

Peripheral parliament

Sovereignty, Indigenous rights and political representation in the architecture of the Sámi Parliament of Finland

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Introduction

This chapter undertakes a politico-architectural analysis of one of two Arctic parliamentary buildings in the European Union, the Sámi Parliament of Finland.¹ It addresses the relative silence within political theory on the political significance of architecture and built spaces (Bell and Zacka 2020). It seeks not so much to understand the political views and debates that shaped the design process as to analyse the architecture of the Sámi Parliament of Finland with reference to the broader political tensions between nation-states and Indigenous peoples.

The nomadic Sámi people have historically inhabited the Sápmi region, which today stretches across the northern territories of Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden (Sarivaara 2012, p. 27). Since the rise of modern state power, the geographical mobility and economic, political and cultural autonomy of the Sámi people have been threatened by the territorial division of Sápmi, concurrent with state policies designed to assimilate the Sámi people into their respective mainstream national cultures (Sarivaara 2012, p. 35). Examining state–Sámi relations is particularly fruitful for moving beyond state-centric analytical frameworks in international relations and political theory, as the Sámi ‘never had anything resembling sovereign authority’, nor have they formulated political claims according to dominant statist norms (Oksanen 2021, p. 96). Instead, similarly to other Indigenous peoples, the Sámi have challenged state authority in ‘a language exterior to the states-system’s ontology of sovereign statehood and rigid mutually exclusive

territoriality' (Oksanen 2021, p. 103). Thus, tensions between the Sámi people and the Finnish state are relevant beyond the remit of Indigenous politics; they provide insights into the nature of sovereignty, human rights and the spatial imaginaries that underpin contemporary understandings of the political (Mayall 1999).

Building Indigenous self-determination in Finland

The cultural-administrative centre Sajos, which houses the Sámi Parliament of Finland, was completed in Inari in 2012 to the design of Finnish firm HALO Architects (Louekari 2012) (Figure 25.1). The parliament, established in 1973, had assembled in a mid-century school dormitory in Inari for the first decades of its existence.² Having deemed the dormitory substandard for parliamentary operations both practically and symbolically, the parliament resolved to build a 'Sámi cultural centre' in 2000, which would house the parliament alongside various Sámi educational and cultural organisations (Sámediggi Saamelaiskäräjät 2000; Oikeusministeriö 2005).³ An open international competition was announced in 2008 (Senate Properties 2008).



Figure 25.1 HALO Architects, Sajos, Inari, 2012. Exterior view, south elevation (photograph by Mika Huisman, 2012). © Decopic Oy

The competition followed Norwegian and Swedish precedent. The Norwegian government organised an open competition in 1995 for the Sámi Parliament of Norway (Sametinget) in Karasjok. The winning design, by Stein Halvorsen and Christian Sundby, consciously references Sámi architectural tradition, casting the parliamentary assembly as an exaggerated *goahti* or *lávvu*, vernacular familial dwellings traditionally built of timber, mosses and reindeer hides (Halvorsen and Sundby 2000). The Swedish state property agency organised an equivalent competition a decade later, in 2006, for a site in Kiruna. The crescentic massing of the winning submission Badjáneapmi (Northern Sámi for ‘awakening’), designed by Hans Murman and Helena Andersson, tapered in both section and plan, hinting formally at a snowbank formed by Arctic winds (Stannow 2006). The project’s realisation has stalled, however, because of the existential threat posed to downtown Kiruna. Due to geological instability caused by the iron ore mine that lies beneath the city, Kiruna is being moved, building by building, some three kilometres east of its current location (Golling and Mínguez Carrasco 2020). The relocation of the city also necessitated the relocation of the Sámi Parliament. A decision was finally reached in 2019 to select a site in Östersund, Jämtland, instead. The Swedish Sámi Parliament’s offices are currently located in temporary premises in Kiruna.

