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Burials Rituals of the Sami and Samoyed People:

Colonization and Culture Loss

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**1.1 Introduction**

Colonialism and conversion: two of the most flamboyant steamrollers of indigenous culture. While colonial empires expanded into indigenous territory, missionary activity of the Lutheran and Orthodox Christian churches and later the religious-like zeal of Soviet communists swamped the unorganized traditional religions of the Sami, Nenets, Enets and Nganasans. Centuries of external pressures caused these cultural groups to lose key aspects of cultural knowledge about their own burial rituals, leaving the Enets completely disconnected from the practices of their forefathers and the other groups grasping on to quickly fading cultural fragments. The existence of the indigenous people of Northern Europe is often overlooked when discussions of the attrition of indigenous religious burial practices arise. Through the analysis of evidence from anthropological, ethnological, and historical sources a deeper understanding of the dissonance and connection between Sami and Samoyed burials can be attained. This can be done through the application of Ake Hultkrantz’s first volume of the International dictionary of regional European ethnology and folklore and Stephen May’s Indigenous rights Self-determination, language and education. By comprehending ethnological terms and the link between indigenous self-determination, language and culture a framework can be constructed to understand the burial rituals of the Sami, Nenets, Enets and Nganasan peoples.

**1.2 Terminology**

The terminology to refer to indigenous groups is ever-evolving, and some of the terms used in the past are no longer accurate or acceptable. In modern times the indigenous people of northern Scandinavia are referred to as the Sami; in the past they were referred to as Lapps. This term is now considered to be outdated and offensive, however, for the sake of accurate research and its use within existing scholarship, it remains in quotes used below. Throughout the paper the terms East Sami and West Sami are used, East Sami typically refers to the Inari (Enare), Skolt, Akkala, Kildin and Ter Sami, West Sami often refers to Northern Sami and Southern Sami (Sergejeva 5). These groups are primarily divided linguistically, this means they have sufficient variety among them in regard to culture and language. The Inari are particularly distinct from the other East Sami peoples. Despite this diversity, the early Sami grave sites are difficult to attribute to any singular group and thus these terms are used as more of a geographical distinction and are not necessarily representative of the group as a whole.

Terms transliterated from the Russian Cyrillic alphabet into the English Latin alphabet sometimes have variations in spelling, in this case the most popular transliteration was selected. The terminology used to refer to Samoyed peoples is rather complex, differing between the various governmental systems of Russia. Prior to the red revolution Samoyeds were called Yuraks, Samoyed or Samodi and this term was used to refer to the Enets, Nenets and Nganasans (Prokof’yeva “The Nentsy” 547). The first mention of Samoyeds is in reference to the payment of a fur tax which signifies their becoming Russian subjects and refers to them as Pyasina Samoyeds. Pre-revolution the Nganasans were grouped into the Avam Samoyeds, Vadeyev Samoyeds and the individual clan of the Oko (Popov, “The Nganasans” 572). “Throughout the 17th century and during the first half of the 18th century, the Tavgi, Tidiris, and Pyasida “Samoyeds,” along with the “Kurak Samoyed,” merged into a single tribe of the Avam Nganasan.” (Dolgikh et al. 83). Due to the large number of Tavgi within the Nganasans they were known as Tavgi Samoyeds for parts of the 17th and 18th centuries (Popov, “The Nganasans” 571). Overall, there are a wide variety of spellings and names used to refer to Samoyedic people, to avoid confusion the text primarily uses the modern names, those being the Nganasan, Nenets and Enets.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**2.1 Sami Graves**

Some of the earliest signs of the Sami come from the Bronze Age. Burial cairns from this area, though with striking similarities to some structures associated with southern Scandinavians, are considered to be more closely related to Sami culture. This is largely due to the asbestos ceramics found at these sites that continue to be associated with the Sami culture to this day (Hansen and Olsen 101). Due to the nature of Sami graves, little is preserved from earlier periods; exposure to the elements and fauna has since destroyed much of what was buried. Cairns have been found from as early as the Early Metal Age; however, it is widely debated which cairns can be attributed to the Sami people (Hansen and Olsen 105). These cairns were in use up until the Viking Age (793-1066), though not all of them are indicative of burials, and were also used for sacrificial sites and other ritual sites.

From the last millennium BCE up until 800 CE there appear scree graves in primarily the Varanger area of northeastern Norway. This kind of grave has been found from 800 CE onwards up until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, throughout a wider area of Sapmi. Scree graves dating after the year 1700 CE all come from the Southern Sami area, and it appears to have been a relatively new practice for that group of Sami. Though the graves did change according to the time and geographical area they are notable for their lack of soil. These graves persist throughout areas of Norway and Sweden, Hansen and Olsen suggest with further investigation it is likely they would be found in parts of Finland and the Kola Peninsula as well (108; Svestad, “The Impact of Materiality on Sámi Burial Customs and Religious Concepts” 43). The scree graves were constructed with space around the dead for their spirit to be able to escape to the outer world, an important aspect of Sami belief and burial culture. Within a naturally occurring or manmade chamber the body was laid and then covered with slabs of scree (Hansen and Olsen 108). The bodies tended to be wrapped in birch and bones of other animals are very commonly found alongside the human bones.[[2]](#footnote-2) At some sites other grave goods have been discovered; however, the looting and destroying of Sami burials and sacrificial sites during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries has made these kinds of finds much scarcer. Nils Storå mentions hollows in the ground between the foundation of prehistoric homes that predate the Varanger graves; these may or may not have been an earlier form of Sami burial (91).

Landscape plays a critical role in Sami culture, as a result of this Sami people from across Sapmi have had a great amount of variation in their religious beliefs and cultural rituals, such as burial in varying areas. The diversity of belief is fundamental in understanding Sami burials, as there is no “one size fits all” explanation of how Sami people were buried without spatial and temporal specifics. One of the most common links to landscape in Sami burials, is the proximity to water:

The Saamis preferred to locate their cemeteries on high, dry ground, usually "beyond the water", i.e. on islands, on the far side of a river, etc. This tradition of burial "beyond the water" was connected with fear of the dead and the belief that water was an effective barrier preventing them from returning to the world of the living.

