



Of Land, Memory, and Belonging

An Ethnographic Study of Sámi Resilience in Guovdageaidnu



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Abstract

This thesis explores resilience from an Indigenous perspective, drawing on a short ethnographic fieldwork conducted in *Guovdageaidnu* (Kautokeino) in 2025, one of the most distinctly Sámi municipalities in Northern Norway. Rather than treating resilience as a simple reaction to adversity, the study approaches the concept as an active and ongoing process embedded in daily traditional practices and expressed through different dimensions of memory and artistic self-representation. It is also made visible in political and ontological tensions over land, governance, and types of knowledge. The method combines participant observation, informal conversations, and content analysis of Sámi cultural production such as museum exhibitions, a film and a ballet performance. This study also engages with literature on Sámi life, decolonial theory, the relationship between human and non-human entities and Indigenous resilience. As a non-Sámi student in social anthropology, I reflect throughout on my own position and my ethical responsibilities in this research. The thesis first examines how resilience is lived as community building and belonging through everyday practices such as language use and traditional knowledge and collective practices. Second, it considers how Sámi self-representation through duodji, joik and cultural productions carries collective and cultural memory drawing on a cultural trauma. The final part explores how Sámi people navigate different ontological perspectives in conflicts over land and natural resources, but also in more subtle tensions around the concept of time and education. Together, these findings frame Sámi resilience as a continuous negotiation within an enduring settler-colonial context.

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Table of Contents

LIST OF APPENDICES	3
LIST OF FIGURES	4
LIST OF SÁMI WORDS	5
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	6
CHAPTER II. BACKGROUND	8
THE SÁMI PEOPLE	8
THE CASE OF GUOVDAGEAIDNU (KAUTOKEINO)	10
COLONISATION ACROSS SÁPMI AND NORWEGIANIZATION	11
RACIAL SCIENCE AND THE LEGACY OF DISTRUST	12
CHAPTER III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	15
ONTOLOGIES AND KNOWLEDGE	15
SAMI SELF-REPRESENTATION THROUGH ART.....	17
SAMI WAY OF LIVING IN NORWAY	19
PREVIOUS STUDIES.....	20
CHAPTER IV. METHODS AND REFLEXIVITY	23
RESEARCH DESIGN AND POSITIONALITY	23
ETHICS, DILEMMAS AND REFLEXIVITY	24
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	26
CHAPTER V. COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH DAILY TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE	29
LANGUAGE AS A FOUNDATION OF BELONGING	29
SAMI TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE	30
COLLECTIVE PRACTICES	35
CHAPTER VI. COLLECTIVE AND CULTURAL MEMORY: SÁMI SELF-REPRESENTATION THROUGH ART 42	
DUODJI.....	42
THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION: A CULTURAL TRAUMA	47
THE REBELLION REPRESENTED IN THE MUNICIPAL MUSEUM	49
THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION MOVIE	51
THE REBELLION REPRESENTED THROUGH A BALLET.....	52
THE JOIK.....	55
CHAPTER VII. BETWEEN SIIDA AND STATE	59
THE ALTA-KAUTOKEINO HYDROPOWER PROJECT: THE ONTOLOGICAL CONFLICT	59
NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT, LAND AND THE GOVERNANCE OF REINDEER HUSBANDRY	66
OTHER ONTOLOGICAL CONFLICTS IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE: THE CONCEPT OF TIME	70
CONFLICTS IN EDUCATION	72
CHAPTER VIII. CONCLUSION	75
BIBLIOGRAPHY	77

List of Appendices

Appendix 1: List of figures

Appendix 2: List of Sámi words

List of Figures

Figure 1. Map showing the different traditional areas of the Sámi languages across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Made by myself on QGIS, based on data from Rantanen et al. (2022).....	9
Figure 2. Map showing the reindeer migration routes in Finnmark. Made by myself on QGIS, based on data from Geonorge and National Geographic.....	10
Figure 3a. Child description of the landscape: “Above the wide tundra plains, the evening sky rests, lying low over the mountains and peaks” (approximate translation)	32
Figure 3b. Child description of the landscape: “Open, empty, a place where there are no trees; usually just tundra, with forest or open land around” and “Open land – small and big – growing bigger, like rounded hills, soft slopes, and gentle round”.....	32
Figure 4. Representation of the fences into which the reindeer are directed before getting separated in the different siida they belong to.....	38
Figure 5. Description in the Kautokeino municipal museum about the Kautokeino Rebellion exhibition.....	50
Figure 6. The dancers take a bow at the end of the ballet performance <i>Lahppon/Lost</i> , Kautokeino, November 2025.....	53
Figure 7. Sámi protestors during the hunger strike of the Alta conflict, in front of the Norwegian Parliament in Oslo, 1979. Picture from Ivar Aaserud/VG/Scanpix. Licence Begrensetgjenbruk.....	62
Figure 8. Tab explaining Philippe Descola’s theory on the four ontologies.....	63

List of Sámi words

Guovdageaidnu: Kautokeino

Siida: Cooperative unit of families sharing pasture lands and undertaking seasonal migrations together (Sara, 2009)

Duodji: Sámi traditional handicraft

Gákti: Sámi traditional dress

Joik: Sámi traditional way of singing

Goavddis: Sámi sacred drum

Lavvu: Sámi traditional portable tent

Sámi Allaskuvla: Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Kautokeino

RiddoDuottarMuseat: Kautokeino municipal museum

Biigá: Home helper

Chapter I. Introduction

In the highland plateau of Finnmark in the northernmost reaches of Norway, lies Kautokeino, or *Guovdageaidnu* in Northern Sámi, a municipality that remains one of the most distinctly Sámi communities in Scandinavia. Here, the Sámi language is spoken everywhere, reindeer herding remains the principal economic activity for many families, and the seasons structure the rhythms of the year. In this place, and among the people who inhabit it, Sámi people are negotiating between traditions, their own way of living and external pressures from the Norwegian state.

This thesis draws on a short ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kautokeino, combining participant observation, informal conversations and content analysis of cultural institutions including museum exhibitions, a movie and a ballet both produced by Sámi artists. I also engage with literature on Sámi life, decolonial theory and indigenous resilience. As a non-Sámi anthropologist, I am aware of the ethical and methodological complexities this position entails, and I engage with questions of positionality and epistemic responsibility throughout the work.

The aim of this thesis is to explore resilience from an indigenous perspective, more specifically from the Sámi people in Kautokeino. The first research question that I ask is how resilience is lived as community building and sense of belonging in the daily traditional practices in Kautokeino. Next, I explore how Sámi self-representation through visual and performing art carry different dimensions of memory, constituting a form of resilience. Finally, I ask how Sámi people in Kautokeino navigate between different ontological perspectives as indigenous people living in Norway. These questions emerge from a recognition that the Sámi people, the indigenous population of the northern regions spanning Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia, continue to navigate the structural and cultural pressures of a colonial relationship that is far from historical. Rather than treating resilience as a simple response to adversity, this thesis approaches the concept as an active and ongoing process that is embedded in daily practices, expressed through collective, cultural memory and artistic self-representation, and read in political and ontological conflicts over land, governance, and knowledge.

After providing necessary historical and geographic context of the Sámi people in Norway and the particularity of Kautokeino in chapter II, the next chapter presents the theoretical literature

and previous research that frame the analysis of this thesis. Chapter IV addresses the methodological choices that shaped the fieldwork, including the challenges and ethical considerations of this research.

To answer the research questions, I explore in chapter V Sámi resilience firstly through the everyday life in Kautokeino, especially from my experience living with a reindeer herding family, the language use, traditional knowledge, and collective practices such as berry picking and reindeer herding. I argue that these practices function not merely as cultural preservation or act of resistance but as acts of community building and belonging.

Next, I engage with Sámi self-representation through art forms such as duodji and joik as practices of collective memory that Sámi people in Kautokeino actively construct and transmit across generations. In the same chapter, I also analyse how Sámi self-representation through a movie and ballet performance can be understood as cultural memory (Assman, 2011), drawing on the event of the Kautokeino Rebellion of 1852, which I relate to the concept of cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004).

In chapter VI, I present another meaningful event for the Sámi community, the Alta-Kautokeino hydropower project, to illustrate the political dimensions of colonial pressures with conflicts over land and natural resources, as a real ontological tension with the Norwegian state. These tensions can also be found in the governance of reindeer husbandry, as well as in more subtle situations in the daily life, such as the concept of time and education.

The thesis closes with a conclusion drawing on the concept of settler colonialism explored by Kuokkanen (2020) and McGuire (2022), that synthesises the findings of this ethnographic study of the Sámi life in Kautokeino. I finally reflect on what this research can contribute to, conversations about indigenous resilience, decolonisation and the enduring ontological situation between indigenous communities and Western capitalist ideologies.

Chapter II. Background

This chapter provides the historical and contextual foundations necessary to understand the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in *Guovdageaidnu* (Kautokeino), a predominantly Sámi municipality in the county of Finnmark, northern Norway. It begins with a broad overview of who are the Sámi people, their history and the processes of colonisation and oppression that they have experienced, focusing primarily on the case of the Norwegian colonial encounter. It then addresses the dark history between Sámi communities and outside researchers, particularly anthropologists and racial scientists from 1800s onwards, a legacy that continues to shape the conditions of social science fieldwork in Sápmi today. Finally, I will contextualise the specific history of Kautokeino, briefly explaining the Kautokeino rebellion of 1852 and the Alta River conflict of 1979-1981 that will be further detailed in chapter VII.

The Sámi People

The Sámi are the indigenous people of the circumpolar region known as Sápmi, englobing the northernmost parts of present-day Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula of Russia (see figure 1). As Lethola (2004) notes, archaeological and linguistic evidence situates Sámi habitation in these territories for at least two thousand years. Their traditional homeland preceded the formation of any of the contemporary nation-states that today divide it, and the concept of Sápmi as a trans-national cultural space remains central to contemporary Sámi identity (Kent, 2014).

The Sámi are composed of a range of peoples speaking distinct but related languages. The communities have historically been differentiated by their livelihood constituted of reindeer herding, sea and river fishing, hunting, and small-scale agriculture practices, moving between inland, coastal and mountain areas, as many of them were nomadic groups. Reindeer herding has become a powerful symbol of Sámi cultural identity, though today only a minority of Sámi are actively involved in it as a full-time economic practice (Britannica, 2026). *Duodji*, the traditional Sámi craft was and still is a meaningful practice and form of knowledge among the community, as well as other forms of expression such as the *joik*, a Sámi traditional way of singing.

The Sámi society is organised around the *siida*, a cooperative unit of families sharing pasture lands and undertaking seasonal migrations together (Sara, 2009). Sámi religious life originally

centred on shamanic practices, using ritual objects such as the sacred drum (*goavddis*), eradicated from the seventeenth century onwards by Christian missionaries (Kent, 2014). The majority of the Sámi population today belongs to the Lutheran Church, with a strong presence of Laestadianism movement in northern Sámi communities (Lethola, 2015).



Figure 1. Map showing the different traditional areas of the Sámi languages across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Made by myself on QGIS, based on data from Rantanen et al. (2022).

Today, the Sámi population across all four states is estimated at between 80,000 and 100,000 people, though exact numbers are difficult to establish given the absence of ethnic registers in national censuses and the complex histories of assimilation that have led many individuals with Sámi ancestry to lose or suppress their heritage. Norway is the country with the largest Sámi population, with approximately half of the community living there. (Britannica, 2026; Skaar 2023).

The case of Guovdageaidnu (Kautokeino)

Kautokeino is a municipality in Finnmark county, the northernmost county of Norway. The Sámi name *Guovdageaidnu* derives from the Northern Sámi word for “halfway”, reflecting the settlement’s traditional location between two major reindeer migration routes (see figure 2), and more broadly its position at the geographical heart of Northern Sápmi (Sara, 2009). Its population is around 2,850 people, with around 90 – 96 percent of the municipality residents being Northern Sámi speakers, making Kautokeino the most Sámi-speaking municipality in Norway (Sara, 2009; Britannica, 2026), also informally called the “capital” of Sápmi (according to my interlocutors).

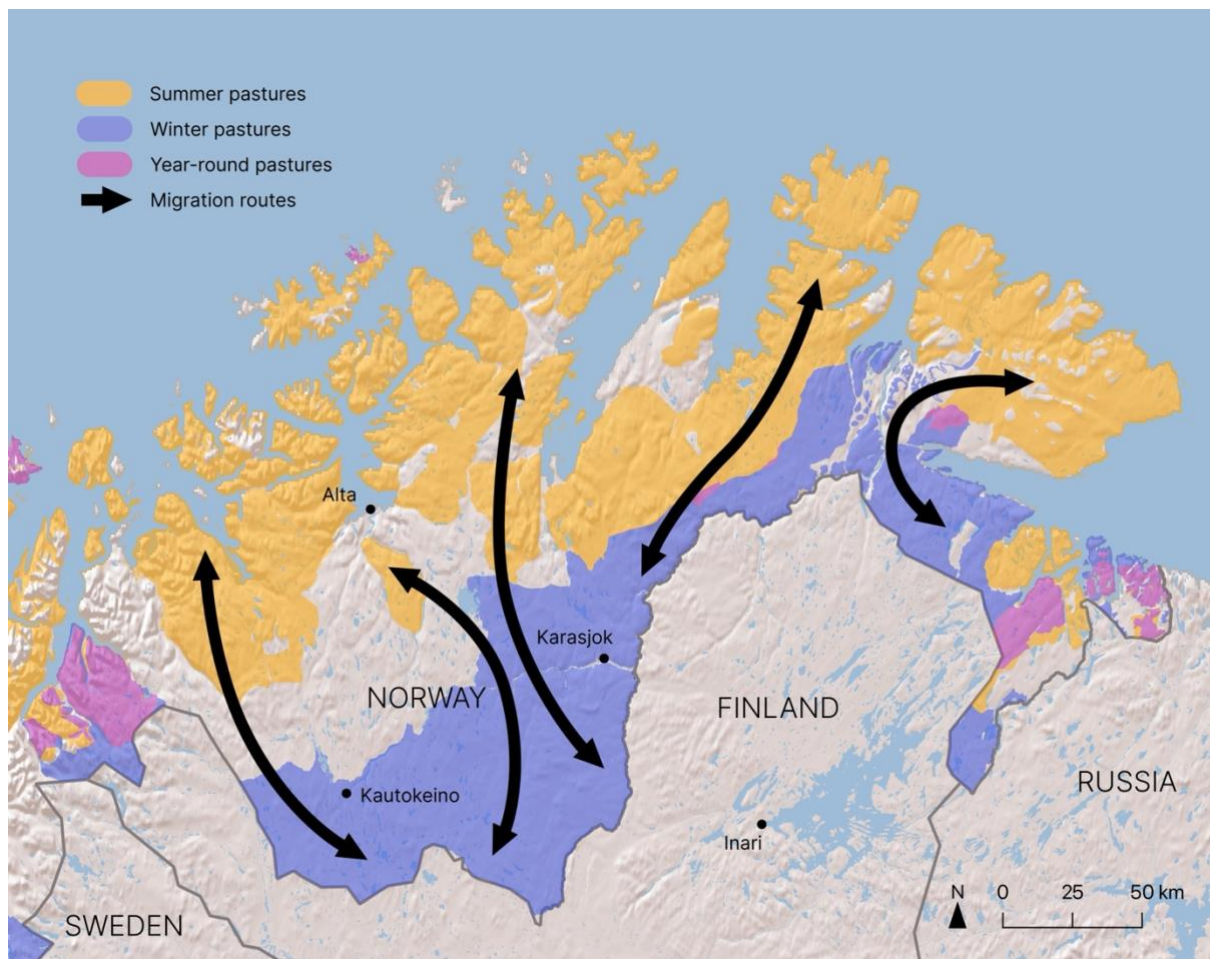


Figure 2. Map showing the reindeer migration routes in Finnmark. Made by myself on QGIS, based on data from Geonorge (n.d) and National Geographic.

The municipality is home to a concentration of Sámi cultural and educational institutions, including *Sámi Allaskuvla* (the Sámi University of Applied Sciences), the Nordic Sámi Research Institute, the *Beaivváš* Sámi Theatre, or the International Centre of Reindeer Husbandry (Sara, 2009; IWGIA, 2023). Kautokeino was also the first municipality in Norway to receive an official Sámi-language name in 1987 (Andersen & Midttun, 1985).

In Norway, there are approximately 250, 000 semi-domesticated reindeer herded on around 40% of the mainland of the country, of which 73% of all reindeer are in the Finnmark region (Johnsen, Benjaminsen, & Eira, 2015, p. 230). In 2024 there were roughly 78,000 to 80,000 reindeer in Western Finnmark, where of the 2877 inhabitants of Kautokeino, 1517 are identified as private reindeer herders, divided among 213 “rightsholders” (Eira, Eira, & Mathiesen, 2025, pp. 3-4). During winter season, reindeer and their herders migrate in the south inland part of the region, whereas the summer, spring and autumn pastures can be found on the coastal areas (see figure 2). Only people of Sámi ethnicity are allowed to own reindeer and all herding is regulated under the Reindeer Husbandry Act of 2007. Since 2014, the national management of reindeer husbandry is fixed by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (LMD), and the regional management by County Governors, with the Reindeer Husbandry Board sitting in an advisory role in between (Johnsen, Benjaminsen, & Eira, 2015).

Colonisation Across Sápmi and Norwegianization

While the precise character and chronology of colonial policies differed between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, all four states subjected the Sámi to policies aimed at assimilation, resource extraction, and the suppression of their distinct identity (Lethola 2004; Kent 2014; Minde, 2003).

From the mediaeval period, the Norwegian Crown and the Catholic Church gradually extended their authority into Sámi territories. From the seventeenth century, Christian missionaries operating under the authority of the Danish Norwegian College of Missions in Copenhagen targeted Sámi religious practices (Kortekangas et al., 2025). Sweden and Norway imposed the settlement of non-Sámi populations in Sámi territories through violence (Kent, 2014), and the discovery of natural resources like fish, minerals, timber, in these territories brought the Norwegian state into conflict with Sámi livelihoods and land rights (Minde, 2003; Paine, 1982).

