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Anthropology Book Forum

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Eds. by Mikkel Berg-Nordlie, Astri Dankertsen, and Marte Winsvold, 2022, *An Urban Future for Sápmi? Indigenous Urbanization in the Nordic States and Russia*, Berghahn Books, ISBN 978-1-80073-264-3

This timely volume focuses on the Sámi people of the Nordic states—Sweden, Norway, Finland—and Russia. Significantly, it shines a spotlight on the experiences of Indigenous people around the world who build their lives in urban spaces.

According to the editors, the Indigenous Sámi’s historic territory is referred to as “Sápmi,” regardless of national boundaries that were created during state formation and colonization. Most of the authors of this book are themselves urban Sámi. They come from various areas of Sápmi, including all the countries that occupy Sápmi. Their unique perspectives on worldwide urbanization place the Sámi within that phenomenon and compare the Sámi experience to that of other Indigenous groups. The editors argue that, for most Indigenous groups around the world, it is difficult to speak about Indigenous populations without invoking colonialism and its lasting effects. The colonial legacy influences how these groups see themselves and how other people see them. Within the book’s pages, readers will witness the history of extensive and uncomfortable assimilation policies the Sámi underwent as they were forced to assimilate to the majority culture. Readers will also see how, over the years, the Sámi have persisted in their efforts to retain and, in some cases, revitalize their culture in order to maintain their Indigenous identity and dignity. Yet, as the authors argue, all cultures around the world are not in a static state; cultural change is inevitable, and the cultures of the Sámi are no exception.

The editors provide readers with a deep historicity of the Sápmi land, the Sámi people, and their interactions with other ethnic groups, situating the Sámi in the rich context of their past. However, the book is mainly focused on contemporary urban Sámi people, their culture in urban areas, and the meaning of culture to today’s Sámi youth. The authors reveal both their challenges and successes in maintaining their culture, and they raise the question of Sámi cultural survival and identity in urban environments that are not devoid of political and cultural challenges and influences.

In the book’s introduction, Berg-Nordlie, Dankertsen, and Winsvold provide an overview of the book, its main arguments, and the themes addressed. They discuss how the colonial legacy has kept the Sámi in a state of marginalization. These authors legitimize the belongingness of the Sámi to urban areas, debunking the myth that Indigenous Sámi live only in rural areas. In fact, the Sámi have a long history of living in both urban and rural areas, given that most of the urban areas have belonged to the Sámi people and are part of the Sápmi. In this way, they are not unlike other Indigenous urbanites around the world. As the editors state, “in fact, many Indigenous peoples have a long urban history” (p. 4). The authors also discuss demographic

shifts, the influence of such shifts, and their influence on Sámi culture, language, and ethnic identity as well as on relations among the Sámi themselves. The authors also reveal the rural-urban connection, one that is not broken simply because one lives in the city. Political, cultural, and historical developments are elaborated, as are the heterogeneity and complexity of Sámi lives and culture, their city spaces, and those of contemporary Sámi youth. The chapters that follow narrow down these broader issues.

Mikkel Berg-Nordlie and Anna Andersen author the first chapter of the book, *The Sámi and the Sápmi: The People and the Land*. They set clear definitions of the terms “Sámi” and “Sápmi” and explain what they mean to this Indigenous population. From a historical perspective, the authors argue that using these terms, emanating from the Indigenous themselves, is more appropriate, as compared to using names that have been conferred by states and majority cultures. The authors next detail the division of the Sápmi land among the Nordic states and Russia, and they expose the discrimination and assimilation policies enacted by these states regarding Sámi language, culture, and religion. Some of the more extreme measures included strict punishment of the Sámi for practicing their traditional religion. The authors also elaborate on scientific racism that emerged between 1800 and 1900, exacerbating the situation, noting “the idea of a Nordic ‘master race’ and the Sámi as a lesser population with no real culture, no real history, and less rights to own the land they used, began to grow” (p. 36). Scientific racism increased instances of racial slurs and treatment levelled at the Sámi. With their “economic base being threatened by land grabbing and development projects” (p. 36) and no state support, the very survival of Sámi identity, culture, and language was at risk. This chapter effectively builds a historical foundation for the remaining authors to build on.

