



Commentary

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Sámi society is an undergrowth in Alta society... You got to know the codes, know people. If you don't know it, then you don't see it. You need knowledge to recognize the signs. People who aren't familiar with this, they don't understand what's being talked about. Sámi in Alta often know about each other. I observe that people can say they knew about us, about our family—but we didn't necessarily know about them. The Sámi also know about those who, for everything in the world, don't want to be Sámi.

(Sámi informant, Alta [Áltá], Finnmark County, Norway)

During the last four years, I have been part of a group working on the book *An Urban Future for Sápmi? Indigenous Urbanization in the Nordic States and Russia* (Berg-Nordlie, Dankertsen, and Winsvold forthcoming), as part of a research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council's Programme for Sámi Research.¹ Our project has explored various consequences of the urbanization of an Arctic Indigenous people, *the Sámi nation*, whose population and homeland—*Sápmi*—has been divided by the states of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. The team of researchers involved in the book has consisted of people from various ethnicities, states, and disciplines: Astri Dankertsen (Sámi sociologist, Norway), Marte S. Winsvold (Norwegian political scientist), Anna Afanasyeva (Sámi historian from Russia, living in Norway), Chris Andersen (Métis sociologist, Canada), and myself (Sámi historian, Norway).

Through the course of the project, we have encountered a wide range of experiences and issues related to Sámi urbanization and urbanity. In this commentary, I will limit myself to discussing only one aspect of Sámi urban life: *urban Sámi invisibility*. In the following, I will make some observations about Sámi invisibility and ways of becoming visible, with an eye to the importance of historical narratives.

¹ Norwegian Research Council, Sámi Research Programme, Grant number 234237; <https://uni.oslomet.no/urbansami/> (homepage; accessed February 8, 2021).



Image: Map of Northern Europe, showing approximate southern border of Sápmi (black line). The border is not formally set, and, in earlier times, the Sámi lived in areas far south of what is today considered Sápmi's southern border zones. Map made with NordRegio's online map-making tool, NordMap.se.²

Invisible History: A People without a Past³

Historical narratives are of fundamental importance for our understanding of what groups we belong to, and what roles we consider different social groups to have. From childhood, we are trained to understand the world through narratives. We are told the history of families, communities, and ethnic and religious groups, and through this we are taught which of these are “ours” and which are not. Throughout our adult lives, we will hear leaders use historical narratives in their appeals to convince us about the right-

2 Different maps may show Sápmi as being larger or smaller than this. This map utilizes the following administrative borders set by the Nordic states for its approximation of Sápmi's southern border area: Norway—the South Sápmi Electoral Constituency of the *Sámediggi* Indigenous Parliament; Sweden—Jämtland (*Jiemhtie*) and Västernorrland counties; Finland—Lapland Region; Russian Federation—Murmansk Region.

3 *A People without a Past* is the title of a 1986 book by Reidar Nielsen, which is specifically about the Coast Sámi or “Sea Sámi” part of the Sámi population. The phrase is here used to allude to the whole Sámi people, who are in the strange position whereby, despite having an extremely long history in Northern Europe (Sámi history spans two millennia), their past has for a long time been “muted” in general history writing. Nielsen argues the necessity of reclaiming knowledge about and respect for one's people's history: “In order to understand one's own time, and to be able to develop in the future, it is necessary to know one's past” (Nielsen 1986, 140).

ness of their cause and rally us to fight for the group claimed to be ours. Historical narratives contribute decisively to, and reflect, the fundamental idea that the group exists at all and position it in relationships to significant other groups. As society constantly repeats the articulation of the discourse on grouphood, it effectively creates the group as a subjective collectivity. Through discourse, a group's existence, its importance, and its relation to other groups are contested, defended, and reinterpreted (Gaski 2008; Kaufman 2001; Lorenz 2011; Thijs 2011; Zachariassen 2012).

