



Mis/translation, Colonialism, and Environmental Conflict

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Abstract This article describes a colonial encounter in north Norway between Sámi practices for fishing and knowing the natural world, and the conservation policies of state policy makers. In Sámi practices the world is populated by powerful and morally lively human and non-human actors. In caring for the land and its lakes in practical ways it is important to sustain respectful relations with those actors. Norwegian environmental policy works differently by distinguishing between nature and culture and seeking to protect landscapes from what it takes to be human interference, so that natural forces can operate unimpeded. The article first explores these two different worldviews and shows how environmental policy imposes restrictions on fishing practices that make it difficult or impossible for Sámi fisherpeople to care for and sustain respectful relations with their lakes. It then reflects on the significance of translation and mistranslation for this encounter, noting that important environmentally relevant Sámi words translate poorly into Norwegian or English, and that the practices that these index are ignored or misunderstood in those translations. In particular, it focuses on the notion of *jávredikšun*, a key term for Sámi people who fish on inland lakes, and shows that the word indexes environmental actions and realities that translate only with difficulty into English. Finally, it considers the potential political and analytical significance of refusing translations of this and other important environmentally relevant indigenous words.

Keywords Sámi, environmental policy, Norway, nature/culture, indigenous knowledge, technoscience, mis/translation

Introduction

Much has been written about the internal colonization of Sápmi, the area in north Fennoscandia that is home to the Sámi people. For instance, in a recent study of wind power in Stekenjokk in Sweden, Rebecca Lawrence shows how the denial of Sámi land rights has worked in three mutually supportive but independent registers: first, in legal moves to claim ownership of what were historically Sámi lands by

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generating specific usufruct rights; second, by appealing to supposedly larger goods such as “the environment”; and third, by using market-oriented practices for assessing goods.¹ Her argument is that these overlapping discourses have pushed Sámi ways of conceptualizing and practicing the world beyond the conditions of possibility available to the Swedish state. It is not simply that they are ignored and displaced—though they are—but also that they are unintelligible and unimaginable as possibly appropriate descriptions of reality.

There are similar stories from Norway. Traditional uses of land are being determined and codified in the (controversial) workings of the Finnmark Land Tribunal. Appeals to supposedly larger national, environmental, and welfare goods are being used to justify projects—hydroelectricity, mining, quarrying, the creation of nature reserves, the limits to herding—that displace Sámi practices and understandings of the land. And market logics are interacting with these to inform decisions about resources and development (including tourism) that again ignore Sámi land-relevant practices. Woven into these logics is a fourth set of practices and their logics—those of technoscience—in which experts such as biologists have privileged rights in many state-relevant contexts to define “the environment” and what will count as sustainability for (e.g.) reindeer herding and salmon fishing.²

In this article we describe the squeeze on Sámi practices in a further Norwegian context, that of fishing on inland high-plateau lakes for *čuovža*, or *powan*.³ We argue that those practices reflect a continuing careful and respectful composition of land and water. Then we show how they are being squeezed by the quite different understandings of conservation embedded in Norwegian environmental policy. The first sections of the article thus detail a story of colonial pressure in which powerful “modern” epistemological, normative, and ontological understandings of land and water are in the process of displacing alternatives. In the closing sections of the article we focus our argument on the colonizing significance of translation and mistranslation. Here we attend to the Sámi notion of *jávredikšun*, a key term for those who fish on inland lakes. The issue is: how might this term be translated? In this article we first leave the word untranslated, and then show that it can be rendered only with difficulty into English. Finally, we consider whether it is better to mistranslate, or, instead, to resist any attempt to translate. We argue that the answer necessarily depends on context, but conclude that in appropriate circumstances the *refusal to translate* deserves encouragement as an important act of indigenous environmental and academic resistance.

Before moving on we need to note that throughout the article we use a series of large-scale terms, for instance contrasting *indigenous* with *the state* (or *biology*), and

1. Lawrence, “Internal Colonisation.”

2. Benjaminsen et al., “Misreading the Arctic landscape”; Joks and Law, “Sámi Salmon, State Salmon.”

3. The senior author, Østmo, is Sámi. A high-plateau fisher, activist, and anthropologist, she has worked closely with other Sámi traditional knowledge holders to document the practices of lake fishing at Sámi Allaskuvla. See Sámi Allaskuvla, “Árbediehtu,” and Østmo, “Sámi Seine Net Fishing.”

Norwegian with Sámi. We do so because these point to important differences and lines of conflict, and to avoid them would be to misrepresent the struggles that we are describing. At the same time, they are also deeply unsatisfactory because they appear to draw a simple line between two purified terms. So, for instance, in the present context what counts as “Norwegian” and “Sámi” are imbricated in a centuries-long history of asymmetrical entanglement (we briefly touch on this below) in which each has taken shape in relation to the other: each *includes* the other, as it were fractally, all the way down.⁴ A similar argument applies to a simpleminded distinction between “indigenous knowledge” and “science,” which has been pungently criticized by, for instance, Arun Agrawal, who observes that there is no single scientific method, no single indigeneity, and that even when it is used to privilege indigenous knowledges the division works to conceal power differentials between different ways of knowing.⁵ As we use such terms our object is therefore neither to argue for what we take to be the misleading purities of essentialism, nor, indeed, to offer succor to identity politics. Rather we do so because it is important to index asymmetrical patterns of significant difference between particular state and local environmentally relevant practices. And, to be sure, to press the significance of what is indexed by *jávredikšun* within the latter.