The notion of a Sámi public building is inherently paradoxical: traditional Sámi architecture knows neither large scale nor immovable structures (Lehtola 2008; Huima 2015; Haugdal 2017). The competition programme explicitly acknowledged that although the architectural legitimisation of Sámi self-rule in Finland entailed the acceptance of paradigms foreign to Sámi tradition – most crucially, publicness and permanence – the resultant project would ultimately stand as ‘a symbol of Finnish Sámi self-determination as well as their living and developing culture’ (Senate Properties 2008, p. 6). The jury, tasked with writing the competition brief and evaluating all submissions, comprised both Sámi and Finnish representatives: five members from Senate Properties, two from the Sámi Parliament, one from the municipality of Inari and two from the Finnish Association of Architects. Additionally, a secretary and four invited experts guided the jury; the latter included Veli-Pekka Lehtola, Professor of Sámi Culture in the Giellagas Institute at the University of Oulu. The jury judged that most submissions failed to ‘achieve a connection to Sámi cultural tradition’ and instead merely ‘mirrored today’s Finnish and universal stylistic attributes’ (Senate Properties 2009a, p. 7). The first prize was awarded to architects Janne Laukka, Tuomas Niemelä and Milla Parkkali, whose design encompassed ‘significantly more themes

from which the Sámi might recognise symbolic content related to their culture than any of the other submissions' (Senate Properties 2009a, p. 14; Ilonoja 2009, p. 10).

Territory, citizenship and Sámi expression

The ambition to build an Indigenous parliament within the borders of a nation-state is inherently fraught with contradictions. The competition brief and evaluation process reflect the self-contradictory nature of the project as well as more general tensions between Indigenous understandings of space and the spatial imaginaries of state sovereignty (Barnsley and Bleiker 2008). Key to modern sovereignty is its territorialisation – the need to demarcate, assert control over and homogenise the national territory (Scott 1998; Lefebvre 2009; Elden 2013). Indigenous peoples' nomadism and non-cultivation of land have often been seen as a lack of civilisation, justifying their violent exclusion and forced assimilation into the nation (Anghie 2004; Shaw 2008; Nisancioglu 2020). Although the Finnish state no longer undertakes such measures, the Sámi Parliament of Finland nonetheless continues to be shaped by state-centric conceptions of sovereignty and nation. The Finnish state was integrally involved in the planning, development and construction of the parliamentary building, yet simultaneously, negotiations over a Nordic Sámi convention stalled; such a convention would establish a unified framework for the protection of Sámi rights in Finland, Norway and Sweden (Lankinen 2017). Indeed, ambiguity regarding the need to territorialise Finnish sovereignty while recognising Sámi cultural autonomy permeates the architecture of Sajos.

The virtue of Sajos is that it avoids the pigeonholes into which Sámi architecture is too often polarised: either contrived references to traditional dwellings such as *goahti* and *lávvu*, which awkwardly transpose vernacular structures to foreign scales, materials and programmes, or anonymous 'council style' buildings born of the Nordic governments' assimilationist politics, which draw more from postwar prefabrication methods than Sámi culture (Skålnes 2008). Sajos rejected both extremes in favour of a more abstracted interpretation of Sámi tradition – its spacious plan and the rounded formal language of its massing and interior volumes were cited by the jury as recognisable, yet refined, characteristics of a meaningful contemporary Sámi expression. Ambiguity and tension arise, however, from the fact that the very characteristics of Sajos considered evocative of Sámi tradition can be, and have been, read as distinctive traits of Finnish

architecture. The building simultaneously creates ‘a profound link ... to the Sámi way of life’ and ‘represents the mainstream of young Finnish architecture’ (Louekari 2012, p. 30).

