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Coexistence through Indigenous Studies: Contemplations from Helsset and Gilbbesjávri

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Global Indigenous Studies in Gilbbesjávri

Early Sunday morning, on September 22, 2019, we sat in a plane to Gihttel (Kittilä). Now, I felt that I could leave behind all the university administrative and teaching commitments. This flight from Helsset [Helsinki] would take us, a group of scholars, to Sápmi, the Sámi homeland. We were heading to the Indigenous Studies Writing retreat for 5 days at the University of Helsinki's Biological station situated in Gilbbesjávri (Kilpisjärvi). The mentors of the Writing retreat, Linita Manu'atu, a Tongan scholar, and Mere Kepa, a Maori scholar, had already travelled to Sápmi a day earlier in order to visit a Sámi colleague of ours, Pigga Keskitalo. The two visiting scholars had led successful Indigenous studies writing retreats among scholars in Aotearoa New Zealand. I felt very grateful for having them as our special invitees.

Two days earlier, an International Conference on Indigenous languages to celebrate the International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL2019), which I had co-organized, had finished in Helsset. There, Linita, Mere, and Taina Tautakitaki, a younger Tongan expert in Indigenous education travelling with Linita to come to know Finland and Sápmi presented papers, and so I had already had an opportunity to learn more about their work. Before their arrival in Finland, I had only met Linita in person. Through Pigga, we had met in Auckland a year earlier, when I participated in the Indigenous Research conference in Auckland, Aotearoa, organized by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, New Zealand's Maori Centre of Research Excellence (CoRE). I was enchanted by Linita's energy, clarity, and ideas she had for conducting Indigenous research. She is a leader in education both in Aotearoa and the Kingdom of Tonga. Mere is a specialist in Maori knowledge and worked on ageing well research. She is affiliated to the University of Auckland and the NorthTec's research study called Whakaora nga whenua whama, sponsored by the New Zealand National Commission for the United Nations as one of the two Maori community researchers. Taina was raised in Fiji.



Our writing retreat group was heterogeneous: not only from different nations and cultural backgrounds, but half of them were master's and doctoral level students, and foreign students who had recently arrived in Finland; the other half was made up of senior scholars. What we had in common was an interest in dedicating ourselves to writing in an Indigenous Studies approach, and of course, being inspired by the Arctic environment. A few of the younger international scholars had never been to the Sámi homeland. Overall, the writing retreat attendants came from the Universities of Helsinki, Lapland, Oulu, Aalto, Umea, and from the Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø.

On the very first evening, we gathered and naturally initiated the writing retreat programme, even though it was supposed to start on the following day. We started by acknowledging the place, Gilbbesjávri, and paid respect to the land, the animals, plants, rivers, lakes, winds, the previous Sámi generations, and the current traditional owners of the land. The land has a long history and is known for a significant mountain to the Sámi, Sáana (Saana). Its presence, shape, and even colour affected all of us. I felt fortunate to see this beautiful being directly from my room's window.

The remaining participants arrived the following day, and we finally started our individual writing projects which occupied the largest part of the day, followed by collective discussions led by Mere and Linita in the evening. During the retreat, they were also available for participants to act as their individual mentors in the writing processes. The retreat's aim was to open a space for Mere and Linita to share their teachings. Meantime, there was an interactive space for everyone to share their own thoughts as well as to reflect on the points addressed by the mentors. As the participants came from diverse backgrounds, we eventually decided to produce a publication on what it means to co-exist as scholars in Indigenous Studies, or what co-existence actually means as a concept.


The Writing Retreat was organized by the Indigenous Studies programme at the University of Helsinki. It was founded in 2015 in response to the need to Indigenize academia and foster more decolonial perspectives at the institutional level (see e.g. Mihesuah & Wilson 2004), and was open to researchers from diverse backgrounds. Earlier, several Sámi study programmes had been running in the Nordic countries, including the University of Helsinki, where a programme had been established in 1993. In addition to Sámi studies in Helsinki, the offered

teaching to those who wanted to improve the well-being in their Indigenous communities beyond the Sámi context. The programme was also intended for those members of the dominant society who aimed at creating more inclusive theorizing and use of Indigenizing methodological tools, among other community-centred research activities.