The period from approximately 1950 to 1980 was an intensive phase of colonial domination of the Sámi in Norway, defined above all by the official state policy of *fornorsking*, commonly translated as Norwegianization: a programme of forced assimilation explicitly aimed at erasing Sámi language, culture and identity in favour of a culturally and linguistically homogeneous Norwegian national population (Minde, 2003). Norway, which had only gained independence from Denmark in 1814 and remained in a union with Sweden until 1905, was engaged throughout the nineteenth century in the intensive project of constructing a unified national identity. The Sámi, along with the Kven and the Tornedalians, also indigenous peoples in the Norwegian and Swedish Arctic, were viewed as culturally inferior, linguistically alien and economically backward (Minde, 2003; Skaar, 2023). From 1851, Norwegian-language teachers were sent in Sápmi with the explicit aim of replacing minority languages with Norwegian. In Finnmark and other areas of northern Norway, Sámi children were removed from their families for extended periods, forbidden from speaking their native language and put into state-run boarding schools oriented towards Norwegian language and culture, and Christian values (TRC Norway 2023; Jones, 2025). The policy was not officially over until 1963, but the Norwegian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2023 report documented that Norwegianization did not formally cease even when officially abandoned, but rather continued long after (TRC Norway, 2023).

The consequences of this policy were profound across all Sápmi, with a specific emphasis on coastal Sámi people. The number of Sámi speakers declined sharply, sometimes with a transmission entirely broken within two or three generations (TRC Norway 2023; Minde, 2003). Many individuals and families experienced shame and an internalised stigma about Sámi identity transmitted across generations (Eidheim, 1971). The loss not only concerned the language but also material culture, knowledge of traditional livelihoods, ritual practice etc.

Racial Science and the Legacy of Distrust

The Norwegianization policy drew on the Social Darwinist ideology, considering Sámi language and culture as evolutionary inferior to the dominant Norwegian society (Kyllingstad, 2014). Scientists and researchers participated actively in projects of racial classification by measuring skulls and cataloguing physical characteristics that positioned the Sámi as an inferior race to legitimate the colonial project.

From the mid-nineteenth century, the Sámi became objects of intense scientific interest across Europe. Paul Pierre Broca, French anatomist and founding father of anthropology, established in the late 1850s, anthropometry as the most effective method for measuring and classifying the different human “races” (Baglo, 2008). The emergence of physical anthropology and racial biology created a powerful demand for human bodies and skeletal remains for measurements and classification, to what Sámi individuals were subjected to humiliating and invasive procedures. As Kyllingstad (2014) has shown in his study of physical anthropology in Norway between 1980 and 1945, the discipline was institutionally integrated with this ideology of Norwegian racial superiority and denied Sámi political and cultural rights on the basis of their supposed inferiority.

In Sweden, the state sponsored racial biology and was particularly extreme in its targeting of the Sámi. An example of what was happening in the south of the country, and more precisely at Lund University, was the work of the Swedish zoologist and archaeologist Sven Nilsson: associating present-day peoples with prehistoric ones, he took the examples of colonized populations within the British Empire, but also Sámi people. He argued that Sámi were closely related to the original inhabitants of Scandinavia and were associated with a “dwarfish race”. He used cranial measurements of skulls that were under Lund’s University Museum’s possession and based his arguments on craniology and ethnographic and anthropological studies of “savages”, situated in this period of Darwinian evolutionary thinking (Burnett, 2025).

The consequences of this history for the practice of research in Sámi communities have been significant and long-lasting. Anthropology, as the discipline most directly associated in the popular imagination with the study of “primitive” or “exotic” people, carries a particular burden of suspicion and judgement inside the community. The legacy of extractive and denigrating research practices means that the outside researchers (in my case a French student in anthropology in Sweden), continue to navigate a landscape of apprehension and where trust is difficultly earned.

In Kautokeino, on 8 November 1852, the town became the site of the event known as the Kautokeino rebellion, one of the very few violent acts of Sámi resistance to Norwegian colonial domination (Lethola, 2004; Andresen, 2007). The aftermath of the rebellion was directed against the Sámi, presented by scholars and the majority population at the time as an act of “religious insanity” and reduced to the consequences of the community’s overuse of alcohol (Andresen, 2007). For a long time, the event was considered a shame by the community but

later became a central point of reference in Sámi historical consciousness and a symbol of resistance to colonial oppression.

Another significant and famous political event in Sámi history in Norway is the Alta conflict: a prolonged series of protests from 1979 to 1981 against the Norwegian state's plan to construct a major hydroelectric dam on the Alta-Kautokeino River system (Paine, 1982).

Details and analyses about the events will be further explained in chapter VII, as I argue that they are directly connected to the topic of ontological conflict and settler colonialism.

Chapter III. Theoretical framework

This chapter goes through the theoretical framework I am using in the thesis to explain my arguments and interpretations of the empirical data collected during the ethnographic fieldwork. I also draw on previous studies about Sámi culture, history and political issues, as well as indigenous and minorities studies that enable a better understanding and development of my own research.

Ontologies and knowledge

In the thesis, two frameworks are put in tension to illustrate the ontological conflicts happening in Kautokeino: by going through Philippe Descola's theory first, I set a picture of an interesting way of differentiating how societies live with the environment around the world. However, during the analysis I demonstrate that Tim Ingold's concepts are more dynamic and relatable to what I encounter during the fieldwork and during my research on Sámi way of perceiving the world and living in it.

In his book *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2005), Descola comes up with a theory of four different ontologies, that I will mostly use as a counter idea, in contrast with Ingold's concepts of dwelling and taskscape, illustrated also in the transcription of a debate between the two anthropologists in *Être au monde: Quelle expérience commune?* (2014).

By dissociating the physical world and the moral world, Descola explains with four ontologies societies' relationship with nonhuman entities: naturalism, animism, totemism and analogism. The naturalist and animist ontologies are the ones I will focus on during my analysis. In the naturalist ontology, which Descola associates mostly to Western societies, a person and a non-human entity would share the same physical world and exterior environment, but a different moral world which we could associate with emotions, "soul", internal reflexions, etc. Whereas in the animist ontology, associated mostly to indigenous societies, the person and, for example, a fish, don't share the same physical environment, their exteriority is different, but they do have interior similarities such as emotions, thoughts and feelings.

Drawing on Tim Ingold's book *The perception of the Environment* (2000), this thesis uses the concepts of dwelling and taskscape to analyse Sámi traditional practices and knowledge in Kautokeino. The dwelling perspective argues that human knowledge and perception of the

world emerges through practical, embodied engagement with it over time. They know it by inhabiting it, moving through it, and working with it across generations.

Closely related to it is the concept of the taskscape: the ensemble of interrelated activities that constitute life in a place, where the timing and texture of one task is always shaped by the others. Knowledge is transmitted not through the transfer of abstract information but through a process by which a learner, guided by a more experienced practitioner, progressively learns to perceive and respond to the environment in skilled ways. These concepts will be central for the first empirical chapter, which I illustrate with empirical data about daily traditional practices and knowledge transmission in Kautokeino. In the last empirical chapter, Ingold's framework will be put in tension with Philippe Descola's theory of ontologies; arguing that while Descola offers a useful structural vocabulary for identifying ontological difference between societies, his fixed representations underestimate the processual and practice-based character of Indigenous knowledge that Ingold's approach better captures.

Rauna Kuokkanen is a Finnish Sámi political theorist and scholar whose work sits at the intersection of Indigenous studies, political science, feminist theory and postcolonial thought. In this thesis I will use her concept of the "logic of the gift" in relation to Indigenous epistemologies and the Western academy. In her book *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift* (2007), she argues that Western academia operates as a kind of "epistemic ignorance": it systematically fails to recognize, receive, or engage with Indigenous knowledge systems on their own terms, which she associates with colonialism. This is not simply a matter of individual prejudice or lack of information, but a structural condition of the academy itself, which had been built on the exclusion and appropriation of indigenous epistemes. Drawing on Marcel Mauss's anthropological concept of the gift, she proposes that the university must learn to genuinely receive Indigenous epistemes as gifts, which requires a fundamental restructuring of institutional responsibility and hospitality. Kuokkanen is critical of the way Western academia works, including postcolonial theories that tend to assimilate Indigenous thoughts into their own conceptual vocabularies. Meaning that when postcolonial theory, for instance, reads Indigenous cultural practices primarily through the lens of resistance, hybridity, or subaltern voice, it risks reducing Indigenous epistemes to reactions against colonialism rather than recognizing them as autonomous, generative knowledge systems with their own internal logic. In this thesis I use Kuokkanen's concepts first in a methodological way, to treat Sámi daily practices and cultural expressions as autonomous rather than defining them primarily in

relation to the Norwegian state or society. Her concept of epistemic ignorance will be used in the first and second empirical chapter to analyse Sámi knowledge and Sámi self-representation through art and cultural institution.

Later I will use her work on settler colonialism in the conclusion to illustrate the ongoing colonial practices happening in Sápmi.

During my research, I have tried to use as many Sámi scholars as possible to analyse my empirical data. I do not believe that Sámi scholars voices and work can speak for all the Sámi communities, but many of them share personal histories and experiences through their work, which were even more interesting for my research when they were themselves from the Finnmark region.

The concept of double perspective (2022) was developed in the context of Indigenous health and knowledge research by Anna Lydia Svalastog, Shawn Wilson, Harald Gaski, Kate Senior and Richard Chenhall, anthropologists and researchers in indigenous studies. This concept describes the capacity of indigenous people who have grown up under colonial pressure to navigate simultaneously between their own indigenous knowledge systems and the dominant Western frameworks imposed upon them. It does not simply refer to bilingualism or biculturalism, but a more cognitive and existential condition in which one must constantly translate and negotiate between different worldviews. In Kautokeino, this double perspective is visible in how Sámi individuals engage with Norwegian state institutions, educational systems, administration etc., while simultaneously maintaining practices, relationships, and ways of knowing that operate according to entirely different logics. Rather than framing the double perspective as a burden alone, the authors engage to understand it as a form of situated knowledge and navigational skill.

Sami self-representation through art

In this thesis I use Jeffrey Alexander's sociological theory of cultural trauma which argues that trauma is not always a psychological event experienced by individuals, but a collective process through which a community comes to understand that something has happened that fundamentally threatens its identity and sense of the world. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), he argues that trauma is a social and cultural construction occurring when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a "horrendous" (2004) event that leaves indelible marks on their group. He emphasizes that it requires a process of

representation, narration, and public acknowledgement before it becomes constitutive of collective identity. I argue that The Kautokeino Rebellion functions as cultural trauma in this sense. Long suppressed or narrated from the perspective of the Norwegian state, it is today retelling through Sámi artistic and cultural production, representing an active reclamation of the event, on Sámi terms. Long felt as a shameful event by the community as it was negatively narrated by scholars and Norwegian media, it is today claimed by the community as an act of resistance against the persecutive state.

I also use the work *On Collective memory* (Halbwachs, 1992) that goes against the dominant psychological view of the early twentieth century that memory is an individual and interior faculty. For Halbwachs, memory is shaped by social frameworks within which we live. His concept of collective memory is carried by living people in ongoing social interaction, shared practices, and everyday life. The collective memory is not archived, it circulates, and is less about the past than the present, especially the present needs of the group. According to him, communities remember what is useful and meaningful for maintaining their coherence and identity in the present, which makes it also selective and always in a process of being reshaped. Halbwachs also argue that there are as many collective memories as there are social groups: different communities will remember the same events very differently, because they are constructing the past from different present positions. In the thesis, this will be relevant to practices like joik and duodji. They are not archived or institutionalized practices (except duodji exhibited in museums), but they are practice-based, social and transmitted through participation and relationship. In Kautokeino, they live in the practice and in the community.

Jan Assmann (2011), working with his spouse Aleida Assmann, built on Halbwachs (1992) the concept of cultural memory described as a more fixed mode of remembering, carried by texts, monuments, artworks, and sacred sites, what he terms as “figures of memory”, fixed points a community return to across generations. Cultural memory in this sense deals with a foundational past, often beyond living experience. It is formalized and institutionalized, requiring specialized carriers such as artists, archivists, teachers and embedded in institutions (art, education, law etc.) that give it durability beyond any individual lifespan. However, for my analysis, the more productive tool is the distinction Aleida Assmann (2008) draws within cultural memory, between its active and passive dimensions. Passive cultural memory is the archive: material that is stored, preserved, but removed from active use. Active cultural memory is the canon: the selected body of objects, works and narratives that a community

keeps in living circulation, actively representing and engaging in the present. The two are not opposed but continuous, since material can move from one to the other. What distinguishes them is whether cultural memory is merely stored or actively kept alive: “The institutions of active memory preserve the past as present while the institutions of passive memory preserve the past as past” (A. Assmann, 2008, p. 98). I use this distinction to read duodji and related Sámi cultural expressions across both modes. Duodji preserved in museums exemplifies the passive, archival dimension. By contrast, the duodji programme at the Sámi University, The Kautokeino Rebellion movie and the ballet performed in Kautokeino during my stay exemplify the active dimension. As I argue in the chapter, this active mode is closely tied to Sámi self-representation and resilience.

Sami way of living in Norway

The concept of resistance as it has been developed by different authors (e.g. Scott, 1985; Foucault, 1976), defining practice primarily oriented against domination, seems suitable to illustrate many Sámi political actions, for example during the rebellion of 1852, the Alta dam project conflicts or even today, many Sámi activists form resistance groups and demonstrations against the state or external actors. In Kautokeino, moments of organized resistance are historically significant, and it is still a relevant dimension of Sámi political life through current demonstrations and activism. However, my fieldwork in Kautokeino didn’t reveal such events or claim, but rather that the Sámi way of living and Sámi self-expression in daily life is not primarily structured by opposition. As one interlocutor put it: “People ask us if we celebrate Sámi National day. It’s Sámi day everyday here.” This suggests that resistance, while real, does not centrally define the texture of everyday life in Kautokeino, as it risks reducing Sámi life to a reaction against colonialism.

Instead, Sherry Ortner in *Anthropology and Social Theory* (2006) and *Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal* (1995), suggests the distinction between resistive agency, which is connected to acting against power, versus projective agency, that relates to pursuing one’s own culturally shaped goals and desires. In *Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal* (1995), she argues that anthropologists have over-applied resistance frameworks in ways that flatten the complexity of what people do and feel in their daily lives.

Ortner’s distinction between resistive agency and projective agency offers a more adequate framework for what I observed in Kautokeino. Projective agency is oriented not against

something but toward something: a good life, a meaningful practice, a valued relationship. This framing honours the vitality and intentionality of Sámi everyday life without reducing it to a response to Norwegian colonialism.

Moreover, I argue that the concept of resilience is also more adequate to illustrate what I encountered during the fieldwork. During my analysis, I will also use the concept of resilience especially from Kirmayer et al (2011) in their article *Rethinking Resilience from Indigenous Perspectives*. They rethink resilience from an indigenous perspective, challenging the dominant psychological model of the term merely as an individual trait that emerges only in relation to risk and oppression. They propose a more dynamic model in which resilience is collective and relational, grounded in land, language, community, and the continuity of knowledge systems (in the case of this thesis: reindeer herding, duodji, etc.) across generations. The authors argue that resilience is not merely a reaction to colonial pressure but still can't be treated as existing independently of that history. Resilience from an indigenous perspective then draws on cultural resources that exist on their own terms, which can be mobilized and transformed in certain cases in the face of colonial adversity. For Sámi people in Kautokeino, daily or recurrent traditional practices are not best understood as a reaction to colonial pressure but as the ongoing vitality of a way of life that has maintained coherence and meaning despite attempts of erasure.

Previous studies

In this thesis I refer many times to the book *The Sámi World* (Valkonen, Aikio, Alakorva & Magga, 2022), which is a rich comprehensive and up-to-date academic collections on Sámi society, culture, politics and knowledge systems available in English. Edited by the Norwegian Sámi Parliament president Silje Karine Muotka and bringing together a wide range of Sámi and non-Sámi scholars, the volume covers a broad scope of topics concerning Sámi peoples: from Sámi legal and political frameworks, ongoing debates, Sámi languages land rights, reindeer herding, arts and education. The book is oriented toward Sámi self-representation and indigenous epistemology, as many of its contributors are themselves Sámi and writing from their own experience. For this thesis, *The Sámi World* functions as an essential reference point and contextual foundation. It provides empirical and theoretical grounding for the discussion of Sámi everyday life, cultural practices and political conditions in Norway, which helps the thesis' analysis of Sámi identity negotiation and cultural resilience.

Reindeer Husbandry: Resilience in the Changing Arctic, Volume 2 (Mathiesen et al., 2024), examines reindeer herding communities across the circumpolar Arctic, including Sámi herders in Norway, Sweden and Finland, through the lens of resilience in the face of rapid environmental, climatic and socio-political change. Drawing on both scientific research and indigenous knowledge systems, the work investigates how herding communities adapt their practices, transmit their knowledge, and maintain livelihood under conditions of uncertainty. This volume integrates reindeer herders as knowledge producers rather than merely research subjects and encourages traditional ecological knowledge and Western scientific framework to work together. This work is relevant to the thesis as it gives more contextual information about reindeer herding, and crucial details that I haven't encountered during fieldwork, but which are essential to the analysis on ontological conflicts concerning management of land and animals.

Another meaningful work that this thesis mentions and puts in contrast with my own study is Astri Dankertsen's article "*Fragments of the Future. Decolonization in Sami Everyday Life*" (2016), that draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in the Lule and Marka Sámi area in Northern Nordland and Southern Troms in Norway. Her central argument is that decolonization for Sámi people is not only a political or institutional project but something performed and lived out in the everyday life. Working through postcolonial and indigenous theory, she analyses what she calls "performed Saminess", the ways in which individuals articulate and enact their Sámi identity daily, often fragmented, ambivalent and in quietly embodied ways rather than through visible markers such as political movements. Her study shows similarities with this thesis in the way she explores how people in this region "recreate the in-between space, altering it from something chaotic and unpredictable [from decolonization] to a Sámi Norwegian intercultural space where they can perform their own sense of cultural belonging". However, this thesis reveals a contrast between Dankertsen's fieldwork site characterized by fragmentation and the partial suppression of Sámi identity as a legacy of Norwegianization, whereas Kautokeino represents a different situation since it is a part of Norway where Sámi people are the majority of the population, with a reindeer herding economy that continues to structure daily life. This contrast illuminates how Sámi resilience and agency take different forms depending on the specific history and geography of the community, which caution against homogenizing account of Sámi everyday life and self-representation.