Fishing

It's a long net and Isak needs to be careful or it will tangle. So he stands in the small rowing boat while Inger Anne feeds it to him, length by length from a rack on the bank. He lays it out carefully, folding it backwards and forwards across the bottom of the boat. When it is safely stowed and its end has been tied to the wooden windlass on the bank he pushes the boat out. Inger Anne rows gently towards the middle of the lake while he stands in the stern paying it out, length by length, with its row of stones along the bottom and the row of floats, mostly wood, along the top. The net and the rope are nylon but some of the floats are a century old, inscribed with the names of long-dead elders. The floats marking the line of the net bob up and down, flapping from side to side as Inger Anne starts to pull the boat to the left to make a semicircle. Half way along the net there's a bigger float, a white plastic container. This marks the middle where there's a bag in the net that will trap the fish. This goes over the side, and Isak continues paying out the net as Inger Anne circles the boat back to the shore. The boat bumps to a stop, Isak jumps out, and pushes it along the shore to close the gap between the two ends of the net. Once the gap is closed they start winding it in. The net forms a large semicircle, with the big float and its bag in the middle, while the floats bob about slapping the water to frighten the fish and stop them diving underneath or passing over the net and escaping.

4. So, for instance, “Norwegian” and “Sámi” fishers often work in similar ways, while many self-identified Sámi speak only Norwegian, and, to be sure, many “Sámi” work one way or another for the state which is not, itself, a monolith. For further discussion of significant difference in a Sámi context see Law and Joks, “Luossa and Laks,” and Joks and Law, “Indigeneity, Science, and Difference.”

5. Agrawal, “Dismantling the Divide.”

The semicircle of the net in the water is getting smaller, but so far no one can see any fish. Perhaps there aren't any in this part of the lake. Perhaps (note this wording, we choose it carefully) it was not intended that that any should be caught. But then there's a splash in the water. A fish. More pulling. And then, with a final heave, the bag comes into view. Isak ties it shut, and it is clear that there are lots of fish. Once they've been disentangled, everyone walks up the bank to the fire. There are grayling and trout and arctic char, but most of the fish are powan. There's a big metal pan with boiling water hanging above the fire, and the catch is cleaned and cut into steaks to be cooked, along with the fat, the liver, and the roe. Inger Anne talks about blessing. Most of the haul will be saved, salted, smoked, or frozen. But there's also going to be a small feast. It's been a good day.⁶

Seine net fishing is an ancient and widespread art, but here it is being practiced on the Arctic plateau. Even with climate change it is below freezing for six to eight months of the year. On the tundra dwarf birch, willow, summer grass, marsh grasses, sedge, blueberries, cloudberries, moss, and lichen mix with rocky outcrops, rivers big and small, and lakes, also big and small. There are wolverines and moose and ptarmigan and ducks and summer clouds of mosquitoes. It is reindeer herding territory too. And for Sámi people it is also a place to go berry picking, rush cutting, gathering firewood, duck hunting, and fishing. In winter lake fishing you cut one or two holes in the ice. And in summer you can go rod fishing from a boat. You aren't very likely to catch powan, but you may hook char or trout or perch or pike, or possibly a grayling.

The names scratched on the floats tell something of the history of this particular net. "Inga Klemetsdatter Hætta 1924," and "Isak Mikkelsen Hætta 1916," the names show that the lakes have been fished by particular families for generations. Unsurprisingly the Sámi language also has a rich fish-relevant vocabulary. You don't catch powan. Instead you catch *sirki* (powan of 15–20 cm), or *láiku* (up to 30 cm), or *čuovža* (fat fish of between 1 and 2 kg), or fish so large—*čalát*—that you have to slice them before you can salt them. And they all have their uses. *Láiku* are good to smoke, *sirki* can be taken to other lakes to build up stocks, while *čuovža* and *čalát*—and specially *čalát*—are filled with fat that can be melted down and stored, in the past a vital source of nutrition. But fishing is also an important economic activity. In the past it was crucial for survival, but it was also a business for those who did not herd reindeer. As trade grew—there has been coastal trade since at least the twelfth century⁷—the exchange of goods became important in Sápmi both to the Norwegian coast, but also with traders from (what are now) Sweden and Finland. By the nineteenth century Sámi people living inland on the plateau were part of a market economy; had acquired a taste for flour, sugar, coffee, and salt; and traded these for salt fish, especially *čuovža*.

But how to get a boat to the lake? Or a net? Or salt? Or the half-barrels used to store the fish when it is salted? Until the advent of quad bikes (and snowmobiles) in

6. This account draws from Østmo's video, "Sámi Seine Net Fishing."

7. Hansen, "Sami Fisheries."

the 1960s, this was nearly impossible in summer, so it was done in winter with sleds and reindeer. Likewise for moving the half-barrels of salted *čuovža*. So everything was brought to the lake in winter (*dálvi*) or “spring-winter” (*giđasdálvi*), and when the summer fishing season started around midsummer day, everything was already in place. And in autumn the barrels of salted fish weren’t moved until the ground was frozen and covered with snow. This meant building turf huts, *goahti*, to live in and for “dry goods,” and separately in cold damp places for barrels of salted fish.