Research and education play a key role in encouraging critical and community-based approaches to research, as well as encouraging the idea and recognition that epistemological pluralism and ways of doing research do matter. Indeed, the University of Helsinki's Indigenous Studies Programme aimed at addressing the questions of inclusion and exclusion of different onto-epistemologies, which in Indigenous contexts highlight human-environment interactions and are relational. Indigenous intellectuals have pointed to epistemological injustices in academia and how to overcome them (e.g. Cajete 1999; Battiste 2000; Kuokkanen 2007; Porsanger 2018). The starting point of Indigenous studies is inclusive, reciprocal, and engages in ethical approaches to Indigenous knowledges and languages, while also aiming at working with Indigenous research methodologies.

Helsinki is far from Sápmi. Nonetheless, Finland's capital city has become a home to the majority of Sámi people. It was the location of state administration, where legal systems and state policies are defined, and therefore education on Indigenous societies is crucial. Many students in fact have recounted that their studies have become useful in many places, such as in ministries, museums, and so on. In order to bring Indigenous perspectives into public discussion, Helsinki Indigenous Studies has actively organized international conferences and public events, both to academic and non-academic audiences. In addition, topical panels and seminars have been organized to increase an understanding of Indigenous onto-epistemologies in the dominant society. There are more and more social, cultural, economic, and physical barriers dividing different groups, societies, and nations, including divisions that are based on different values and conceptual understandings of the world. Certainly, information on different views is lacking. Among other things, Indigenous Studies has hosted conferences and panels with Indigenous guests from near and far, such as from Standing Rock, USA.

Sometimes such discussions have involved scholars with opposing views to the same table. For instance, we organized a panel on the impacts of the Arctic Railway on the Sámi people, aiming to create a dialogue between contrasting views. The participants came from state agencies, the



business world, and the Sámi Parliament. The coexistence of differences and aiming at epistemological plurality has been the aim of the Helsinki Indigenous studies programme. Along similar lines, we organized the writing retreat in Indigenous studies in Gilbbesjávri.

The collegial writing process

Some participants in the writing retreat had more knowledge of Sámi issues, others had very little knowledge at all, while many of the attendees were themselves Sámi. Some had long-term research experiences with Indigenous peoples far from Sápmi, and whose thinking drew from those co-existences, including myself, who has worked mostly in Brazilian Amazonia. My own writing task in the writing retreat was to prepare a research project proposal for an ongoing call. I was also finalizing and polishing several manuscripts that I had just received from peer review processes. All my texts dealt with the Amazonian social worlds and with environments different from our Arctic location. But the silence of Gilbbesjávri, where I was now accommodated, offered an extraordinarily peaceful place for concentration on my writing tasks.

During the days, fruitful and constructive discussions developed with my colleagues. Among others, Mere gave good advice on describing the local Amazonian Indigenous terms and concepts in such a way that the land-based approach would be more comprehensible, even for the evaluators of my application, who had very little experience of Indigenous life worlds. One of the native English-speaking participants in the writing retreat revised the language of a paper I was working on as she was well-versed in decolonizing research methodologies; we could really discuss the best selections of words and phrases in a constructive way. The writing retreat thus presented an extraordinary gathering of colleagues with similar views, and offered a space dedicated to writing rather than listening to paper presentations or workshopping. Even when working at the University office, attending meetings along the corridor, and in the coffee room, such a collegial way of supporting each other's writing attempts, intellectually and technically, was not present.

In the evenings, the writing retreat people gathered by a fire, and learnt more from our Tongan and Maori mentors, as well as from those who wanted to share their thinking. Some preferred to just listen, and therefore remained silent. We learnt about Kaupapa Maori, its birth, purpose,

and limitations guided by Mere. We learned, too, about Tongan thinking, as generously shared by Linita and Taina. English was our common language, but any language could have been used to express our thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the day. Co-existence, after all, is also about nonverbal communication.