In previous research, Kuokkanen (2020; 2022) and McGuire (2022) have both engaged with settler colonialism in the case of Sápmi. Kuokkanen argues that the Sámi situation cannot be understood through a generic postcolonial framework that concern mostly overseas European empires, but through settler colonialism instead, which means that the colonizing population does not simply extract resources and govern from a distance, but permanently settles in the land and seeks to eliminate or absorb the indigenous population. Both Kuokkanen and McGuire demonstrate the settler colonialism model happening in Sápmi through different political examples such as the creation of national Sámi parliaments as contributing to that model (McGuire, 2022) or through the example of the Deatnu Agreement of the Deatnu River in Sápmi, negotiated between Norway and Finland (Kuokkanen, 2020). Kuokkanen's concept of epistemic ignorance, discussed in the theoretical framework, is embedded within this settler-colonialist analysis. In this thesis, I try to show this model through people's struggle in everyday life to negotiate between the Sámi philosophy and way of living, and the Norwegian policies and pressure on them. I also argue that this settler colonialism can be read through the lens of ontological differences and conflicts, adding that indigenous perspectives and epistemes are not taking into consideration as they are not in the state's interest, and don't align with capitalists' ideologies.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the subaltern speak?" (2010), poses a delicate question for any scholar working on marginalized or colonized communities: can those who have been systematically excluded from structures of power make themselves heard within those very structures, or does the act of speaking within dominant frameworks reproduce the conditions of their own subordination? In her work, Spivak doesn't argue that subaltern people lack voices or agency, but that the systems through which their words are received are structured by colonial and patriarchal power. This work is relevant to this thesis because the argument demands reflexivity from my own side as a European anthropologist: this thesis must remain attentive to its own position as an external academic framing of Sámi life, and to the risk that its empirical data, however carefully used, may enact the form of the epistemic ignorance that Kuokkanen identifies.

This theoretical framework used along the thesis was chosen in an attempt to reflect the complexity of what I encounter during fieldwork, and what it means to study Sámi life in Kautokeino.

Chapter IV. Methods and reflexivity

Research design and positionality

The data was collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Kautokeino, Norway, where I stayed during five weeks in October and November 2025 in a Sámi family. The father who I will call Klaus, works as a reindeer herder, and the mother who I call Maria runs a company selling products across Norway. They have three small kids between 3- and 9-years old living with them. I also met relatives on both Klaus' and Maria's sides such as their siblings, cousins, parents or nieces and nephews.

As the access to fieldwork and to the Sámi community in general is a challenge for social scientists, I decided to get an entry through a volunteering position from an online platform where my host family was searching for a volunteer to help mostly Maria in her daily life, with chores around the house and taking care of the kids, with the possibility to help with reindeer herding work according to the season. The platform principle works as, in exchange for volunteers' help, the accommodation and food are provided by the host family, along with the cultural insight. When looking for a place on the platform, I kept my options open regarding the country, as long as it was in Sápmi territory. I also didn't mind the tasks people were asking volunteers to do, as the only parameters I had in mind was that they had somehow a close relationship with animals and/or nature through their work or hobbies, and of course, that they agreed on me doing my research with them. For each place I applied to volunteer, I made sure to present myself as studying anthropology in Sweden, my age, that I come from France and that I wanted to use this volunteering experience to do research for my master thesis. Without going into details, I specified that my research interests focused on people's relationship with the environment, especially in the arctic and that I was very interested in Sámi culture. After many exchanges with several families across Sápmi, Maria agreed on me coming to their place in Kautokeino, and one week later I was on a night train in direction to Northern Norway.

As a non-Sámi, French and outsider to the community, I neither speak Northern Sámi nor Norwegian. I have an intermediate language level of Swedish which helped understanding some Norwegian in some cases, but most conversations I had with interlocutors were in English. The language barrier wasn't challenging as most of the people I encountered were very good English speakers, but Northern Sámi or Norwegian was sometimes used by the

people I was spending time with if they were talking directly to each other, judging that I didn't need to understand their conversations.

Ethics, dilemmas and reflexivity

As someone who recently moved to a Scandinavian country, I genuinely felt interested and motivated to do research with the indigenous people living in this part of Europe. Having graduated from an anthropology bachelor's degree in France, I have been exposed to a certain appreciation to Philippe Descola's famous work on ontologies and animism. This influenced many of my readings and the reason why I was interested in indigenous people's relationship with the environment and non-human entities in the first place, and more recently especially in the Arctic.

Conducting research with the Sámi people as an anthropology student requires honest engagement with the discipline's own troubled history in the region. As explained in the background chapter, throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Sámi people were subjected to racial classification, skull measurements and ethnographic research that served colonial agendas rather than the interests of the community itself. French and Swedish researchers in particular were mentioned by one of my interlocutors during the field, who laughed at me when I presented myself as a French woman, studying anthropology in Sweden.

Before going to fieldwork, I was aware of these issues and challenges anthropologists face when trying to work with the Sámi community. Having talked with other anthropologists facing issues to even get in contact with Sámi people, I was warned by the complexity of it. However, I didn't expect that this legacy was that strong and that I would experience this many judgments from all people I was presenting myself to. I didn't understand it was still persistent in people's mind despite the evolvement and reform of the discipline of social anthropology. Soon enough, after only few days of fieldwork in Kautokeino, I encountered scepticism and sometimes even laughs from people for what I represented: another outside researcher, another social scientist, another study of a community that has been studied many times, and perhaps not listened to properly. From what I understood, the community feels tired of being interviewed by researchers or journalists that would stay for a few days, take the information they need and go back to write things from their own perspective, which Maria thought was often very far from what Sámi people really meant. I could feel an exhaustion from the community trying to talk

about “what everyone wants to know about, then leave and we never hear from them again” (heard several times during fieldwork).

I would be dishonest if I’d say that this didn’t affect me or my mood during my time in Kautokeino. Many times, I felt like I shouldn’t be there, I was doubting myself and my motivations for choosing such a delicate topic to do research on, but also simply my motivations for studying anthropology in the first place. My reactions to their hostility were first: I didn’t want to upset even more people I just met by trying to defend myself against their strong opinions, and second, it made me question myself significantly more than I expected. I was simply speechless. What could I say? I thought then perhaps they are right, perhaps I am not legitimate to do this research and perhaps I am indeed an enormous cliché (as someone said to me during the fieldwork).

I was not prepared enough to defend myself and my interests and it took me some time before I found the right words to reassure people, or at least my main informants. Despite knowing my intention, Maria and people I encountered during fieldwork made me feel unworthy of this research sometimes. On the other hand, my hosts told me I wasn’t the first social scientist volunteer they hosted. When I asked why they would accept us in their home and to do our research, they admitted that they were hoping that by spending time immersed in their family we would get a better understanding of what Sámi way of living is, and I guess, then share more truthful results. It took me some time before I managed to find the confidence to stand up for myself and my good intention. I came to this research with genuine interest to learn, and I hope, a measure of care.

This situation shaped how I approached the research during my time there. Navigating through this, I decided not to ask for official interviews, and tried not to sound too pushy, adopting a more subtle way of gathering information. It was hard to build relationships with people, and I sometimes chose not to say what I was studying and what I was doing there when I just wanted to have informal social interactions, tired of being judged and feeling lonely, needing some friendly company.

As during most ethnographic fieldwork, I sometimes picked up useful information from people who had not been informed about my research and thus had not agreed to be part of my study. I chose to use such data as general thoughts encountered during fieldwork, mentioning no names or biographical details.

This being said, my key interlocutors' recommendations of places, authors and events were very helpful for me and my work, opening doors for me. Staying longer would perhaps have helped gain more trust of the local community, although this was hard to organise within the time frames of thesis work.

Going to this fieldwork through the volunteering platform implied that I was not there for my research only. I agreed to work for my host family and to help as much as I could, which sometimes prevented me to organise my days and my research otherwise, but I think it was also a benefit since it allowed me to spend more time with my host family in a more informal setting to learn their way of living, and to be deeper immersed into the fieldwork.

Data collection and analysis

Considering the distrust I encountered during fieldwork, my study is limited to a few formal informants. The collection of the data consisted of fieldnotes of my days among my host family and people I met daily, going from many informal conversations to observations of what was happening in the city of Kautokeino.

Observations and qualitative content analyses of museum's exhibition are important part of the thesis, such as the *RiddoDuottarMuseat* in Kautokeino, which has a permanent exhibition of local Sámi culture. One part of the exhibition that I couldn't visit is only open during summer as it represents buildings and huts from the 1700s. However, the indoor exhibition represents Sámi handicrafts items such as traditional clothing like the *gákti*, accessories, shoes, and objects of daily uses from the past such as knives made from reindeer antlers, or wooden items ranging from milk pots to trunks. Another part of the museum is dedicated to the event of the Kautokeino rebellion of 1852, retelling the story and retracing the life of the survivant Lars Hætta. In my analysis, I use the museum to talk about how *duodji* represents a form of collective (Halbwachs, 1992) and cultural memory (Assman, 2011), but also to talk about the cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004) that the rebellion represents to the community.

At the *Alta Museum* I learned more about the Alta-Kautokeino hydropower project and conflict that happened between the 1960s and 1970s, part of the permanent exhibition "Resources and Identity" presenting topics around the city's natural resources and how they formed human activity and identity in the area over time. The story telling of the exhibition helped use the

event to analyse the ontological conflict at stake here between the Sámi and the Norwegian state.

In mid-November 2025, I visited and helped Maria and her children for a day to hold a stand selling homemade *saft* (i.e. syrup) at the annual *duodji* market in Kautokeino. The market lasts three days each year, including many Sámi handicraft, artists and companies selling their products, but also non-Sámi sellers of silver jewellery, toys and other products. During this day I used participant observation and fieldnotes to write a sub-chapter about *duodji*.

The 2008 movie *The Kautokeino Rebellion* directed by Nils Gaup served as one source of data in this study through qualitative content analysis. The film retells the 1852 uprising in Kautokeino, which I argue represents a form of cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004) today in Kautokeino, but also to the broader Sámi history. In this thesis I also associate the movie to the concept of cultural memory (Assman, 2011), as it reflects both historical and contemporary Sámi issues through a famous cultural artifact among the community.

Indeed, as the uprising marked minds and hearts among the community, a ballet choreographed by the Sámi artist Elle Sofe Sara performed nationally around Norway and had a two nights representation in Kautokeino at the end of November 2025. As I watched the ballet live in the very place where the rebellion occurred, it constitutes another data source through ethnographic observation and content analysis of the embodied language of dance, Sámi musical elements such as *joik*, and reviews from locals to me directly and from journal articles.

During an entire week I observed and participated in reindeer herding work which consisted of separating reindeer in different fences according to the *siida* they belonged to. From this, I use mostly my observations, my own feelings and body implication as data source, along with some information from Klaus and Maria. Literature research about reindeer husbandry also gave me a broader picture of the practice according to the seasons and migrations, helping me complete my knowledge about what herding implies and herders' perspective.

Literature research about Sámi culture, history, political issues, and reindeer herding was made before, during and after the fieldwork. Ahead of my time in Kautokeino, my theoretical references were mainly Western anthropologists and researchers. While I was in Sápmi, I discovered many Sámi scholars' work at the local Sámi University library, recommended by Maria, people I have met in town, Norwegian researchers and local Sámi professors.

During this time-constrained fieldwork, my host family and their close relatives and friends were my main interlocutors. Although their information was invaluable, I cannot claim that I understand the entire Kautokeino community's perspectives and opinions.

All informants and people mentioned in the thesis have pseudonyms attributed to ensure anonymity, except for the artists and people whose name are publicly recognised for their work.

Chapter V. Community building through daily traditional practices and production of knowledge

As I travelled through Sweden, crossed the Finnish border, and finally arrived in Norway, I heard the shifts between languages and noticed that the road signs around me were written in Sámi. Although I was moving through the Fennoscandian Peninsula and entering Norway for the first time, I was, above all, entering Sápmi. Kautokeino appeared to me as a special place, as it is a part of the Norwegian state where the minority is locally the majority with constant presence of Sami language and symbols but where I could observe the everyday negotiation between Sámi and Norwegian ways of living. In this chapter, I will try to picture the everyday life in Kautokeino by showing how daily cultural practices, transmission and production of knowledge contribute to community building and sense of belonging. These practices show that when cultural knowledge is transmitted, social relations are reinforced, which makes Kautokeino a unique place in the state of Norway. Moreover, I would like to call attention on my choice to present Sámi traditional practices not only through the lens of strategies against the majority part of the state in this chapter, but mostly as autonomous producers of knowledge, which I draw on Kuokkanen's work. I use Ingold's theory and concept of the dwelling perspective and taskscape, showing how we can relate it to Sámi ontology and way of producing knowledge, using my ethnographical experience among this herding family in Kautokeino.

Language as a foundation of belonging

Speaking Northern Sámi plays a central role in shaping a shared sense of belonging in Kautokeino, as the municipality has the most Sámi-speaking inhabitants in Norway, as nine out of ten people have Sámi as their first language (Living in Kautokeino, s.d.). The use of the language in everyday interactions – at home as I experienced with my host family, in school, in public places, on road signs – transmits shared values and enable people to understand each other in a special way, since many concepts related to daily activities in Sámi have no direct translation in Norwegian. For example, there are many ways in Sámi to name and describe elements of the landscape and natural environment such as the snow in its plural form,

especially for reindeer herders, depending if it's referring to snow on the ground or on trees, lakes, the sound of it, the processes and impacts of the temperature, wind or rain, and other characteristics; (Gaup Eira, 2022) and affecting herding practices. The simple fact that there originally no word in the Sámi language for a direct translation of the term "nature", but a variety of terms depending on how one is involved with the natural environment, shows that: first, "nature" is a modern concept invented by western societies, and second, that speaking Sámi in Kautokeino is a key medium through which knowledge is preserved and transmitted, but also a way of affirming collective identity and sustain the sense of community, shared values and perspectives (Magga, 2022). Historically, when the state started their unification programme and Norwegianization in Sápmi territories, people were not allowed to speak their traditional language anymore and children sent to boarding schools were reprimanded for not speaking Norwegian in their daily lives. Today it is not only a way for the Sámi people to identify themselves as part of the same community but as Teresa L. McCarty et al. mentioned in their work about language reclamation in diverse Indigenous communities in the US and Hawaii, it is "a personal yet community-oriented responsibility", and "a journey of belonging, of restoring hope for cultural continuance [...], it is about voice, community building, wellness, equality, self-empowerment and hope." (McCarty, et al., 2018, pp. 169-170). In this sense, speaking Sámi in the everyday life in Kautokeino operates as a form of cultural resilience and sense of continuity for the community, against a past of linguistic suppression and assimilation, but also enable production and transmission of knowledge in a shared environment.

Sami traditional knowledge in the everyday life

In addition to speaking Sámi at home, Sámi public schools are regulated under the Article 108 of the Norwegian Constitution, stipulating that the authorities must create conditions for Sámi people to preserve and develop their language and culture. In 2007 Norway adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which means that concerning the education system, school programs should incorporate Sámi traditional knowledge, history and cultural values. As Åmot and Bjerklund underline in their work on Sámi rights and sustainability in early childhood education and care, the *Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens* should promote "the children's Sámi language skills, strengthen their Sámi identity, and promote Sámi values, culture and traditions". A major part of the kindergartens' work focus on the relationship the community share with the environment, as the framework states that the schools should "build on a Sámi understanding

of nature to help ensure that the children can live in harmony with nature, make use of and harvest the land and develop respect for natural phenomena” (Åmot & Bjerlkund, 2023, pp. 167-168).

As I was at home with Maria and the kids on a Sunday morning, I was tidying the living room and found one of her 7 years old son’s papers from school including different pictures of landscape and natural environment with his handwriting under each of them. When I asked about it, Maria told me the assignment was for the kids to describe the landscape on the pictures, what they could see (figures 3a & 3b). The way the landscapes are described shows the attentiveness given to the details of the natural elements and phenomena happening in the pictures according to the colours, the seasonal characteristics, the shapes and textures. These attributes to the natural environment are indeed part of Sámi traditional knowledge and taught not only in a familial context but also at school from an early age, as part of the “Sámi cultural environment” which Magga defines in her work, encompass the Sámi traditional knowledge of the landscape and the environment, but also the relationship the community share with it:

Traditional knowledge is linked in many ways to the landscape, nature, natural resources and livelihoods and makes it possible to create a cohesive, rich and cartographically accurate description of an area [...]. Traditional knowledge allows for interpretation of the environment and the landscape, which in turn gives rise to the meanings that render a landscape a cultural landscape and an environment a cultural environment. (Magga, 2022, p.