Respectful Relations

But this is only part of the story. Fishing for *čuovža* is a practical and economic activity. But it is also about sustaining relations with nonhuman actors.⁸ Consider the word *bivdit*. This is the Sámi word for seeking, striving, asking for, or aiming for. But it also is the word for the serious (nonrecreational) activities of fishing, hunting, and trapping. However, in practice, these two sets of meanings weave together because Sámi families ask their lake for fish. Then it is up to the lake to respond. Sámi people say “*jávri addá dan maid addá*,” “the lake gives what it gives.” Sometimes it gives plentifully and sometimes it does not. A catch was *intended*—or it was not. So requests are important, but after you have fished it is just as important to offer thanks. Inger Anne says that just before you leave after fishing, you thank the lake, and you bless it. Perhaps silently, perhaps not. “*Buressivdniduvvon lehkos dát jávri mii addá midjiide guliid*.” “May this lake that gives us fish be blessed.” Indeed, you bless it even if it has not given any fish, for it has fish in it even so. “*Buressivdniduvvon lehkos dát jávri*.” “May this lake be blessed.”

Here, then, is the argument: for Sámi people fishing is about respectful relations with fish and lakes. But not just fish and lakes. Consider this orally transmitted story.

A fisherman and a boy went to a lake to fish. They put out the net and caught lots of fish. They salted the fish, and they melted the fat to make a pan full of fish oil. But then, later, it was empty. Why, wondered the boy? Where had it gone? The second day was the same: good fishing, lots of oil, and then an empty pan. And the third day was the same again, but this time the boy was curious. He pretended to sleep, but kept watch. Then he saw the fisherman get up, take the pan, walk with it and pour the oil over a stone. Later the boy went off by himself, picked up the stone, and threw it into the lake. That day they caught nothing. And the next day was the same. On the third day there were no fish either, but they caught a reindeer heart. This seemed strange to the boy, but they were short of food, so they cooked and ate it, and carried on fishing with no success. Then they killed a *boazu*, a reindeer. But when they butchered it they found it had no heart. “How strange,” said the boy. “No it isn’t,” said the fisherman. “We ate the heart already.” And then the boy got scared and ran home.

8. For comparable accounts see de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics”; and de la Cadena and Blaser, *Indigenous Cosmopolitics*.

Why was the boy scared? The answer is that it was only when he saw that the reindeer had no heart that he realized that the stone wasn't any old stone, but that it had power, power over fishing, the lake, and indeed over matters of life and death. It was only then that he realized how dangerous it had been not to show it proper respect. So the story, like many that come from indigenous societies,⁹ tells us that Sámi people enter into respectful relations with people and animals but also with objects that may be invisible to outsiders. So the fisherman makes an offering to the stone because the stone is sacred, a place to be respected, an "offering stone," a *sieidi*.¹⁰ If this is not done, then the relation will fail—that is the moral of the story. People need to give, they cannot simply take, and least of all should they quarrel with a *sieidi*.¹¹ But the same is true for other landscape inhabitants. Topography, lakes, rivers, rocks, weather, wind, plants, and animals, all may be actors deserving of respect, for Sámi fishing people live in a *morally lively world*. There is no straightforward division between realities and values. Like people, lakes and stones embed values, intentions, desires, and notions about what is proper and what is not, and they act accordingly.

The conclusion is self-evident. As for many other indigenous peoples,¹² this is a place where a division between nature and culture makes little sense. Indeed, there is no word for "nature" in Sámi.¹³ Instead, the relations that weave in and through the landscape in Sápmi indifferently bind people and other beings together in negotiable but respectful long-term ties. And in the face of the power of these nonhuman agents, the story is also insisting on the significance of *humility* and *adaptability*. The worlds of fishing or reindeer herding or moose hunting are uncertain. Will the lake give fish? Is this intended? Perhaps, or perhaps not. Will the conditions for moving a herd be favorable? Very often not. Is it safe to travel? Possibly not. When Sámi people say "*jahki ii leat jagi viellja*"—"one year is not the next year's brother"—they are pointing at the unpredictability of the world. On the tundra there is not much certainty, weather-wise or indeed in any other way, and people therefore have to be ready to handle each year as it unfolds in its own particular way. Control gives way to respect.¹⁴

But appropriate long-term relations with lakes take many forms. One, the ice break that comes at the end of winter pushes brushwood and other bits and pieces before it and it is respectful to clear the resultant debris from the inlets and outlets of the lake. Two, Sámi fisherpeople do not catch more than they need: they set limits. Three,

9. Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 51.

10. Äikäs, "Archaeology of Sieidi Stones," 49; Porsanger, "Indigenous Sámi Religion," 41; Kuokkanen, "Láhi and Attáldat," 25; Reinert, "About a Stone."

11. Oskal, "On Nature and Reindeer Luck."

12. See, for instance, Zahara and Hird, "Raven, Dog, Human," on comparable Inuit understandings.

13. In legal and administrative Norwegian "natur" is mistranslated as *luondu* in Northern Sámi. *Luondu* is the nature or character of someone or something (as in "human nature"). Porsanger, "Indigenous Sámi Religion," 38.

14. Mazzullo and Ingold, "Being Along."

in autumn and winter they do not fish on or near the spawning beds. These, they say, need to be left in peace. Four, they stop fishing if the fish are all the same size because this shows that the lake is not healthy since the fish are not reproducing. Five, as we have seen, they may make an offering to a *siedi*. Six, again as we have seen, they may offer a blessing to the lake. Seven, they will return fish bones to the soil under a birch tree after a meal. All of these are forms of respect and ways of looking after the lake, forms of what Sámi people call *jávredikšun*. But the lakes are cared for in other ways too. In Sápmi the spring thaw is often a moment of drama. The ice dams that have built up in the long winter crack and break as temperatures rise, and the ice floes on the rivers sweep everything before them. This is a good time for respect: it is best to stay well out of the way. But it is also a moment when the lakes get scoured. The bursting ice floes sweep away rushes and weed. Branches, trees, mixtures of soil and vegetation and wood, everything is swept before them and the river inlets and outlets to the lakes get cleared. So the time of melting is also a time of cleaning. And this, say Sámi fishers, is good for the lake because channels are scoured, areas of brackish water do not build up. Currents (*rávdnji*) will flow in the lake in the summer, refreshing the water (*čáhcemolsašupmi*) so that the powan are *sávri*—fat and firm-fleshed.¹⁵ They will be healthy and grow well, while pike and the parasites that come with pike are reduced. So this is another way of looking after lakes and their fish.

