

Reindeer and the Living Landscape: A Changing Sami Vision of Life

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INTRODUCTION

In his article *Ethnobotany: An Old Practice, A New Discipline*, E. Wade Davis asserts that one of the most important and most difficult jobs of the ethnobotanist is to record “not only lists of plants but a vision of life itself.” To understand a vision of life is to understand not only how a specific group of people uses their environment, but how that group perceives it,¹ and how those perceptions influence them and their environment. The vision of life of many indigenous peoples is intensely connected to the land, and the plants and animals which share that land.

For the Sami, indigenous peoples of Northern Scandinavia who rely heavily on wild reindeer herds, the animal connection is especially crucial. Sami understanding and use of many plants - and of the rest of their environment - often happens through the reindeer herds which they once followed so closely. However, beyond individual plants, the Sami vision of life grants sentience to the entire landscape. The intricacies of weather and ecosystem come together to create land that is as alive and as aware as a

human being. Yet, under social and environmental pressures from the rest of the world, the landscape - and with it, the Sami vision of life - is changing.

Most of these changes are not random, nor do they stem from any sort of natural ecological transition. They have to do with government regulation, with environmental exploitation, and with wider issues in Scandinavian society. The Sami vision of life is changing in response to a changing world. For the most part, these were changes in which the Sami did not have a say. For better or for worse, decisions about the environment, about laws, and about Scandinavian society are having a tangible effect on the Sami experience. While way of life may be a more obvious and easier-to-measure means of understanding this change, the way in which people interpret their world can be equally significant. With this in mind, it is important to

understand the effects that altering social, economic, and environmental pressures are having on the Sami vision of life, first by understanding what it has been in the past, then by looking at what it is becoming.

Before I continue, it is important to acknowledge my own relationship with this topic. I first came to it through a distressing revelation. One of my family legends tells the story of a distant grandfather of

mine, a priest, who once walked across Norway to convince the Queen to fund the building of an orphanage in the north. He was something of a family hero, but in researching him one day several years ago, I discovered that his ‘orphanage’ was, in intent and execution, not

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¹ E. Wade Davis, “Ethnobotany: An Old Practice, A New Discipline,” *Anth 3541 Course Pak*. (1995)

unlike Canada's own residential schools, meant to Christianize and Norwegianize Sami children whilst being distanced from their parents. Shockingly enough, I can also, going further back in my family tree, trace my ancestry to a community of Sami living along the northern coast of Norway. When I told my immediate family about my discovery I expected it to start some difficult conversations, but I think none of us felt ready to grapple with a past that had such tangible and painful consequences in the present. My interest in the Sami, and in Scandinavia more broadly, stems from my desire to change that, not to mention the feeling that I have something to make up for. That said, I cannot claim to come to this topic as an anything but outsider. Norway is an entirely foreign place to which I have never been, nor does my family maintain any connection to our Sami ancestry. I have benefited from every advantage of wealth, race, and nationality that goes with having lived my entire life as a White, Southern Canadian whose most recent family narrative is that of colonialism in Western Canada. While I have done my best to focus on firsthand accounts like the books of Sami hunter Johan Turi, the fact is that my experience is one of racial and economic privilege, by which I am removed and protected from many indigenous peoples' experiences of racism and disenfranchisement. My hope, in writing this paper, is to help myself and others begin to understand how the Sami might be supported in reclaiming their power, respect, and authority in their relations with the land.

THE REINDEER HERDS

First and foremost, Sami interpretation of the world appears to happen primarily through the reindeer. They form a central part of the Sami

lifestyle and therefore are a key component of the Sami vision of life. Johan Turi, a Sami hunter living in northern Norway in 1931, attempted to record the entirety of his traditional knowledge in *Muittlaus Samid Birra*, or *Turi's Book of Lappland*. In this work, he said, "really the Lapps have almost the same nature as reindeer, both of them migrate north and south, in the way they are used to migrating..."² In Turi's eyes, the life of the Sami was inextricably tied to that of the reindeer. Their vision of life was constructed primarily through the herds. Even now, this connection is so strong that, according to Pertti J. Peltó in his much more recent book *The Snowmobile Revolution*, "the Skolt Lapps have always considered themselves to be reindeer herders above all, even though the total food intake of reindeer meat was probably less than was provided by fish."³ Even when reindeer are not directly related to the survival of the Sami, they remain in the close relationships with them, helping them to form a framework for understanding the world.