(Luk’jančenko 202)

Landscape also played a role in what kind of materials were available for burial, in areas with a lack of trees a coffin burial is unlikely to be found. Birch bark, which was often used to wrap a body prior to burial, could not be used in the case of a location with no birch bark. The soil conditions in many areas of Sapmi are poor, explaining why scree graves may be more practical if an area was too rocky. Orientation was also an evident theme among Sami burials, though it appears to change due to the time period and geographic region; graves were intentionally buried in specific orientations at cardinal directions, or between them (Francis 220; Storå 135). Overall, the burial traditions of the Sami people related directly to the landscape the burial was occurring in.

During the Viking Age and Early Medieval Age trade blossomed throughout Scandinavia, and the interactions between Sami and their southern neighbors increased dramatically. In a similar era, Christianity came to Denmark, soon followed by the rest of Scandinavia and Russia. This brought the Sami into contact with Christianity for the first time, and while conversion did not occur for several more centuries, Christian influence on Sami burials became apparent rather quickly. Some of the notable changes were the change from burying the dead in sleds to burying them in coffins, the change from wrapping the dead in birch bark to ordinary dress, and a seemingly increased importance of burying the dead with metal goods (Budo i Rosa 22). Asgeir Svestad has argued that the conversion of the Sami in the west of Sapmi made little change to their burial rituals, as they had already become so similar to Christian traditions by this time (“Sami Burials and Sacred Landscapes” 126). Svestad also states that certain Eastern Sami grave sites from pre-conversion are nearly indistinguishable from those post conversion (“Sami Burials and Sacred Landscapes” 126). Ultimately, though, the Christianization of Sami burials occurred much earlier than the conversion of the Sami people from their indigenous religion to Christianity.

The excavation of the island Todd’suel revealed many of the burials performed by the Pasvik Skolt Sami. Three layers of burials were excavated, with the deepest appearing to be the most recent and having been dug through the two previous layers. From this site Nils Storå concluded that there were six types of graves (A through F) and three kinds of superstructures (I through III).

A. *Rectangular wooden coffins with a flat lid*. In general the coffins lay only just beneath the surface with a shallow covering of earth and lay in an approximately north-south direction. The body was in the supine position with the head at the southern end of the coffin. This type of coffin was encountered in 14 graves.

B. *Lapp sledge.* The pointed end of the sledge faced north and the body lay on its back with the head at the southern end. Only one grave of this type was found.

C. *Lapp cradles*. In the two cradles which were found there lay the bodies of children. Both cradles lay north to south but in one case the head was at the northern, in the other, at the southern end.

D. *Wooden coffins narrowing towards the foot.* The lid was like a roof in shape. Deeply buried in an east-west direction. The dead bodies lay on their backs, the head at the western end. Altogether eight graves of this type were found.

E. *Coffins made of hollowed-out tree trunks.* A total of four such graves were found. In two of them lay the bodies of children.

F. *Birch bank shroud.* Found in only one case, it was the body of a child lying on its back in a northeast-southwest direction with the head to the southwest. The body lay on a kind of wooden base with several layers of birch bark around it.

I. The walls made of two layers of rough-hewn timber with a ridge roof made of planks. The planks were kept in place by means of nails made of iron or wood. The five houses of this type stood in an east-west direction.

II. A kind of framework made of round timber with the bark still on it and lacking joints at the corners. On this framework there was a covering made up of layers of thick planks. The roof rested loosely on top of this. Only one construction of this type was found and it faced east-west.

III. A simple plank structure. On top of the planks, which lay in the same direction as the grave, east to west, there was a loose plank on which axes were often found. Possibly this was a rudimentary grave house or one which had rotted away. Four examples of this type of structure were found.

(Storå 125-126)

The earliest of these graves came from the pre-Christian period, and are dated to between the 13th and 14th centuries. The shallowest layer comes from the early Christian period and is dated between to the 15th and 16th centuries. The most recent and deepest graves come from the 19th century, and the youngest is from 1925; however, Storå was informed by a local that someone may have been buried there more recently, approximately ten years after the written date of 1925 (Storå 128). These six forms of graves are a good indication of what Eastern Sami graves looked like in the period leading up to and after conversion, which began in roughly 1550 (Svestad,“Sami Burials and Sacred Landscapes” 117; Budo i Rosa 3). Grave houses appear to be unique to the Eastern Sami, though burying the dead in *pulka* (also called *geres*)or sleds appears to have been common across Sapmi. This tradition may date as far back as the first millennium BCE (Budo i Rosa 13). However, Svestad argues it is much more difficult to date this tradition (Svestad, “Sami Burials and Sacred Landscapes” 123). Overall, Storå’s 6 grave types exemplify the variety of Sami burials even within a small community and can give a better understanding of what some Sami graves looked like.

As the Sami are largely semi-nomadic people, they were not always near a burial site (or later churchyard) when an individual passed. This resulted in a variety of temporary sites being used to keep the dead safe until they could be transported to an appropriate place for burial. There is a great deal of variety in the types of temporary burials. Some were shallow graves that could be easily dug up, these are typical of summer temporary graves, after snow fell the bodies could more easily be transported by sled (Storå 106). In the case of the dead that died during a journey in the summertime, a coffin was made, or the body was wrapped in reindeer skin and suspended in the air (Storå 106). This technique to create so-called aerial graves was also used to store meat and fish away from predators while also drying it out (Storå 107). Bodies were also suspended on sleds, or put on raised platforms, forms of aerial graves differ substantially. Due to their temporary nature, details about them come from written records that were typically written by non-Sami missionaries. Ultimately, there appears to be considerable variety in Sami temporary burials, and likely many of the forms were never recorded and their methods have been lost to time.

Finally, it should be mentioned that though the practice of cremation was widely accepted for several decades, it is a highly debated topic that with modern research appears to be untrue. The discovery of hearths full of bone remains in a variety of former Sami settlements in Norway and Sweden. The Brodtkorbneset site near Lyngmo, Norway was recently excavated, to better understand these hearths that were believed to be cremation sites. From three of the hearths an assessment on the thousands of bones fragments found showed that there was no evidence of human remains being burned in the hearth (See fig. 2.1) (Hedman and Olsen 8). This topic continues to be debated by scholars and has not been definitively put to rest.