At the same time, global climate change is also recognized as a developing problem. The spring ice break no longer happens every year. The winters are not as cold as they were, the permafrost is slowly melting, and at melt time more water is absorbed into the ground while the rush of water and ice is smaller. And more than in the past, the spring melt is happening little by little, so the surge is getting smaller and the lakes are no longer being properly scoured. But in this world of woven relations the work of the spring melt may be, should be, and indeed is also often undertaken, by people. In part, this is done by seine net fishing itself, which is also a way of looking after a lake because the weights on the net drag along the lake floor shifting the slime and slimy rotting leaves, and stirring up sediment and worms and insects good for fish. Equally important, fishing uproots the sedge that chokes the lake and stops the circulation of water. To fish, then, is to fish, but is also to look after a lake respectfully: it is part of *jávredikšun* that works in the same way as the spring ice melt and the wind. But there are other possibilities: for instance, by making a song, *luohti*, for the lake and singing it, *yoiking*;¹⁶ by clearing sedge by uprooting it; or by clearing the tangle damming the inlets and the outlets to the lake if the spring melt has not done this first. These, then, are all part of looking after lakes and after those fishing in those lakes—people. In short,

15. If currents flow in the lake, then they bring air, *áimmu*, though this does not need to be spelled out. One of the traditional knowledge holders who had been following scientists working on powan also talked of oxygen.

16. *Yoiking* is widespread in Sápmi, and *luohti* are made to honor or to remember a person, a landscape, or indeed a lake.

people are just another part of this morally lively and respectful long-term web of relations between the different actors that make up a place.

Rules

But the authorities do not see it this way, so there is the collision between Sámi practices and those of the Norwegian environmental agencies.¹⁷ This conflict is simultaneously political, a clash between two different sets of practices and the ways of living and being that these carry, a collision between two quite different versions of land and water, and a conflict between two normative worlds. Thus, when Sámi people think about *javredikšun*, they are thinking about the lake and its surroundings and the practices that follow the seasons as these unfold: the weather, the wind, the temperature, the number of mosquitoes and insects in the air, what the changing conditions mean for the fish. Or where the cloudberries will grow. And how it was in the spring; whether the snow melt was dramatic or not. People watch the world and their surroundings. All of this enacts the world as a woven, morally lively, uncertain, but long-term web of relations between powerful actors. In these practices, the environment is not a resource. It is not separate. Rather it is a place to be lived in and worked with appropriate respect, a set of encounters that will provide what is needed to live if those relations are properly sustained. Here, as we have seen, any individual person is an actor alongside many others: human, animal, natural, and supernatural.

But the environmental agencies of the state have a quite different understanding of what they think of as the natural world. This is underpinned by a range of commitments including what Norwegians call *friluftsliv*, which enacts unsettled places as recreational wilderness.¹⁸ It is also powerfully sustained by science-based understandings of the environment that similarly distinguish between nature and culture. The general argument is well rehearsed,¹⁹ but the guiding assumption (visible, for instance in ecological modeling of reindeer populations or salmon numbers) is that the natural world is properly understood as the expression of causal relations susceptible to general articulation and potential manipulation.²⁰ In this worldview specific environmental circumstances vary, but the mechanisms that underpin those circumstances do not. In the present context, this becomes important because those principles are used as a basis for state policy making. The resulting science-sustained environmental policy lines

17. See, e.g., Eidheim, "When Ethnic Identity"; Oskal, "Political Inclusion"; Minde, "Assimilation of the Sami"; Briggs, "Science, Local Knowledge, and Exclusionary Practices"; Hirvonen, "Voices from Sápmi"; Eira et al., "Sápmi: Kautokeino, Norway, and Inari, Finland", 31; Kraft, "The Making of a Sacred Mountain"; Sara, "Land Usage and Siida Autonomy"; Skogvang, "Legal Questions"; Reinert, "Weight, Density, and Space"; Johnsen, Benjaminsen, and Eira, "Seeing like the State"; Joks and Law, "Sámi Salmon, State Salmon."

18. *Friluftsliv*, or "outdoor recreation," emphasizes the moral, physical, and nation-building benefits of outdoor life, and especially wilderness activity. See Ween, "Tracking Nature Inscribed."

19. Strathern, *After Nature*; Latour, *Politics of Nature*.

20. Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*.

itself up with *friluftsliv* to protect wilderness areas and minimize the impact of “culture” on “nature.”

In this way of thinking Sámi count as “culture,” not “nature,” so this collision continues the long-term squeeze of Sámi ways of living off, relating to, enacting, and caring for the land. For lakes and lake fishing the collision takes the form of an array of rules and regulations that restrict how, where, and when Sámi people may fish and care for lakes. Relevant rules include the following: One, fishing is not allowed without a *permit*. Two, fishing is only allowed between certain *dates*. Three, fishing is only permitted in certain *places*. Four, in lakes that are also fished for trout and arctic char there are minimum *mesh sizes*. And five, there are rules about what can be done in and around lakes in wilderness areas. For example, no motor vehicles are allowed off-road between snow melt (May 5) and July 1. This creates two problems: One, this makes it difficult to care for lakes, because by July 1 sedge has grown thick and strong and is difficult to dislodge. And two, some lakes do not lie on the permitted off-road routes, and special dispensation is needed to travel.

