

# Norway

## Chapter 5: Further Assimilation

### Ole-Henrik LIFJELL (Åarjel-saemie)

My name is Ole-Henrik Lifjell. I am a 24-year-old Sámi on the Norwegian side of Sápmi. I am what you call an Åarjel-saemie, a southern Sámi. Sápmi is the term we Sámi use to refer to the geographical area in which we reside. This includes the countries of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Sámi are widely spread out and there are cultural differences and differences in language between us, even though we are one People.<sup>1</sup>

We see that the way the Sámi are treated by governments also differs among the four countries in which we live. This has historically made—and still makes—it difficult for us Sámi to stand united as one People. We do not face the same challenges in our respective countries, and the governments in each country have different histories in the way they treated our ancestors (and how that has led to the way we are treated today). This is something that, in my experience, is dividing us Sámi.

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<sup>1</sup> Knut Kjeldstadli, “Racism and Minorities,” *Norgehistorie.no*, last modified November 13, 2018, <https://www.norgeshistorie.no/forste-verdenskrig-og-mellomkrigstiden/mennesker/1603-rasisme-og-minoriteter.html>.

One core issue as Indigenous Peoples is the problem that arises in the meeting between the country's majority and its Indigenous Peoples. A lot of people in Norway, for instance, struggle to see the value of promoting or positively speaking about Sámi. We are seen as Norwegians in the same sense that non-Indigenous people see themselves as Norwegians. Our physical appearance does not differ too much from them, and therefore we are what they call "white passing." We are integrated into Norwegian society and, in that sense, I could see how the majority of people would see that there is no need to further fund or acknowledge us as minorities.

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Norwegian government performed phrenology on the Sámi. This involved measuring the skulls of our people in order to make scientific "discoveries" that would show that the Sámi were lesser beings, primitive, and not as evolved as the Norwegian people. In addition to this, the government also dug up graves of buried Sámi. This was also for skull measurements and to prove their racist scientific theories correct.

Assimilation policies were cruel towards the Sámi. Another tool the government used was "Wexelsens plakaten." The goal of this was to erase the Sámi languages. It was illegal for Sámi families to use their languages, and children using their native tongues in school were punished for doing so. The idea behind this policy was to build a

Norway where the population had a strong national identity, and by erasing the Sámi culture and language, the governments hoped that they would lose their culture and it would be easy for the Sámi to develop this same national identity. The teachers that taught Sámi children would even receive financial grants if they could prove that their students could perform well in spoken or written Norwegian.<sup>2</sup>

In 1901, just over 100 years ago, the Norwegian government forced Sámi children to be sent to boarding schools. These schools housed children throughout most of the year. The purpose of the schools was to isolate the Sámi children from their language, culture and lifestyles in order to better assimilate them.<sup>3</sup>

After approximately 100 years with this assimilationist policy, there was a positive change. The Norwegian government acknowledged the Sámi culture and saw the damages they had previously done towards a whole People. As a way of owning up to their previous inhumane treatment—that constituted violations of basic

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<sup>2</sup> Ketil Zachariassen, “The abolition policy towards Samar and women,” *Norgehistorie.no*, last modified June 14, 2017, <https://www.norgeshistorie.no/industrialisering-og-demokrati/artikler/1554-fornorskingspolitikken-overfor-samar-og-kvenar.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Helge Dahl, *Språkpolitikk og skolestell i Finnmark 1814-1905* (Oslo: Universitetsforl, 1957).

human rights—they turned the previous boarding schools into institutions to regain some of what had been lost. The schools that earlier had housed Sámi children, forced to become Norwegians, were now institutions for assimilated descendants to learn the language and culture of which their ancestors had been robbed.

The structure of the institution was a given number of weeks (6-8 weeks approximately) during a regular school year, when Sámi children could come and learn their traditional languages and traditions. This could be supplemented with Skype-based tutoring at the children's respective Norwegian schools. The child would be taken out of their classroom in order to learn the Sámi language with a teacher over a screen via Skype, and this would help the student retain what they learned at the Sámi schools. I was one of these kids.

This new policy made it difficult for a whole new generation of Sámi children to find their identity as Indigenous Peoples. They spent most of their time in regular, Norwegian schools, but still went away eight weeks per year to learn about language and culture. A lot of the kids that went had no prior knowledge of the Sámi culture, while some of them both spoke the language and belonged to families that were reindeer herders. This created a divided group between the Sámi children, where some would feel less Sámi than others. At the same time, at their Norwegian schools, they might be the only Sámi, which led them to feel neither Sámi

enough nor Norwegian enough. One result of this whole process has been that some young Sámi have neglected their heritage and “decided” to simply become Norwegians.