139)

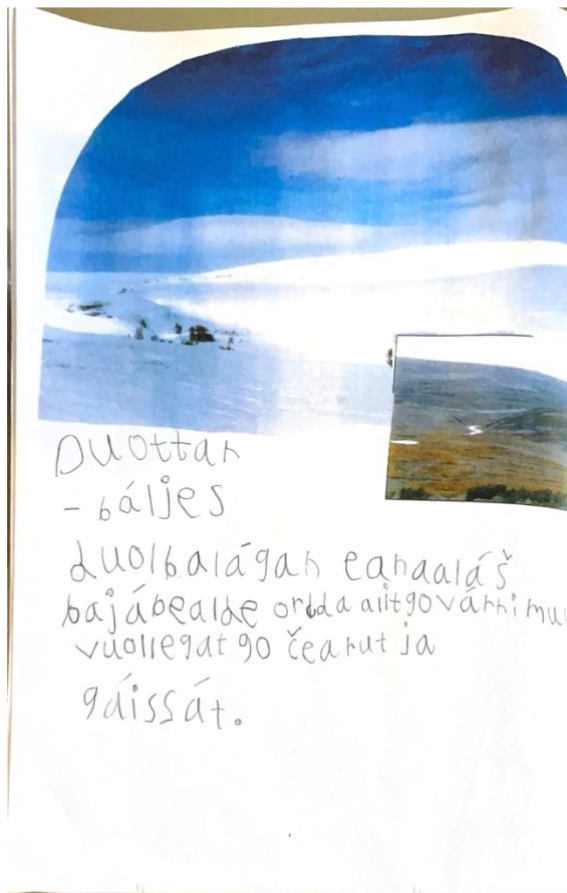


Figure 3a. Child description of the landscape:
 “Above the wide tundra plains, the evening sky
 rests, lying low over the mountains and peaks”
 (approximate translation)

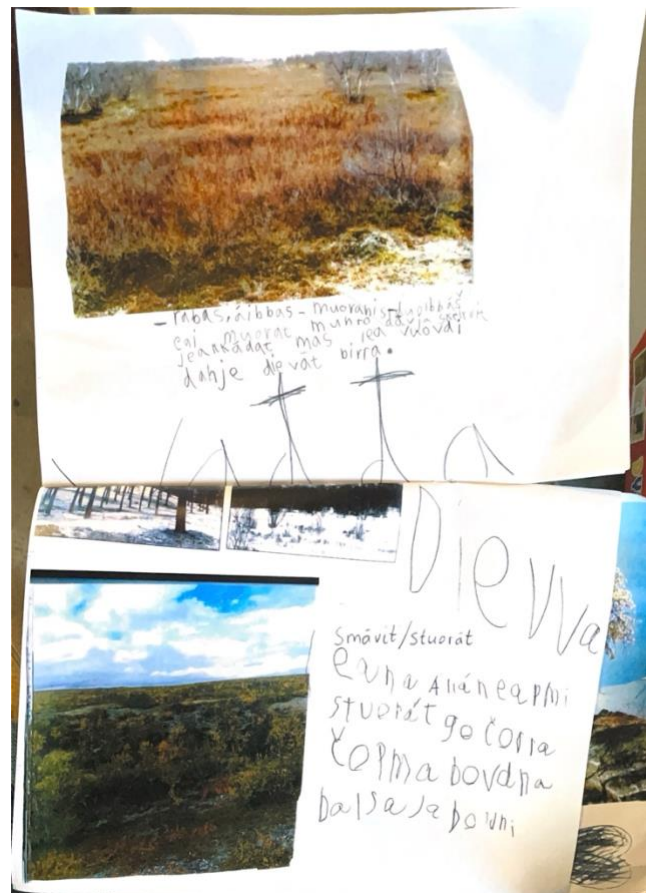


Figure 3b. Child description of the landscape: “Open,
 empty, a place where there are no trees; usually just
 tundra, with forest or open land around”
 “Open land – small and big – growing bigger, like
 rounded hills, soft slopes, and gentle round”

I haven't done any research on other Norwegian school's curriculum or looked if this kind of assignment would be realised the same way by non-Sámi children, but it seemed unfamiliar with what I have been used to in my personal education in France. Even now, if I look at the pictures and try to describe them with my own words, my description would be quite different from what the little boy has written. He uses terms that make the landscape move and alive, with action verbs such as “lying”, “rests”, “growing”, and very precise qualifications such as “soft” and “gentle”, that wouldn't naturally come to my mind when describing a landscape. The little boy's descriptions reveal an epistemology in which knowledge of the land and the environment is grounded in practice and echoes a relationship with nature, rather than a simple static description. In fact, the traditional practices of herding, gathering, fishing, allow people

from the community to recognize and qualify the environment depending on movements, seasonal changes, textures and perspectives, and become an active participant in the daily life. As I would talk about herding practices with a local professor in Indigenous studies in Kautokeino, they explained how working outdoor and close to the environment shape the herders and become almost a part of their body. This resonates with Tim Ingold's concept of the dwelling perspective, which he uses to describe the relationship between human and nonhuman and as a tool to understand people's perception of the environment. According to him, we understand the world by moving and living through it, through our practices with it, and through sensory engagement of the body and the landscape as interconnected, which is where knowledge emerges (Ingold, 2000).

During my first week in Kautokeino, Klaus was more often at home preparing different things for the separation work with the reindeer and clearing the family garden before the "big snow" arrived. As I was helping him building fences in the yard in case of sick reindeer who would need feeding, he showed me how to properly use the hammer and make the wooden pillars stable, saying "here we learn by doing", which I have heard Maria saying before that was a real motto of the Sámi way of living. As Lethola argue about Sámi transmission of knowledge: "[...] learning by doing builds an emotional bond to the place and parents that have taught that doing. When certain basic skills are learned in childhood, they are stored in muscle memory and become instinctive." (Lethola, 2022).

As traditional activities such as herding, gathering, traditional cooking or handicraft are taught at school from early age to high school but also at the Sámi University for Applied Sciences in Kautokeino, it is as well transmitted in more informal contexts from generation to generation which often become a social and familial gathering part of the everyday life. In their living room, Maria had hanged to the wall above the television, a calendar made by one of Klaus' relatives they called "the cultural woman", as she is known in the family for always promoting their traditions. In this calendar, none of the month were represented by the usual days and weekly tables but instead represented by pictures and explanations text of Sámi traditions according to the month mentioned. When we think about a regular calendar that a lot of families hang in their home to plan their events as my own parents would hang their own in the kitchen at home, they always follow the same monthly and weekly schema. On Maria's calendar, you couldn't see any date number or any day of the week. Under each month were family pictures of them doing something related to Sámi traditional practices. Some of them were illustrated by the different herding practices depending on each season, such as calf marking in the autumn

months or reindeer separation in the beginning of winter, the different stages of meat preparations, handicraft activities, berries picking during the summer, etc. This calendar shows that Maria's, Klaus' and their kids' lives were rhythmized by these events and traditions throughout the year, and not by the specific days of the week, and that Sámi way of living is cyclic (Keskitalo, 2019) as the everyday life is dependent on the seasonal traditions and changes, which we will deeper analyse in a next chapter.

I discovered reindeer meat for the first time eating dinner with Maria, Klaus and the kids. During my stay with them, reindeer meat was one of the main dishes served several times a week, prepared in different forms and from different parts of the animal. When minced or boiled and served with pasta or potatoes, the taste hasn't been that far, in my opinion, from beef that I am more used to eat. However, I also experienced the tongue and heart, or the fat melt in water directly poured into a mug, from which Maria and Klaus would give me the beneficial nutrients and healthiness.

In Sámi food culture, every part of the reindeer killed has traditionally had a purpose and nothing was wasted, as blood, offal and fat will also be prepared and served to eat. The parts that are not eaten such as the skin or the antlers will serve for *duodji* (handicraft) to make art, accessories or shoes locally, but also sell abroad. However, practices are different in reindeer slaughtering houses due to European Union legislation concerning food production that forbids the use of animal blood, brains and other organs (Nilsson, 2022), which must be wasted at the slaughterhouse except from one specific part, that local people I met during my stay in Kautokeino use for their own company. Using reindeer body parts to create products in the health sector sent all over Norway, as well as combining academic science with traditional knowledge of reindeer meat show how knowledge can be used within external legislations to Sámi practices, to transform it into a business. If there is only one part of the reindeer that is allowed to be kept from the slaughtering, these people saw the opportunity to buy them from the local slaughterhouse and share their knowledge to the rest of the country, in the form of a commercial product. As Svalastog et al. (2022) developed with the concept of double perspective, I argue that we can connect this "strategy" to this, as it describes the capacity of indigenous people who have grown up under colonial pressure to navigate simultaneously between their own indigenous knowledge systems and the dominant Western frameworks imposed upon them. Rather than simply speaking both languages and being bicultural, the concept refers to a more cognitive and existential condition in which indigenous people must

constantly navigate and negotiate between different worldviews. In this case, the double perspective is visible in how they engage with the state and European legislations, while maintaining the practice of wasting as less as possible from the animal, and ways of knowing about its nutritional and health value. As Magga (2022) put it, Wilson et al (2020) explain clearly that “the resilience, strength and flexibility of Indigenous Peoples in the face of various challenges is possible because Indigenous Peoples make use of a range of different repertoires, which enable them to experience the simultaneous existence of multiple realities” (Magga, 2022).

I also think that when she uses the term of “multiple realities” it is in fact a good way of putting it, rather than the tendency of talking about “different worlds” between the Norwegian State and Sámi. Western societies and Indigenous Peoples share the same world but experience different realities, whom the latter find themselves obligated to navigate between several of them simultaneously.

Collective practices

Maria had stored berries in the freezer that she picked over the summer. Together with her son and I, we spent an afternoon turning them into jam and saft (a Scandinavian fruit drink), as she explained is often a tradition Sámi families would do at home. Once the juice was put into several bottles, we sold them at the annual *duodji* market in town. While I haven’t experienced the picking of the cloudberry in Kautokeino since I was doing fieldwork during the winter, this practice is part of Sámi food culture and another form of livelihood connected to the land that many Sámi men, women and children would do during the spring and summer. Cloudberry picking in Sápmi is not only a practice but a traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) (Joks, 2022), of the conditions in which the berries must be to collect them, of the specific areas where we can find them without being on “private” land (as used by a specific *siida*), the weather conditions that would facilitate the picking or how to store and prepare them. This knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation as children would learn it from relatives and do it on their own to teach it later in their life (Joks, 2022). Of course berry picking is also a Scandinavian non-Sámi practice, but I would say that in the Sámi context, it has a special significance related to the close connection with the surroundings in Sápmi, as the natural resources and the territories are not administratively delimited to specific families but is a

common knowledge of which area belongs to which *siida* and where one's allowed to do berry picking (Magga, 2022). Hence, berry picking is a traditional gathering practice in Sámi culture that once again connects people to the land, creating a relationship between human and nature, but also connects people to each other, producing and transmitting knowledge.

Reindeer herding is one of the strongest expressions of community and collective participation in Finnmark. I arrived in Kautokeino at the end of October and Klaus was talking about how everything was getting prepared ahead of the separation work of the reindeer at the fences, before he and his brothers leave for the winter pasture. The pre-separation work mostly involved for the herders to fix fences, spread sand on the icy ground inside the fence where they will have to catch the reindeer and, right before the separation process, it took also some time for them to gather a good amount of the animals inside the first fence. The herd usually belongs to one specific person but managed by several herders of the same family representing a *siida*. The *siida* unit system represents the traditional Sámi community governance and social organisation in which "each extended family has separate areas for accessing and using natural resources, and other families do not, as a rule, use areas belonging to others. The *siida* boundaries are not demarcated; knowledge of them suffices, and they are respected among the Sámi." (Magga, 2022).

In Kautokeino there are many *siida*(s) that are involved in herding and manage their own herd, which I don't have the exact number of. Klaus is the "leader" of his own, meaning his herd legally and administratively belongs to him, and is managed by him and his relatives. The exact number of reindeer per each *siida* is not supposed to be known to others as it is considered private business and as one shouldn't be too proud or complain about the numbers of animals owned, as I could read in Sámi philosophy (Oskal, 1999), (see reindeer luck in chapter VII). However, there are approximately 240.000 domesticated reindeer in Norway that involves nearly 3.000 people working in herding, which most of them are in the county of Finnmark, mostly populated by Sámi people (Oskal, Turi, Mathiesen, & Burgess, 2009). Klaus gave me the rough number of 2500 reindeer that he owns, and according to him, once regrouped with the reindeer of the other *siida* they are working with at the fence, this is the biggest herd in all Norway.

I was asking many questions about how this works the days before we start, as a way for me to prepare myself at least a little bit to know what to expect or know what to do once we will be there with all the animals, as Maria would tell me "It's so many. You can't imagine". I would

most of the time face short answers, as Klaus ended telling me “I can’t explain, you have to see by yourself.”

During the separation work that lasted a week, herders and their relatives, wives, children, cousins, siblings, etc. are joining and involved in one way or another. The small kids would learn by observing and participating to some tasks such as feeding the reindeer or helping to gather them, while the teenagers and young adults would start having more responsibilities and working alongside elders, as I also helped with, guided by Klaus’ eldest daughter. Our main tasks were to gather the reindeer that were first mixed between the different *siida* in the half-wide pasture, to make smaller groups enter the different fences before the very last small one, where the herders and their families were attentively searching and recognizing their own reindeer, to finally catch them by the antlers and drag them inside their private fence (figure 4). The way to recognise their own reindeer depends on the ear mark they have been given earlier at the end of summer-beginning of autumn when they were born, and sometimes some marks on their fur done with colour spray. This job was beyond my ability, and I was amazed by how they could recognise the earmarks among them all running in circle around us so fast. Hence, by Klaus’ daughter, whom I will call Olga here, and the younger people’s side, we instead had to collect the maximum of reindeer from the bigger fences and make them enter the last small one before the men could catch them. To do so, we had a giant piece of fabric of several meters that we would hold and run towards the reindeer in the direction of the next fence.

After the first time, I thought the fear and the adrenaline of it would become less intense but each time we would repeat the task, it kept feeling surreal to me. From the sound of the thousands reindeer’ feet against the floor, to their snoring, their belt ringing and the look in their eyes when they saw us coming, everything felt really intense and it was hard to contain my excitement mixed with my fear among all these young people who knew exactly what they were doing and felt so calm and natural about it. Olga was not being the most talkative, I was just trying to follow her and reproduce what she was doing. Several times the herd ran toward us instead of the direction of the fence, understanding that they were going to be trapped. During those moments I felt so scared, seeing hundreds of them running toward me, already imagining myself stepped under their feet or stabbed by their horns. I quickly understood that when that happens, few gestures with the available arm that is not holding the fabric are enough to make them go away, and if this doesn’t work, they will try to go under or jump over the fabric, but rarely bump into us, probably being more afraid than we are. By running towards them with the fabric, I fell a few times because of the icy ground before quickly getting up and

running again, and I thought to myself “please don’t break anything, how embarrassing would it be”.

Once we managed to make the smallest number of reindeer into the last small fence, most of the youngsters were standing side by side with the oldest, in the middle of the animals running in circle, trying to recognize their own, while I was standing along the fence, next to Klaus’ sister and mother. During this time, they gave me the task of vaccinating with a syringe the reindeer who needed it, held still by the antlers by Klaus’ relatives, and I would mark them with a spray before the men would keep dragging them into their fence. As you can imagine by the 2500ish reindeer, we repeated all these tasks many times over day and night, during the entire week.

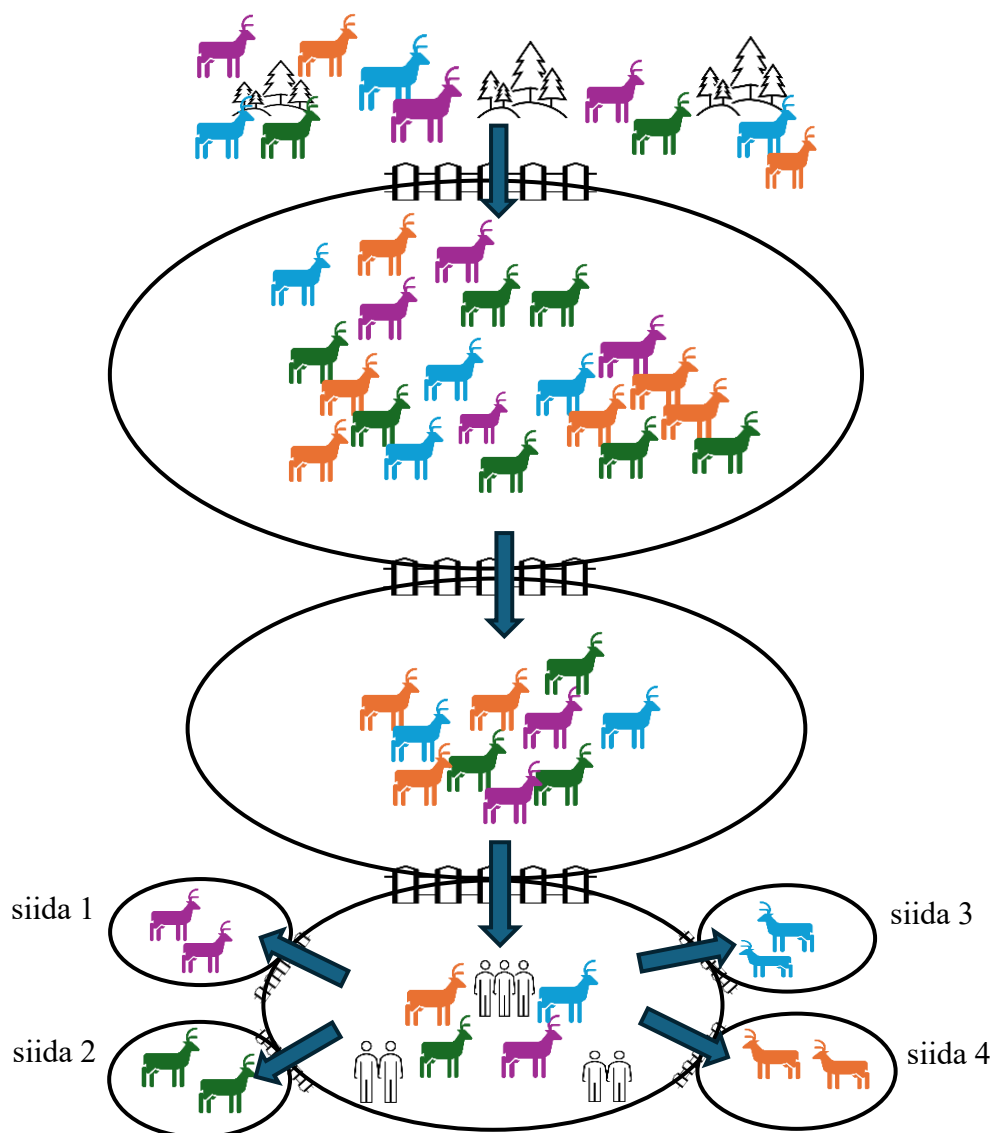


Figure 4. Representation of the fences into which the reindeer are directed before getting separated in the different siida they belong to.

The separation work happens every year right before, or just during, the beginning of winter, before the reindeer (and the herders) migrate for the inland pastures close to the Finnish border where they will spend all winter, whereas the summer migration happens on the coastal parts of Finnmark. When I arrived at the end of October, a small amount of snow was already covering the ground but would come and go due to unstable temperatures. Maria told me the separation work would begin soon without knowing exactly when, as Klaus and the other herders were waiting for more snow to fall, and I understood that it must be cold enough during the winter migration so the reindeer and herders can cross the frozen river to join the pastures.