Indigenous people and other ethnic minorities are adversely affected by the existence of a certain genre of history-writing that treats a near-exclusive focus on the dominant ethnic group as the neutral way to write history, and the existence of other peoples as being of marginal interest to the grand narrative. One should not underestimate the impact that society's dominant historical narratives have on ideas about what place Indigenous people have in society, and where we belong—both on our own ideas and on those of dominant social groups.

The Sámi have been made invisible in the history-writing about the states we live in and most of the local communities therein—urban and rural. In Norway, the tendency to leave out the Sámi from the general history of the country can be traced back to at least the Norwegian nationalist movement of the 1800s, when the political ambition to secede from Sweden came to be characterized by an ethno-nationalistic ideology that eventually took on strong racist overtones in regard to minority ethnicities within the emergent sovereign state of Norway (Pedersen 2008). The Sámi were identified as an inferior race, a population without any real culture or indeed any history as such—a dark mirror image of the Nordic region's “master race” for which academics in Europe were trying to find evidence at the time (Kyllingstad 2014).

The ideological belief in biological races was largely discredited during the mid-1900s, but nationalism and ethnic chauvinism are more difficult to get rid of. More importantly, historical narratives have a tendency to reproduce themselves without any active malice on the part of the narrators. Any act of narration includes the promotion of certain events or entities as being the most relevant, thus implicitly or explicitly marginalizing or excluding others (Fulsås 2005; Sejersted 1995; White 1975), and so it is enough that later narrators simply do not adequately question the narrative choices made by those who established the fundamental structures of the main historical narratives. The “original sin” of narratively silencing the Indigenous people automatically propagates itself until someone makes noise.

In the case of the Sámi, that noise is currently being made, to a certain extent and with local variations. Academic retellings of national, regional, and local histories that include the Sámi in a more visible manner, or focus on the Sámi, have become more widespread. The establishment of academic institutions in the north, where the Sámi are most highly concentrated, has been key in this regard. However, we have not yet reached a situation where the Sámi presence in national history-writing is entirely normalized in all the states that have divided Sápmi and the Sámi. Moreover, despite the production of new academic history works that include the Sámi, the new narratives about northern history

are rejected by parts of the general population. Some react negatively when exposed to history-writing that is markedly different from that which has dominated throughout their lives—particularly when the narratives underscore the presence in their home districts of an Indigenous people upon whom they may have been taught to look down. Local newspapers in northern Norway have hosted many debates in which the new visibility of the Sámi element in history writing has been attacked.

As the epigraph to this commentary suggests, the Sámi presence both past and present can be almost invisible in urban areas—unless you know what to look for. The invisibility of Sáminess in everyday life and the long-term muting of Sáminess in local and national historical narratives strengthen each other: Lacking experience with local Sáminess may lead to a sense of alienation when confronted with local Sámi history, and lacking knowledge of local Sámi history may lead to an inability to recognize local Sámi culture. The remainder of this commentary will focus on two specific aspects of Sámi invisibility in everyday urban life: the invisibility of Sámi place names and the absence of places of remembrance for Sámi history.



Image: Sámi woman photographed in the 1880s as part of a French “research expedition” to the north. This was during Norway’s assimilation policy towards the Sámi, and a period when non-Sámi academics tried to use scientific methods to prove that the Sámi were a lesser “race.” The woman pictured is Bánne Risten (Kristine Mikelsdatter Hetta), great-great-grandmother of the author. Public domain.⁴

⁴ See: <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011013407711/roland-bonaparte-sin-samling-portrett-av-kristina-mikelsdatter-hetta-inngar>.



Image: A mother and child in Finnmark, after the WWII Burning of Finnmark by Nazi occupiers retreating from advancing Soviet soldiers. Public domain.⁵

Invisible Names: The Signpost Wars

Many landscapes in the north, both urban and rural, have two sets of place-names: one visible and one invisible. Due to assimilation policy and other anti-Indigenous practices, Sámi toponyms in the north have generally not been put on maps and signposts. Only the majority-ethnos's toponyms have been made visible, resulting in a situation wherein most people in the north do not know the Sámi names, or even that there are Sámi names in their home areas. Today, the old Sámi names are being “umuted” on maps and signposts in some parts of Norway. How far this process has progressed, if it has even started, varies from place to place. For those who know the invisible names, their surroundings possess extra sets of knowledges and histories that are inaccessible to others—and unfortunately *unacceptable* to some of these others: Over the last decades, the Sámi have had many experiences with negative reactions to our toponyms becoming visible on signs and maps in tandem with the majority-culture names.

