wind farm is called environmentally friendly but still creates new difficulties for an Indigenous community that was already there, is it fair to still call that progress? Progress for whom?



Looking at all of this together, the language, the church, the reindeer, the wind farms, I do not think these are separate stories. I think they are the same story told in different periods. Sámi people were not simply strangers who happened to feel out of place. They were made to seem foreign so that someone else could step in and decide what happens to their land and their lives.

However, I do not want to leave this only as a story about what was done to Sámi people, because that would flatten them into something they are not. Alongside all of this, there has also been resistance: language revitalization, Sámi parliaments, and ongoing pushback against projects like wind farms. In other words, Sámi people have not simply absorbed what was imposed on them, they, at the same time, have also fought to define their own terms, then and now.

So maybe the question is not simply whether tradition should be preserved or whether development should continue. Both can become problematic if decisions about the future of Sámi people are still mostly made by others. This is also

Photo 3

Sámi ceremonial drum displayed at Siida Museum.

about how much space they have to determine their own lives: who gets to decide, what they want to preserve, what they want to change, and what kinds of change they actually want.

But even then, the question is still not finished yet. Who exactly do we mean when we say “they”? Sámi people are not one single group with one shared opinion. There are differences across generations, region, occupation, belief, and how people personally relate to tradition or development. So, when we talk about “the

Sámi voice”, whose voice are we actually hearing? Who gets to represent it, and who is still left unheard?

I don’t think I can really answer that from here. I was only there for a few days, while the things I was listening to what had happened over generations. So, I still don’t know exactly what to make of all of it. But I think I do understand one thing differently now: I don’t think “stranger” was ever really about them at all.

Photo 4
Reindeer spotted along the way to our accommodation.