In December 2015, the Norwegian government decided that they would end the funding of the Sámi schools. These were schools that taught a lot of kids about their heritage, about the losses of their wealth in terms of knowledge in both crafts and language. These institutions had not only been a resource in terms of passing on knowledge, but also institutions that had given families and relatives the possibility to regain their bonds to each other. It had given people with difficulty in finding pride in their heritage a chance to feel connected to it, and to create a stronger society within the Sámi regions (and even beyond).

The argument from the government was that children could not rely on eight weeks a year of meeting and socializing in order to learn the Sámi language. With that statement, they were completely ignoring the fact that a culture is so much more than exclusively learning a language. Traditions in terms of living off the resources found in nature—for cooking, creating tools or gathering materials for use in daily life—are just some of the things one would learn at the institution. Being an Indigenous person is manifested in a mind-set as well, including how you perceive the people, the nature, the animals and the resources surrounding you. These ways were taught at the physical

institution of the Sámi schools, and not over a screen. The necessity of meeting other children in the same situation as you was, at least for me, key in my decision to learn Sámi despite being perceived as the weird, different kid at my Norwegian school. If I had not had the opportunity to meet other kids in my situation, I don't think I would ever have been able to motivate myself to learn a difficult language over a screen with a stranger as a teacher whom I would never be able to meet with in-person. That would be a lot of pressure to put on a 6-year-old.

Positive motivations and healthy environments are keys to success when it comes to learning and blooming. As previously mentioned, a lot of kids were and still are growing up in families that have little to no knowledge of both the Sámi culture and language. I was lucky enough to grow up in a family that acknowledged the culture and heritage, and expressed pride in them. However, neither my mother nor father knew the Sámi language, so an institution that taught language through practice in relevant situations was so important for me. On the other hand, there were some Sámi children that knew the language, but had little to no knowledge of the culture and traditions. In that sense, the Indigenous identity was amplified by learning and experiencing together as a little family at the Sámi schools.

I think for children in learning, the most important thing to further grow is seeing and

experiencing. For me this meant understanding that even though I might be the only Sámi in my (Norwegian) school, I am not alone in my culture. Not feeling alone, and seeing that the culture is alive through experiencing it, makes being Sámi feel real. You could not live out a culture simply by reading about it or hearing about it from a textbook. In the same way, I wouldn't be able to live out the culture of the Sámi based on what I had read or heard in school.

As a bearer of culture and old Sámi knowledge, these institutional schools let the Sámi children engage in reindeer herding. The reindeer is the pillar of the Sámi culture, from the food we make of it (which basically means every part of the animal that is edible), to the tools we make from reindeer, and also to our art and clothes. Also, the language we speak, and how specific it is in terms of describing weather and nature, reveals a lot about our strong connection to reindeer herding. I believe that we have to thank our ancestors who worked as herders for keeping our language alive. The only part of the Sámi lifestyle the government did not touch was the reindeer herders. I believe the economic benefits of reindeer herding provided enough of an incentive to leave it alone. Herders have been able to actively use the Sámi language consistently through their daily lives while working/herding reindeers.

My entering politics and engaging the public for Indigenous causes is rooted in the decision of

the Norwegian government to stop funding the Sámi schools. Through mobilizing other Sámi as well as supporters from Norwegian parliament and others in Norway, we managed to receive a lot of media publicity and to move some politicians onto our side. We fought this cause for about a year, conducted interviews and published a documentary. The Norwegian government decided, after negotiations, to keep the schools running and continue to fund them. Seeing this change has indicated to me and to many others that the people actually have some power, and it made me realize that there are more issues we can deal with as Indigenous Peoples.

It is so easy to neglect minorities and, in my experience, governments tend to do so in order to make room for other priorities, as that is more economical for them. A great threat to us Sámi are the prejudices that the majority of the non-Indigenous Norwegians have against us. We are not visible in the daily life of “regular” Norwegians, even though Sámi is recognized as a national language in Norway. The children in Norwegian schools have no knowledge concerning us Sámi and there are many misinterpretations about us, our history, and our culture.

I am concerned for the future generations of Sámi. We need to see stability and that there’s positive growth in the Sámi society. The pace that things are going at right now forces us to still feel colonized and, to some extent, further assimilated.