Of course, this relationship is not purely related to food. Reindeer fill vital roles in almost every aspect of Sami life. Until the recent advent of snowmobiles, they provided a means of transportation, and their uses did not stop there. Reindeer hides were used for making shoes, leggings, fur coats, and other clothing, while reindeer sinews were used for sewing. A few items were made from reindeer antler and bone, and reindeer meat was traded for cash.⁴ Reindeer again make a prominent appearance in traditional Sami medicine - of the total remedies recorded by herder Johan Turi, 31% were zootherapeutics - remedies which rely on animal components, rather than plants or minerals. In contrast, ethnobotanical cures made up 17% of

² Johan Turi, *Turi's Book of Lappland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), 65.

³ Pertti J. Peltó, *The Snowmobile Revolution: Technology and Social Change in the Arctic* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press,

1987), 23.

⁴ Ibid.

his repertoire, followed only by mineral and chemical cures (12%).⁵ This connection between animals - especially reindeer - and health is yet another way in which the long-standing Sami relationship with reindeer makes itself present in a part of their lives that others might consider to be completely separate. The herd is connected to everything, from food to medicine. It is a main source of stability and well-being, not just as a matter of survival but also of financial security and holistic wellbeing.

Beyond this, reindeer also make prominent appearances in Sami art and song, both forms of storytelling that represent, in any context, an attempt to express oneself and the surrounding world. What appears in art and in music is likely to be of crucial importance to the artist's vision of life. Both Turi's book and *The Snowmobile Revolution* include art done by Sami herders and their families. Consistently, the images' main focus is on reindeer and reindeer herding equipment.^{6,7} For example in *Turi's Book of Lapland*, Turi includes a drawing titled, "In a Church Village."⁸ It depicts people wandering between houses and tents, socializing and going to church. However, unlike his other illustrations it does not involve the reindeer migrations; it is meant to show a time of the year when the Sami were more settled and were not following the reindeer migration so closely. Yet, the reindeer have found their way even into this picture, some depicted pulling sledges while others - faint outlines at the edge of the drawing which Turi never completed - are simply present in the village. Even in this part of traditional Sami life,

more separate from the herds than in other times of migration or breeding, reindeer are an intrinsic component of their daily lives.

This trend can be seen again in *joiks*. Unlike a song in the Western sense, which would be sung *about* something, joiks have been described as "personifying, illustrating, or taking the melodic likeness of its object."⁹ They represent something's "deepest name,"¹⁰ and, according to joiker and lawyer Ánde Somby, have "the ability to bring something into the room that is not there before you start, like (...) the ptarmigan. (...) All of a sudden people saw a ptarmigan and right after I brought in a wolf as well. Not a very hard wolf, but still a wolf; and that is close to the old shamanistic idea of transformation."¹¹ In other words, one doesn't joik *about* a thing. One simply joiks it. They are used to express an experience of being, and as such, what a Sami joiker chooses to joik says much about how they see the world, what they feel to be significant and to what they feel the most connected.

When asked, Anne Louise Gaup, a reindeer herder from Karasjok, told an interviewer that "most of the time (...) when I am joiking, it's actually in the springtime, when we are moving with the reindeer herd to the summer area. Then I joik because I can see the reindeer have had a good winter and the female reindeer are pregnant."¹² Joiking also enjoys a special connection with reindeer in Turi's book, and the "Reindeer joik", the only joik explicitly about reindeer, was also the only joik to be given its own chapter title.¹³ Meanwhile, reindeer were at least referenced in almost every other joik that

⁵ Thomas DuBois, and Jonathan F. Lang, "Johan Turi's animal, mineral, vegetable cures and healing practices: an in-depth analysis of Sami (Saami) folk healing one hundred years ago." *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 57, no. 9 (2013)

⁶ Turi, *Turi's Book of Lapland*, 257-595.

⁷ Peltto, *The Snowmobile Revolution: Technology and Social Change in the Arctic*, 172-76.

⁸ Turi, *Turi's Book of Lapland*, 285.