⁵ See: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ole_Friele_Backer_Finnmark.jpg.

The muting of Indigenous toponyms contributes to the alienation of Indigenous people from lands and communities in their own home territories, and to the erosion of Indigenous identity. Giving the toponyms “voice” by putting them on maps and signposts constitutes a reconstruction of the broken link between communities dominated by the majority ethnos and the Indigenous people; it can contribute to rebuilding both the Indigenous identity of the place and the place-identity of the Indigenous people who live there. Such reconstructions may be particularly urgent in urban areas, which tend to be majority-culture strongholds, and where Sámi culture and presence are often identified as “out of place” (Dankertsen 2018). It is part of what Howard-Wagner (2021) refers to as “a struggle to ‘de-alienate’ urban space, to reintegrate it into the web of Indigenous social connections; and in this regard, dealienation is about re-appropriation.”

However, what de-alienates the Indigenous people may cause parts of the dominant group to experience alienation. To see a name that you have never heard of before being used about a place you thought you knew may produce such a feeling, and your response to that depends on a number of things—for example, your security in your own identity. The matter of dominant-group responses to Indigenous signage in Sápmi is complicated not just because of the absence of an historical knowledge of Sámi presences but also because of the undercurrents of dominant-group hostility to the Indigenous: Generations of people in the north have been taught that Sámi culture, language, identity—and “blood”—are inferior. Many still do not want to be associated with “Sáminess.” This is strengthened by the fallout from earlier adaption strategies for the assimilation policy against the Sámi: In some cases, the people who shun and “police” against visible Sáminess have ancestors who have “passed” as non-Sámi and have taught this behaviour to subsequent generations. When the places where they live are signposted in Sámi—and thereby *as* Sámi—this may feel like an attack on their identity as members of the dominant majority, and as an involuntary reconstruction of Indigenous identity. To quote from the commentary’s epigraph: “The Sámi also know about those who, for everything in the world, don’t want to be Sámi.”

An iconic picture in modern Sámi history is that of a signpost welcoming people to the officially bilingual rural municipality of Gáivuotna/Kåfjord—with the Sámi name riddled with bullet holes. The “signpost shootings” took place at the turn of the millennium, but, a decade or so later, the signpost wars came to town. The urban area in Sápmi where Indigenous signage sparked the most conflict was Tromsø (*Romsa*), the largest city in Norway’s northern half. In 2011, the leftist municipal government applied for inclusion in Norway’s “Sámi Language Administrative Area. This would have meant, among other things, that Sámi toponyms would be put on signposts. However, as a response to the application, anti-Sámi sentiments were whipped up in that year’s municipal election campaigns; the rightist opposition won the election, and the application to the Language Area was withdrawn.

There was a notable dissonance between the events of 2011 and Tromsø’s earlier image as a liberal city, a place where the Sámi were accepted. This dissonance was experienced by some Sámi as disheartening and alienating. Tellingly, a documentary film about the event was named “The Great Setback” (NRK 2012). Speaking from personal experience, as a

onetime citizen of Tromsø, it was a shocking revelation that such attitudes to my people had been lurking under a tolerant surface all the time. One of the many lessons to be learnt by Tromsø's "signpost war" may be that one should not confuse a general absence of active anti-Indigenous utterances with tolerance: The majority population may prove to include a dangerously large number of people who are tolerant only as long as you do not become too visible, as well as others who, when push comes to shove, are not really committed to defending Indigenous visibility.