In the last day's evaluation round, some of the foreign participants said that they wished they had learned more about Sámi society in the writing retreat. I realized that many of them had not previously learned about the society, or maybe they had, but hoped for more experimental knowledge.

Unfortunately, my Sámi co-organizer at the writing retreat, Pigga Keskitalo, had in fact become sick and she could not participate fully in the writing retreat, and so the Sámi knowledge in the programme remained thin. Meantime, the Sámi participants preferred to focus on their writing, rather than educating others. On the other hand, everyone was aware that this writing retreat was led by Tongan and Maori scholars, and thus global Indigenous approaches were in focus. Later, I came to think that it might have been through our Maori and Tongan mentors in the Writing Retreat that the participants had deeply sensed the energy of the land, Sáana, and experienced the importance of place-based knowing and land-centred education.

Ultimately, the Indigenous studies approaches in the writing retreat had allowed a space for reflexivity and the situatedness of our relationships with the local land, the animals, waters, meteorological phenomena, and even previous generations whose actions, movements, and knowledge were present in specific places. It was thus rewarding to hear that the place had affected the participants and that, now, many of the participants were eager to know more about the Sámi and local history.

Co-existing with differences?

Co-existence within Indigenous studies is about engaging with different ways of being and knowing the world. Yet, Indigenous studies scholars also co-exist with scholars coming from other fields of science. Before arriving at the Kilpisjärvi Biological station, some of my colleagues in human and social sciences had expressed that the biology researchers largely ignore local cultures when carrying out their ecological research in the Kilpisjärvi Biological station. How much knowledge of the different fields do we actually know as researchers about



each other's disciplines and current ways of doing research? A lack of information often causes epistemic injustices and prejudices (e.g. Fricker 2007). However, information is often available on various issues, but the point is more about being interested, making time, and even acknowledging one's own ignorance. Knowledge is also linked to different interests and values. How can we know what we do not know, or how do our values and interests make us ignorant?

The Arctic has been a destination of several expeditions, places of colonization, and large-scale resource extraction without a dialogue type of consent from the local population. The establishment of research stations in the different nation states of the Arctic has been part of that continuum. The Kilpisjärvi Biological station was officially founded in 1964 for environmental research as well as field and laboratory trainings of biologists and geographers. It also offers a well-equipped venue for research stays for researchers in several fields, and the accommodation is open to everyone. Bio-artists have also made the station their venue for work, thinking, and co-existing with the Arctic environment.

Certainly, social and cultural aspects, and historicity are also considered in the biologists' analytic systems, but what do biologists and other scholars working in Sápmi generally know about Sámi society? Or could it be assumed that scholars in the human and social sciences know more about the cultural and societal history, present, and norms of the Sámi? I could imagine that the landscape was shaped by Sámi history as well as by long-term interactions between humans and other-than-humans. The memories and impacts of different kinds were materially present in the land. These histories and entanglements could be made even more visible for the Gilbbesjávri visitors, no matter what their background.


That made me think that maybe the Kilpisjärvi Biological station could become an academic location to inform scientists, writers and scholars about Sámi history and about their present and future aspirations for researchers in different fields. Steps toward that could be materialized by making the Sámi place-names visible in place names and signs, as well as providing the visitors with more information about Sámi society and the history of the place. This was not only a question that concerned the research station, but, also, the tourist agencies and visitor centres in the location. Information about the Sámi clearly exists (see e.g. Encyclopaedia of Saami Culture 2020), but there is a difference between book knowledge and experiential

knowledge. In my view, Finnish history was much more present by the lake, particularly the histories of those who had died during Two World Wars alongside the lake.

