

## Colonization, resistance and reconciliation seen from Trondheim.

Why is the Sami Parliament in Norway calling for a Truth commission? Why has the Sami Church Council for a long time focused on the need for reconciliation, both with regard to the church and the majority society? I will try to explain the historical background for this, using Trondheim as an important reference point.

The city of Trondheim has historically played a quite central role in the shaping of inter-ethnic relations between the Norwegians and the Sami. The city is located quite close to traditional Sami territories, and the river floating through the city has its sources deep in the Southern Sami Mountains.

In year 1030 Norway officially became a Christian kingdom. The same year Trondheim became the country's capital, and it remained so for almost 200 years (1217). Nidaros, which was another name for the city, soon became a diocese, which got major parts of the wide Sami territory, Sápmi, under its expanding interest sphere.

In many areas, particularly along the coast, the Sami came into cultural contact with Christianity already during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. During Medieval times, the Sami gradually became more acquainted with Christian beliefs, but interpreted them on their own terms. The traditional Sami religion however remained until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### COLONIZATION

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the colonization of Sápmi – which still was without national borders – accelerated. The rich fisheries in the far North and the mining potential in the inland, motivated three countries – Denmark-Norway, Sweden and Russia – to make sovereignty claims over the same areas. In a vast region in the north, the Sami during the entire 16<sup>th</sup> century had to pay taxes either to two – or even three countries.

From this time, the Church became increasingly important as an instrument for the expanding states. Church building in the Sami territory became national markers. Integration of the Sami population into the national ecclesial systems by baptism and church attendance was a way to make national citizens of the population of the land.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a Christian doctrine, inspired by Old Testament thinking, made *national religious purity* a priority within the young Nordic Lutheran States.

The Old Testament covenant involved an integral relationship between God, a certain people, and a particular piece of land. It implied that the people had God's blessing and prospered on the land only as long as it *collectively* stayed faithful in its relationship to God. Thus, sorcerers and idolaters were regarded a threat to the national security. They polluted the land in religious terms and made the people unclean, with the risk that God's blessing was replaced by God's curse.

This religious idea was now applied to the Nordic Lutheran states, and legitimized some of the most intense witch-hunts in Europe compared to the population numbers. On an individual level, it affected ethnic Norwegians, especially women, even harder than the

Sami. However, on a collective level the Sami religion was particularly affected. Many Sami shamans were sentenced to death in Norway during this period.

We are now back in Trondheim again. From the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the city became the center for an intensified pietistic Christian Mission to the Sami. It was led by the committed priest Thomas von Westen, later referred to as "the Apostle of the Sami". He made several mission journeys, organized a team of missionaries and established an educational center for the mission here in Trondheim. He is buried in the Cathedral beside us.

The official story was for a long time that von Westen was a strong supporter of the Sami language, which is true. What has been less part of the story is his strong demonization of the Sami spiritual tradition. In fact, he held the Sami to be worse than most other heathen peoples in the world, since they, according to him, also were explicit Devil worshippers. During the production performed to us after lunch, incidents and missionary accounts from this period will be shared with us.

Hundreds of sacred drums were at this time collected by force. Many burnt. Sami sacrificial sites were in some areas systematically destroyed. By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Sami religion was not any longer practiced publicly. It was the end of the drum time.

In 1752, a young Sami boy from the North arrived to this city 18 years old. His name was Anders Porsanger. He was recruited to become a language expert at the missionary school, and to assist the developing Sami Bible translation. 10 years later, he was the first Sami in Norway to get a university degree and to become an ordained priest.

It started as a success, but ended in conflict. It was a great surprise when the authorities in Copenhagen in 1771 appointed him as Chaplain of the Cathedral here in the Trondheim. It caused a local uproar among the establishment of the city, with the result that Porsanger never got the position. He was rather sent to the far north. Disappointed and disillusioned Porsanger ended up burning all his Bible translations.

After the death of Porsanger, it took amazingly enough almost 200 years before Church of Norway again got priests that officially identified themselves as Sami. What happened?

Well, the official minority politics began to take more a negative direction in Norway. In 1814, Norway became independent from Denmark and got its own constitution. A national wave washed over Norway the next decades. It became a national priority to promote a mono-cultural Norwegian identity.

From around 1850 the Norwegianization era started. It was an increasingly systematic State-run assimilation policy, which lasted for over a century. A mix of nationalism, security politics and social darwinism legitimized it.

A new legal doctrine concluded that the nomadic lifestyle of the Sami did not establish land rights, and the Sami territories were now claimed as State lands. The Sami language became in practice prohibited in the schools, and a residential school system was

implemented. While some individuals in the church resisted, the institutional church with a few exceptions also became implicit in the Norwegianization of the Sami.

## RESISTANCE

The first couple of decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Sami organized themselves politically to counter the authorities. This brings us back to Trondheim again. 6<sup>th</sup> February 1917 the first Sami National Meeting gathered Sami from the South to the North, and from both sides of the Norwegian-Swedish border. This event is today a symbol of Sami resistance, generating Sami pride and is celebrated as the Sami National Day in 4 countries.