Seeing that the Sámi are still experiencing a lot of challenges in terms of government decisions that do not take into account the experiences and input of Indigenous Peoples, I believe it is hard for young people to see the positive in choosing to both pursue Sámi studies as well as live off the traditional ways of the Sámi, such as reindeer herding and fishing.

We see that many large companies have had interest in the traditional land areas that the Sámi have used for their way of living, such as the reindeer herders to which my own family belongs. In the autumn of 2017, the government agreed to put up large windmills in areas that were home to reindeers. The consequence of this forced already-established laborers to flee the areas in order for these other, commercial interests to be established.

Other examples of difficulties Sámi have faced include the unwillingness of the government to build fences in areas that have both railways and reindeers. In the winter of 2016, around 100 reindeers were massacred over the course of one weekend. This particular area has seen great losses of reindeers over a long period of time. This is one of the main political causes I have taken up in the Sámi area where I'm from.

The rights to land seem to be the most pressing issue to the Sámi in Norway at this point. Violation of our land rights is probably also the easiest way to further assimilate us as Indigenous Peoples and force us to quit our traditional ways of

living by pressing us out of the industries to which we have traditionally belonged.

In my case, I have experienced some challenges in terms of living with being a double minority. As a gay Indigenous person, I have learned that being different from those around you does not make you weird, even though others may say so.

I grew up in a very small and safe village. As a kid, I was sometimes spared from being picked on for playing with dolls and wearing my favorite princess sweater. However, when it became clear to the other kids at school that I was a Sámi, the sparing was over. As a Sámi child in a Norwegian school, I received a lot of tutoring in school in a classroom alone. I had Sámi language and history in classes separate from my classmates and travelled every fourth week to a Sámi school. The comments from the Norwegian children at my school were that I was less evolved, and that I needed extra tutoring in order to keep up with them. I still don't know if the attitude the children had towards Indigenous Peoples sprung from their parents teaching them these ways of perceiving Indigenous Peoples, or if it was just that children in general find others that are different from them and point them out.

In some ways, I'm happy that they noticed me being a Sámi and pointed that out. I grew up in a family that is very confident and proud of their Indigenous heritage. This also rubbed off on me

growing up. Because of that, I never felt any anger towards my cultural and ethnic heritage. I imagine that it would be more difficult for me if I was picked on for being feminine or “gay.” I see a lot of children that have been bullied for their sexuality as kids, and they often struggle even when they have grown up.

When I started high school, things changed. After years of growing up as the weird Sámi boy, that went away for one week every month when I spoke a language that no one else understood while attending the Sámi schools. At this time, my *perceived identity* changed. It became clear to the other students at my school that I was the gay one. I never was bullied for it directly, but sometimes gay slurs would be shouted at me, and I was even told to get out of the changing rooms before gym classes. Some of the boys were sceptical about having a gay guy “looking at them” while wearing little or no clothes.

If we compare Sámi to other Indigenous peoples and their history towards queer people, we can extrapolate that queer people would have been treated differently by our Sámi ancestors. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Sámi were nomadic people that lived in and off of nature. They had no written language or ways to make documents that generations after could read. Because of that, we really do not know what their views of queer people were. However, comparing to other Indigenous Peoples around the world, we can imagine that the

same respect for and celebration of queer people would have been the case for the Sámi. I know, for instance, that in some Native American societies the queer person was seen as two-spirited and often was well-respected as a shaman. Being queer was a strength.

The Sámi were Christianized in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. After that, their ways of living, practicing their lifestyle, and their religion vanished. We know very little of the time before that in terms of their views towards queer people. But in today's society, the geographic areas where Sámi suffered due to oppressive Christianization still have a negative attitude towards queer people. In that sense, I think you could debate whether this is a Sámi way of perceiving queer people or an effect of colonization.

We have lost so much of our heritage due to colonization that I think many of the Sámi youth of today see it as their job to further pass on the remains of our culture. It's quite recent that it became shameful to be Sámi. And it is also in the near past that we as a people were robbed of our basic human rights. I do believe that my generation of young Sámi is the first generation in a long time to feel proud of being Indigenous and belonging to such a vast and rich culture. In societies where industrialism and capitalism are further expanding, my Sámi family and friends and I see that we need to be an opposing front. The mind-set of us as Indigenous Peoples to act on the precautionary principle, seems to be more needed than ever. This

is not only for our traditional way of living as reindeer herders, but from an environmental and a global perspective.