During the week of working at the fence with the reindeers, there wasn't a real schedule of what to do at what specific time. We could start early in the morning, have a break in the middle of the night, or start at the end of the day for few hours and never knowing when the next break would be before going back. All the work depended on the people available, the weather conditions and the animals. Connected to the dwelling perspective, Ingold's concept of the taskscape resonates here as he associates it with the interrelated ongoing activities that creates life in a place (Ingold, 2000). According to this, a landscape is never static but always in the process of being made through different practices, as well as tasks are not simple isolated activities, rather interconnected with the landscape. The tasks I experienced doing during the separation work but as well as the whole cycle of reindeer herding such as moving between pastures, checking on the herd, preparing equipment, ear marking, butchering, and other livelihood practices such as berry picking as mentioned above, constitute a real way of being in and knowing the Finnmark landscape.

Decisions are made collectively among herders, based on experience and environmental conditions, as I could observe sometimes the men reunited at the fences and talking about the next decisions and strategies to make. Some of the relatives who could not help full-time throughout the week were still coming when the time allowed them, helping here and there or simply watching and catching up with others. Like Maria, who was busy working for her company, would come by, stayed for few moments and let the kids with us at the fence, or Klaus' sisters who also had full-time jobs in town, and most of the kids were given some time off from school to join their family at the fence. In this sense, herding is therefore not only an economic activity only managed by some of the family members but also a social institution where the entire family is involved and where even showing up for a short moment is meaningful. It is a network of mutual support and reinforces the sense of community and shared cultural values.

At Kautokeino's local High School, young people have different study programs to choose from, and reindeer herding being one of them, they will learn about herding work or reindeer meat industry. However, some of them admitted to me while working at the fence that most of their knowledge about herding came from working directly with the animals and their families. Learning reindeer herding in school would never have the same impact as practicing the work that cannot be separate from the landscape. Young people learn by being there, with the ones that already know and with the actual outdoor conditions. As Klaus told me, it is hard to explain, and we only understand fully by being there. Knowledge production and transmission are once again closely linked to community and belonging, and to the engagement of the body in the landscape, as Ingold's developed with his concept of dwelling (2000), knowledge emerges in the landscape. Connected to this, he also describes the concept of taskscape (2000) as the ensemble of interrelated activities that constitute life in a place, and where knowledge is not merely transmitted through transfer of information but through a process, from the experienced practitioner to the learner, progressively learning to perceive and respond to the environment in skilled ways, within the environment (2000).

This chapter had explored how recurring traditional practices and forms of knowledge in Kautokeino produce a sense of community and belonging. Language use, transmission of traditional knowledge at school and at home, domestic food practices and collective participation in reindeer herding do not simply preserve tradition; they create the social conditions in which people recognize themselves as part of a shared world. In this sense, community is a process continually emerging through interactions, care and shared responsibility. Through these engagements and relationships with landscape, animals and one another, people in Kautokeino continuously reaffirm a sense of place that is not only geographical but social and moral. The use of Ingold's concepts of dwelling, taskscape and the idea that knowledge is acquired through participation is directly applicable to what I could observe and experience during my ethnographic fieldwork in Kautokeino.

As I introduced it, I considered that, before analysing the challenges the Sámi people in Kautokeino may experience within Norwegian structures in the next chapters, it was crucial to primary focus on how Sámi traditional practices are first and foremost lived as daily practices among the community, with their own communities' agency and interests.

Sherry Ortner developed the concept of projective agency in her book *Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal* (1995), in which she opposes it to resistive agency. Projective

agency, rather than being connected to acting against power, relates in this case to pursuing one's own culturally goals and desires, oriented toward and not against something: toward a good life, a meaningful practice, valued relationships. This distinction offers a more adequate framework for what I observed in Kautokeino during my participation in herding, events and discussions about traditional knowledge with my interlocutors.

I argue that we can also connect the everyday life in Kautokeino to a form of resilience illustrate by Kirmayer et al., (2011) in their article *Rethinking Resilience from Indigenous Perspectives*. The authors argue that mainstream psychological models of resilience as merely individual traits and emerging only against risks and oppression are too narrow and ahistorical to fit the realities of Indigenous peoples. Drawing on their study with indigenous communities in Canada, they propose an understanding of resilience relocated in collective and cultural processes rather than in isolated individuals. Instead, they suggest resilience as collective and relational, grounded in land, language, community and the continuity of knowledge systems across generations, exactly as I encountered during fieldwork in Kautokeino.

As Kuokkanen explains, Indigenous epistemes are generative knowledge systems with their own internal logic and not only reactions or forms of resistance to colonialism. Focusing on the latter only would reproduce what she calls “instrumentalism”, which “denies or diminishes autonomous value and agency” only to present them existing and inferior in the regard of the dominant: “Today, instrumentalism continues in practices that construct indigenous people as cultural repositories or ethnographic curiosities, be it in research, in classrooms, or at public events. Instrumentalism ensures that they remain objects, not agents or subjects, of their own knowledge and epistemes.” (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 73). I would like both the reader and me to keep that in mind for this thesis to help emphasize the idea of Sámi people as producers of knowledge, how it must be recognized, and how it can serve western ideologies, which I will analyse later.

Chapter VI. Collective and Cultural memory: Sámi self-representation through art

In the following chapter, I analyse how other practices in Kautokeino can serve as negotiations within Norwegian institutions and as forms of resilience for Sámi people. These practices are deeply entangled with memory, history and experiences from past generations, accompanying the sense of community with a collective remembering through shared stories and places. I will move from everyday life to more explicitly symbolic and artistic forms of resilience by examining Sámi self-representation through art and cultural institutions. Artistic expressions strongly work to narrate Sámi history, identity and political claims in Kautokeino, in a more public and visible way and emerge sometimes from direct responses against the ongoing colonial pressure. I use the examples of *duodji* and *joik* to show how they can be connected to forms of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) when they are practiced in familial and community settings; but also, how their institutionalized forms better relate to the concept of cultural memory (J. Assmann, 2011), that A. Assmann (2008) differentiate into an active and passive form.

Duodji

In this section, I present *duodji* first through Halbwachs's concept of collective memory (1992), when it is practice-based rather than institutionalized, for instance when it is made and worn within informal and families' settings. I further argue that in other cases *duodji* is better understood as cultural memory in J. Assmann's sense (2011): when handicraft items appear in cultural institutions such as museums and public spaces in their exhibited forms. From this concept, A. Assmann make a distinction between the passive (that she calls archive) form of cultural memory, and the active (that she calls canon) form of cultural memory. According to this, I argue that the *duodji* exhibited at the *RiddoDuottarMuseat* in Kautokeino is better understood as what A. Assmann calls passive cultural memory, in its archived form representing the past, while the *duodji* school programme at *Sámi allaskuvla* (the Sámi University of Applied Sciences) represents a more active form. I treat both as institutionalized cultural memory, while noting that the museum preserves *duodji* as an object of the past whereas the university sustains it as a living, generative practice.

First, let me introduce the practice: *Duodji*, the Sámi handicraft, has always been part of the community and can take different forms. The *gákti*, the traditional Sámi dress, is one of them, but it can also be shoes, accessories such as bags, belts, bracelet, socks or hats, but also knives, cups and other functional items. They are made from reindeer skin and fur, fish skin, reindeer antlers and hoof, and other natural materials such as wood, tin, wool and cloth. Duodji are made both for personal use, sale and artistic purposes, and historically circulated through local exchange networks or regional trade with surroundings populations in Northern Scandinavia. During my time in Kautokeino I had the opportunity to make my own craft project with the help of my host family and their relatives, giving me the reindeer and fish skin and showing me how to start making a bracelet. For the more technical parts and to add more details to it, I was taken to a close relative of my host family considered as more expert in duodji to teach me the rest. I was invited to decorate it with red, blue, green, silver and golden colour pearls echoing “Sámi colours”, as my interlocutor would say, which is the colour palette representing Sámi identity that we can find on the Sámi flag and on most of the traditional clothing such as the *gákti*. Nowadays, the *gákti* is mostly worn for occasional celebrations such as weddings, ceremonies, some parties or as I could see, some of the older ones would wear it when visiting the fences without really participating in the separation work with the reindeer.

During the reindeer separation work, most of the herders were wearing mainstream modern outdoor clothes, very carefully chosen and resistant against the cold. Klaus and Maria also made me wear some of their clothes, as the ones that I brought (and thought were warm enough) were definitely not made for such temperatures. As Magga (2022) explains in her work and from her own *gákti* traditions, the traditional outdoor clothes the herders were wearing in the past such as fur and reindeer skin for coats and boots, were quickly replaced by western clothing materials when in the 1960s, herders integrated snowmobiles into their work. The traditional clothes were not compatible with the hot engines of the snowmobiles that could get burned, thus herders changed for more practical outdoor materials to wear (Magga, 2022). At the fences where we were doing the separation work, a lot of the men were indeed wearing mainstream modern clothing such as thermal overalls jackets, thick ski pants or big boots, as well as handmade mittens or thermal socks inside the boots, made of fur, with traditional handmade belts holding knives.

From what I learnt from my interlocutors, different Sámi regions across Fennoscandia have distinct *gákti* designs, where the base colour and patterns varies: for example, the Kautokeino dress is mostly blue and have a lot of decorations on the collar and chest area, with silver

brooches on the belt and women would often wear a large red shawl with long fringes over the dress, like Maria's wedding dress she showed me. In other Sámi town such as Karasjok, a neighbouring city in Norway where the Sámi Parliament is, the design of the dress would be the same blue colour but way less decorated, or other Sámi places in Sweden and Finland would have other base colours and other ornaments and decorative patterns. The design distinctions on the clothing are not only aesthetic but communicate specific information about the person who wears it: variations in cut, sewing design and accessories vary depending on women and men, but also indicates a person's home region, a siida connection, the marital status, and other social information. As Maria was going through her craft material before we choose which one I would use for my bracelet, she showed me two different patterns on ribbons that one was made for women and the other one for men. Details on the gákti also allow people to recognize for example if the person who wears it is from Kautokeino, Karasjok or another Sápmi area. Some details can also relate to old stories or events.

From the mid 1800s onward, the Norwegianization policies strongly discouraged wearing Sámi handicraft and especially gákti, where teachers in schools or administrators in public places believed that adopting Norwegian cultural norms would help students and people assimilate into the national society, the same way speaking Sámi languages was discouraged and effectively forbidden. When gákti or other duodji items were visible on Sámi people, many of them experienced shame or punishment for expressing their cultural identity. As Magga puts it: "Over the past two decades, the traditional dress has become a significant means of Sámi cultural emancipation and political resistance" (Magga, 2022, pp. 40-41). Therefore, beyond visual expression of local identity and social affiliation, the way the gákti is made or the way to wear it also relate to resilience from an indigenous perspective (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

The knowledge to make duodji is transmitted through generations, and the items related to clothing and accessories are mostly made by the women in the family. According to Maria, who hasn't learned that much sewing from her mother as she was working abroad a lot, sewing the gákti and other clothing gives a special valued position to women inside the family. One of their relatives who helped me sewing the bracelet, is making most of the family's clothes and has taught others in the family to sew as well, like they helped me with my small craft project. Duodji is still transmitted in a domestic setting, practiced in household where techniques, patterns and materials are transmitted through practicing together and remains a form of what Halbwachs (1992) called collective memory: it is embodied and reconstructed in the present through social practice. Maurice Halbwachs uses this sociological concept to refer to the shared

memories and representations of the past that bind a social group together, including more informal, lived, and embodied forms of remembering (Halbwachs, 1992). Duodji is made, used, and transmitted through “learning by doing”: through hands, through households, through the kind of embodied intergenerational transmission my interlocutors told me about during my fieldwork.

As mentioned before, during my time in Kautokeino I also observe Sámi handicraft at the annual duodji market taking place at the end of November, where many Sámi sellers come from different region of Sápmi to sell their products. That’s where I helped Maria and her children to sell the cloudberry *saft* we made ourselves the day before. This market is the opportunity for locals to buy new materials for their own duodji creations but also already made clothing and objects, as well as silver jewellery that decorates a lot of gáktis, as silver accessories have always been very popular and highly demanded among Sámi, but has always been items bought from silversmiths and not made by themselves (according to my interlocutors). From my observations, the market in Kautokeino illustrates somehow the community-based practice in which duodji is made and transmitted through direct social interaction. One can treat it as collective memory in Halbwachs’ (1992) sense, as it is sustained through lived community practice, while noting its organised and commercial form that give it a sort of institutional dimension at the same time.

I pursue the analyse of duodji this time in its cultural memory form (J. Assmann, 1992, 2011; A. Assmann, 2008). In Kautokeino, one can visit the municipal museum *RiddoDuottarMuseat* to see more Sámi handicraft, clothing, silver jewellery, and other items such as old fishing and hunting tools and daily objects from the past, where booklets are available for visitors in several languages with descriptions and translations of each items exhibited. In this case, the museum anchors the cultural memory of duodji within an institutionalized setting, in the sense developed by Jan Assmann (1992, 2011), as cultural memory requires a degree of formalization and institutionalization: objects, rituals, art or texts that carry meaning, and through which a community preserves its past across generations (J. Assmann, 1992, 2011). The duodji exhibited at the municipal museum were made hundred years ago and preserved as objects of the past: they are stored, catalogued and removed from active use. In this sense, I analyse it more precisely to what Aleida Assmann (2008) calls the passive, or archival, dimension of cultural memory. Here the handicraft is preserved as an object of the past in a stabilized form, made available to future generations as archived heritage.

In other cases, duodji also appears in an active, or canonical form of cultural memory (A. Assmann, 2008). At *Sámi allaskuvla*/the Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Kautokeino, a specific bachelor's and master's programme are dedicated to duodji, among other programs in reindeer herding, journalism from an Indigenous perspective, Sámi school teaching and Sámi language and literature. The duodji programme represents cultural memory in its institutionalized form: formalized into a curriculum, transmitted by professors, yet, unlike the museum where duodji is preserved as an object of the past, the university sustains it as a living, productive practice. It thus demonstrates that institutionalization doesn't necessarily mean fixation or musealization: here cultural memory is generative and actively reproduced.

I would like to note that the transmission of duodji through these undergraduate and graduate programs is taught as a rigorous discipline, with its own techniques, and as formal recognition of duodji as a legitimate knowledge system deserving its own academic program like any Western academic subject. As Kuokkanen puts it:

“[...] these programs are necessary in order for indigenous academics to validate their systems of knowledge, build capacity in their communities, and claim space for indigenous students and scholars. They are the hubs of indigenous research, scholarship, and capacity building both in intellectual terms and in terms of broader, communal self-determination in the mainstream academy.” (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 128)

It constitutes what Kuokkanen recognizes as an autonomous Indigenous epistemic system and a form of knowledge that carries its own internal logic, aesthetic standards, social meanings and irreducible to its function as crafts or costume. Through design, colour, patterns and cuts, we saw above that, *gákti* in particular, operates as a complex semiotic system and encodes a diversity of information. To know how to make, wear, and read a *gákti* is to participate in a shared world of meaning that has been sustained and transmitted across generations.

This section has examined Sámi self-representation through duodji as a form of collective memory, and two distinct forms of cultural memory, drawing on theoretical framework for the different settings in which the practice lives. In familial and community settings, duodji functions as collective memory in Halbwachs' (1992) sense, sustained by the living practice of the group. When preserved in museums, I connect it to the passive, archival dimension of cultural memory (A. Assmann, 2008), institutionalized and stored as objects of the past. Finally, when duodji is still institutionalized yet kept in living circulation, I connect it to the passive, or canonical form of cultural memory in A. Assmann's (2008) sense: the institution here keeps

the practice generative rather than merely archived. Read together, these modes demonstrate that the same practice can move between memory forms according to its settings, and that duodji constitutes an act of Sámi self-representation and resilience. What determines its mode is not the object but the social context that carries it: who transmits it, to whom and through what means.

The Kautokeino Rebellion: a cultural trauma

To understand the next arguments of this chapter, it is needed to tell the story behind The Kautokeino Rebellion that took place on the 8th of November 1852, that I will present mainly drawing on the movie *The Kautokeino Rebellion* from Nils Gaup (2008) and literature from Cato Christensen (2012).

In the mid-nineteenth century in Finnmark, even more than today, most Sámi families in the region lived from reindeer pastoralism, moving all together (and not only the men) seasonally with their herds between inland winter grazing areas and coastal summer pastures (Christensen, 2012). Reindeer were not only a source of meat but also the basis of transportation, clothing, trade, and family wealth. Herds were usually managed collectively by families, and women often played an important role in daily herd management, milking, and organizing camp life while men handled long-distance movements and trade. During this period, Sámi herders were increasingly tied to the Norwegian market economy through local merchants who controlled trade in remote northern communities (Gaup, 2008). In Kautokeino, the Swedish local merchant Carl Johan Ruth held a near monopoly on goods such as flour, coffee, cloth, and alcohol. As we can see it in the movie, many Sámi families had to buy these goods on credit and Ruth often demanded repayment through reindeer or other valuable resources, sometimes at unfair prices. Over time this created cycles of dependency and poverty among some herders and alcohol sales worsened the situation as it was sold frequently, and alcohol abuse became a serious concern in the community (Gaup, 2008). Many Sámi believed that traders deliberately encouraged drinking because it made people easier to control economically.

At the same time, a strong religious revival movement spread through northern Scandinavia under the influence of the Swedish Sámi Lutheran pastor Lars Levi Laestadius. His teachings emphasized strict morality, repentance, and especially the rejection of alcohol. The movement, known as Laestadianism, which is a religion practiced by many in Sápmi today, attracted many

Sámi followers because it criticized the social injustices they experienced and allowed them to practice Christianity in ways that were closer to their own culture, especially in their relationship with the natural environment (Heith, 2018). However, many Sámi people saw the merchant, the authorities, and parts of the church as morally corrupt forces that were destroying their community through alcohol and economic exploitation, which led to a rebellion from the Sámi against their oppressors.