Differently again, there are also rules about what can and cannot be done with or to lakes or their immediate surroundings, and perhaps it is here that the collision becomes most stark. So, for instance, the regulations require that the areas around lakes not be disturbed, which means that it is illegal to work on river inlets or outlets. If these get clogged by logs and brushwood then that is too bad because, in the logic of wilderness management, silting up and damming are natural processes, and it is not the place of human beings to interfere with such processes. And just in case anyone is tempted to ignore the rules, two sets of officials enforce the regulations: the Statens Naturoppsyn (the Norwegian Nature Inspectorate) and Reinpolitiet (the Reindeer Police).

In the logic of Sámi practice none of this makes sense. The Arctic plateau is neither a wilderness nor the expression of a pristine nature in need of protection. Rather, as we have tried to show, it is a web of unfolding, productive, morally charged, and reciprocal relations between lively actors worthy of respect and care. Sámi people work within this web to exercise a kind of limited stewardship (though more on this word below), while recognizing that nothing can be controlled. As for the state’s rules for environmental protection, these mean that looking after lakes in this way becomes difficult or impossible. For Sámi people this is both disrespectful and bad for fishing, since the more you fish (within the limits set in Sámi traditional practice) the better and the healthier the stock.

The Politics of Mis/translation

The history of Sápmi is now widely recognized as a cultural and political scandal. After centuries of settlement, enforced trade, religious persecution, economic extraction, the imposition of (changing and) increasingly impermeable national frontiers, the practices of state-building and the “normalization” of populations that go with this including the imposition of Norwegian as a national language, it is only in the last forty years

that there has been any substantial pushback. Thus, the recognition of Sámi as an indigenous people and the 1989 Norwegian creation of the *Sámediggi* (the Sámi parliament) reflects a welcome if tardy political response to that scandal.²¹ Even so, as we have shown above, there are continued state-mediated pressures on Sámi land-related practices. Often difficult to imagine within the realities performed by state agencies, Sámi realities, entities, skills, forms of knowing, and moral sensibilities are still being squeezed. The state, usually in denial about the performativity of its own practices and those of the biology on which it draws, conceives of itself as describing and regulating features of a reality that already exists, a “one-world world.”²² It makes a sharp cut between nature and culture, drains normativity from the former, and marginalizes the world of Sámi practice, treating this as a set of cultural beliefs bearing at best an anecdotal relation to natural reality.

Nature, wilderness, landscape, environment: it is a commonplace that such terms are embedded in and help to enact powerful practical, spatial, epistemological, normative, legal, and ontological assumptions and agendas.²³ Unsurprisingly, what happens in Sápmi is no exception to this rule. Thus, when Sámi people speak of their land they talk of *meahcci*. As we have shown above for lakes and fishing, in Sámi practices “landscape,” *meahcci*, becomes a densely textured and changing network of identity-sustaining and respectfully negotiated long-term movements and encounters between lively, morally conscious, and often powerful human and nonhuman actors.²⁴ Importantly, though Sámi people share experiences of these encounters and work by observing patterns in this weave, to know *meahcci* is not to amass abstract knowledge about the behavior of “the environment” in general. Located in the practices of living in and with the land, it is rather to know how particular physical forces, lakes, rivers, terrains, nonhuman beings, plants and vegetation, animals and fish may act together in particular locations, at particular times, and in particular circumstances. Grazing for reindeer, caring for lakes, rivers, reed-beds, coastal places for fishing, where ptarmigan live or moss or sedge can be gathered and berries can be picked—the practices around all these constitute *meahcci*.

So how is *meahcci* translated into Norwegian? The answer is that it becomes *utmark*, a displacement that leads us straight to the politics of translation. Thus, in Norway agricultural, recreational, and legal practice distinguishes between *innmark* and *utmark*. *Innmark* (roughly fields or arable land) lies close to the farm. It is where animals are kept and crops are grown. *Utmark* (roughly outlying fields or “wilderness”), also part

21. For creation of the *Sámediggi*, see Johnsen et al., “Seeing like the State,” 230.

22. Law, “What’s Wrong with a One-World World?”

23. Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness.”

24. See Mazzullo and Ingold, “Being Along”; Helander, “Sami Subsistence Activities”; Lehtinen, “From Relations to Dissociations,” 22; and Ween and Lien, “Decolonialization in the Arctic?” On human-environment-animal relations in other contexts, see Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*; Hinchliffe et al., “Urban Wild Things”; Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Zahara and Hird, “Raven, Dog, Human”; and Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*.

of the farm, is the borderless area where cattle or sheep may go in summer, where there is hunting and fishing, berries are gathered, and firewood is collected. By extension, *utmark* is a place of recreation, of *friluftsliv*, for urban Norwegians. Overall, then, in Norwegian legal and everyday practice *utmark* refers to locations not permanently settled, where people may roam, make campfires, pick berries and mushrooms, and (sometimes) hunt, while minimizing their environmental footprint. And this is the term, *utmark*, that is used to translate *meahcci*.²⁵ Even though *meahcci* is not and could never be, unpopulated wilderness.

So, what do we learn? The answer is that this translation is an expression of state administrative and political power. Indeed, and as many have noted, it is not so much a translation as a colonial mistranslation of the older *meahcci* term together with the realities indexed by the latter. For, though settlement and farming have a long history in Arctic Norway,²⁶ farming is marginal and has been on the retreat in recent decades. And since relatively few Sámi people farm, unlike *meahcci*, the *innmark-utmark* logic is barely relevant to how they live. In sum, *meahcci* is neither pristine and unpopulated wilderness, nor is it *utmark*.²⁷ To equate *meahcci* with *utmark* is an expression of colonial power.