The seemingly contradictory readings of the building echo general difficulties relating to overlapping conceptions of identity, citizenship and belonging. Sámi individuals’ Finnish citizenship is sometimes seen to contradict demanding equal rights as a Sámi national (Siivikko 2019, p. 50). In Finland, the construction of a national identity has historically centred on the promotion of equality alongside the assertion that cultural homogeneity ensures social cohesion (Palmberg 2009; Keskinen, Skaptadóttir and Toivanen 2019). The Sámi people have been represented as uncivilised outsiders, a ‘people without a history, a primitive remnant of what had been – something opposite to Finns’ (Siivikko 2019, p. 53). The promotion of equality has historically been pursued through policies that inadvertently promoted a homogenised Finnish national identity (Sarivaara 2012, p. 35). Education policy is an illustrative example. The Education Act of 1947 made basic education compulsory for all children living on Finnish territory, eliminating structural disadvantages in equality of opportunity. However, Sámi children were often sent to boarding schools due to living in remote areas. In these schools, speaking Sámi was prohibited, students were taught about Finnish culture and history – from which the Sámi people were excluded – and Sámi children were shamed and bullied for their cultural background. Although public boarding schools did provide Sámi children with free education, they also had a significant assimilationist effect (Ranta and Kanninen 2019, pp. 146–171). Balancing the rights of the Sámi as citizens of Finland and as members of an Indigenous people remains fraught with difficulty and ambiguity.

Architectural ambiguity and contesting Indigenous rights

In the architecture of Sajos, the open plan and curved walls illustrate aspects unassignable to exclusively Sámi or Finnish tradition (Figure 25.2). The light filled, high-ceilinged foyers respond to the competition programme’s demand for a ‘generous and bright’ interior that would simulate the sense of openness experienced ‘atop fells, where Sámi thought wanders freely’ (Senate Properties 2008, p. 7). Attributes of airiness and lightness, however, cited as evidence of Sajos’s rootedness in Sámi conceptions of space, are often evoked as typically Finnish characteristics in projects such as Helsinki’s central library Oodi (Oikarinen 2019). So, too,

the ‘soft, rounded forms’ of Sajos ostensibly draw from Sámi tradition, according to both critics and the architects themselves, yet can arguably be associated also with the strong lineage of curvaceous, often timber, spaces in Finnish architecture (Senate Properties 2009a, p. 14; Laukka 2012a, 2012b). The timber panelling of the rounded interior walls recalls contemporaneous projects such as the Kamppi Chapel of Silence (Vartola, Holmila and Riikonen 2012).

The ambiguities in distinguishing between Finnish and Sámi architectural elements in Sajos evoke ambiguities in Sámi political representation in Finland, as the remit of Sámi rights remains hotly contested. The Sámi people’s status as an Indigenous people – with a collective right to cultural autonomy and practising their traditional lifestyles – was enshrined into the Finnish constitution in 1995 (Ranta and Kanninen 2019, pp. 20–21). The Finnish state objects to more substantive forms of political and economic self-determination, limiting Sámi constitutional protection to cultural issues. Although the state promoted the establishment of the Sámi Parliament in 1973 and the building of Sajos in the 2000s, Finland has not signed the International



Figure 25.2 HALO Architects, Sajos, Inari, 2012. Foyer (photograph by Mika Huisman, 2012). © Decopic Oy

Labour Organization 169 agreement,⁴ and the Sámi people continue to be marginalised and ignored in important decision-making processes (Sarivaara 2012). Although the range of Sámi grievances is broad, by far the most contentious issues are those relating to land ownership and land regulatory rights, as the territorialisation of the Finnish state clashes with Sámi understandings of space, nature and land use.

Such clashes materialise in certain themes in Sajos which seemingly amalgamate Sámi and Finnish traditions, but are, in fact, rooted in discord. The sweeping vistas from Sajos into surrounding woodland purportedly express Sámi peoples' intimate relationship with nature; yet similarly, in Finnish architecture, visual links to the outside are considered indicative of a collective subconscious engaged in 'forest dreaming' (Aalto 1925; Louekari 2008). The ample glazing and concave curvature of Sajos's façades magnify views outside, but inevitably impede any direct contact with the elements, thereby reducing the 'tradition of "outside while inside" thought' in Sápmi to a visual simulacrum rather than producing an immersive corporeal experience (Einejord 2007; see Figure 25.3). The compromise pertains to a critical underlying tension: the very term 'nature' refers to wholly different concepts in Finnish and Sámi cultures (Magga 2007). For the Sámi people, 'humans are a part of their environment, and nature is not seen as a distinct entity' (Ranta and Kanninen 2019, p. 87). For the state, the vast areas of uncultivated land in the Finnish parts of Sápmi are, in Martin Heidegger's (1977, p. 17) terms, a 'standing-reserve': natural resources made legible and ordered, that is, transformed from land into territory (Elden 2013).