The rebellion itself was carried out by a group of Laestadian Sámi led by figures such as Aslak Hætta and Mons Somby. Early in the morning on the 8th of November 1852, the group attacked the trading post in Kautokeino. Merchant Carl Johan Ruth was killed during the assault, and the local sheriff who represented Norwegian state authority in the area was also killed, and the parish priest was beaten but survived. The rebels also destroyed barrels of alcohol at the trading post, which shows how strongly the uprising was connected to the struggle against alcohol and the economic control of the merchant. Norwegian soldiers and officials were sent to the region, and many people connected to the uprising were arrested, including both men and women. Aslak Hætta and Mons Somby were executed in 1854 after being held in prison and interrogated by the authorities (Dancus, 2014). Other rebels were imprisoned for many years, such as Lars Hætta, whom later had an important role for the Sámi community, as he was the first person who translated the Laestadian bible into Sámi (RiddoDuottarMuseat, Kautokeino, 2025).

These punishments had serious consequences for Sámi families: while men were arrested or imprisoned, women often had to manage the herd alone, take care of children, and deal with legal and economic pressures from the state. In some cases, families lost animals or grazing opportunities because they could not maintain their herds during the long imprisonments. The trials and punishments therefore affected not only the individuals involved in the rebellion but also the wider community. The skulls of Aslak and Mons were kept during many years by the state, then by the University of Oslo for study purposes, and were finally returned to their family's descendants in Kautokeino in 1997 (Dancus, 2014).

As Christiansen puts it, during the time that has followed the event, the dominant perception about it “remained a source of shame and stigma, perhaps for the Sámi population at large, but certainly within local Sámi communities” (2012, p.59). The years following the rebellion, scholars and most of the Norwegian population presented the event as an act of “religious insanity” and reduced the rebellion as a consequence to the community’s overuse of alcoholism

(Andersen, 2007). While the community has been long condemned to shame towards the event, it has evolved and replaced by “more nuanced and multifaced understandings, at least among scholars” (Christiansen, 2012, p.59). Today the Kautokeino Rebellion is understood as more than a violent incident, as it reflects the broader tensions between Sámi communities and the Norwegian state, including economic exploitation, conflicts over religion, and the pressures placed on traditional Sámi livelihoods such as reindeer herding.

In the next section I argue that the 1852 Rebellion can be identified as what Jeffrey Alexander calls a cultural trauma. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Alexander et al., 2004), Alexander argues that trauma is not simply a psychological experience but a social and cultural construction. A cultural trauma “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander, 2016). According to him, trauma is not automatic, it requires a cultural process of claim-making, narration, and representation through which the community comes to recognize and name what happened to them as foundational to their collective story. I also argue that this cultural trauma has been represented and claimed by the Sámi community in Kautokeino through different forms such as museum exhibition, a movie and a ballet performance, which I analyse as cultural memory (J. Assmann, 1992,2011; A. Assmann, 2008) projects built on this cultural trauma of the 1852 rebellion.

The rebellion represented in the municipal museum

Before going to Kautokeino I had heard about the event and about the quite famous movie relating what happened during the rebellion, released in 2008 and directed by the Sámi filmmaker Nils Gaup, who was himself born and raised in Kautokeino. I’ve never got the chance to watch it before going to Kautokeino but thought it could be something people could talk to me about. When I was visiting the municipal duodji museum, one small room was dedicated to the rebellion projecting some scenes of the movie and retracing the event on a wall with texts and images, focusing especially on the life of Lars Hætta, one of the survivor rebels who translated the bible into Sámi during his time in prison. What stroke me at first when reading the texts of the exhibition was the standing position the museum takes when telling the story: not that they shouldn’t, but perhaps because I was not used to a cultural institution to express their own perspective in such a way. The first text said in English, under the Sámi text:

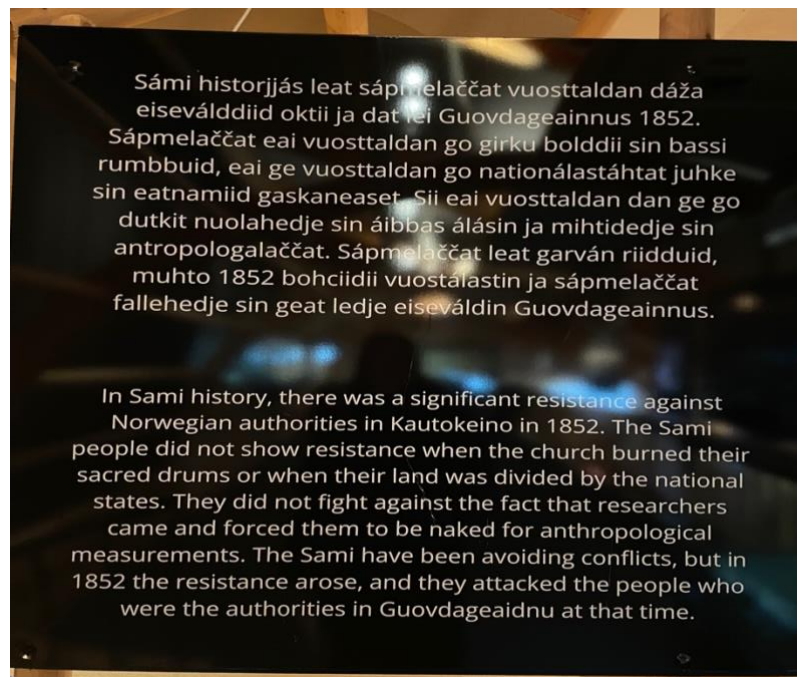


Figure 5. Description in the Kautokeino municipal museum about the Kautokeino Rebellion exhibition

The way the text above is constructed narratively opens with a long accumulation of colonial violence that the Sámi endured and did not resist when it mentions the burning of the sacred drums, the division of the land and the forced nakedness for anthropological measurements. It points out the patience before the 1852 rebellion, framing the event not as an act of sudden aggression but as the result after a long and painful restraint. The rebellion is presented as historically inevitable and justified. I noticed that the museum is not simply reporting what happened but is constructing a specific framework for interpreting the events, as a deliberate narrative choice and being a real political actor. This is a municipal museum, managed by Sámi people and where the Sámi are the majority population. Therefore, the museum is a local institution speaking from a specific political position within its own community's moral and political framework, refusing the colonial framing that has been historically characterized and framed by scholars and the Norwegian state by the time following the events. As Christensen translate it from the cultural anthropologist Olaf Graff: "The view of the Kautokeino uprising that has been most common is that the insurgency was a result of religious delusions, fanaticism and spiritual arrogance among a primitive and emotionally unstable nature people" (Christensen, 2012, p. 59). Whereas here, at the municipal museum, the framing of the 1852 rebellion reveals the explicitly political dimension of Sámi cultural memory institutions,

framing it as a morally justified response to prolonged dispossession rather than an act of criminal violence or religious fanaticism. As a site of passive and archival cultural memory in A. Assman's (2008) sense, the museum presents a historical event into a reference point for collective identity and a cultural trauma, leaving the opportunity for visitors to reflect on the past struggles the Sámi faced against the Norwegian state. Yet, the museum also raises questions on ongoing issues the community still experience. Here the museum connects the past, the archival dimension of the rebellion, to the present at the same time: which we can connect to the active definition of A. Assmann simultaneously.

The reader might notice that among the oppression practices mentioned in the museum description (**Figure 5**), the part mentioning anthropological measurements are surprisingly described like they happened before the rebellion of 1852, which, as I presented earlier in the background chapter, is chronologically incorrect. Indeed, the Sámi sacred drums called *goavddis* were destroyed over several decades during the 17th and 18th century by the Christian Church, considered as evil and to be used for witchcraft purposes (Harald, 2024), and the national borders between the Scandinavian countries were formed also during that time.

However, measurements of skulls for colonial purposes only began from the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and in the Nordic countries. The conflation of the different types of oppression and violence points at an overall experience of the cruelty and abuse on Sámi people, such as the burning of the sacred drums and the division of the land, to emphasize the colonial violence while doing abstraction of the practiced period. In this case, one can question the museum's choice of doing so, but that can be read as a way for the curators to mention this part of history although the exhibition is focusing on an event that happened beforehand.

The Kautokeino Rebellion movie

As I was coming back with a stack of wood from the shed to keep the fire going in the living room, Maria suggested that we watch the movie together while the kids were playing around. We talked about the movie quite a few times before as Maria told me about a ballet performance coming to town at the end of November, written and choreographed by a local Sámi and inspired by the event of the rebellion. The day before the performance we then watch the movie together, and Maria translated a lot of it to me as the version we got was in Sámi and Norwegian and didn't have any English subtitles. Nils Gaup's film narrates the same event, from a Sámi

perspective as he is himself from Kautokeino, the movie was shot in different places in the Sápmi part of Norway and in Sámi language. In the movie we understand Sámi struggles against the authorities and the church who have poor consideration about the families working in reindeer herding. Gaup chose to film the rebellion as legitimate resistance and enable the event to take a shared narrative form among the community and shows to a wider public another side of the history previously framed by the Norwegian state. As Christensen puts it, Gaup did not frame the film “[...] only as historical documentation of the Kautokeino incident of 1852, but also as a highly relevant testimonial of the suppression and injustice towards the Sámi, and even towards indigenous peoples in general.” (Christensen, 2012, p. 68). The Kautokeino rebellion movie fits A. Assman’s framework of active cultural memory as it is a deliberate cultural production that takes a historical event and transforms it into a shared narrative. The fact that it was directed by Nils Gaup, a Sámi filmmaker, and produced in Sámi language adds a layer of self-representation that makes it particularly resonant as an act of cultural memory-making. However, the film is not only telling a memory but rather a political and aesthetic act of deciding what to remember and how.

The rebellion represented through a ballet

I wasn’t aware before coming to Kautokeino that a ballet representing the uprising event of 1852 was performing in town during my stay. Maria spontaneously talked to me about it after few weeks and invited me and some of her relatives to the show. The ballet called *Lahppon/Lost* was created and co-choreographed by the Sámi artist Elle Sofe Sara and danced by non-Sámi dancers from the Norwegian National Ballet. It had its premiere in October 2025 in Oslo followed by a tour in several cities in the country, with two nights representations in Kautokeino in November 2025 at The *Beaivváš* Sámi National theatre.

The troupe had a bit less than twenty dancers and one *joiker* who opened and closed the show. The music was loud during the dances, with mostly drums and vocals. I remembered finding the music extremely powerful and even though I am not used to watch ballet shows that often, I thought that it was probably the most emotional show I watched in a theatre. I was also glad that we watched the movie right ahead of it so I could recognize the scenes and the story illustrated by the dance, since none of the artists were talking.



Figure 6. The dancers take a bow at the end of the ballet performance *Lahppon/Lost*, Kautokeino, November 2025.

When I talked about it with Maria at the end of the show, we both discussed how the choreography and the music were made not to exactly recognize a specific scene or part of the story, but rather sharing the emotions involved in the event: none of the gestures were explicit on herding, drinking, killing or fighting, but rather expressing the feelings of each of these crucial moment of the rebellion, intensified by the music we could hear from speakers, produced ahead of the representation. The stage was animated by different wooden and coloured decors moving along the story and carried by the dancers, integrating them in the choreography. In the background, video footages were projected, representing snowy landscapes, reindeer or pre-shots of dances from one of the main dancers. At the end of the show, interlocutors shared how emotional it was, how they almost cried and the goosebumps they had several times during the show.

Few days after, we could read meaningful thoughts about it from the locals in Kautokeino in the New York Times Magazine which got the chance to interview some of the audience, but also the dancers, Elle Sofe Sara and the artistic director of The Norwegian National Ballet. In the article, Sara, the creator and Sámi co-choreographer of the ballet whose ancestors participated in the rebellion, expressed genuine anxiety about her authority to present a collectively owned history, adding that some descendants refused to participate in her research or asked their testimony to be deleted (Abend, 2025).

To me, it echoed what Maria previously told me about how a lot of Sámi people don't talk about their past or the traumatic past events that happened in the community because according to her, "they don't know how to tell it", as if no words can be suitable enough. The Norwegian National Ballet's artistic director articulated a similar anxiety as Sara, about whether the institution was "again stepping over the voices" it claimed to create space for (ibid., 2025). Hence, despite their concern, Sara chose to let non-Sámi dancers interpret the story the community struggles to tell and gave them sessions on Sámi history and traditions during few weeks in Kautokeino, few months before the premiere, to learn about the local culture. As she expressed for the journal: "Dancers at this level can do something that Sámi can't; they carry it with their body in a different way and physicalize it" (ibid., 2025). Yet, the standing ovation in the theatre, the emotional reactions some shared with me and testimonies in the *The New York Times* from some of the locals such as a reindeer herder saying: "It didn't matter that the dancers weren't Sami. They made the rebellion come closer. It was magic." (ibid., 2015) suggests that the translation succeeded, despite the risks.

Drawing on Kuokkanen's argument that dominant Western institutions tend to receive Indigenous knowledge on their own terms rather than transforming themselves to genuinely accommodate it, *Lahppon/Lost* can be read as a site where this tension becomes visible and self-conscious. Both the Sámi artist and the Norwegian institution are aware of the risks of reproducing colonial schemes by letting non-Sámi dancers share a story that isn't theirs, but they can't fully resolve it within the constraints of the collaboration. The ballet makes visible a tension between a strategic way of sharing Sámi episteme in Norwegian national culture, and on the other hand it raises questions on whether the receiving institution of "the gift" in Kuokkanen's terms, which here is the Norwegian National Ballet or the Sámi dancers, simply translated the story in terms that the dominant institution can receive. Produced by a Western institution, performed predominantly by non-Sámi dancers and having its premiere in Oslo before reaching Kautokeino, the ballet illustrates the tension in asserting Sámi epistemic presence within dominant institutional spaces, despite the implication of Sara as a Sámi choreographer and the validation from the local community. However, Kuokkanen's framework was developed primarily in relation to academia and not specifically to arts and cultural institutions. One can argue that the analysis fits in this context as they are as well part of the Western academy, as performing art and visual arts, along with cultural heritage are artistic and cultural studies disciplines in a lot of university programmes, but she has not clearly mentioned it in her work.

The *joik*

The *joik* is the Sámi traditional guttural form of singing, which doesn't only tell about something, but is meant to evoke a presence and reflects on relationships in which humans, land, emotions and memory are interconnected. A *joik* does not describe a person, place or animal but is understood as an embodiment of them, making them present in the act of performance itself. It can be a way of recalling someone or something that is missing to the person who sings the *joik*, as a way to communicate with the person or the objects being *joiked* (Hämäläinen, Musial, Salamonsen, Graff, & Olsen, 2018). This characteristic means that *joik* functions traditionally as a form of memory that is not stored and retold occasionally but instead renewed each time it is sung. Sámi people used to *joik* for many circumstances to express their feelings and thoughts in daily situations, until the spread of Christianity and colonial policies, when *joik* became heavily stigmatized. The church especially saw the *joik* as pagan and sinful, and as a result, became less visible (or hearable) in the Sápmi regions. The prohibition of *joik* by Laestadian Christianity and its discouragement under Norwegian assimilation policies represented not only a cultural restriction but an attack on a mechanism of tradition and identity. Despite these restrictions *joik* survived and was transmitted privately within families (Lane, 2025), which itself translates an act of resilience.

I could enjoy *joik* at the ballet Lahppon/Lost, which opening scene started with the joiker Lávre Johan Eira. Standing at the front of the stage, he interpreted a *joik* that he later said to journalists was carrying the memory of Kautokeino, the rebellion and the people involved in it. Here are the words that he shared on the official social media page of the opera of Norway, explaining the meaning of the *joik*:

"This is a personal *joik* that belongs to people who participated in the Kautokeino rebellion. Aslak Hætta is a distant relative of mine, although I am not a direct descendant of him. His *joik* is a little special, I think. I learned it from Inga Juuso. I have heard a story that she heard it from an old woman over the phone. But the *joik* itself is probably older than that. But that this *joik* still exists today and that we can stand here and *joik* it — I think that is quite remarkable. There is also something very powerful on an emotional level when these *joiks*, which represent such a chapter in our shared history that is a little dark, take the stage on such a large and important national scene." (translated from Norwegian)

Here Lávre Johan Eira describes a transmission of the joik that he heard from Inga Juuso who was a Sámi joiker and actress in *The Kautokeino Rebellion* movie, who apparently heard it from an old woman over the phone, as the joik itself is, according to sayings, older than that (Abend, 2025).

I connect this to collective memory operating as a chain of transmission across generations, with no institutional back up or archival saving. The fact that it survived and passed from voice to voice is a testimony to the community's investment in keeping the memory of this joik alive. The joiker also identifies Aslak Hætta, who participated to the rebellion, as a distant connection of his genealogy: it is not a simple song about this Aslak Hætta but it is a joik that belongs to him, that carries his memory. He also describes something emotionally powerful happening when he sings as this joik represent a dark chapter in Sámi shared history: here he expressed the cultural trauma of the rebellion of 1852.

However, the artists directors and performers of the ballet had chosen to bring this joik onto a national stage when they performed all around Norway. In this case, we can see the fine line between what remains collective memory in Halbwachs' (1992) terms, and what bounce to the more institutionalized dimension of active cultural memory from A. Assmann's (2008) sense when it becomes part of a ballet performance within the Norwegian National Ballet's settings.

In contrast to the performance, I had the chance to listen to people's joik within family gatherings in Kautokeino, as well as when I was invited to this local concert where a Sámi band was performing. The band included a joiker, a DJ and a saxophonist, both dressed in a gákti. The instrumental was made of electronic sounds and tones, with a majority of joyful and upbeat songs, to which people were dancing in front of the stage. The young singer was joiking at the rhythm of the music, sometimes including lyrics in Sámi, and people were joiking along, recognising some songs. Most of the public was wearing regular modern clothes, the women often adding a red or blue fringes scarf on their shoulders, and a lot of them knew each other, greetings on the dancefloor or at the bar. The joik being a guttural way of singing, can sometimes sound - to people who are not used to it like I was - quite repetitive and easy to stay in mind. As I was joining the dance, people where singing along around me and as much as I wanted to sing with them, I thought it would perhaps not be appropriate since I didn't even know what the songs were about and I was aware of the weight of what joiking means for this community that I am not part of.

From the family setting to the community concert stage and the national spotlight, joik illuminates how Sámi resilience operates simultaneously as collective (Halbach's, 1992) and active cultural memory, in the sense of A. Assmann's work (2008).