Such mistranslations abound in Sápmi. Indeed, we earlier footnoted a second. Norwegian *natur*, not dissimilar to English *nature*, gets rendered in Sámi as *luondu*, though nature as a category distinct from culture makes no sense in Sámi land-related practices. And there are many other mistranslations. So, for instance, though we cannot explore this here, Sámi distinguishes grammatically much less sharply between objects and actions. As Edward Sapir might have put it, its “matrix” is different.²⁸ The point is caught by Solveig Joks’s tongue-in-cheek question: “What is the wind doing in English if it is not blowing? Is it sitting in a tree?”²⁹ The point is that in Sámi objects are less object-like than in English or Norwegian, less separable from verbs. And, more generally, such mis/translations are characteristic tools of colonization. So what does this imply for lake fishing and looking after lakes? And what does it imply for *jávredikšun*, the term we have deliberately left untranslated above?

Mis/translating *jávredikšun*

Jávredikšun is a compound word: *jávri* means “lake,” while *dikšut* signifies taking care of people (though not sick people or children) or attending to a skilled task such as preparing a reindeer skin. This suggests, a first option, that we might translate *jávredikšun* into

25. Compare these (our translations). “The Sami term *meahcci* and the general meaning of this term are not identical to the definition of *utmark* in the *friluftsliv* law”; Sámediggi, “Sametingets Retningslinjer”, sec. 2: “In these guidelines, *meahcci* shall be understood in the same way as *utmark* in section 1a of the Public Administration Act.” Klima og miljødepartementet (Norwegian Ministry of the Environment), “Lov Om Friluftslivet,” sec. 1a.

26. Riseth, Solbakken, and Kitt, “Naturbruk I Kautokeino.”

27. See Ween and Lien, “Decolonialization in the Arctic?”

28. Sapir, *Language*.

29. Her gently teasing question draws on Ingold, *Being Alive*, 17.

English as “lake care.” Recent social science work on care has extended the scope of the term *care* to characterize practices—for instance in agriculture—far removed from the home, the caring professions, or health. In addition, it no longer implies the (recent) idea that care is necessarily gentle or kind.³⁰ But this work also makes three further salient points.³¹ First, it notes that in many contexts circumstances develop unpredictably so control is impossible. The point is that care cannot be planned but necessarily unfolds adaptably. This fits with *jávredikšun* where unpredictability indeed demands adaptability. Second, it argues that care involves not only people but nonhuman actors (for instance dietary regimes or medical technologies), so that care is materially heterogeneous.³² Again, the resonances with *jávredikšun* are striking. People may clear brushwood, but so too does the spring melt, while clearing sedge may bring good fishing, but so too may blessing the lake. Caring is a collective process that weaves together different kinds of actors, and this applies as much to *jávredikšun* as to health care. And then, third, the literatures also observe that caring balances different and possibly conflicting aims and goals.³³ The implication is that there is no possibility of achieving perfection, let alone a stable state. And this works in part for *jávredikšun* too. Here there is no stability or end state, no perfection, and no stable way of mediating between and reconciling the wills or concerns of the different lively actors caught up in looking after lakes. The world is an uncertain process.

So, there are good reasons for translating *jávredikšun* as “lake care,” but there are other possibilities for translation too. Perhaps the most obvious is “lake stewardship.” The word *stewardship* points to the significance of trust and of bearing responsibilities that lie beyond immediate self-interest. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, human beings were placed on earth as stewards of creation,³⁴ which implied the altruistic governance, safeguarding, and possibly the management and improvement of a world held in trust on behalf of God. And there are analogous environmentally relevant delegations of responsibility from gods to people in many indigenous cultures.³⁵ In the context of contemporary Western environmental politics, God is usually displaced by secular alternatives, so responsibility becomes due to a hierarchical superior, an organization, good national or supranational governance, and/or future generations, but the basic idea of the altruistic safeguarding of a world held in trust remains unchanged.³⁶ So how well does it work if we translate *jávredikšun* as “lake stewardship”?

30. Mol, *Logic of Care*; Harbers, “Animal Farm Love Stories”; Law, “Care and Killing.”

31. See Mol, Moser, and Pols, *Care in Practice*; Gill, Singleton, and Waterton, *Care and Policy Practices*; and Joks and Law, “Sámi Salmon, State Salmon.”

32. Law and Mol, “Veterinary Realities.”

33. Moser, “Perhaps Tears Should Not Be Counted.”

34. Saltman and Ferroussier-Davis, “The Concept of Stewardship.”

35. Beckford et al., “Aboriginal Environmental Wisdom.”

36. Saltman and Ferroussier-Davis, “The Concept of Stewardship,” 733. On countermanding self-interested behavior (“agency”) with disinterested stewardship in environmental governance, see Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson, “Toward a Stewardship Theory”; and Steffen et al., “The Anthropocene.”