Figure 25.3 HALO Architects, Sajos, Inari, 2012. North wall (photograph by Mika Huisman, 2012). © Decopic Oy

The architecture of Sámi culture and sovereign authority

Historically, dissonant conceptions of nature have been a central theme in state–Sámi disputes, and a vector for galvanising Sámi political activism as well as transnationalising these disputes. In Sweden, Sámi political movements became more active in the 1950s in response to the state's expansion of hydroelectric dam construction projects in Swedish Lapland, demonstrating how 'the affected reindeer herding Sámi had ontologically constituted the rivers and tundra that were dammed and flooded as homesteads, spiritual sites, pastures, fishing waters and migration routes ... these meanings and economic values were rendered exterior by the Swedish state, which gave them little consideration when the dams were planned' (Oksanen 2021, p. 102). A watershed event for the transnationalisation of state–Sámi disputes was the Alta conflict between the Sámi people and the Norwegian state, again over the state's plans for new hydroelectric dams that endangered Sámi livelihoods (Somby 1999). This conflict culminated in barricades and hunger strikes by both Sámi and non-Sámi activists in Norway, as well as international involvement by the World Council for Indigenous Peoples, thus turning the dispute into an 'international media spectacle' (Oksanen 2021, p. 105).

Territory is a key marker of modern sovereignty; states are intensely concerned with guarding their territorial boundaries and exercising their sovereign power within (Elden 2013; Agnew 2015). The Finnish state asserted its sovereignty in the north by appropriating Sámi land in 1886, categorising it as 'excess land' rather than property of the Sámi people (Ranta and Kanninen 2019, p. 44). Evidence of property records stretching back to the seventeenth century has done little to change the state's stance on Sámi land ownership (Korpijaakko 1989). Even a constitutional committee noted in 2004 that state ownership of Sámi land is legally 'questionable' (Hyvärinen 2010, p. 143). Key ongoing land disputes pertain to issues such as the boundaries of reindeer collectives, as well as plans for an Arctic Railway which would pierce through Sámi lands (Lakkala, Alajärvi and Torikka 2017; Lakkala 2019). In both cases, the Finnish state has marginalised the Sámi in decision-making processes, despite multiple denouncements by the deputy chancellor of justice and various constitutional committees, which have argued that the state has repeatedly failed to fulfil its legal obligation to negotiate with the Sámi people (Ranta and Kanninen 2019, p. 229). Internally, Sámi land rights challenge 'the current distribution of political power' by limiting the authority of the state (Buchanan 1993, p. 99). Externally, exercising sovereignty in the north

functions as a performance to an international audience, allowing Finland to retain membership within the society of sovereign states (Salter 2019). To justify ignoring Sámi land ownership claims, the state argues that they are unrelated to the Sámi constitutional right to cultural autonomy (Hyvärinen 2010, p. 141). For this reason, the very definition of Sámi culture has become a key political stake in state–Sámi disputes.