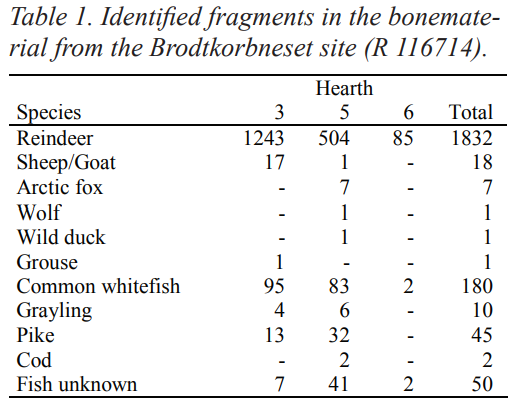


Fig. 2.1 An analysis of the bone fragments found at the Brodtkorbneset excavations; this analysis was only done for three of the hearths found, i.e. hearths #3, #5 and #6 (Hedman and Olsen 8).

**2.2 The Influence of Outside Societies on Sami Culture**

Unfortunately, not a great deal is known about the origins of Sami culture, Sami is a traditionally oral society, and likely lost a huge amount of historic memory throughout periods of assimilation. The first written account of the Sami is in Tacitus’ *Germania*, where the Sami are referred to as fenni, they are described as “liv[ing] in astonishing barbarism and distinguished misery” (Tacitus 213). *Germania* was written around 98 CE and though the account is brief it implies that the Sami resided in a large area of Scandinavia and potentially parts of Germany as well. This idea is backed up by archaeological evidence that suggests the Sami were slowly pushed to the extreme north over a period of hundreds of years due to pressures from outside societies. As *Germania* is the first written account of the Sami and is written by a Roman, it can at least be inferred that the Sami have been in contact with outside societies since the first century. Because of their links with external links, the Sami share many similarities with their neighboring peoples, making it difficult to distinguish archeological evidence. Unlike in American and African contexts in which Europeans arrived and drastically changed indigenous cultures, the Sami were in contact with other Europeans for centuries before any obvious attempt to assimilate them began. In conclusion, Sami culture has been influenced by external cultures, for at least two thousand years and likely longer, this means Sami culture likely took on aspects of nearby cultures but kept its own unique identity.

**2.3 Acculturation During the Viking and Early Medieval Ages**

As mentioned above, during the Viking Age and early medieval period, there was increased trade and travel throughout Scandinavia, which caused greater interaction between the Sami and their Viking neighbors to the south. This period is also associated with a change in Finnish mythology (Mägi 170). The Viking Age was a period of exploration, this resulted in a mixing of cultures and technologies that greatly influenced and altered the way of life in Scandinavia. Arguably the biggest change culturally was the conversion to Christianity. Prior to converting, there was overlap in many traditions that were shared by both Sami and southern Scandinavians. The practice of marking the grave site with a ring of boulders, is echoed in the Viking tradition of outlining burial mounds with rocks in the shape of a boat such as at the infamous Jelling complex or Lindholm høje, dating to approximately 1100 CE and from the 5th century CE to roughly 1050, respectively (Luk’jančenko 203; Holst et al. 475; Sparavigna 1). Another one of these shared traditions is similar grave goods, since both traditions believed that the dead could bring objects into the afterlife with them, both groups buried valuable goods with the dead. As trade flourished between the Sami and their southern neighbors many of the goods found at archeological sites were also similar, such as the two different types of strike-a-lights found both at Brodtkorbneset hearths and Viking Age graves near Birka (Hedman and Olsen 13). “This degree of exchange extended into Sámi burial customs, which changed during the Viking Age to include metal depositions as well as separate burials of silver jewellry (brooches, rings) …” (DuBois, “The Pre-Christian Religions of the North'' 357).

Practically, all of Scandinavia had polytheistic religious practices prior to the arrival of Christianity. During the latter parts of the Viking Age and early Middle Ages as trade continued and Christianity spread, the first signs of Christianity among the Sami began to appear. In some places there are even crosses near Sami burial sites that predate the coming of missionaries to that area (Svestad, “Sami Burials and Sacred Landscapes” 125). Overall, this era was one of transition, from the Sami sharing a similar culture to their neighbors to their southern neighbors adopting new ideas and values that slowly trickled into the Sami way of life.

**2.4 The Conversion of the Eastern Sami**

The conversion of the Eastern Sami began in the 16th century with the first baptism occurring in Käddluhtt in 1526 (Sergejeva 21). Though the conversion of the Eastern Sami began nearly a century prior to that of the Western Sami, the consequences for not adhering to the strict Christian principles were much less severe. Many of the Sami who did not live near churches continued to practice their indigenous Sami religion, other Sami whose seasonal lands were near churches did not practice Christianity for the half the year they were away, this was particularly common at the start of conversion. *Sjidd*[[3]](#footnote-3) continued to function in their traditional usage well into the 19th century. Many Sami continued to speak their native languages rather than the language Christianity was taught in, which was typically Russian, as the missionaries in this area were Russian orthodox (Sergejeva 14). Though the burial of Sami in the East did transfer to the usage of coffins rather than sleds after conversion, coffins found from centuries after conversion continue to have holes in them (Budo i Rosa 9). The holes in coffins are important signs that Sami religion continued to be practiced as it is believed that this is necessary in ensuring the souls of the dead could continue to the afterlife and would not be trapped in their burials. The conversion also led to Sami being buried in churchyards, however, these churchyards continued to be located in areas beyond the water (Budo i Rosa 13). This is another aspect of Sami religious culture that has deserved and has preserved the tradition of protecting living Sami from vengeful spirits. Due to the relaxed nature of this conversion many Sami were able to continue practicing their traditional religion. However, the lack of centralized organization in Sami religion as opposed to Christianity, combined with the stability and education Christianity could provide led to many Sami converting to Christianity by choice. This meek mode of conversion may have allowed Sami religion to be practiced alongside Christianity, but it did not leave a lasting resentment towards the missionaries and a yearning to return to tradition as seen in the Western context.