The answer is reasonably. In part, this is because stewardship in some measure overlaps with care. But it is different too. Since stewardship rests on the significance of resisting self-interest, it is more oriented to the dangers of appropriation or of inappropriate or short-term use of resources. This implies that it is about the proper character of productive (though not necessarily economic) activity. Thus, to translate *jávredikšun* as lake stewardship is to emphasize, for instance, the conservation of fish as a long-term resource. It is to press the importance of avoiding inappropriate fishing, or of not catching the wrong kind of fish in the wrong place or at the wrong time of year. It is also, however, about *fishing enough*. This is because under normal circumstances to take plenty of fish will increase the number and quality of the fish in a lake. Healthy lakes are also those that are extensively, albeit appropriately, fished. Indeed, and *contra* the most obvious conservationist instincts, the chronic problem on the Sápmi plateau at present is not overfishing. It is rather that *the lakes are being insufficiently fished* in appropriate ways.³⁷ And then there are other forms of stewardship too: the clearing of brushwood and the uprooting of sedge become productive and possibly economically relevant activities. Thus, though nothing is certain on the Arctic plateau, to think of *jávredikšun* as lake stewardship is to draw attention to the actions needed to secure health and sustainability of the lake as a place for fishing in the longer run. This indeed involves care, but it also extends beyond it.

So *jávredikšun* plausibly translates as “lake care,” or as “lake stewardship.” But a third possibility—albeit less a translation than a significant resonance—is with gift giving.³⁸ Thus it is plausible to argue that *jávredikšun* is in some measure predicated on indirect long-term return and forms of (possibly unequal) reciprocity between powerful and independently willed actors, and it certainly involves moments of gift giving and (possibly different yet again) blessing. We saw how the *sieidi* stone was offered oil, how the remains of fish left after eating were placed in the soil under a birch tree close to the lake, and how the lake was blessed. Something is being given, but the transaction is neither economic nor barter, but reflects long-term relations and obligations.³⁹ At the same time, gift giving only makes sense in a world populated by actors endowed with the moral sensibility to recognize and respond to respectful and disrespectful behavior, which is how it is on the Arctic plateau, where lakes, like other powerful beings, may be offended. Or where they may give fish this time, or next time, or not for a very long time. In short, since offerings are important in the process of maintaining relations, something like gift giving is also taking place.

37. Note here an ironic resonance with fish stock modeling that focuses on maximum sustainable yields. See Hindar et al., “Gytebestandsmål for Laksebestander.”

38. Starting with Mauss, *The Gift*, gift giving has been extensively explored in anthropology (Yan, “The Gift and Gift Economy”), and its genealogy can be traced to pagan classical antiquity. See Frank, “The ‘Force in the Thing.’” In the context of Sápmi, the significance of gift giving in relation to the land has been explored for education by Kuokkanen, “Láhi and Attáldat.”

39. Kuokkanen, “Láhi and Attáldat.”

Lake care, *lake stewardship*, and *gift giving*, each of these terms catches important parts of *jávredikšun* and resonates with different ways of knowing and relating to the world in English. And no doubt there are further possibilities. But, and crucial to our argument, we also want to insist that these are *mistranslations*: that they are eliding differences; that they are what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “uncontrolled equivocations” because the same words point to different kinds of things.⁴⁰ So, for instance, if *care* implies vulnerability or tinkering, then it fits less than well with *jávredikšun*, while if *stewardship* hints at delegated trust or centralized environmental management then this too matches *jávredikšun* poorly. And the gift giving metaphor also has its disadvantages. Do lakes offer gifts to those who fish in them? Probably not. So here is the conclusion. Each of these possibilities catches something, but only something; translating *jávredikšun* is less than straightforward, and this is because English words point to different realities and different worlds.

Taken together, the inadequacy of these particular translations points to a systematic problem to do with the politics of translation. The issue is, when is it wise to translate; when is it sensible to equivocate? And when would it be better to *resist translation* altogether?

Conclusion: Translation as Betrayal

These are questions with long and contentious histories. Should the word of God be available in the vernacular, and if so in what form? During the European Reformation, some who translated the Bible paid with their lives when they got this wrong, while literary translators have been arguing about the proper relation between “source” and “target” languages since European antiquity.⁴¹ More recently, first anthropology and linguistics, and then the three disciplines of translation studies, postcolonial studies, and indigenous studies have all explored the character of translation and mistranslation.⁴² Indeed, for some anthropologists, the discipline is precisely defined by the process of translation,⁴³ while the very notion of language has also been plausibly questioned as a colonial invention.⁴⁴

We cannot explore these debates here, but one consistent thread that runs through many of the literatures is the tension between those who take translation to be difficult but possible, and those who hold that what is lost in translation is so important that satisfactory translation can never be achieved.⁴⁵ The argument that we have made in

40. Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology.”

41. Bassnett, “Postcolonial Worlds.”

42. Leavitt, “Words and Worlds.”

43. Lienhardt, “Modes of Thought”; Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation”; Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation*.

44. Heryanto, “Then There Were Languages.”

45. For a particularly compelling version of the latter position, see Nadasdy, *Hunters and Bureaucrats*. Nadasdy explores the dominatory implications of using the knowledges and categories embedded in and reproduced by state bureaucratic structures. See also Bassnett, *Translation*.

this article lies between these two positions. As we have noted, our core concern has been with *how best to insist on environmentally relevant difference* in contexts of coloniality, and as we have tried to show for *jávredikšun*, the process of translation tends to erase difference. Thus, though they are also fractally interwoven, the practices, the realities, the specificities, and indeed the metaphysics of Sámi lake fishing practices are quite unlike those enacted in Norwegian environmental policies and the apparatuses within which these are embedded. Here the conflation of *meahcci* with *utmark* stands as a cautionary warning. It reminds us that colonization by translation is its own large machinery,⁴⁶ a form of unthinking domination that routinely works by simultaneously refusing the possibility of difference and failing to see that this is precisely what it is doing.