Critiques of Sámi architecture are anchored in the disputes concerning definitions of Sámi culture. As a project that consciously avoided repeating, let alone relying on, stereotypical visuospatial and structural motifs in its evocation of Sámi tradition, Sajos has largely evaded debates on architectural appropriation and exoticisation. Timber, the traditional material of all Sámi building, is used throughout the design, but in an idiom decidedly distinct from vernacular precedent; interior elements such as furnishings derive their tones from the Sámi flag, but refrain from reproducing Sámi patterns or symbols; the formal syntax of spaces such as the parliamentary assembly hall allude geometrically to Sámi handicraft (*Duodji*), but do not resort to objectification (Senate Properties 2009b). To a large degree, such nuances were products of post-competition development of the initial submission. The assembly, for instance, was judged excessively ‘cave-like’ by the jury in its proposed form, and redesigned entirely (Senate Properties 2009b, p. 13). Given that the realised version of the assembly, clad in birch panels, bears resemblance to mainstream Finnish architecture, it might be cynically viewed as a ‘Finnicisation’ of an original proposal more closely related to Sámi tradition (Figure 25.4). Based on the competition programme and evaluation minutes, however, it appears more plausible that the jury, composed of both Sámi and Finnish members, consciously guided the project away from elements that veered too close to cliché (Senate Properties 2008, 2009a, 2009b). The end result thus avoided becoming an architecture more closely related to the Lapland travel industry than Sámi culture itself, a phenomenon Sámi architectural scholar Joar Nango calls the ‘Giant Lávvu Syndrome’ (Nango 2009).

On the one hand, parliamentary architectures of non-sovereign polities might seek to underscore similarity to the architectures of sovereign states, in order to imply or legitimise hopes of eventual coequality; on the other, they might communicate their dissociation from sovereign precedents and counterparts. The parliamentary buildings of Greek tributary states, for instance, simultaneously embody the architectural conventions of their suzerain in plan, and reject them in elevation (see Kotsaki in this volume). The elevations and plans of Sajos subtly but subversively communicate the differences between the Sámi Parliament of Finland



Figure 25.4 HALO Architects, Sajos, Inari, 2012. Parliamentary assembly chamber. The wall relief is *Eatnu, Eadni, Eana* ('Stream, Mother, Ground') by Outi Pieski, 2012 (photograph by Mika Huisman, 2012). © Decopic Oy

and its nation-state counterpart, completed to the design of J.S. Sirén in 1931 in Helsinki. Whereas the main façade of the Finnish Parliament communicates a robust, heroic sense of unending civic solemnity – its claim to ancientness magnified by the Egyptianate references that complement the Corinthian granite colonnade – that of Sajos bows to the timelessness of nature instead (Hakala-Zilliacus 2002). The lively and uneven spruce panelling of the exterior suggests parallelism between the building mass and the tree trunks that surround it. The auditorium and the assembly hall sit on the ground floor of Sajos like nuclei in a cell, their bulbous irregularity a conscious counterpoise to the unyielding symmetry of Sirén's assembly (Figure 25.5). Significantly, members of the Sámi Parliament are seated around a circular negotiation table in the assembly hall, where not even the chair is distinguished spatially, in marked contrast to the literally and metaphorically elevated positions assumed by the speaker and ministers in the Finnish Parliament.

Conclusion

The celebration of Sámi culture in Sajos is a welcome rectification of earlier cultural appropriation and exoticisation of the Sámi as tourist attractions and even zoo exhibits (Siivikko 2019, p. 58; Ranta and Kanninen 2019, pp. 127–129). Cases such as the 2017 Finnish-Norwegian Teno River Fishing agreement, however, framed by Sámi groups as threatening their cultural autonomy, demonstrate that defining Sámi culture remains politically contentious (Ranta and Kanninen 2019, p. 175). Even in cases where Sámi culture and lifestyles are clearly impacted, the Finnish state continues to ignore its 'obligation to negotiate' with the Sámi enshrined in Section 9 of the 1995 Act on the Sámi Parliament, despite repeated legal complaints even by international actors such as the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Ranta and Kanninen 2019, p. 180). However, recent developments have given the Sámi limited hope that their right to cultural autonomy might be taken more seriously in the future. In 2017, the Administrative Court of Northern Finland overturned and submitted for reconsideration the state's decision on the boundaries of the Näkkälä reindeer collective, due to shortcomings in the state's background investigation process and the lack of hearings involving affected Sámi individuals (Lakkala 2017).