Some Sámi signposts were eventually put up in Tromsø—eight years later—but 2011 marked the breakthrough into public debate of a local anti-Sámi discourse that has resurfaced sporadically in cases where the urban Sámi have become too "visible." This discourse includes elements of distrust of the Sámi and fears of Indigenous rights being used to suppress the majority. It also includes traces of an interesting historical narrative which essentially constructs the Norwegians as the ethnos that is most "at home" in the urban area and the Sámi as alien, an "immigrant" people who should not make demands on the Norwegians:

The Sámi—most of them immigrants—speak Norwegian fluently and are Norwegian citizens. They have the same rights as any other citizen of Tromsø. But this is not enough for them, they want Tromsø's identity to change... Others who move from their homes and homelands to live in Tromsø, respect and accept both street names and place names in their new homeplace. (Spokeswoman for the Tromsø Conservative Party's Senior Branch, reader's letter, to iTromsø, 2018)

This discourse mutes the existence of the area's old Sámi population; focuses on Sámi citizens who have moved from other, rural parts of Norway; and discusses these in terms that equate them with immigrants, effectively upholding the urban area as being Norwegian and *only* Norwegian. By drawing on historical narratives, both national and local, that render the Sámi as invisible, one may deny the Sámi rights to have their present-day culture become more visible. One may question whether one is observing simple blindness to local Indigenous history or what Howard-Wagner (2021) refers to as the deliberate production of a "malevolent absence" to marginalize urban Indigeneity. In many cases, those who discuss the Sámi as historically absent in the city simply echo the version of history they have received throughout their lives. In other cases, those who argue against the Sámi presence may know very well that it is there.

The "unmuting" of toponyms has the potential to serve as a process of reconciliation between the Sámi and the dominant majority. However, this would require that the Indigenous population not experience the unmuting as a traumatic, conflict-riddled process, confirming or even worsening their fears about what pernicious attitudes towards them may still exist. In some places, the emergence of Sámi toponyms into visibility has been less conflictual, so that the net experience may be that society is progressing towards tolerance and inclusion. In Tromsø, the chance for further reconciliation was lost due to the issue's politicization during an election year, which likely caused increased alienation.



Image: Bilingual Norwegian-Lule Sámi signpost welcoming visitors to to Bodø (Bådåddjo), the capital of Nordland County, Norway. Photo by Marit Myrvoll, 2011.



Image: The Russian “cultural capital” of the Sámi is rural Lovozero (Lujavv'r). Double signposting in Russian and Sámi is not common, but, in Lovozero, the Sámi toponym is incorporated into the village's coat of arms.⁶

⁶ See: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6f/Coat_of_Arms_of_Lovozero_%28Murman-sk_oblast%29_%281989%29.png.

Invisible Heroes: Urban Sámi Memorials of Conflict and Cooperation

Amid the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020, there were discussions in many countries about the appropriateness of statues, street names, and other memorials that celebrate people who have contributed to racist ideology or practices. In Norway, these discussions tended to concern memorials to “old heroes” accused of slavery or the racialization of non-European peoples. Less attention was given to monuments and places that celebrated people who have had a negative impact on old minorities in the country, like the Sámi people.

A related issue that has attracted slightly more media attention over the last years is the absence of memorials to notable Sámi personages and Sámi-related events in history. In a situation where the Sámi aspects of history have long been muted, such places of remembrance constitute a physical disruption of the oppressive patterns of old narratives: At the local level, they serve as reminders for both the dominant majority and the Indigenous community that the Indigenous people form part of the town’s past and present—a reclaiming of the Sámi right to be Sámi in the city. Such places of remembrance may also become important gathering spots for Indigenous communities (such as during cultural events or political demonstrations) and achieve added symbolic significance as urban Indigenous places in and of themselves. In the following, I will account for the creation of some notable urban Sámi heritage sites that took place during our project’s research period.