⁹ Tina K. Ramnarine, "Acoustemology, Indigeneity, and Joik in Valkeapää's Symphonic Activism: Views from Europe's Arctic Fringes for Environmental Ethnomusicology." *Ethnomusicology*

53, no. 2 (2009)

¹⁰ Ramnarine, "Acoustemology, Indigeneity, and Joik in Valkeapää's Symphonic Activism: Views from Europe's Arctic Fringes for Environmental Ethnomusicology."

¹¹ Ramnarine, "Acoustemology, Indigeneity, and Joik in Valkeapää's Symphonic Activism: Views from Europe's Arctic Fringes for Environmental Ethnomusicology."

¹² Randall Hyman, "Sámi Easter." *Scandinavian Review* 102, no. 2 (2015): 18-29.

¹³ Turi, *Turi's Book of Lapland*, 225.

Turi recorded, even when the joiker was joiking what would seem to be a different topic entirely.¹⁴ For example, one joik was sung by a man, Matte, who was rejected by his lover in favour of another man, Nilas. Matte's joik expressed his anger and mourning through the reindeer. After Matte, the jilted lover, "wept and sorrowed, until he nearly lost his reason," he joiked, "Voia voia, nana nana, Birru Baegalak, Now I'll kill all Nilas' reindeer."¹⁵ Thankfully for Nilas, Matte actually goes on to marry another girl and live in comfort and plenty - a happy moment expressed through another joik, also about reindeer.¹⁶ However, the reindeer aren't confined to Turi's joiks of the 1930s. A more modern joik from the Skolt Lapps boasts of their reindeers' prowess over those of the Inari men, connecting reindeer once again to pride and wealth. They sing, "Inarin porot ne ovat / kuin kankeat heinäsäkit (...) mutta kas meidän ajokkaamme/ kenokaulat ja komeasarvet," - "Inari reindeer they are/Like stiff hay-bags (...) But look at our draught geldings/Slim-necked and beautiful antlers."¹⁷ Through joiks like these, it is evident that reindeer in the Sami vision of life take on a greater significance than simply animals to be herded. They form a framework through which human experience and emotion can be understood and expressed, from joy, happiness and pride, to rage and loss.

PLANTS AND THE LANDSCAPE

We can safely conclude that the Sami vision of life is intensely connected to the reindeer herds. In some ways, their relationship with plants and the landscape is also shaped by their relationship with reindeer. However, it would be an oversimplification to say that reindeer are the only way through which the Sami connect to the

world around them. Considered alone, plants might not be discussed or used much beyond material needs of the herders and their animals, but the minute that they are considered as a part of the wider landscape, they take on a life of their own. Essentially, the land is understood as a connected whole, meaningless without all of its component parts. This connectedness extends to the Sami themselves and their relationship with the land. In the most explicit embodiment of this relationship, protective spirits take up residence in the land and enforce certain behaviours on their Sami neighbors, representing the land's ability to hold an opinion, and to punish or reward those who inhabit it. As a forest or a pasture, the land comes alive.

Reindeer moss - a low, spongy, slow-growing lichen which clings to the rocks in northern climates - is the perfect example of a plant that acquires significance only in connection with the other plants around it. It can be used as a dye or a medicine, generally forming only a minor part of the Sami diet and pharmacopeia. For the most part, this unassuming little lichen is noticed because the reindeer herds eat it through the winter months, when other food is no longer available. However, simply knowing where the lichen grows is not enough. The availability of the lichen pasture depends on all of the factors surrounding it, from the trees to the weather to the season. A herder from Sirges explained,

One thing that has been good this year is the younger forests, around 1.5 metres high. Here, the pasture was quite good. But in the older forests... a lot of snow fell in the autumn, and at the beginning of January it melted, so all the snow fell down from the tree crowns and

¹⁴ Ibid., 77, 216, 204, 207, 22.

¹⁵ Ibid., 204.

¹⁶ Ibid., 208.