Among the Sámi themselves, choosing how to respond is a divisive issue. Maintaining a positive relationship is desirable, but agreeing to partially problematic proposals might be interpreted by the state as having

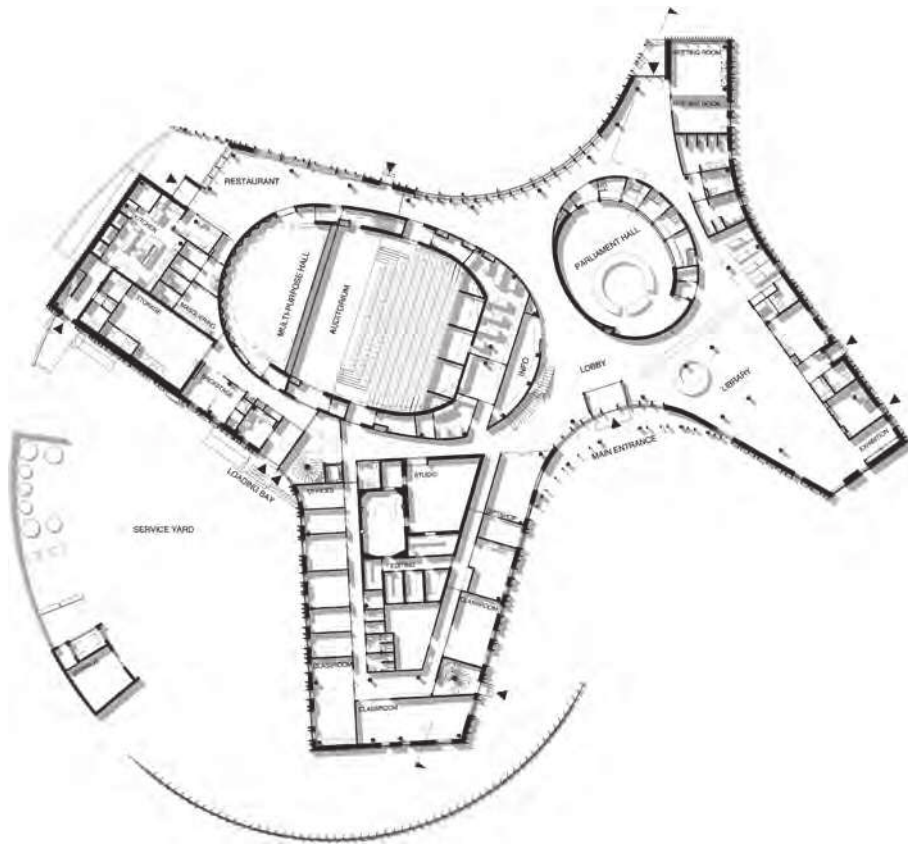


Figure 25.5 HALO Architects, Sajos, Inari, 2012. Ground floor plan, originally at 1:300 (drawing by HALO Architects, 2012). © Janne Laukka, Tuomas Niemelä and Milla Parkkali

done enough. Conversely, refusing to negotiate might result in the Sámi becoming even more marginalised. Sámi MP Jan Saijets recently asked of a contentious Nordic Sámi convention: ‘If the convention is rejected, will there ever be a new one on the table?’ (Lankinen 2017). These difficulties reverberate directly into architectural reception. Major commissions such as Sajos have been received overwhelmingly favourably in Sámi communities, yet their architectural successes have not correlated with, let alone triggered, analogous political successes.