A field of unmarked graves was the catalyst for renewed interest in urban Sámi history in Trondheim (*Tråante*)—Sápmi’s second largest city and Norway’s third largest city. This story begins at the end of World War II, when the Soviet Army liberated occupied Finnmark County in the far northeast of Norway. The fleeing Nazi occupiers implemented scorched-earth tactics on their way out: During the event known as “The Burning of Finnmark,” the Nazis burned down houses, killed livestock, and destroyed infrastructure in the demographic core areas of the Sámi population in Norway, Finnmark County and northern Troms County. The population was forcibly evacuated to the southwest, becoming internal refugees. A massive number of refugees passed through Trondheim, the regional centre of middle Norway, on their way to southern Norway. My own great-great-grandmother and her family were among them. They were transported by boat from the north and by cattle wagon from Mosjøen (*Mussere*) to the transit city, Trondheim, before being sent further southwards. Some of the accounts from the forced evacuation are harrowing:

We were loaded into those cattle wagons, and the wagons were shut. After a while, we started to run out of air, and we began to shout and punch the walls to have someone open the doors. But nobody came. In the end, there was almost a panic. But finally, somebody managed to smash a ceiling window, so we got some air. (Refugee from Kvalsund [*Fálesnuorri*], in her 20s at the time of the evacuation, quoted in Palmer 2010).

Some of the refugees in transit did not get further but for various reasons died in Trondheim. Twenty-eight of them, mostly Sámi and members of the Kven ethnic minority,

were buried in unmarked graves. During a Sámi National Day event in 2015, there was a public lecture about urban Sámi history that mentioned this event, and this sparked a coalition of local politicians and representatives of the local Sámi community to begin working for a place of memorial. In 2017, a “Sámi-Kven Memorial Grove” was created at the site of the graves (Altaposten 2017; Ságat 2017).

The year 2017 was something out of the ordinary for Trondheim, and indeed for the whole of Sápmi. In that year, Trondheim was host to a year-long, multi-event festival called *Tråante2017*, organized by representatives of the local Sámi community, the urban municipality, the county, and the *Sámediggi* Indigenous parliament of Norway (Berg-Nordlie 2018). *Tråante2017* was a centenary celebration of the first border-transcending Sámi political congress, which took place in Trondheim on February 6–9, 1917. This congress has become a key symbolic event in Sámi history. It is identified as a symbol of the will of the Sámi to organize across local communities and state borders in order to fight for our survival as a people. The National Day of the Sámi (February 6th) commemorates the congress. *Tråante2017* was a grand, public, symbolic reconnection between the Sámi and Trondheim city—not just for the dominant population, but also for the Sámi. Since the Sámi demographic core areas are further north, South Sápmi has tended to be doubly invisible: treated as peripheral in Sámi contexts, and generally not associated with the Sámi by the dominant ethnic group. For one year, however, all eyes were turned on the “centenary capital” of Sápmi.

Two permanent urban Indigenous heritage sites have so far come out of Trondheim’s centenary celebration—both of them memorials to Elsa Laula Renberg (1877–1931). Laula Renberg was the woman who took the initiative to the 1917 congress, and her image has to some degree come to personify *Tråante2017*. Elsa Laula Renberg was already one of the most iconic characters in Sámi history, but *Tråante2017* cemented her status as something akin to a “Mother of the Nation,” and she increasingly appeared on paintings, t-shirts, graffiti, stamps, etc. A 2017 documentary about her was titled *The Woman Who United Sápmi* (NRK 2017).

The first of the Laula Renberg memorials created in the wake of *Tråante2017* was erected not in Trondheim but in Mosjøen, where she spent much of her life (NRK 2019). The statute, set up outside the city hall, rapidly became an example of the avoidance of symbolic slippage: Places of Indigenous remembrance in non-Indigenous majority areas risk becoming identified by the majority, and even utilized by the authorities, as symbols that, by their focus on a more troubled past, idealize a “reconciled” present. However, the Elsa Laula Renberg statue was rapidly repurposed as a symbol for contemporary political mobilization. One night in 2020, the town of Mosjøen woke up to find the statue tied up with a lasso and gagged. This was a protest action performed by Sámi activists—after agreement with descendants of Elsa Laula Renberg and the sculptor—to protest the state’s seizure of Sámi reindeer herding land to Øyfjellet Wind Farm, a massive power plant on the mountains near the town (NRK 2020). The notability of the statue and its symbolic potential was utilized to shed light on a contemporary Indigenous issue.