**2.5 The Conversion of the Western Sami**

Unlike the conversion of the Eastern Sami, which was by all accounts rather peaceful, the conversion of the Western Sami included aggressive force, strict regulations, and at times, violence. This was largely carried out, at first by Lutheran missionaries, and later by members of the clergy and government from the period of 1650-1750 (Svestad, “Sami Burials and Sacred Landscapes” 118). In relation to the conversion of the Western Sami Håkan Rydving states: “[t]he violence directed against the Sami was organized and systematic” (61). This is supported by the legal constructions that forced Sami people to give up their native religious practices and attend church under fear of punishment. This is best exemplified by the introduction of the death penalty as a punishment for sorcery, this law remained in place until 1726 (Rydving 56). Sorcery was typically associated with the possession of a drum or the performance of sacrifices, however, there were lesser crimes that were associated with the forced assimilation process. According to Rydving there are only three known cases of Sami being executed on the grounds of sorcery, though there are plenty of accounts of Sami being accosted in the possession of a drum and being forced to denounce their gods and give up their culturally significant instruments (57). There are also records from district courts such as Jokkmokk detailing the levying of fines against Sami individuals for failing to attend church often enough, or failure to be present on religious holidays (Rydving 58). This fear bred a culture of secrecy around Western Sami religious rituals. Western Sami men believed women and children were more likely to report them to the authorities, and thus began excluding them from religious practices (Rydving 60). Over time this policy of exclusion led to religious rituals dying out, and not being passed down to the next generation.

In tandem with the conversion of the Sami and the criminalization of their religion, came the influx of destruction of sites of worship called *sieiddi* (DuBois, “Destroyed, Displaced, Displayed, Decolonized '' 2). *Sieiddi* are typically stone, or wood features found in important areas of Sami landscapes and are understood to have protective and prosperous properties if correctly worshiped. Unfortunately, aristocrats and priests alike stole and destroyed these sacred objects in the name of Christianity, with some instances of Sami individuals to destroy their own *sieiddi* *(*DuBois, “Destroyed, Displaced, Displayed, Decolonized '' 5). The religious deculturation that came from Christian intervention permanently altered the state of Sami burial culture, leading to Sami being buried in coffins in churchyards. The end of scree burials was also brought about in a similar timeframe (Hansen and Olsen 110). Far fewer aspects of indigenous Sami religion remain apparent in Western Sami burials after the period of conversion, an assimilation appears more exhaustive. The infamous reburial of Aslak Hætta and Mons Somby in 1997, who were sentenced to death after a violent struggle with Norwegians and buried headless as their skulls were sent to the university in Christiania, the reburial contained many aspects of Sami culture, but reinforced Christianity’s place in modern Sami life (Mathisen 23). The reburial occurred in the same churchyard where the bodies of the deceased were originally buried, this time with their entire skeleton, the heads being buried in miniature reindeer herding sleds with elements of traditional Sami handicraft (Mathisen 28). This event was not without controversy, and many Sami boycotted the event because it was held in a church, despite Hætta and Somby both being pious Lutherans (Mathisen 29). This event symbolizes the leftover resentment towards the church after centuries of oppression, as well as the tie between Sami burial customs and Christianity that remain intertwined to this day.

**2.6 Governmental Regulations Resulting in Deculturation**

The loss of Sami religious culture was not an activity mediated on behalf of Christian churches, but rather it was also carried out by governments both intentionally and unintentionally. As previously mentioned, laws prohibiting the practice of pre-Christian Sami religion were instituted, which prevented Sami people from practicing their religion. The government also imposed regulations that led to the loss of the Sami language, traditional clothing, and their semi-itinerant lifestyle. Though these regulations were not directly related to the religious customs that surrounded Sami burial they contributed to an overall loss in Sami cultural knowledge. The institution of boarding schools and workhouses removed Sami children from their families at a young age and strongly discouraged the use of the Sami language and wearing of traditional clothing. In Sweden the workhouses were intended to bring education to minority children as early as the seventeenth century; the government also attempted to bring schooling to the Sami in tent schools (Rydving 59). However, the education was low quality and the ratio of teachers to pupils was too expensive for the state to maintain, and many children were still unable to receive education (Palo et al. 293). After Sweden implemented a Swedish only policy, the pressures to assimilate increased and “the workhouse[s] foster[ed] a culture of denunciation whereby children [were] encouraged to report on one another’s infringements of the rules in exchange for extra food” (Palo et al. 294).

Due to the fact Finland only gained independence in 1917 the maintenance of the Finnish language was hugely important and no schools specific to minority languages were established, resulting in a more unconscious form of assimilation and cultural oppression for the Finnish Sami (Palo et al. 292). In Norway the policy of ‘norwegianisation’ was specifically used to assimilate minority groups, such as the Sami, with the process beginning around 1850 and ending as late as 1980 the policy had detrimental effects on Sami cultural knowledge (Minde 6). The policies that slowly became more anti-Sami eventually prevented any use of Sami language at school environments, this made it incredibly difficult for Sami children that did not speak any Norwegian to learn without any aid or explanation from their native language (Minde 10). Furthermore, due to the difficulties of learning Norwegian many Sami students completed their entire education without ever becoming literate (Minde 13). The breakdown of communication between parents and children resulting from these policies led to the discontinuation of many important Sami traditions and leaving some Sami languages seriously endangered (Minde 27; Sergejeva 14). A similar policy of ‘russianization’ was undertaken in Russian Sami territories (which included Finland between 1809 and 1917) which aimed to assimilate *inorodtsy[[4]](#footnote-4)*. The people were viewed as primitive and in need of development, and by the Soviet Era a process of de-indigenized had begun to occur along the western Russian border along the Kola Peninsula (Berg-Nordlie 9). The changing borders during the past two centuries in Scandinavia have greatly affected the Sami people due to their positions in the extreme north. The changing hands of Finland and the “us vs. them” mentality of the east-west divide in Europe as well as the two world wars caused the northern borders of Scandinavia and Russia to change a variety of times, and the borders to be fortified more securely (Minde 16). This affected access to former reindeer husbandry pastures, burial grounds and churches they were members of this may have applied to *sieiddi* and other sites of worship that were rarely marked on maps (Sergejeva 17). In conclusion, government policies greatly affected the retention of cultural knowledge and are likely partly to blame for the Sami not returning to their own culture practices, such as traditional Sami burials, after legal enforcement of Christianity was abolished.