Taken together, I recognise the artistic practices discussed in this chapter as a cultural memory project built on the cultural trauma of the rebellion, in which a community actively shapes the meaning of its own traumatic past rather than allowing that meaning to be determined from outside. In this sense, the cultural elaboration of the Kautokeino rebellion is not only an act of remembrance but of resilience, a collective insistence that this story belongs to the Sámi, that must be told on Sámi terms and that it continues to matter, especially because the issues the community faced and led to the rebellion are ongoing struggles. The museum exhibition, Nils Gaup's film and Elle Sofe Sara's ballet Lahppon/Lost reveal how the 1852 uprising functions not merely as a historical event but as a site of cultural trauma in the sense developed by Jeffrey Alexander (2024). It represents an event whose weight on Sámi collective consciousness has not diminished with time but continues to shape how the community understands its history and its relationship to the Norwegian state. During my time in Kautokeino, I have learned about the event and the cultural significance it still implies today for the Sámi people especially in Kautokeino, merely through watching the movie with Maria, visiting the municipal museum and the ballet performance, which are intentional acts of cultural memory-making. The fact that some descendants of the rebellion refused to speak about it during Sara's research testifies to the unresolved and deeply personal dimension of this trauma. I believe it was also Maria's way of communicating its significance and perhaps her attachment to this part of history by taking me to these places, instead of simply talking about it. This event remains alive in memories and in the community's active cultural response to this trauma. Each of these cultural productions makes a different choice about how to carry the memory of the 1852 rebellion: the museum walls fixing it in permanent, authoritative text within the community itself; the film circulating it in the Sámi language and region from the community's perspective; and the ballet translating it into movement and sound.

This resilience can also be connected to what Spivak argues in her essay "Can the subaltern speak?" (2010) when she questions how those who have been systematically excluded from structures of power can make themselves heard within those very structures. According to her, the issue is not in the ability to speak or whether subaltern people lack voices, but rather in the act of speaking within these dominant frameworks, having more chances to reproduce their

own subordination due to being structured by colonial power. It is a question raised by the Sámi choreographer Elle Sofia when she created the ballet within the Norwegian National Ballet framework, but also what the filmmaker Nils Gaup tried to negotiate by re telling the event of 1852 through the community's perspective in his movie, within the institutionalized framework.

All these creative examples discussed in this chapter can also make us wonder about whether there is will to resist against external power. As presented in the theoretical framework chapter, I am not certain I can claim these performances as resistance acts like the event of the rebellion of 1852 undoubtedly was. Instead, I prefer to argue that these artefacts and performances are ways for the community to tell their own story in their own terms, adapted within institutions, as an act preferably associated with resilience described by Kirmayer et al. (2011) as collective, relational, and grounded in the continuity of knowledge shared across generations. They are Sámi self-representation and resilience in their own way, despite the state owning position such as fundings or institutions, which illustrates what I will analyse next concerning the negotiation of Sámi ontology and way of living in Norway.

Chapter VII. Between Siida and State

In this chapter I will first present another meaningful event for the Sámi community, the Alta-Kautokeino hydropower project, to illustrate the political dimensions of colonial pressures. I argue that conflicts over land and natural resources can be read as a real ontological tension between the Sámi people and the Norwegian state, as we can also see it in the case of conflicts concerning governance of reindeer husbandry. I end this chapter with more subtle situations in the daily life in Kautokeino such as the way the concept of time is experienced and the education system in Sápmi to add another layer of these tensions between different ways of living.

The Alta-Kautokeino hydropower project: the ontological conflict

This section will present the conflict over the Alta-Kautokeino river not only as a political dispute over resource management between the Norwegian state and the Sámi, but as a confrontation between radically different ways of being in the world, what anthropology has come to call an ontological conflict (Descola & Pignocchi, 2022). I mobilise the theoretical frameworks of Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold that allows to map the differences between the modes of relating to the river, the land and the non-human from the different actors involved in the conflict. The event was chosen to be presented here after my visit to the Alta Museum where I learned more about it, and as it is remembered not only as an environmental protest but also as a foundational moment in the struggle for Sámi self-determination and recognition of Indigenous rights in Norway (Garcia-Anton, Gaski, & Guttorm, 2020).

As I and my host family were driving to Alta to spend the day in a bigger city, we stopped at the Alta Museum where one can find the World Heritage Rock Art Centre. One part of the museum is exhibited outdoor and open during summer, while the indoor exhibitions represent Alta's geology and history of rock types and arts. Another important part of the museum's permanent exhibitions called "Resources and Identity" exhibits topics around the city's natural resources and how they formed human activity and identity in the area over time, with as special mention to the Alta Conflict.

The Alta Dam Conflict was one of the most important environmental and Indigenous rights struggles in modern Norwegian history. It took place mainly between the late 1960s and early 1980s and was about plans by the Norwegian government to build a large hydroelectric dam on the Alta River that flows between Alta and Kautokeino, through other Sámi towns such as Máze (Sælhun , 2025). While the project was presented as part of Norway's national strategy to expand hydroelectric energy production, it also threatened lands used by Sámi communities for reindeer herding and fishing. The conflict became a major political and cultural turning point, bringing Sámi rights and Indigenous land claims into national and international public debate (Nykänen, 2022).

As Robert Paine explain in his work "Dam a river, Dam a people?" about the event (1982), during the twentieth century Norway relied heavily on hydroelectric power as a source of energy for industrialization and economic growth. Rivers across the country were gradually dammed in order to produce electricity for expanding cities and industries. In the 1960s the Norwegian government began studying the possibility of building a large dam on the Alta River. The proposed project often called the Alta-Kautokeino hydropower project, would involve the construction of a major dam and reservoir system that would flood large inland areas. For the state, the project promised increased electricity production and regional development in northern Norway. However, the Alta River valley was also an important ecological and cultural landscape. The river was one of northern Europe's most famous salmon rivers, supporting both local fishing traditions and tourism. Even more importantly, the surrounding plateau and valleys were used by Sámi reindeer herders from Kautokeino. Seasonal migrations of reindeer crossed areas that would be affected by the dam and reservoir. As reindeer herding in Finnmark depends on large territories and seasonal mobility between different grazing areas, flooding land or building infrastructure can block migration routes, reduce grazing areas, and disturb animals. For the herding families concerned, the project therefore threatened not only land but also the long-term viability of their livelihood and cultural practices (Paine, 1982).

Opposition to the dam began in the late 1960s and early 1970s when environmentalists, local residents, and Sámi activists started to criticize the project. Initially, protests focused on environmental concerns, including the destruction of river ecosystems and salmon habitats. However, as the project plans became clearer, Sámi political organizations increasingly framed the issue as a question of Indigenous rights and land use (Alta Museum, 2025). At the time, Sámi political representation within Norwegian state institutions was very limited. Many

activists argued that decisions about land in Sámi areas were being made without meaningful consultation with the people whose livelihoods depended on it. The Alta case therefore became a symbol of the broader colonial relationship between the Norwegian state and Sámi communities (Garcia-Anton, Gaski, & Guttorm, 2020).

During the 1970s, new Sámi organizations and activists became involved in the protest movement. Demonstrations, public meetings, and legal appeals were organized. The conflict also gained support from environmental groups across Norway. For the first time, Sámi activists and Norwegian environmentalists collaborated in a large national protest movement (Sælthun, 2025). The conflict escalated dramatically at the end of the 1970s and in 1979 the Norwegian parliament decided to move forward with the construction of a modified version of the dam, despite ongoing protests. This decision triggered large demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience. One of the most visible forms of protest was the establishment of a protest camp at the construction site near Alta, where activists physically blocked roads and construction work in an attempt to stop the project (Alta Museum, 2025). Hundreds of protesters participated in these actions, including Sámi activists, students, environmentalists, and supporters from across Scandinavia. Police eventually removed protesters and dismantled the camps, but the protests attracted major media attention. In 1979 several Sámi protesters carried out a hunger strike in front of the Norwegian Parliament in Oslo to force the government to recognize Sámi rights to land and consultation. Images of Sámi protesters sitting outside the parliament building became powerful symbols of Indigenous resistance within a democratic state (Nykänen, 2022).

Construction eventually continued despite the resistance. Although the dam was ultimately built and the power plant began operation in 1987, the Alta conflict had political consequences as this intense national debate forced Norwegian society to confront the question of Sámi rights and the legacy of assimilation policies. One of the most important outcomes was the creation of new political institutions for Sámi representation: in 1989 Norway established *Sámediggi*, the Sámi Parliament of Norway in Karasjok, giving Sámi people an elected body to represent their interests in national politics (ibid., 2022).



Figure 7. Sámi protestors during the hunger strike of the Alta conflict, in front of the Norwegian Parliament in Oslo, 1979. Picture from Ivar Aaserud/VG/Scanpix. Licence Begrenset gjenbruk.

Culturally and symbolically, the Alta conflict also strengthened Sámi identity and activism. It marked a moment when Sámi voices became highly visible in Norwegian public life, and many scholars describe it as a turning point in the modern Sámi political movement, comparable in importance to other Indigenous rights struggles around the world (Paine, 1982; Nykänen, 2022; Sæthun, 2025). For Sámi communities, the Alta conflict showed both the limits and the possibilities of political resistance. On one hand, the dam was still constructed, demonstrating the power of the Norwegian state over land use decisions, and on the other hand, the protests succeeded in bringing Sámi issues into national and international discussion. Because of this, the Alta conflict is today remembered not only as an environmental protest but also as a foundational moment in the struggle for Sámi self-determination and recognition of Indigenous rights in Norway (Garcia-Anton, Gaski, & Guttorm, 2020).

At its core, the conflict also stages a confrontation between almost opposite ways of being in the world, what I recognise as an ontological conflict. Having my undergraduate in anthropology from a French university, it is impossible for me to talk about ontology theories without mentioning Philippe Descola and his four ontologies schema of animism, totemism, analogism and naturalism. In *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Descola (2013) argues that what distinguishes these modes is the way in which societies identify themselves being in the world and differentiates the interiorities and physicalities of beings: whether humans and non-humans are seen to share an inner - moral - interior vs. a physical - exterior life. To him, Western societies, or the Norwegian government in this case, operate within a naturalist ontology, as a non-human entity such as the river is a physical resource, quantifiable, convertible and measurable for the planners, that shares the same physical world as humans. In this framework, the river has no interiority, no relational agency and doesn't share human's inner and moral world.

	Naturalism	Animism	Totemism	Analogism
Physical	=	≠	=	≠
Moral	≠	=	=	≠

Figure 8. Tab explaining Philippe Descola's theory on the four ontologies

The Sámi relationship to the Alta River corresponds far more closely to what Descola calls an animist ontology, which he usually identifies to other Indigenous societies. On the opposite of naturalism, in animism, non-humans and humans don't share the same physical world. For instance, my physical experience within the world would be completely different from what a fish or a mountain would experience as its external environment (Descola, 2019). However, non-humans are understood to possess interiorities similar to those of humans; they have what we can associate with a "soul", emotions, with whom humans must maintain relations of reciprocity and respect. In that case, for Sámi people the river was not an object but a co-constructive element of a world in which human, animal and landscape were entangled. In Descola's terms, the river and the other non-human entities connected to it and threatened by the dam project were sharing an inner life with the communities in contact with them.

The third actor involved in the conflict were the non-Sámi environmentalists and activists that occupy a more ambiguous ontological position. According to Descola, environmentalists, ecologists and all individuals mobilising a discourse in which nature deserves protection, has intrinsic value or needs human's help to be conserved or rewilded; is still belonging to the naturalist category, as protecting nature is still a form of control over it. Yet, their actions and oppositions to environmental injustices reveal an internal critique of naturalism, a discomfort with its most extreme extractivist implications.

Here we can point out the limitation to his framework and its tendency to assign collectives to coherent and fixed ontological modes, leaving hybrid and transitional positions difficult to theorise. By identifying four modes of identification, he certainly provides a powerful tool for revealing the specificity of modern societies' ways of being in the world, but his structuralist heritage produces somehow a picture that is static and over-determining. By following his idea, western societies being western societies and indigenous people being indigenous, possess pre-determined ways of being in the world and perceiving the environment. Individuals and groups are, in his account, largely formed by the ontological mode they inhabit, and their perceptions, practices and values are organised according to its logic.

Where Descola operates at the level of cultural schemas or modes of identification, Ingold insists on the lived practice and direct perceptual engagement within the environment, as we discussed above with his idea of the dwelling perspective and his concept of taskscape (Ingold, 2000; 2022). For Ingold, humans do not first exist as self-contained subjects who then impose a cultural framework onto a pre-given natural world, but they come to be who they are and to

perceive the world through ongoing and active engagement within an environment that is itself in movement and transformation. In *The Perception of the Environment* (2000), the concept of taskscape is introduced as the ensemble of practical activities through which a community inhabits and co-shapes its surroundings (see also chapter V in this thesis). As Joks (2022) describes in his study on Sámi cloudberries picking, “Sámi people go to *meahcci* (plural, *meahcit*), which is/are the locations where people undertake different tasks at different times, such as fishing and berry picking” (Joks, 2022, p.156), in which he also relates the term *meahcci* to Ingold’s concept of taskscape: “Meahcci is [...] better to describe as a taskscape [...].The concept of taskscape highlights the way in which activities and surroundings are entangled in Sámi gathering practices” (Joks, 2022, p. 153). Following this argument, we can also relate it to Sámi reindeer herders and the other members of the community impacted by the Alta-Kautokeino project, as the river was not a resource but was a living entity in a taskscape, a practical skill and an ecological knowledge.

Descola suggests a theory of ontologies based on cultural differences, whereas Ingold suggests that we consider ontologies according to relations between people and the environment. As Kuokkanen frames it “In Ingold’s view, the relational model better reflects the ways in which indigenous peoples’ knowledge, identities and relationships with the natural environment are constituted” (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 61). In this sense, Ingold’s perspective suggests another way of understanding the conflict over the dam project: the state’s project was not merely the physical transformation of the river, it was the destruction of a taskscape, of practice and perception through which the Sámi community constituted themselves. The conflict is hence located at the level of embodied, perceptual being in the world, rather than merely as representations.

If both thinkers attack the nature/culture dualism, both do it from different angles: Descola considers that the separation of nature and culture into two distinct domains is historically and culturally specific invention of modern Western thoughts, what he calls naturalism. In naturalism, a single, unified nature governed by laws and studied by science is set against a multiplicity of culture that vary in their representations of it. What his theory suggests is that this is just one of four possible ways of distributing interiorities and physicalities among being. In animism, for instance, the boundary does not run between humans and nature.

According to Ingold, the mistake is already in thinking that relations between humans and their environment are mediated by classificatory systems or cultural models. For him, what comes

first is not a schema but a practice, a skilled engagement, a movement through the world. During a debate conference between them both held in 2014, Ingold and Descola discussed around the central question in anthropology about “why people do things differently around the world?”. To this question Ingold criticises Descola’s framework of using “culture” as the answer:

“[...] we can’t say that cultural differences are due to something we call culture, at the risk of finding ourselves trapped in an endless circle. [...] Human beings do not end up projected in a cultural context previously defined: they are confronted to a certain context and become certain human beings. If they develop certain characteristics, it’s from being in the middle of a multiplicity of relations: their knowledge, capacity of judgement, body language, all of them developing within an environment.”

(Lussault, Descola, & Ingold, 2014, pp. 46-47)

(my translation)

Before starting my research and going to the fieldwork, I thought Descola’s theory would be the centre of my research question and would be a foundational argument of my thesis. However, after having experienced a fragment of what life is like in Kautokeino for reindeer herders and after deep research reading mostly Sámi scholars, I realized that Ingold’s framework suggests a more accurate and dynamic way of understanding people’s relationship with the environment, or at least of trying to grasp Sámi’s. The way Klaus’ work was always depending on the weather conditions or the animals, but also how daily activities in Kautokeino are planned around the temperatures, the snow, the darkness of the polar nights, made me see how people have developed practical skills and knowledge within the environment.

Natural resources management, Land and the Governance of Reindeer Husbandry

The Alta Dam conflict marked a turning point in Norwegian - Sámi relations, prompting a wave of legislative and constitutional recognition of Sámi rights since the creation of the Sámi Parliament in 1989, after the conflict. Yet, as Johnsen, Benjaminsen and Eira (2015) demonstrate, formal recognition did not translate into genuine participation in the governance of Sámi livelihoods. From the 1970s onwards, the Norwegian state developed increasingly interventionist policies aimed at regulating the number of reindeer permitted per herding unit, justified on the grounds of preventing overgrazing and ensuring the long-term ecological sustainability of Sámi pasture lands. The 2007 Reindeer Husbandry Act consolidated this,

establishing maximum herd sizes that herding districts were required to observe under penalty of forced slaughter (Ravna, 2008). In this section I will present the tension between the states' regulations of reindeer numbers and management in contrast with the herders' arguments trying to defend the complexity of their herding practice and their ecological knowledge to be considered.

As mentioned above, even if the herd belongs to a main figure in the siida, all the other family members are involved in the herding work throughout the year. Sons and daughters of reindeer herders are brought from a very young age to the different fences and pastures, and taught how to manage the herd, feed the animals, how to recognize their own, to catch them or to earmark them. At the fence where we did the separation work, many young people were here helping their own siida catching their animals and I would join them trying to make groups of the herd going through the different fences (see figure 4).

One day, after the separation work was done, I was talking with one young adult whose dad is a herder, whom I asked whether he would see himself taking back the herd when his dad will retire, to which he said "No, I don't see a future in it. We are only allowed less reindeer over the years, what will I be left with? Only few reindeer can't even afford you to buy bread". I noticed from talking with youth that feelings were very mixed between wishing to their families work and heritage in reindeer husbandry, and on the other hand, had a hard time imagining a future career within this work.

During winter season, reindeer and their herders migrate in the south inland part of the region, whereas the summer, spring and autumn pastures can be found on the coastal areas (see figure 2), (Eira, Eira, & Mathiesen, 2025). Only people of Sámi ethnicity are allowed to own reindeer and all herding is regulated under the Reindeer Husbandry Act of 2007. Since 2014, the national management of reindeer husbandry is fixed by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (LMD), and the regional management by County Governors, with the Reindeer Husbandry Board sitting in an advisory role in between (Johnsen, Benjaminsen, & Eira, 2015). The County Governor is essentially a state administrative office, which, based on Johnsen et al. (2015), the Sámi Parlement expressed concerns about the influence of the herders as decision-makers since it is not a politically representative body.