Another place of remembrance for Elsa Laula Renberg was chosen in 2020, when Trondheim municipality decided to name a square in the central part of the city in her honour. The square is situated near the church where the 1917 congress took place and is to be given an artistic expression that “lifts the consciousness about Sámi culture in Trondheim, and the city’s connection to a wider Sámi landscape” (Ságat 2020).

At the other end of Sápmi, in the Russian Federation, we find Murmansk City—by far the largest city built in the homeland of the Sámi. The Murmansk Region’s urban areas are characterized by a particular degree of Sámi invisibility. This is an effect of the massive demographic swamping by non-Sámi that has occurred relatively recently (the Soviet Era, 1917–1991), forced relocations of Sámi people away from the areas where major urban centres were built by USSR authorities, and a lack of general consciousness among the regional populace about the Indigenous presence (Afanasieva 2014; Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012). A telling moment in recent history (2011) occurred when the then Governor of the region declared in a meeting with representatives of various ethnic minority communities at which the Sámi were also present that, “historically, on the territory of Murmansk Region, a native population has virtually not existed. All the people here, in one way or another, came from the outside” (YT 2011).

As in the Trondheim case, we must go back to World War II to understand the background of the urban Indigenous memorial that was built in Murmansk City in 2020. The memory of WWII holds a special place in the national narratives of many European states, but it is particularly important in the Russian Federation. The largest state to come out of the collapsed USSR, Russia identifies as the heir to the Soviet Union, which suffered massive losses during the war and was decisive in defeating Nazi Germany. While not formally Russia’s National Day, Victory Day (*Den’ pobedy*) has arguably become Russia’s *de facto* National Day. May 9th is celebrated on a massive scale, fostering national unity around this shared, traumatic, and heroic historical event—which, in Russia, is empathically *not* called “World War Two” but “The Great War of the Fatherland” or “The Great Patriotic War” (*Velikaja otečestvennaja vojna*). It could be argued that, in Russia, the commemoration of an ethnic minority’s contribution to the war effort is important not only for the sake of honouring the sacrifices of one’s kin but also because the act of remembrance underlines that the minority is also ultimately a part of the national community, has a stake in it, and is part of the shared history of the country.

There are two streets named after Sámi war heroes in the village of Lovozero (*Lujavvr*), which serves as the “cultural capital” of the Russian Sámi (since this is where most of the forcibly moved Sámi ended up). These are Vasilij Jur’jev and Ivan Danilov, the latter of which perished in Stalingrad, where the Soviets turned the tide of the war. Until recently, there was no memorial to the Sámi participants in the Reindeer Herder Battalion (1941–1945)—a unit that operated against the Axis forces that invaded the USSR from the northwest and thereby established a front line that cut directly through Sápmi.

A monument to the Reindeer Herder Battalion had been proposed by Russian Sámi activists in the 1990s, but nothing had come of the suggestion. During the last 10 years, statues to commemorate the Battalion were set up in the town of Naryan-Mar (Nenets

Autonomous Area) and the village of Novikbozh (Komi Republic), and, in 2014, the issue was raised again by members of Murmansk Region's Indigenous community. This time, the authorities eventually agreed that the Russian Sámi should get a WWII memorial in Murmansk City. The statue, placed on the outskirts of Murmansk City, was unveiled on the annual "Day of the Heroes of the Fatherland" (December 9th) in 2020 (Gov-Murman.ru 2020a; Novayagazeta.ru 2020). During the ceremony, the chief librarian of the Department of Local History Literature noted that "Not a single combat operation of the polar partisans, who went into the enemy rear to a depth of five hundred kilometers, could do anything without the Sámi soldiers" (Saami Council 2020).