**3.1 Who Are the Samoyedic Peoples?**

Samoyedic is a term largely used as a grouping of languages, however, in the past it was used to describe several different groups of people. The peoples that remain from this group today are the Nenets, Tundra Enets, Forest Enets, Nganasans and Selkups. Though the Enets identify themselves as two culturally different groups with their own unique languages, as of the 2010 census the population of both forest and tundra Enets totalled only 227 individuals (Khanina et al. 110; *qtd. in* Dobzhanskaya 7). Due to their small population and the fact that both scholars and the Russian government groups Forest and Tundra Enets together, it is difficult to differentiate between the two groups, and thus they will be grouped together for the purposes of this paper. The Selkups though a Samoyedic group are distinctly different from the other Samoyedic peoples mentioned previously as a result of their migration southwards and their interaction with the Khants and the Kets (Prokof’yeva “The Sel’kups” 587). The Selkups share few cultural markers with the Nenets, Nganasans and Enets and thus will be left from this research.

The culture of the North Samoyedic peoples is marked by their connection with the tundra, as well as the importance of reindeer as a key resource for nourishment, the creation of traditional clothing, tools, and cultural artifacts (Dobzhanskaya 8,17; Popov, *The Nganasan: The Material Culture of the Tavgi Samoyeds* 86). The first recorded encounters between Samoyedic peoples and Russians was in 1116 in the Novgorod Primary Chronicle in which the peoples are referred to as the Chud (9). Potapov claims that Samoyeds were first referenced earlier in the Chronicle in 1096, stating: “The Novgorod Chronicle for 1096 says: “The Yugry people have their own language and live next to the Samoyeds in the midnight countries ""(105). However, this appears to be an error as there is no entry for the year 1096 in the chronicle. The discovery of burials from the 12th-13th centuries gives the earliest examples of Samoyed graves (*The Chronicle of Novgorod* 7). Though scholars believe these graves belong to Khants or Nenets or a previous group that was a mixture of the two, this is most likely what Proto-Samoyedic graves looked like (Slepchenko et al. 406). The graves were fairly shallow only 0.47m-0.54 meters deep, the bodies inside were wrapped in birch with fur products covering their faces and had been naturally mummified by the arctic conditions (Slepchenko et al. 407). Grave goods were found with the bodies including bronze plates, strips and beads, glass beads, leather straps, copper bracelets and an iron knife (Slepchenko 405). Other descriptions from early Nenets burials describe the cemeteries as grouped by family, on raised hills, with the body’s head pointing west and typically with a bell on an erected post near the head of the coffin (Kvashin 52,55). “Имелись варианты захоронений: в половине лодки, в земле, детей хоронили в подвешенном состоянии на деревьях” (“Other burial options include in half of a boat, in the ground, children had aerial burials in the trees.”; my trans. Kvashin 52). Samoyedic traditions from different groups have been preserved to varying extents, the least of which is burial.

**3.2 Effects of the Tsarist Regime**

As with the Sami, the invasion of Europeans into traditionally indigenous territories in Russia caused several changes and a slow deculturation of the peoples living there. Throughout the Tsarist, Soviet and Post-Soviet periods the becoming of the Samoyed peoples as Russian subjects led to a decrease in traditional ways of living, including burials. The Russians first encountered a group of peoples that would later come to make up the Nganasans (the Pyasina Samoyeds) in 1618 and imposed *yasak*, a fur tax or tribute that was regularly paid to the Russians (Popov, “The Nganasans'' 572). Later other indigenous groups were subjected to the same tax which by 1627 included members of the Tidris, Tavgi and Vanyads all of which would later come together to form the Nganasans (Dolgikh et al. 84). Yasak was eventually paid by a vast number of Siberian Indigenous peoples including many Samoyeds which were especially vulnerable because they lived in the Western regions which were closer to the heart of the Russian Empire. At the same time as the implementation of the *yasak* attempts to Christianize the Nenets were made (Zenko 1418). As the empire continued to expand Russians began to settle further and further west, driving Indigenous populations further east. This was disastrous for the Enets who had a relatively small population of approximately 3000 at the beginning of the 17th century and had lived largely undisturbed up until this time (Dolgikh 583). “The Enets ethnic group, like no other nationalities of Russia, was subject to assimilation with other ethnic groups. As a result, their culture, including religion, has similar features and elements to other peoples of Siberia. This is especially true of Nenets, Nganasans and Dolgans” (Kistova et al. 802). The migration of Selkups, Kets and Nenets into their traditional homelands led to the assimilation of Enets into other groups, particularly the Nenets (Dolgikh 583).

As the traditional religion of the Nenets is one focused on animism, resettling in a new region likely had some effect on their religious practices as well. In the later years of the Tsarist era a policy of “Russianification,” in 1822 the term *inorodtsy* was first used in a legal document, this term is widely translated as alien and has had an evolving meaning but was used to describe peoples that were not considered to be truly Russian (Slocum 173). From 1822 until the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917 a policy of Russifying non-Russian people living within Russian borders was employed, only becoming stronger as with time (Mironov 85). Many of these policies centered on the use of the Russian language, which was mandated for official documents, in schools, on trains, labels and so forth (Mironov 87). Through the analysis of census data from Boris Mironov argues that these “Russianification” policies were largely ineffective, with “Russians” in Siberia only increasing by 2.7% over the seventy-year span of 1827-1897 (Mironov 94). This is attributed to the lack of funds and the vastness of the Russian Empire; it simply was not fiscally feasible to provide education in the Russian language to such a sizable population spread over the entire empire (Mironov 100). Long term the effects of actions taken on behalf of the Tsarist regime had permanent consequences for the Nenets, Enets and Nganasans despite some of the shortcomings of official “Russification” policies.