¹⁷ Pelto, *The Snowmobile Revolution: Technology and Social Change in the Arctic*, 55.

became compacted. But in the younger forests, the snow had not attached itself so much to the branches, so it was already on the ground.¹⁸

What he described is the result of a warm period in the weather, during which snow melted from the branches of the older trees and fell to the forest floor, compact and frozen. This blocked the reindeers' access to the lichen. In contrast, the younger trees trapped less snow, which resulted in a looser ground cover.¹⁹ In another year, this analysis could have been completely different. An early melt could have arrived, resulting in all of the young forests' ground snow re-freezing as ice. This relationship, between snow, trees, and lichen is a complex one, and necessary - so much so that the coincidence of all the factors that make a good pasture gets its own entirely separate word - *guohtun*. A Sami herder explained, "guohtun is more than just the food, it is the whole actually: how the reindeer can get their food. It means that what is above the lichen is also included in it, everything that influences the food itself."²⁰

Without a deep understanding of the rest of the landscape, knowing about the lichen is essentially useless. As Turi so frankly puts it, "...the *sidas* that know where there is pasture, they will keep their herds alive, and the *sidas* who do not know where there is pasture, their reindeer weaken and die."²¹ This multi-faceted relationship of the *guohtun* clearly reflects how Sami vision of life takes a wider perspective on the landscape as a whole, connected ecosystem.

This sense of connecting factors extends to the Sami themselves, how they have lived on the land and the activities that they carried out there. A distinction is made, for example, between *duovddagat* - land that is lived on - and "wild tracts."²² The change in name reflects a change in the nature of the land itself, from uninhabited wilderness to a place which has entered into a relationship with its Sami inhabitants. By engaging with a place, the Sami become one of the factors which defines it. Similarly, mountains acquire their names from events that took place there²³ and churchyards are named after the first person to be buried there.²⁴ They are actors in a two-way relationship, the Sami on one side, the land on the other. In this way, the land acquires an identity, and is felt to be an intelligent actor in its own right, capable of ownership, sympathy, and of calling down good or bad luck on those people and animals that inhabit it.²⁵

In its most obvious form, the living landscape gains an identity through spirits that become associated with the land. For example, Johan Turi devoted a significant section of his book to the *Uldas*, who he describes as "the folk who live underground, and in the rocks."²⁶ They are presented as a chaotic presence, generally good, but only "if a man does what he should do."²⁷ These spirits have also been called *Guifhtar* and *Katniha*, and are as much a person as the Sami herders themselves.²⁸ They provide the means for communication with a landscape that is very much alive and opinionated, with its own expectations and rules for behaviour. Respecting these rules can lead to luck and prosperity, while

¹⁸ Samuel Roturier, and Marie Roué, "Of forest, snow and lichen: Sami reindeer herders' knowledge of winter pastures in northern Sweden." *Forest Ecology and Management* 258, no. 9 (2009): 1960-1967

¹⁹ Roturier and Roué, "Of forest, snow and lichen: Sami reindeer herders' knowledge of winter pastures in northern Sweden"

²⁰ Roturier and Roué, "Of forest, snow and lichen: Sami reindeer herders' knowledge of winter pastures in northern Sweden."

²¹ Turi, *Turi's Book of Lapland*, 54.

²² Turi, *Turi's Book of Lapland*, 106.

²³ Ibid., 59.

²⁴ Ibid., 285.

²⁵ Ibid., 222.

²⁶ Ibid., 193.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Elina Helander-Renvall, "Animism, personhood and the nature of reality: Sami perspectives." *The Polar Record* 46, no.1 (2010): 44-56.

breaking them is inviting hardship. For example, in 2004 an elderly Sami woman reported that she had made a deal with the underground spirits, “to live in a proper way and not to disturb these spirits”, and in return, they promised to guard and increase her reindeer herd. Another Sami man, Artur Larson, made a favourable impression on the *Katniha* as a child. Although he passed away in 1990, he was reported to have had special powers, tremendous luck with hunting and the ability to cure people.²⁹