In their very rich volume *Reindeer Husbandry: Resilience in the Changing Arctic*, the editors all coming from a Sámi background or involved themselves in reindeer herding in Sápmi, outline the complexity of this practice and expose the issues herders are facing in a time of

environmental crisis (Mathiesen, et al., 2024). Reinert and Oskal (2024) explain the distinctive and complex characteristics of reindeer herding in the Arctic. This particular form of husbandry is nomadic, practiced in a particular Arctic climatic context, but in fact regulated as any other form of animal husbandry across the country by the Norwegian Ministry of Food and Agriculture, which exposes several issues: “Employing the logic of normal animal husbandry – with an almost complete lack of attention to the Arctic climatic context – several crucial factors were ignored.” (Reinert & Oskal, 2024, p. 124).

Indeed, the climatic variations and the nomadic form of herding are such specific characteristics which can't be ignored to understand the productivity and the appropriate management of reindeer herding. In contrast to other agricultural practices based on captive animals placed in close pastures controlled by farmers, pastoralism requires mobility and flexibility largely depending on the fast environmental changes in the Arctic, but also on reindeer autonomy of, for instance, finding suitable grazing lands, which in turn depends on ice and snow quality that constantly varies, all of that influencing the number of reindeer and production of meat each year. In other words, reindeer herder must work “in collaboration with nature, not against it” (Reinert & Oskal, 2024, p. 125).

The issue today within the management and regulations concerning reindeer husbandry in Norway is that the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, who remains the top authority over reindeer husbandry policy, doesn't take these parameters into consideration when making legislations. When it comes to the number of reindeer allowed per herd, the state narrative holds that there are too many reindeer in Finnmark, leading to overgrazing and degradation of pastures and increased animal diseases. This is presented as scientifically established fact, based primarily on regression models developed by Lenvik (1990), showing an inverse relationship between reindeer density and carcass weights – if animals are lighter, the pastures are overstocked, as explained by Johnsen, Benjaminsen, & Eira (2015, p. 235). In that case, the state presents destocking as an objective measure based on science. In the same article, a former director of the Reindeer Husbandry Administration expressed concern that the LMD was basing decisions on one specific input only, from this particular Lenvik (1990) study.

However, research such as Mathiesen et al. on reindeer husbandry (2024), show that the relationship between reindeer numbers and vegetation changes is more complex than the regression models from which the ministry is basing its legislations, and that herder's suggestions were simply ignored by politicians and officials.

What the herders are defending here is that the narrative of “too many reindeer” is in fact a concept itself being misapplied with a wrong diagnosis of the cause. They contest the selective science used by the authority, accusing the traditional knowledge that could offer a richer understanding of herd and pasture dynamics as systematically excluded from the conversation. Traditional indicators and knowledge that herders point out for helping decision making are often classified as “subjective and supplementary” (Mathiesen, et al., 2024), while the state’s quantitative indicators are presented as “objective”:

“The basic inability of the government system to recognize the natural cyclicity of reindeer herds is at the core of the problem. Rejecting traditional knowledge as “superstition,” for the Ministry in Oslo with their background in normal agriculture, the herds of the tundra to them appear to be a disorganized barn.” (Reinart & Oskal, 2024, p. 129)

This dynamic can as well be understood through James Scott’s (1998) concept of “seeing like a state” and governmentality. The Norwegian Ministry of Food and Agriculture approaches reindeer husbandry by rendering it legible and technical: herd sizes are measures through regression models, and the goal is a standardized market-oriented industry (Reinart & Oskal, 2024). Traditional Sámi herding knowledge, which attends to the composition and flexibility of the herd, the quality of migration routes, without forgetting the social relations within and between siidas sharing lands and pastures, is undervalued.

Nils Oskal, a Sámi philosopher professor that I met at the Sámi University of Applied Sciences wrote about the concept of reindeer luck (Oskal, 1999), that perfectly frame the tension with dominant Norwegian and broadly Western concept of value. Where Western capitalist society tends to reward quantifiable productivity, legal ownership, individual rational agency, and the mastery of nature through technology accounting, reindeer luck operates on an opposite level. At the core of this philosophy, counting your herd is a sign of arrogance and can bring the herder and his family bad fortune for being too exact on the number of animals that one has. One shouldn’t complain about too little reindeer, nor be too proud of having a lot, as this would challenge the reindeer luck. The reindeer luck can be influenced by the respect herders must show towards the reindeer and the land they use, as well as the kindness to show to other individuals: “[reindeer luck] improves if you live a value-driven life. You should be humane, honest, faith and honourable but these values do not automatically belong to everyone with a large and beautiful herd. How your reindeer luck develops depends on how you love as a person, not just how you handle reindeer.” (p. 177).

“[...] The herd should not be thought of or treated as a means. It has value in itself. It is considered in bad taste to point out a reindeer as fat or thin or point out an animal as a means to an end, such as future meal or clothing. This insults the reindeer. The hide belongs to the animals whereas the clothing made from it belongs to people.” (p178). It is not earned through the number of animals or the money they will provide but cultivated through a way of being. For Sámi individuals, this collision with the Norwegian and legal framework is existential: to inhabit both worlds simultaneously is to be asked to hold two irreconcilable self-understandings at once.

Such conflicts as the Alta-Kautokeino hydropower project or the legislation and management over reindeer husbandry are not confined to moment of spectacular confrontation; and does not always concern natural resources. The same incommensurability runs persistently in the everyday life in Kautokeino: in the classroom, in the doctor’s office, in the management of time, in the working conditions and in the philosophy of life. If the Alta case and conflicts over reindeer husbandry governance revealed the ontological stakes of belonging to a particular landscape, the following section turns to the subtler areas in which Sámi ways of being in the world are negotiated within and sometimes against the dominant society.

Other ontological conflicts in the everyday life: the concept of time

For Sámi people that are involved in reindeer herding, time does not move in a straight line (Keskitalo, 2019). For a reindeer herding family, the rhythm of the year is dictated not by a monthly or weekly Gregorian calendar but by the logic of the land and the animals. For those involved in reindeer herding, the concept of time is cyclic and is measured by the observations of nature (Keskitalo, 2019). The herders follow the migration of the reindeer throughout the seasons; the quality of the snow indicates whether the animals will be able to graze and feed themselves properly, as the movement and health of the reindeer in time and space are connected to climate and temperature. The life of the herding family is hence organised according to the reindeer herding periods and cycles, as shown in chapter 5 with the “Sámi calendar” that Maria has hanged in their living room: cycles related to the use of specific areas such as the winter or the summer pastures, seasons of the calves, the ear marking, the separation-work etc. (see also Gaup Eira, Turi, & Turi, 2023).

In their rich work on reindeer husbandry and their section on “*Understanding of Time in Reindeer Herding in Guovdageaidnu*”, Gaup Eira, Turi & Turi, having themselves grown up in Kautokeino and within herding families, explain that even some names of the months have a meaning related to a phenomena directly associated with the herding practice: “For example, May is *messemánnu* in Sámi (reindeer calf month), in which calves are born” (Ibid., 2023, p. 71). Time is then organised around the reindeer and its biological functions that are themselves related to the environment, the land, and the weather. In this case, time is connected to the environment and experienced by the herders through the body and through practice. It took me some time before I understood during my first weeks of fieldwork that the concept of time in Kautokeino, and especially among this family, was so different from what I was used to, as I was always asking for what would happen next: when are we going to work with the reindeer? What are the plans for tomorrow? At what time should we prepare to go to the fence? etc. Most of the time I would get frustrated by the answers of Klaus and Maria being “We don’t know yet”, “Maybe, we will go to the fence, maybe not. It’s always *maybe* here”. I had a hard time understanding how they were organizing their life around such uncertainty. I finally realised that this “uncertainty” was in reality the knowledge I didn’t have about the environment and the herding work, and that their life was dependent of them.

In contrast, the Norwegian society’s way of living runs on appointments, meetings and planning ahead. The healthcare system, the social services office, the school administration; all operate according to a grid of fixed slots, standardized durations and deadlines, that aren’t considering the weather or the movement of the animals. Maria having her own company selling around the country has no choice to deal with offices hours, and the children going to pre-school and kindergarten are also dependent on the “western clock” and calendar. This mean that they all need to navigate between medical or bureaucratic appointments in the middle of the separation work, or that an administrative deadline can come up during the weeks when *siida* members are needed to help with any type of herding work. The choice that presents itself in this kind of case is not a minor inconvenience but a structural demand to subordinate one’s entire way of being in the world to an external temporal logic. As Maria told me: “My husband will not look at the clock, and you can’t ask him to be on time somewhere. He doesn’t work like that; his work is always unpredictable”. Adaptation is in fact a keyword in reindeer husbandry and in the Sámi way of living. To adapt to the temperatures, the snow conditions, the animals need, climate change, indeed defines the concept of time and space for Sámi herders and their families. It is in fact connected to the relationship the community share with the environment

as something to live in and with, instead of trying to control it. It's almost like it's the other way around, the environment controls what the herders will decide to do and when they will have to work. Adaptation is a way of living and surviving the environmental challenges reindeer herders face daily.

Conflicts in education

The Norwegian School system has made formal accommodations for Sámi languages and culture, and Kautokeino municipality operates schools where North Sámi is a language of instruction. As explained above, the local High School and University also have their own programme related to reindeer herding, traditional handicraft and other traditional knowledge classes. However, according to what I have been told about the schools in Kautokeino, one of the most persistent problems facing Sámi education in Finnmark is the shortage of qualified Sámi-speaking teachers. On paper, the Norwegian state has made significant formal commitments to Sámi education. Kautokeino, as part of the Sámi language administrative district, is legally required to provide instruction in North Sámi at every level of schooling, from kindergarten upward. The Norwegian Constitution, ILO Convention and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child all stipulate the right of Sámi children to an education that reflects their language, culture, and identity (Åmot & Bjerlkund, 2023). And yet the gap between legal entitlement and lived reality seems to appear when my interlocutors say that there aren't enough qualified Sámi professors.

In the Norwegian online information hub Kifinfo, developed by the Kilden Information Centre for Gender research, Stuen published an article "Without our university, there wouldn't have been any Sámi-speaking teachers" (2023), talking about how the Sámi University in Kautokeino is the main supplier of Sámi-speaking teachers to schools in Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia, but still face issues to have enough people speaking and teaching the language across the Sápmi regions:

"In practice, some children are not taught in Sámi, even though the municipalities are obliged to ensure this. The situation is particularly problematic in kindergartens – it's a sign of a bigger problem.

The health service, the judicial system and child welfare services also suffer from this. So we have a pressing need for more people with Sámi language skills." – says Torjer Olsen, Head of the Centre for Sámi studies at UiT The Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø (Stuen, 2023).

What the Head of the Centre for Sámi studies at UiT in Tromsø notices here, is that the schools within Sápmi are sites of ongoing negotiation how Sámi knowledge can be transmitted within a framework that remains structurally Norwegian. The shortage of qualified Sámi-speaking teachers has deep historical roots that reach back to the Norwegianization policies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Sámi language and culture was suppressed through the school system (Minde, 2005). For over a century, the school was an institution of erasure. What the present shortage of Sámi teachers represents is therefore a long trail of a colonial educational project that dismantled the conditions for Sámi language transmission across generations.

Leila Susanne Vars, rector of Sámi University of Applied Sciences, expresses that Sámi University of Applied Sciences “must focus on higher education helping strengthen Sámi communities and industries and preventing more Sámi youth from leaving Sámi industries and core Sámi areas for the cities. Sámi University of Applied Sciences is therefore also important to prevent depopulation from Sámi communities, especially in Finnmark” (Stuen, 2023). As she has noted, the institution finds itself in a sort of competition with the universities in other parts of Norway, to where young Sámi people leave Finnmark and do not return. The result, in Kautokeino, is that even in schools nominally committed to Sámi language education, children and youth frequently encounter a lack of Sámi speaking teachers.

Hence, the schools within Sápmi are sites of ongoing negotiation about what Sámi knowledge is, who holds it, and how it can be transmitted within a framework that remains structurally Norwegian. In her study of local educational practices in Kåfjord, Evju (2022) captures this tension through the concept of cultural interface – a dynamic space where difference experiences, narratives and identity positions meet and shape teaching practices. This study was held in a part of Norway where the Sámi community as a different cultural context than in Kautokeino: Kåfjord is a city in the Troms region, in the northern west side of Norway where Sámi, Kven and Norwegian community are mixed and where assimilation of Sámi and Kven went much further, with a more hybrid identity as the result than in Kautokeino. In that community shaped by decades of deeper Norwegianization and the layered coexistence of multicultural heritage, teachers express articulate identities and their way of teaching resisting binary oppositions between being indigenous or majority society when one of the professors says “We don’t talk about Sámi versus Norwegian; we talk about us. We are a mix of

everything” (Evju, 2022, p. 261). This reflects not confusion or loss of identity but a dynamic subjectivity in which it is possible, as Evju puts it, “to be both, or even more.” (p.261).

In contrast, Kautokeino presents a different configuration of this tension. Kautokeino is the most distinctly North Sámi municipality in Norway, where Sámi language and culture remained comparatively stronger. It is the municipality with the highest concentration of North Sámi speakers in Norway, and the home to the Sámi University of Applied Sciences, with a reindeer herding economy that continues to structure daily life. The sense of *we-ness* in Kåfjord reflects a genuinely different lived negotiation than what I encountered in Kautokeino, where the assertion of a distinct Sámi identity and way of living were much stronger. This is not to say that identity in Kautokeino is static or uniform. Herding families navigate Norwegian administrative systems, speak Norwegian when they must, send their children to schools that navigate within national framework, and engage with state institutions where logic is not their own. What is at stake here is the technically demanding way of knowing how to herd reindeer across this particular landscape, in this particular climate, within the particular social structure of the *siida*, when external forces are imposing a logic different from what herders and their family live. People in Kautokeino also hold “multilayered positions that are dynamic” (Ibid., 2022) but from what I could encounter and hear from people in Kautokeino and especially reindeer herding families, the negotiation between the Sámi way of living and the Norwegian way was experienced as an external demand, a pressure felt as coming from outside.

To conclude this chapter, I showed through the Alta-Kautokeino hydropower project, land and reindeer husbandry governance conflicts and everyday life situations that there is a profound ontological tension that emerges when Sámi way of living encounters the administrative and extractive logics of the Norwegian state. In Kautokeino, herders and their relatives continuously navigate between these two ways of living, engaging with state structure, when necessary, while reaffirming, in practice and in memory, the logics that constitute Sámi identity. This navigation itself is a form of resilience: a daily struggle of holding a sense of self and community that the state’s persistently tries to diminish.

Chapter VIII. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore resilience from an indigenous perspective, more specifically from the Sámi people in Kautokeino. Across the preceding chapters, the analysis has moved to different dimensions of Sámi life: the grounding community in everyday practices and traditional knowledge, the active construction of cultural memory through artistic and institutional self-representation, and the enduring conflicts that arise between the Sámi and Norwegian state's ontologies. Taken together, I tried to reveal a picture of a community that is neither frozen in tradition nor defined by its relationship to colonial pressure but one that is dynamic, self-determined and generative. The practices illustrated in chapter V such as the transmission of knowledge, reindeer herding, or berry picking as well as the cultural memory work analysed in chapter VI through duodji, the joik and artistic reworking of the Kautokeino rebellion in film and ballet are the texture of everyday life in Kautokeino. They represent a community that actively produces its own representations and its own future. They are acts of expressions from a people who are, to use Kuokkanen's terms, not merely objects of epistemic ignorance but active producers and holders of knowledge. Sámi resilience in Kautokeino, then, is perhaps best understood as simultaneously ordinary and political. It is the ongoing practice of a community that is navigating within a structure that has not ceased trying to absorb or erase it.

To conclude this work with a final analytical frame, I turn here to the concept of settler colonialism as developed by Kuokkanen (2020; 2022) and McGuire (2022), to understand the ongoing issues the Sámi community is facing in Norway, as well as in other parts of Sápmi. Unlike classical colonialism, which implies a temporal endpoint, a moment of decolonization or formal independence, settler colonialism persists. It is reproduced through legal frameworks, land regimes, administrative institutions and cultural hierarchies that continue to subordinate indigenous peoples to the logic and interest of the settler majority. As Kuokkanen and McGuire argue, the Sámi case exemplifies this structure: the Scandinavian states, despite formal recognition of Sámi rights and their institutions such as the Sámi Parliaments, continue to operate through mechanisms that marginalise Sámi sovereignty, delegitimise indigenous knowledge and use their integration policies to disguise their permanent colonial actions.

The empirical material presented in this thesis gives concrete examples of this structure. The conflicts analysed in chapter VII over the governance of reindeer husbandry and land in

Kautokeino are expressions of settler colonialism, and, I argue, expressions of a deeper ontological friction: a conflict between a Sámi relationship to land, collective stewardship, seasonal rhythms of dwelling, and a Norwegian state logic that treats land as a resource to be administered and exploited. This ontological tension discussed in the same chapter further illustrates how settler colonialism operates also in the subtle imposition of majority-society categories onto Sámi ways of living, through education and the concept of time.

Yet, a central argument running through this work is that Sámi life in Kautokeino cannot be merely understood through the lens of colonial subjection alone. Reducing it to resistance or adaptation alone risks reproducing a form of ethnographic refusal, in Sherry Ortner's sense, that denies indigenous people the fullness of their own purposes. Instead, what I encountered is a community engaged in what Ortner (1995) calls projective agency: oriented not merely against colonial constraint but toward its own visions of the good life, sustained by its own knowledge and its own social forms.

Finally, this thesis has been shaped within the limits of my own position as a non-Sámi researcher and raises questions that extend beyond individual reflexivity, pointing toward a broader methodological and ethical agenda for the discipline of anthropology. Further research could engage more with the conditions under which researchers enter indigenous communities, produce knowledge with them, and circulate that knowledge within academic institutions.

To go further, I would say that anthropological perspectives and a serious engagement with traditional ecological knowledge and different epistemologies should be introduced widely and at an earlier stage in each individual's formal education. Cultivating an awareness of ontological plurality, systems of knowledge and different ways of inhabiting the world should not merely belong to the graduate stage, but to a broader educational and political responsibility.

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