In Chapter Two, *Cities in Sápmi, Sámi in the Cities: Indigenous Urbanization in the Nordic Countries and Russia*, Berg-Nordlie and Andersen attempt to answer the following questions: “How and why did urban areas form in Sápmi? When did large-scale urbanization of the Sámi people begin? In which urban areas are the Sámi most concentrated?” (p. 54). The authors portray these questions as problematic to answer, given the nature of past data collection methods and the periods in which these methodologies were used to gather demographic information. The emphasis on rurality prior to World War II and rapid urbanization after the war are representative of these issues. Moreover, during that time, invoking a Sámi identity often provoked discrimination, causing people to hide their identity, making it even more difficult, or very nearly impossible, to find reliable population numbers, most urban Sámi people did not know they were Indigenous.

The authors then delve deeply into Sámi urbanization experiences in each of the four colonizing states, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. The authors also reveal the complex and varied dimensions of urban areas in the Sápmi by focusing on each state separately as well as the urbanization of the Sámi people in these states. Understanding geographic divisions is key to understanding what it means to be Sámi in the urban areas of each nation, “because urbanization processes, and indeed Sámi history in general, have been very different in the eastern and western parts of Sápmi” (p. 54).

In Chapter Three, *Young City Sámi in Norway and Sweden: Making Space for Urban Indigenous Identities*, Astri Dankertsen brings to life the importance of Sámi identity in Norway and

Sweden. She argues that, “there are differences in the identity-negotiation processes that develop among Sámi in the four northerly states that have divided Sápmi, and indeed within the same states, but we also find some remarkable similarities regarding the urban context and its relevance for Sámi identities” (p. 107). Furthermore, while Dankertsen supports the significance of Sámi identity, she also problematizes their Indigenous identity as complex and ever-evolving; it has been and is shaped by political forces such as colonialism and assimilation policies as well as by changes within the Sámi population itself. Thus, the author argues that obtaining an authentic and pure Sámi identity can be problematic since there are antagonizing criteria among the Sámi themselves. This is especially true at the present time, when the Sámi are coming together to create communities that will reinforce their identity in an environment where there are many ways of being and becoming Sámi. Additionally, while the Sámi are portrayed as having a cultural identity, they are of different religious and social class backgrounds. Finding commonalities, the author suggested, could ameliorate interethnic struggles.

This chapter is especially important because it discusses hypermobility between the cities and rural areas, particularly the mobility of the young. Dankertsen compares urban-born Sámi youth to those who have migrated to cities for education, work, and settlement, noting that “while previous generations often hid their identities, many young Sámi of today have a very different perspective. They live in a time when there is more space for being Sámi, when more and more people are proud of being Sámi, and they demand their right to be Sámi in an urban environment” (p. 142). The author argues that since identities are not static but are constantly in the making, the youth are able to create their own urban Sámi identities.

In Chapter Four, *Urban Indigenous Organizing and Institution-Building in Norway and Russia: By and For Whom?* the authors Mikkel Berg-Nordlie, Anna Andersen, and Astri Dankertsen highlight the Sámi’s capacity to create their own urban spaces—spaces where culture can be practiced and passed on to the youth, and where a majority of the Sámi can congregate and become a unified voice in speaking to the majority’s power in their states. Though many spaces are mentioned, NGOs and cultural houses are the central focus in this chapter. The author argues that these spaces have the capacity to be all-inclusive by catering to the many ways and dynamics of being Sámi and, at the same time, can create a collective voice.

Chris Andersen, in Chapter Five, moves readers from the specific experiences of the Sámi to the global stage. *Sámi Urbanization in the Global Currents of Indigenous Urbanization* is an exposition on the global process of urbanization sweeping across the whole world. Andersen states that, “The world has never been more urbanized than it is in 2021. The United Nations (UN) reports that roughly 55 percent of the world’s total population reside in urban locales, compared to only 30 percent in 1950. This proportion is expected to grow to nearly 70 percent by 2050” (p. 222). He argues that this phenomenon is inclusive of Indigenous peoples, and he compares Indigenous populations within the global context of other ethnicities.

As stated previously, this book is very timely and speaks to the many experiences of Indigenous people around the world who are leading urban lives while performing indigeneity. They are revitalizing and reconstituting their culture and keeping the urban-rural connection, even as external and internal factors continue to shape and reshape their identities. The book will benefit

researchers in the areas of cultural anthropology, Indigenous studies, history, global studies, race and ethnicity, urban studies, and globalization studies.

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