**3.3 Deculturation as a Result of Soviet Regulations**

The early Soviet Period saw a light of hope for the protection, development and revitalization of Indigenous cultures, unfortunately these pure intentions were eventually left at the wayside as the need to rapidly industrialize and unify the country took precedence. The Committee of the North, which existed from 1924-1935 aimed to bring healthcare, education and communism to the remote people of Northern Siberia. The Committee employed highly trained ethnographers and attempted to provide conditions for the preservation of indigenous languages, by undertaking projects such as creating alphabets for languages that did not have them (Atnashev et al. 1). Upon the liquidation of the Committee of the North in 1935 the Soviet Union lost all potential of developing and integrating indigenous peoples of the north into society as equals and employing no distinctive indigenous policy after this time (Atnashev et al. 3). Despite the lack of a clear policy towards the indigenous population of Russia efforts that have been classed as “Russianification” can be seen throughout the remainder of the Soviet era.

The forced collectivization of Siberia began in 1931 with the deportation of 40,000 kulak farms (*президиума Западно-Сибирского краевого исполнительного комитета от 5 мая 1931 г."О ликвидации кулачества как класса"*). However the collectivization of indigenous populations started at different times in different regions with the collectivization of the Enets beginning in the 1940s and not being completed until the 1960s (Khanina et al. 120). The most notable effects of collectivization and the formation of *kolkhozes[[5]](#footnote-5)* and *sovkhozes[[6]](#footnote-6)* was the control it gave the Soviet government over people who were formerly fairly removed from their government and the cultural transmission that occurred as a result of two or more distinct indigenous groups being combined into one *kolkhoz* or *sovkhoz*. Most Nganasans were assigned to *kolkhozes* that contained Dolgans; they are non-Samoyedic peoples with their own language and system of beliefs (Ziker 208). Despite this, Dolgan religion and lifestyle closely resemble that of the Nganasans. This may be due to them occupying a similar region, however, a majority of the research done on indigenous peoples of Northern Siberia was completed during or after the collectivization period, thus reflecting Dolgan religion and lifestyles after Soviet interference (Kistova et al. 792). The forced collectivization relocated individuals across the Soviet Union, many of which landed in Siberia, which was becoming a strong agricultural stronghold, these newcomers along with those trying to escape Soviet authorities pushed Enets further east (Khanina et al. 120). This was also coupled with anti-shaman campaigns that aimed to eliminate traditional religious practices from indigenous ways of life (Khanina et al. 120). The combination of moving from traditional lands, anti-shaman campaigns, and an influx of non-indigenous newcomers led to a deculturation in Enets, Nenets and Nganasan traditions and beliefs.

After collectivization was firmly established the Soviet government began to roll out a policy of forced settlement, beginning in the 1950s with Enets and Nenets into the 1970s when a majority of the Nganasans became sedentary. This policy brought nomadic peoples and inhabitants of small villages to larger settlements, where greater cultural and linguistic interaction took place (Khanina et al. 120). It also exemplified the outright control the Soviet government had, which they used to encourage productivity in order to fulfill five-year plans. For example, the Nganasans traditionally were hunters, unlike their Nenets neighbors, but in the 1930s the government decided to change their main mode of occupation to reindeer herding, only for this to be reversed in 1978 (Ziker 209). These kinds of policies had lasting negative repercussions for the preservation of traditional modes of being.

The Soviet government eventually employed boarding schools as a means to educate minority populations of the North in the Russian language and the value of communism. This was done with the hope of fostering a sense of oneness that would prevent any fracturing in the coming war with the West, which was believed to be inevitable. Contrasting the nomadic schools that the Committee of the North attempted to establish, the boarding schools that the Soviets established in the 1950s did not possess the same cultural sensitivity, but instead aimed to integrate indigenous children into the Russian way of life (Farran). These schools often prohibited the use of any language besides Russian with punishments for children who failed to comply. (Khanina et al. 118-119) Children were removed from ages as young as one or two and sometimes did not return home until their late teens (Farran; Vakhtin). The tight governmental control that was established through forced collectivization meant that nearly every school age child attended a boarding school and ones that did not surely were not recorded (Dolgikh et al. 86). Predominantly due to these boarding schools, UNESCO lists Nganasan, Tundra Enets, Forest Enets, Tundra Nenets, Forest Nenets and Nenets as endangered languages with status ranges from critically endangered to unsafe (“World Atlas of Languages'').

Overall, the Soviet period is responsible for a decline in cultural preservation of Nenets, Enets and Nganasan culture. Through the forced collectivization of indigenous peoples, the migration caused by Soviet relocations and people attempting to escape collectivization, the forced settlement of nomadic peoples and the implementation of boarding schools more than a generation of people have been robbed of a connection with their own culture and language. This deculturation has had the most quantifiable ramifications on viability of languages, however language loss is linked directly to cultural loss and from this we can extrapolate that loss of traditional religious and burial culture was lost during this period.

**3.4 Ramifications from the Soviet Fallout to Modern Day**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the construction of a new non-communist government was a tumultuous time for all of Russia, but for the isolated peoples of the North that had come to lie on Soviet support it was even more difficult. The seeds for this disastrous period were planted in the 80s when the government run reindeer economy began to fail (Khanina et al. 119). As previously established the relationship between reindeer and people is a key aspect of the Nenets, Enets and Nganasan cultures; though at different times the people of these groups have been reindeer herders or reindeer hunters, the reindeer has always remained a crucial cultural signifier. The collapse of the reindeer economy continued into the 90s with more issues arising from the Soviet collapse. Services formerly provided by the government were no longer available, such as access to helicopters to transport goods and people and to shoot wolves that preyed on reindeer herds (Tuula 197). Additionally, economic hardship caused rising oil prices, which made the use of snowmobiles and motorized boats which had previously been used for herding, hunting, and fishing by the peoples of the tundra unaffordable, furthermore the remoteness made repairs to these vehicles essentially impossible (Ziker 214). In the late 90s and early 2000s there was a scarcity of reindeer vaccinations leading herds to further decrease in size, these economic hardships led to people leaving the tundra and traditional life to look for work in settlements (Tuula 194). In the settlements language use and traditional practices tend to be used less and less frequently and there have also been issues of alcohol addiction recorded among the Nenets (Atnashev et al. 5). In Nganasan territories that returned to reindeer hunting in 1978, the use of motorized vehicles was paramount in their new way of life. Due to this there are no domesticated reindeer which were traditionally used for transportation during hunting and some hunters have even attempted to employ dog sleds in light of this (Ziker 214).