Different sources have different versions of exactly which organizations and which individuals did the main job of securing the establishment of this urban Indigenous heritage site. To understand why, it is necessary to know that, for more than a decade now, there have been heightened tensions between the regional authorities in Murmansk and parts of local Sámi civil society. The situation originated in a conflict over whether to implement the Nordic *Sámediggi* model for Indigenous representation in Murmansk Region, which again become embedded in the broader conflict dynamic of steadily deteriorating Western-Russian relations (Berg-Nordlie 2017). Hence, in connection with the WWII memorial, two versions of events can be gleaned: an "oppositional narrative" in which activists affiliated with the pro-parliament camp are claimed to have done most of the work required to have the monument realized, and an "official narrative" which highlights the efforts of organizations and institutions affiliated with the regional authorities (Gov-Murman 2020b; Novayagazeta 2020). One gets the impression that a good chance for reconciliation between the authorities and critical civil society by working for a common project may have been lost; nevertheless, the result of it all is that the Russian Sámi now have a physical place in a metropolitan area that marks their presence in its past and present.



Image: Dano-Norwegian king Christian IV. In 1609, he sent a letter to northern *fief* lords (*lensherrer*) in which he wrote that the Sámi were “naturally inclined to use witchcraft” and that the fear of such magic caused Norwegians to refrain from colonizing areas where many Sámi lived. His solution was to command the *fief* lords to have Sámi practitioners of “witchcraft” “exterminated without mercy” (Alm 2012). In the subsequent witch trials, practitioners of the Sámi faith, along with non-Sámi women accused of witchcraft, were executed. In 1880, this statue of king Christian IV was unveiled in downtown Oslo—or Kristiania, as the city was called at the time, having been renamed in the king’s honour during his lifetime.



Image: Elsa Laula Renberg, a Sámi organizational pioneer who led the first urban Sámi association (Lappish Central Association, Stockholm, 1904) and initiated the first border-transcending Sámi congress (Trondheim, 1917). A statue was erected in her honour in 2019, in the northern small town Mosjøen (*Mussere*).⁷

⁷ See: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7a/Elsa_Laula_Renberg.jpg.

Afterword

No past, No name, No place is a strange title to have to use for a commentary about Indigenous people. After all, the definition of a people as Indigenous tends to include the possession of precisely these three things: A history of having been subjected to colonial practices (past); the retaining of national identity despite attempts to destroy it (name); and a connection between the ethnos and the land (place). However, the title describes key challenges that many Indigenous peoples face. To erase a subjugated people's past, to mute their names for themselves and their lands, to reconstruct them as alien to the place they belong—these are age-old techniques of conquest, and are not particularly tied to urban conditions. Still, the cultural strongholds of many Indigenous nations during the onslaught of colonialism have been in rural places, so for most of us an urban life is a life outside the stronghold—it is to face assimilation pressure daily, and to deal with lingering ideas that urbanity and Indigeneity are at some level mutually exclusive. The ideas that cities have no Indigenous past, no Indigenous names, and no place for Indigeneity are found both within parts of the dominant group and within parts of the Indigenous community itself.

Still, based on what we have observed during our research project, it does not seem fitting to end this commentary on a pessimistic note. While becoming increasingly aware of the challenges, we have also encountered resistance to the muting and alienation of urban Indigenousness, the recontextualization of Indigenous culture to fit urban conditions, outright denials of the urban–Indigenous dichotomy, reconciliation and cooperation between Indigenous and dominant-group actors, the reclaiming of urban Indigenous history and names, and the establishment of urban Indigenous spaces. There is much to be optimistic about given what we have observed when studying Sámi urbanization.

This commentary addresses only one aspect of the urban Sámi experience—visibility and invisibility—narrowed further down to signposts and monuments, and discussed in light of views on historical narratives and their significance. The field of research relating to Sámi urbanization contains a multitude of aspects, which yield different results depending on what analytical lens is used to investigate them, and is only one domain within the larger research field of urban Indigenous studies. The growing body of research on this subject is of great importance not only for the enhancement of our understanding of important events unfolding in our time, but also as source material by which future historians will seek to understand what will no doubt be considered a major event in the history of a large number of Indigenous peoples.

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