These underground spirits are the protectors of sacred places and grazing lands. Often, their rules have to do with showing respect to the land, not interfering with specific places and never taking too much. They make sure that humans follow these rules regarding land use, and regulate human behaviour in nature.³⁰ For example, if a Sami settles over a spot where the *Uldas* live, they can expect to be haunted and visited in their dreams.^{31,32} When a herder shows disrespect to the land by using rough language, they invite calamities related to grazing lands, animals, and other herders.³³ Even when the *Uldas* are not explicitly involved, the Sami landscape is able to take retributive action against those who behave irresponsibly. For example, take the case of the bark of the Scots pine, which the Sami use to make into a sweet treat. Traditionally, when collecting the nutritious inner-bark, one is supposed to leave a strip of cambium intact. This cambium - the layer of cells between wood and inner bark - is what allows the tree to recover from the bark stripping. Additionally, when a tree was cut down its spirit had to be warned in order to give it time to escape. Failure to leave cambium

intact or to give adequate warning to a tree's spirit would lead to illness and disaster for the perpetrator.³⁴ In all of these cases, it is evident that the land is able to enact tangible consequences on those who behave irresponsibly. This is crucial to the Sami vision of life, itself so closely tied to the reindeer and to the landscape.

A CHANGING VISION OF LIFE

About halfway through his book, Johan Turi breaks away from his narration of Sami history to begin a section with the title “*Here I tell something more about Lapps, and this is almost the most important thing.*”³⁵ He goes on to write about the falling number of reindeer herders, the loss of land to Norwegian settlers, and environmental degradation, which makes reindeer herding increasingly difficult.³⁶ Although Turi's account is not a contemporary one, he was already observing that the Sami ways of life, and the Sami vision of life, were changing as a result of outside pressures. This change has continued into the present day, with transforming environmental, economic, and social stresses prompting a shift in the way in which the Sami view their relationship with the land and the reindeer.

Environmental pressures have had a substantial impact on the evolving Sami vision of life. One major event was the Chernobyl disaster. Huge amounts of radioactive Cesium 137 were absorbed from the air by reindeer lichen, and subsequently entered the reindeer when they ate

²⁹ Helander-Renvall, “Animism, personhood and the nature of reality: Sami perspectives.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Johan Turi, *Turi's Book of Lapland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), 195.

³² Helander-Renvall, “Animism, personhood and the nature of reality: Sami perspectives.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lars Östlund, Lisa Ahlberg, Olle Zackrisson, Ingela Bergman, and Steve Arno, “Bark-peeling, Food Stress, and Tree Spirits - The Use of Pine Inner Bark for Food in Scandinavia and North America.” *Journal of Ethnobiology* 29, no.1 (2009): 94-112.

³⁵ Turi, *Turi's Book of Lapland*, 107.

³⁶ Turi, *Turi's Book of Lapland*, 108.

the lichen through the winter months.³⁷ This led to, among other things, a government ban on the sale of reindeer meat, and compensation for unmarketable meat, encouraging Sami herders to slaughter huge amounts of reindeer. The killed reindeer, however, were not butchered and consumed, as they would have been traditionally, due to the radioactive contamination. The passing on of herding and butchering knowledge was therefore interrupted for a period of several years.³⁸ The consequence of this was a deteriorating relationship with the reindeer. Families could no longer rely on their herds to meet all their needs, and were forced to turn increasingly to outside sources of food and income. The act of herding had become simply “pretending.”³⁹ As Sami reindeer owner Ged Persson explained of the faltering connection, “this is not just a matter of economics but of who we are, how we live, and how we are connected to our deer and each other.”⁴⁰ Such a big environmental change, combined with government regulations, ultimately pushed Sami herders away from their herds and strained the connection between reindeer and the Sami lifestyle.

While economic and environmental pressures are forcing a greater independence from the reindeer, Sami awareness of the land as a living being is being transformed by an increased sense of protectiveness as a result of other endangering forces throughout Scandinavia. Prevailing treatment of the environment is far from the Sami idea of a living landscape, which asserts that the natural world must be treated as a living being, with respect and open communication. Logging, for example, is becoming a major

threat to the diverse and delicately balanced ecosystems required for lichen grazing during the winter.⁴¹ Threats like this one have meant that the Sami vision of life is shifting, from a close collaboration with the land to a sense of the need to protect it.

