



Introduction to Säi'mm

A U T H O R S: MARIA NORDVALL in collaboration with Säi'mm members.

SÄI'MM- SKOLT SAAMI NETWORK 2021

Säi'mm is a network of cultural workers primarily from the Skolt Saami region. Through the online exhibition and articles Säi'mm opens its work to the public. In 2021, we have been meeting every two weeks online to share knowledge and experiences about Saami culture and museums. Discussions across borders have been especially important during a time when traveling has decreased.

Members of the network include staff from Ä'vv Museum: Maria Kemi-Rein, Skolt Saami Cultural Foundation: Mari Gauriloff and Mirva Tapaninen, Pechenga Historical Museum: Anna Churlik, Elena Popova and Tatiana Bazanova, Ájtte Museum: Maria Nordvall and Elina Nygård, as well as independent artists Hanna-Maaria Kiprianoff and Tuuli Malla.

Sápmi, the land of the Saami – extends without bounds across the territory of four nations, encompassing a vast area of mountainous and forested country, tundra and wetlands. Here, we have hunted and fished for thousands of years, we have wandered endless paths and given names to mountaintops and streams. We have raised our children, sung praises of the land and appeased the gods for good hunting. We have followed the reindeer, driven our herds to better grazing and watched over our new-borns.

SÁPMI

The Saami are an indigenous people whose historical lands and traditional centre Sápmi, crosses several national borders: Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Sápmi is constituted on the basis of an idea of a common indigenous culture, social concerns, and political institutions within established nation states. However, the concept of Sápmi is far more complex. It also refers to a multifaceted discourse, Saami experience, as well as to

the landscape and the Sami people. This project can perhaps be seen as a metaphor of Sápmi itself and its core - the mutual exchange over cross borders.

THE VALUE OF WORKING TOGETHER

We are Săi'mm, the name is a Skolt Saami word for net, fishing net or network. This network can in many ways be considered "contemporary", a new way of collaborating across borders. And in some respects it is so. Meeting digitally as we did during the project will probably be considered by posterity as characteristic of the years during the pandemic. We have found new ways of doing something which is the very core of us as Saami people - cooperate.

Instead of the traditional physical meetings Săi'mm's encounters took place mostly in a virtual world over zoom, emails, phone calls and especially; over time. There we created what we would like to call "safer spaces". Which are places in the digital sphere where we have been able to talk about infected issues, about fears, about hopes for the future and tactics for decolonization. Members of the network come from various backgrounds with different perspectives and first languages. We have navigated together how to communicate and learn from each other. We have discussed the importance of power, our own responsibility to make a change both as individuals and institutions, language, art, Saami handicraft, history, present and the future. Even though we come from different parts of Sápmi, we have so much more that unites us than what separates us from each other. We all have a tragic story in many ways, but perhaps the shared grief can also be part of a healing process?

The nature of Săi'mm corresponds to a Saami world view. Without cooperation, we would not have had a Saami history, present or future. We have always helped each other, learned from each other, and through this been able to create something new together. In exchange there is a creative act of great value. Through networking stories, our knowledge, and cultural heritage have been passed on through generations. All of this has happened across national borders. The reindeer have always wandered across the borders that others have drawn across the territory. Networking is indeed necessary for our survival and evolving. Săi'mm is hopefully one additional example of that.

EXHIBITION & ARTICLES

Through this exhibition and article series, we tried to crystallize the focal points from our meetings and workshops which ended up taking the shape of four main topics: **Myths and storytelling, Dress and craft, Place names** and **Leu'dd**. The articles have been written by network members and works by guests who contributed with poetry, photography, soft and hard craft, leu'dd and painting.

We did not aim to only present our results but also ask questions and start a process of reflection within the person “visiting” the digital exhibition. The democratic process has been important to us in Säi'mm. Decisions have been made jointly and we had, for example, an Open Call where Skolt Saami artists were invited to suggest existing or new works for the online exhibition. This is also part of our vision to include and increase representation. As a small part of a large process of decolonization. Because if it does not start from us, then where should it start?

This project is in itself a counterforce to the colonial. The existence of the network is an activist act, which aims to strengthen collaboration and share knowledge across borders in the Skolt Saami region, as well as increasing knowledge of Skolt Saami culture outside the area.

We exist and we exist as one people. We see our differences and embrace them, but above all - *we see our similarities.*