Additional issues with shortages of cash in the tundra have led to people being paid in products rather than money, and some have even returned to barter-style economies (Tuula 196; Ziker 215). The 90s and early 2000s were a hopeless time for many peoples of the tundra with Ziker stating: “There is no work, no regular life, and no social protection.” in regard to Nganasans and Dolgans living in isolated areas (214). However, in more recent scholarship glimmers of hope begin to appear, as programs resembling some of the attempts of the Committee of the North have emerged in areas such as the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, with a Tundra kindergarten program being launched in 2016 (Atnashev et al. 3). Despite these efforts economic constraints make it difficult to ensure language and culture revitalization in this new stage of indigenous development. Ultimately, the immediate collapse of the Soviet Union had some catastrophic effects for the Nenets, Enets and Nganasan peoples, nevertheless promising new initiatives have emerged that have the potential to reinvigorate aspects of traditional culture.

**3.5 Burial Rituals of the Nenets**

The burial rituals of the Nenets are well preserved in comparison to many other indigenous groups in Russia. “Despite the forced conversion of the Soviet period, a large majority of Nenets have retained their traditional culture and lifestyle” (Zenko 1419). One of the key hallmarks differentiating Russian Orthodox and Nenets burials is the depth of the grave, which in the case of the Nenets is fairly shallow, about half a meter deep (Reznikova et al. 129). In many settlements the dead have begun to be buried in the same cemetery as Russians, Nenets hold the belief that the dead can bring items with the afterlife, so graves can be differentiated by whether items such as reindeer sleds surround them (Reznikova et al. 129):

The dead person and the things he would need in the afterlife: clothes, utensils are laid there. Partially the belongings (that did not fit inside) are placed next to the burial place: furniture, a sledge (narty), a khorey (a sharp pole to drive deer) is placed vertically. Over the grave on the bar a bell is attached. Bells are moved by the wind, so there is a quite ringing over the cemetery. Boxes at the cemetery are large and small, for children. Wood is blanched from wind and water. Near the graves of adults there are belongings which were used by the deceased during lifetime: dishes, furniture (stools, small tables, leaning against the coffin, even a sofa), next to some there are sledges and khoreys, because when a reindeer herder dies, it is customary to kill a deer for the deceased to have a one to ride on. Meat is carefully removed from the bones and is shared between the people who help with funerals. A deer skeleton with horns is left in the cemetery.

(Reznikova et al. 129)

In the case of a herder's death, a reindeer is sacrificed. (Zenko 1419) An *ittarma* is made for the dead, it is a sort of doll that resembles the deceased, for several years after the death it is dressed to resemble the individual who died, and after it becomes a family idol. (Zenko 1419) Though in modern times some Nenets many Nenets have been baptized they continue to practice burials that reflect time-honored traditions of their peoples.

(Kvashin 56)



Fig. 3.6 “The Burial”: A depiction of a Nganasan aerial burial by the Nganasan artist Motyumyaku Turdagin.

**3.6 Burial Rituals of the Nganasans**

In Nganasan culture there are two types of burials: light burials and heavy burials. The “light” dead included children under the age of 15, people who died by suicide, drowning or exposure to the cold, these individuals were given aerial burials in which a coffin was secured to a tree (Koptseva 716). The “heavy” dead were people who had lived long and had families, with the elderly being considered the heaviest:

The typical way of burial of the «heavy» Nganasan dead is on the pulk with a construction called matalira (conical burial tent like an ordinary tent with poles). A deceased is provided with a pulk with implements and food. L.V. Khomich writes that «most of the implements were prepared for an old woman: she was to take everything she had worn and even made, i.e. everything where her nilu (life energy) had existed» [5; p.52]. After the pulk with a deceased and matalira were set, they stuck or suffocated the reindeers drawing the pulk of a dead, which were left there.

(Koptseva 717)

Reindeer were killed during the burial ceremony because it was believed that Nganasans lived on in a “lower world” after death, awaiting the time when they reentered a child during birth and began life anew (Popov, “The Nganasans” 579). Though fewer Nganasans have converted to Christianity and their shamanic religion remains fairly healthy, the way of life is threatened by the unstable situation left behind by decisions of the Soviet government (Syroechkovski 1431). The return to reindeer hunting in 1978 and the subsequent collapse of resources previously provided by the Soviet government have left many Nganasans extremely isolated and without needed support such as access to healthcare.

**3.7 Burial Rituals of the Enets**

The Enets are the worst affected by Russian activity; their population is now 10% of what it was two centuries ago, and with this population loss, cultural loss, has also taken place. The Forest Enets language is severely endangered and the Tundra Enets language is faring even worse and is currently considered to be critically endangered. Language loss is one of the simplest ways of observing a decline in connection to tradition, however the Enets religion has survived to some degree. Orthodoxy was particularly unpopular among Enets due to their animistic religion being on the opposite side of the spectrum (Kistova et al. 804). Enets society was traditionally gendered but due to Soviet modernization strategies polygamy, the levirate, bride-price and labor divisions have begun to disappear (Dolgikh 586). A combination of these listed factors is likely what has led to the discontinuance of traditional Enets burials in favor of Russian burials. (Kistova et al. 804) A traditional Enets burial was a complex rite that required the presence of a shaman, performance of several rites, including a purity rite and the preservation of the tent in which the individual had lived in a broken form (Kistova et al. 804):

When a man died, he was wrapped in robes designed for the funeral rite, sewn into reindeer skins, and then put on sledges and taken away to the tundra, where a wooden hut with no entrance was placed over the dead. A ritual murder of a deer, which carried sleds, took place near the hut, and the things of the deceased were left there, depending on their sex. If it was a man, then they left a trap, a spear and a boat, if it was a woman, they left a thimble, dishes, a cauldron, a needle case.