So, refusing to translate is a potential tactic of resistance,⁴⁷ and in the present context it becomes a specific device for resisting the unreflecting adoption of the epistemological and institutional assumptions carried in the centralizing and textually oriented practices of biology and state administration.⁴⁸ In addition, and as a part of this, it is a way of resisting the one-world world metaphysics entailed by those practices.⁴⁹ And this is the profoundly serious game that we have played with *jávredikšun*. Yes, we have redescribed *jávredikšun* in English, so we have indeed been working with translation. But at the same time, we have refused to translate the term because we wanted to throw grit into the well-oiled imperialist practices of that English, and so lay down a marker of epistemological, normative, institutional, and ontological difference.⁵⁰ We have not sought to create what José Ortega y Gasset once called an “ugly translation”⁵¹—another possible strategy of resistance—but our object has been similar. Accordingly, we have followed the example of indigenous researchers in a wide range of other contexts and sought to make the world of Sámi practices less legible,⁵² a little less open to translation by power, and a little less susceptible to the equivocations and the betrayals that follow in the wake of that translation.

Is this simply a gesture? Perhaps so, but we suggest that it is more than this. In particular, our hope is that highlighting the unfamiliarity of *jávredikšun* might tempt

46. Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation”; de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics”; Leavitt, “Words and Worlds”; Rudiak-Gould, “Promiscuous Corroboration and Climate Change Translation”; Cameron Mearns, and McGrath, “Translating Climate Change.”

47. For examples of this strategy in other contexts see Mol, “Language Trails”; and van de Port and Mol, “Chupar Frutas.”

48. Agrawal, “Dismantling the Divide”; Nadasdy, *Hunters and Bureaucrats*; Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

49. Law, “What’s Wrong with a One-World World?”

50. For discussion of mistranslations (“equivocations”) implied by ontological difference see, inter alia, Verran, “Re-Imagining Land Ownership”; Verran, *Science and an African Logic*; Turnbull, “Futures for Indigenous Knowledges”; de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics”; Blaser, “Notes Towards a Political Ontology”; Joks “Laksen Trenger Ro”; Blaser and de la Cadena, “The Uncommons”; and Law and Lin “Provincialising STS.”

51. Quoted in Leavitt, “Words and Worlds.”

52. For other contexts see Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*; and Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

those whose work in policy undoes Sámi practices of sustainability to ask themselves: What exactly is it that we are doing? Is this wise? Is an alternative politics of *jávredikšun* conservation possible? Or is it possible to imagine conservation practices that simultaneously respect both *jávredikšun* and state concerns with the character of conservation, that make it possible to go on better together in difference?⁵³ These, however, are all questions that grow out of, and depend on, an initial willingness and ability to recognize difference. They start with the recognition that the weave of environmental practices, indigenous and otherwise, exceeds the logics that dominate Western ways of practicing and telling the world,⁵⁴ recognition that there are indeed realities to be known that cannot be converted into the scientific knowledge so often appropriate to Western institutional contexts.⁵⁵ But they are also questions that lead in turn to a set of corollary questions: if this is being achieved, then how to work on and with the recognition of difference? How to build on this? And here there are many options. Would it be best to stick with refusal? Would ugly translation serve better? Or alternatively, would it be preferable to cultivate careful and extended forms of mistranslation?⁵⁶ Would it be best, in other words, to create a web of imperfect translations across difference of the kind that we have created for *jávredikšun*?

No doubt there are further possibilities, but any response to these questions is best understood as a matter of tactics. Perhaps disappointingly, it is not sensible to make bold statements. In colonial environmental struggles there can be no general rules: we have no choice but to attend to specificities. This tells us that each of these options is a possibility, each is plausible, and that the best way to respond necessarily depends on local political and analytical circumstances. So, in Sápmi, while recognition of difference remains slow in political debate and within the relevant environmental agencies, this suggests that there are good reasons for a strategy of refusal. At the same time, however, there are recent and encouraging small-scale signs of movement. So, for instance, Sámi-speaking anthropologists, including the senior author of this article, are now being asked to teach environmental civil servants about Sámi practices in relation to the land. This is a significant opening, but this teaching removes those practices from the land to the seminar room, and it is not being done in the Sámi language. Few of those who work in the administration of environmental policy in the north of Norway actually speak Sámi. Necessarily, then, the courses are offered in Norwegian—and sometimes, indeed, in English. It follows, then, that this teaching includes a careful web of mistranslations, crafted for a context in which there is a developing if incomplete

53. Verran, "Re-imagining Land Ownership."

54. Though very different empirically, consider, for instance, Gudeman, "Vital Energy"; and Green "The Day-World *Hawkri* and Its Topologies."

55. Nadasdy, *Hunters and Bureaucrats*.

56. This is a version of the tactics adopted by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her extended discussion of the distinctive character of Kaupapa Maori research and its relation to Western social and natural science. See Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 185–97.

recognition of difference. Though, we should also note, *jávredikšun* has remained untranslated in this teaching, just as it has in this article.

This environmental opening to Sámi practices is a straw in the wind, albeit one that is encouraging. However, our basic point about translation remains: this is only satisfactory if it is also framed within the recognition of difference. But we want to conclude with a different though related thought: there are analogous questions to be asked of English-language social science. Indeed, these can be very bluntly expressed. Why on earth would academics working in environmental humanities *want* to reduce *jávredikšun* to concepts that belong to English language practices and understandings, and so to English-language versions of reality? And, the corollary, what might we learn academically and analytically if we were to *refuse* this kind of intellectual imperialism, if we were to take terms and practices such as *jávredikšun* into the environmental humanities, and if we were to teach ourselves to recognize difference better?⁵⁷

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57. For related arguments for anthropology see Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*.

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