The Southern Sami woman Elsa Laula Renberg was the great pioneer organizing the meeting. She travelled extensively to mobilize the Sami, even in the north. The second Sami National Meeting was hosted in Bonakas, Tana 1919. Renberg participated in a follow-up meeting in the same village in 1920. She is seen in the middle of the picture.

A local Sami teacher from Bonakas, Per Fokstad, became a central Sami visionary and ideologist. In a manifesto from 1924 he argued for a school system built on Sami language and Sami cultural values and traditions. In 1926, the Parliamentary School Commission however responded arrogantly echoing the social Darwinist thinking of the times, saying: *"Sami intellectual life and culture is something that does not exist. The people's character and talent does not point in that direction."*

These three Sami children were all small school kids when this statement was made. The children were close relatives of Fokstad and from the same village. The little boy to the right is my father, and beside him my aunt and my uncle.

When I grew up in the 1970s, my father said to us: *"I only spoke Sami when I attended school. It took me three years to really understand what was going on. I had 5 years of primary school. That is my education. The only thing I learned was that our Saminess was an obstacle when we were entering the Norwegian society."*

In the 1920s, the Sami political movement broke down. So did also the people's self-esteem. The most devastating decades of the Norwegianization now occurred. Many communities switched from a Sami to a Norwegian identity during these decades.

This is a picture from the same village Bonakas in the middle of the 1970s. The little boy in the middle is myself, and I am there with my two brothers, my father and my aunt. My Norwegian mother is not visible, but behind the camera and very present.

This picture can symbolize the changes that had occurred. My father and aunt belonged to the last Sami speaking generation in the village. The Sami identity of the community was dissolving. We heard stories that in some of the neighboring communities, people were now fully rejecting their Sami ancestry. My impression as a child was that our Saminess was a family matter – and something that belonged to an era left behind. Nobody told the story that 200 meters behind the trees at the picture – in the local prayer house – this village had hosted the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sami National meeting in 1919.

Up in the valley the situation was somehow different. In fact, new and stronger Sami movement was under its way protesting against the cultural and political marginalization of the Sami. The conflict peaked with the resistance against the damming of the Alta-Kautokeino River in 1979 and 1981. It involved big demonstrations in the north, starving strikes outside the Norwegian Parliament and Sami women occupying the Prime minister's office. It drew national and international attention. The case had come out the control of the authorities.

It was a turning point. Sami rights were put on the agenda, and things happened fast. During a decade a small revolution occurred. The Norwegian Parliament adopted the Sami Act in 1987, the Sami clause in the Constitution in 1988, the Sami Parliament was established in 1989 and the ILO Convention 169 adopted in 1990.

The church was rather anonymous when the Alta struggle was at its peak, but changes were underway. In 1992, the Sami Church Council was established as a national council directly under the National synod. It was mandated to maintain Church of Norway's involvement in indigenous peoples' issues.

#### RECONCILIATION

In 1997 the National Synod of Church of Norway summoned here in Trondheim, and it adopted a resolution that later is referred to as the "reconciliation resolution". For the first time Church of Norway on an official level dealt with, and confronted, its implication in the Norwegianization of the Sami. The resolution said: *"The National Synod acknowledge that the Norwegianization politics, and Church of Norway's involvement in it, represented an assault against the Sami people. The National Synod will contribute to ensure that the injustice is not continued."*

The resolution provided a basis for a new momentous resolution in 2003 regarding the controversial Finnmark Bill, which was the first attempt to settle the Sami land rights issues in Norway. Church of Norway became the first national institution, which supported the Sami Parliament's view that the Bill from the Government was not fulfilling the standards in international law on Indigenous peoples' rights.

Church of Norway is not perfect. It is still a challenge to make our adopted policies reality. However, there are some very good developments. One example is the worship life in the Cathedral here in Trondheim. The last 3-4 of years the Southern Sami language has been used on a regular basis in the greeting and the blessing in all services all year round. Both the national bishop, the local bishop, the dean and the local parish priest practice it.

A big symbolic national event is taking place next year. 6<sup>th</sup> February it is the 100 years anniversary of the first Sami National Meeting. It will be a big celebration. The same day, a new Sami side altar is consecrated in the Cathedral.

A Sami side altar in the Cathedral carries great symbolic meaning. Firstly because the "crusade" against the Sami religion went out from this building in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, because it was the Methodist church that in 1917 became a sanctuary and provided a space to resist the Norwegianization, even though most of the Sami belonged to Church of Norway in 1917.

From a Sami perspective, a visible Sami side altar in the heart of this cathedral is truly transformative. It has potential to become a strong symbol of the transformative pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. It may become a symbol that inspire what is at the heart of this conference: namely truth-telling, healing and transformation

Dat sáhtta šaddat symbolan mii movttidahtta dan maid mii viggat dáinna konferánsain:  
duohtavuoda muitalit, dálkkodit ja nuppástuhttit min gaskavuodaid  
Ollu giitu!