(Kistova et al. 804)

The only aspect of the traditional burial that remains in modern Enets practices is the preservation of the tent. The gendered aspects of these ceremonies were likely discouraged by the Soviet ideals that were expounded upon the Enets people. The powerful connection between the Enets and their land was repeatedly broken as Russians slowly encroached on their land, first causing a migration east in the 17th century, then causing their territory to shrink over the following several centuries (Khanina and Koryakov 75). Though Enets remain a close connection with the land to this day, continuing to worship nature and make sacrifices to its spirits, the stress of the past centuries has extinguished many aspects of their culture.

**4.1 Conclusion**

A crucial challenge of this research was the lack of translations for the many working languages of research on the topics of Sami, Nenet, Enets and Nganasan peoples. This as well as lack of capacity to travel made a great deal of research inaccessible, such as A.A. Popov’s second volume on Nganasan social culture which was never published and remains in an archive in Russia. An additional challenge with working with material from Soviet years was the tendency of the authors to sugarcoat the colonial tendencies that their government employed during the cultural genocide the Soviet Union committed. For more information on the challenges of Soviet historiography in relation to the indigenous people see (Werth). Suggested additional research includes the effects of industrialization and climate change on indigenous burial practices as well as comparisons between the burials of other arctic cultures.

The diversity of Sami burial practices makes it difficult to contrast them against other groups, especially since the Samoyedic people are not a monolithic group. Very little work has been done in comparing the burial practices of these two groups, with the exception of Nils Storå’s work contrasting the Skolt Sami and the Samoyeds, he lists a great deal of similarities between the two. This may be a result of the close proximity that the two peoples once lived in. (Storå 276) “Some scholars have compared the name "Samoyed" with the Lappish (Saam) words "same-yedne" (\*land of the Saams"). This is based on the fact that the territory settled by the Nentsy in the north of the European USSR, who were the first to be encountered by the Russians, was in earlier times inhabited by the Lapps (Saams)” (Prokof’yeva 547). This phenomenon could be a resolution for the shared trait of using sledges during Summer and Winter, something uncommon in other regions and likely influenced the use of sledges in both burial cultures (Storå 166). The conditions of the region have also lent to both the Skolt Sami and the Samoyeds using birch bark in burials and the frozen and rocky ground likely contributed to the shallowness of graves and the tendency for burials on the surface of the earth (Storå 95,98). The wooden structures sometimes built over Samoyed graves often resemble Skolt Sami grave houses and some even have holes for the soul to escape, though this is reserved for shamans or similarly gifted people (Storå 148-149, 154). Evidence has also been found of carvings of dead Skolt Sami near the grave site in an artform similar to *ittarma* (Storå 258). There is also a shared use of suspension in Samoyedic burials this is often used for children, whereas Sami more often used it as a temporary form of burial, but Sami do store dead fish, fox and other game in trees, even hanging cradles in trees to keep the children out of the way (Storå 102,109). Both cultures worship bears, a common practice in the arctic and each group have different rites that involve hanging parts of the bear’s skeleton in a tree, this is notable as the bears were highly respected and their death was an important cultural event (Storå 114-115).

Both cultures also employed temporary burials, though there are many more details about Sami temporary burials than the Samoyed equivalent. The importance of the nature and its landscape is also a key aspect of both Sami and Samoyedic burial practices with early Nenets being buried on top of hills, cults of nature worship in the Nganasan and Enets context and the Sami focus on water when determining sites for cemeteries (Kvashin 52; Kistova et al. 797,802; Svestad, “Sami Burials and Sacred Landscapes'' 119). The belief that shamans/noaidis are spiritual guides between the worlds of the dead and the living is consistent between Sami and Samoyedic belief, however the lost art of the noaidi makes it difficult to understand if this meant that they played a similar role in burial rites (Kistova et al. 792; DuBois, “The Pre-Christian Religions of the North'' 368).

The effects of Christianity seem to have taken a far greater toll on the religious preservation of the Sami, though effects on the Samoyeds are not completely absent. Both Russian Sami and some Sami living in areas formerly controlled by Russia as well as Samoyeds bury their dead on the third day following death, something likely absorbed from Christian Orthodoxy (Storå 232-233). Land encroachment appears to have greatly affected the Enet’s as well as the Sami’s preservation of burial traditions, making it one of the more damaging effects of colonialism on these peoples. Boarding schools across Russia and Scandinavia caused severe language attrition to the indigenous populations furthering a loss of religious knowledge. The Sami of Norway and to a lesser extent Sweden and Finland have strong governmental representation and activities aiming to preserve and revitalize Sami heritage are much better funded than efforts for the Sami, Nenets, Enets and Nganasans of Russia. Ultimately, the Sami living on the Kola peninsula and to a lesser extent other Sami share many commonalities with the Samoyeds of Siberia. However, the nation-states and Christian sects that colonized each region had the greatest repercussions in preserving traditional burials, while these evolutions of these same nation-states have and will continue to have the final say in whether these traditions are restored or lost completely.

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1. Though Selkups are Samoyedic people, they will not be discussed in this paper, so they have been excluded in this section. See 3.1 for further clarification on this decision. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Audhild Schanche is one of the leading scholars, if not the leading scholar on the topic of Sami scree burials, however, the vast majority of her work on this subject has not been translated to English as of currently. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Sjidd* typically refers to the traditional lands of the Sami, the religion and culture of the Sami is directly linked to the landscapes, the loss of their nomadic lifestyle and *sjidd* is one of the key aspects of deculturation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This term means alien peoples in Russian and will be used to refer to the groups targeted in ‘russianization’ policies. (Berg-Nordlie 3) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A *kolkhoz* was a collective farm in the Soviet Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A *sovkhoz* was a Soviet farm, which differed from *kolkhozes* mainly due to the fact they were created on land confiscated by the state, whereas *kolkhozes* were several farms combined to become a collective farm. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)