This shift can especially be seen when looking at the joik. In Turi’s written translations of joik lyrics, most were praises of the land, people, and animals.⁴² In contrast, while those elements are still present in translations of modern Sami joiks, many also show an increasing attention to the political and social situation of the land in the wider context of the rest of Scandinavia. For example, popular Sami singer Sofia Jannok joiks, “Jag var här först inte sist/Deala inte med mig som en rättstvist/mellan ditt, mitt, rader på vitt” - “I was here first, not last/Don’t treat me like a legal battle/ between yours, mine, lines on a form.”⁴³ Even these few lines contain some drastic differences from older joiks. This transformation is especially evident when viewed in contrast with Turi’s *Reindeer song*, which begins, “Silken coated, silken coated, voia, voia, voia, nana, nana, nana/ Running like the sun-beams, voia voia voia, nana, nana, nana.”⁴⁴ While both singers are still joiking the land and the reindeer, Sofia Jannok’s focus has obviously shifted. Her joik is not a spontaneous expression of admiration. It was clearly planned and sung for an audience, asserting her connection to the land by addressing them with a demand - “I was here first, not last/Don’t treat me like a legal battle”. Through joik, she articulates the struggle over land and Sami identity which Turi first pointed out in his *most important thing* chapter.

³⁷ Melanie Blackwell, “Effects of the Chernobyl Disaster on Sámi Life.” *University of Texas*. Accessed September 24, 2015. <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/sami/dieda/socio/chemobyl.html>

³⁸ Blackwell, “Effects of the Chernobyl Disaster on Sámi Life.”

³⁹ Blackwell, “Effects of the Chernobyl Disaster on Sámi Life.”

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Roturier and Roué, “Of forest, snow and lichen: Sámi reindeer herders’ knowledge of winter pastures in northern Sweden.”

⁴² Turi, *Turi’s Book of Lapland*.

⁴³ “Snölejoninna Lyrics,” *Lyrics Translate*. Accessed October 9, 2015. <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/sofia-jannok-sn%C3%B6lejoninna-lyrics.html>

⁴⁴ Turi, *Turi’s Book of Lapland*, 225.

This increasingly political vision of life is evident, too, in Sami parenting practices. Sami parents emphasized concerns about assimilation and the necessity of preserving their traditional culture, particularly their language. One parent exclaimed,

One has to be alert all the time to teach children the proper Sami language. We watch them all the time. Norwegian words so easily enter their play, for instance when they play with their Barbie dolls. It takes a lot of energy. My God, when I think of how much time we use watching and correcting the language!⁴⁵

In response to perceived pressures from the rest of Scandinavia, Sami families have begun to think more about their complex political position. They emphasize how important it is that their children respect the land and follow traditional Sami practices, but also that they be “hardy” in the face of teasing, a concern which is probably more tied to a “long-standing situation of social oppression”⁴⁶ than it is to natural dangers in a traditional way of life.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have seen that the Sami vision of life, once firmly rooted in a relationship with the reindeer and with a powerful living landscape, is taking on an increasingly self-aware and political angle. This was a change brought on by years of combined social, political, economic, and environmental factors, and it is one that is likely to continue to happen over coming generations.

Change is, of course, inevitable. It is impossible and unrealistic to expect the Sami vision of life to remain unchanged throughout history.

Nevertheless, in his book ‘The Snowmobile Revolution’, Pertti J. Peltto argues that recent changes in Sami lifestyle have been a “reindeer disaster”⁴⁷ for Sami culture and livelihood.

While similar judgments about a vision of life would be unfair and unfounded, a change clearly is taking place. It is a change that could have ramifications for the Sami way of life and way of interpreting the world. Furthermore, it is a transition that is happening in reaction to government and corporate decisions - environmental, economic, and social - in which the Sami have had very little say.

Thankfully, the Sami have already taken things into their own hands. The changes discussed in this paper, a special focus on the preservation of language and culture, and increasing environmental activism, are also changes that put some power back in Sami hands. Alone, however, this is not enough. The Sami need to be involved in decisions that will affect their lives, their herds, and the land they live on. After all, who else can ask the land itself what would be best?

⁴⁵ Cecilie Javo, Richard Alapack, Sonja Heyerdahl, and John A. Ronning, “Parental values and ethnic identity in indigenous Sami families: A qualitative study.” *Family Process* 42, no. 1 (2003): 151-164.

⁴⁶ Javo, Alapack, Heyerdahl, and Ronning, “Parental values and ethnic identity in indigenous Sami families: A qualitative study.”

⁴⁷ Peltto, *The Snowmobile Revolution: Technology and Social Change in the Arctic*, 98.