Discourse on contemporary Sámi architecture has hitherto focused largely on issues of authenticity: ‘How Sámi is a building?’ An interrogation of Sajos with reference to tensions between Finland and

Sámi rights complements prior discourse by evaluating not merely its authenticity as a Sámi building per se, but as a product and expression of the relationships between Indigenous peoples and nation-states, and their continued contestation over the boundaries between the cultural and the political. The events and practices that have taken place within Sajos since its inauguration in 2012 amplify the ambiguities of the architecture itself; at least equally telling are those events that have not. The assembly hall at Sajos has been the site of protests by Sámi MPs against violations of Sámi self-determination, and the building has hosted several cultural events, ranging from Sámi art workshops to the Indigenous film festival *Ijahis Idja*.⁵ Alongside the cultural centres, research complexes, museums and other public buildings erected in Sápmi since the 1970s, Sajos curates events that directly critique the political relationship between the Sámi and the Nordic nation-states. Countless film screenings, dance shows, debates, art exhibitions and installations constitute a neglected dimension of Sámi public architecture: the ephemeral and extra-architectural activity provoked and hosted by buildings like Sajos serves to underscore the political conflicts faced by the polity which they serve. The importance of considering bodily movement, activity and ritual through an ethnographic lens in the analysis of architectures of power is evident (see Johansen in this volume).

Meanwhile, decisions regarding land rights and other crucial issues – which, according to the state, fall beyond the remit of Sámi cultural autonomy – continue to be made outside the walls of Sajos, often free from Sámi input, despite their significant impact on the future of the Sámi people.⁶ The building that was conceived as a symbol of Sámi autonomy, and that is broadly considered an exemplar of meaningful contemporary Sámi architectural expression, threatens to remain a backdrop and symbol of their continued struggles for political recognition.

Notes

¹ The other is the Sámi Parliament of Norway in Karasjok.

² Finland was the first of the three Nordic countries with Sámi populations to establish a Sámi political body in 1973, known as the Sámi Delegation 1973–1995 and the Sámi Parliament from 1996. The Sámi Parliaments of Norway and Sweden were established in 1989 and 1993, respectively.

³ All translations are made by the authors.

⁴ The International Labour Organization Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169) contains important provisions for protecting Indigenous peoples' collective rights, including provisions regarding land ownership and regulatory rights (Article 14), natural resource ownership and use (Article 15), taking Indigenous customs into account when applying national laws (Article 8), and an obligation to consult Indigenous peoples with regard to any legislative or administrative measures directly affecting them (Article 6). See Josefsen (2010, pp. 6–7).

- 5 Although group acceptance is usually seen as a central requirement for membership within an Indigenous people (Sarivaara 2012, p. 54), in 2011 the Supreme Administrative Court of Finland overruled the Sámi Parliament's decision to refuse the electoral register applications of some individuals they did not accept as Sámi. The following year, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination condemned the decision as contrary to the Sámi right to cultural autonomy. In 2015, the Court again overturned tens of Sámi Parliament refusals of electoral register applications, leading to two formal complaints by Sámi individuals to the UN Human Rights Committee, which determined that the Court had violated the Sámi right to self-determination (OHCHR 2019). A number of newly elected Sámi MPs were individuals deemed non-Sámi by the Sámi people themselves, resulting in protests by two Sámi MPs against the Court's ruling at the first meeting of the new 2016–2020 Sámi Parliament in the assembly hall at Sajos (Aikio, Näkkäläjärvi and Alajärvi 2016). Despite condemnation by the UN Human Rights Committee, the Supreme Administrative Court has upheld their ruling (KHO 2019).
- 6 State-Sámi relations in Finland are, of course, continually changing due to new legal rulings and political initiatives. Recently, the Lapland District Court at Utsjoki ruled that the 2017 Teno River Fishing agreement violates the Sámi people's constitutional and international rights (Leisti 2019). The case has now been appealed to the Supreme Court of Finland and represents a potential landmark case for Sámi rights (Ranta and Kanninen 2019, p. 182). A crucial development has been the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Concerning the Sámi People by the government of Finland (Valtioneuvosto 2021). The Commission will examine how the Sámi people have been and continue to be discriminated against and how their rights have been violated; it is also expected to recommend ways to 'strengthen connections between the Sámi people and the Finnish state' (Vaarama 2021).

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