Currently, the research station offers many benefits. It has laboratory equipment, long-term records and data are available for comparisons, there is cooperation with bio-artists, a place to see the northern lights, and the helpful staff attract visitors (Kilpisjärvi Biological station 2020). These are all extraordinary strengths of the place, but the possibility to learn about Sámi culture and society – in Sápmi – through the landscape and information could be offered to visitors. This could also include information on the spot about how to ethically carry out research in this Sámi traditional home land and take into account how that affects the Sámi.

Consequently, the research station could truly become a step forward in co-existence, and even for Indigenization. However, Indigenization is a sensitive issue, as it is a deeper process than just increasing information, as Martin Nakata (2006) has pointed out. It can also easily become an act of moralization, limitation, division, and even new exclusions. Instead, Indigenization, as proposed by many authors, should be about co-existence and more horizontal relationships (e.g. Mihesuah & Wilson 2004; Nakata 2006). Even if the Biological station had its own purposes, in the Gilbbesjávri context, Indigenization and decolonization could mean bringing people into a dialogue with other views and knowledges. In fact, many people coming to Gilbbesjávri wish to know more about the local culture, history, and the present. The station could point to and engage with many ways to know and sense the land. The hidden stories and histories deserve to be told, while some of them are still meant only for the local people.

The Kilpisjärvi Biological station could also offer place-based information about environmental conflicts in Sápmi. Among them could be the Malla mountain that we saw from the window of the research centre's canteen. I remembered when a colleague of mine in the writing retreat reminded me that it was the Malla Strict Nature Reserve where biologists and reindeer herders had had many disputes about land use. There were many narratives and views in the Malla environmental conflict (see e.g. Meriläinen & Heiskanen 2019). Some scientists and national authorities for nature resources have argued for conservation and limiting the land use, as the local environment was destroyed, among others by the increasing number of reindeers, while the Sámi, among others, have defended their traditional ways of living and pointed to difficulties in earning enough to support their families. For the visitors in



Gilbbesjávri region, and for further co-existence in the future, it would be food for thought to know the differing arguments and knowledges and views of the actors, and consequently an opportunity to experience the Malla Strict Nature Reserve, among other cultural sites of significance, from different angles. The research station could also offer a place for individual reflection about one's own knowledge and values. This could also create trust between different actors. It has been noted that epistemic injustices are complex cultural and social phenomena, and also impact people at cognitive levels. Drawing from distinctive onto-epistemologies, the local landscape could be experienced differently.

The Sána mountain itself embedded different histories, being significant for the Sámi, even sacred, while for many trekkers it might merely be just one beautiful mountain among others. Yet, I believe that the mountain itself also affects people in its own ways, beyond what people had learned from the literature or from other people. Therefore, it is important to open the environment to be sensed and experienced in terms of relations. This can also create respect and encourage responsibility in the Sána mountain.

Coexisting in the future

Research aiming at ethically sustainable inclusion of Indigenous knowledges, knowledge-holders and languages plays a key role in Indigenous Studies, alongside research conducted from the inside and done in Indigenous ways. Research can be an experience of co-existence. As educators and researchers, we have a deep responsibility in the process of imparting knowledge and encouraging a healthy co-existence of knowledges. Sharing our own experiences with different Indigenous communities and lands can eventually create deeper understanding of diverse ways of being in the world.

The next Indigenous Studies writing retreat will definitely deepen the Sámi perspectives on the Gilbbesjávri. Learning more about the local histories and views will bring new layers and perspectives to the place. Among others, I would like to learn more about the places that inspired the Sámi artist, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää in Gilbbesjávri. I believe the mountains, rivers, lakes, northern lights, and animals inspired his artwork, which today exists in musical and diverse material art forms. I have learnt that he lived a long period of his life in the Gilbbesjávri region; he suffered a tragic car accident by the Gilbbesjávri road, and, later he lived in his artist


home not far from Gilbbesjárvi on the Norwegian side. His artwork is still inspirational for many Sámi intellectuals, traditional knowledge-holders, musicians, and craftspeople. The artist is inspirational to me, and knowing his story better would allow me and the next writing retreat participants a novel way to contemplate the Gilbbesjávri landscape. There is still much to learn from other histories and points of views.

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