

MASTER THESIS

UiT - The Arctic University of Norway

ACADEMY OF ARTS
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TIL DE SOM HAR VÆRT, TIL VI SOM ER
TIL DE SOM KOMMER ETTER

MEN MEST AV ALT TIL BESTEMOR OG BESTEFAR

PREFACE

The desire of conveying the Kven culture and history through my practice can sometimes feel like a play of shadows and whispers. It is challenging to be determined when the answers to your questions often are vague or polarized when searching for inspiration within the culture itself.

In some ways, it feels like you're late to the party, or more like two decades late. The people you talk to and the stories people are referring to gives the impression of a culture that is slowly dying, and that the fragments that are left are incomplete and only shadows of what it once were. The feeling of conveying a culture close to extinction can be described as being a part of a constant rescue mission picking up fragments and pieces trying to make them fit into a modern society. People within the community are frustrated but they also tell stories that justify their frustration. This can make it hard for others to connect with the culture. Do I have the right stories? Are you entitled to be a part of this without knowing all the answers, or have felt any direct consequence of the assimilation politics? Are you a part of this even if you do not speak the language, or grew up in specific areas?

I want to create the pulse that I missed growing up: A pulse of possible recognition and validation of a culture that is not only breathing, but that is important, relevant, and still growing. This is a process that rests on seeking potential in the intersection between the traditional stories and modern society.

It is easy to get blinded by everything that is not there but should have been: The language that disappeared from your family not long ago. The missing traditions and knowledge that did not survive years of assimilation. The fragments are still there, but you will never be able to glue the pieces together without leaving any marks: the language will feel constructed as it never will become your mother tongue. The knowledge you should have learned from your grandmother is handed to you from Youtube or DIY's.

By recognizing and confronting these sometimes constructed methods to reconnect with your own heritage, it is also possible to see the possibilities that rises by working with the fragments. Instead of seeing it as limiting, the fragments also leaves room for interpretation.

Ingebjørg Hage said in a lecture about traditional Kven architecture that the Kven culture presents itself in the details. The big picture may not seem Kven, but it's there, in the details, if you know what you are looking for. It can be one specific window frame, a recognizable door, or the shape of a spike. It is there, you just need to know about it.

As a young and curious Kven artist, I choose to focus on the Kven details and see the potential in creating something new. I pick up the pieces with a curious mind, eager to glue them together with my position as a young Kven connecting with my own heritage. And maybe this will provide courage for others to do the same.

THE PRECENCE OF SILENCE

We were standing in a forest staring at a rock. The bright orange and yellow leaves were still grasping tight to the trees, but soon they would fall to the ground leaving the trees ready for winter. The trees seemed small in size, but it was the rocks laying between the trees that were enormous. It was almost like someone had placed the big rocks in the forest as a joke, they felt so misplaced. It was not raining, but the air was too cold for anything to dry, leaving the forest soaking wet. The snow had crawled even further down the naked mountains since yesterday and we hoped for just one more day before the snow would hit the lowlands. Tomorrow we would hope for the same.

Is this the right one? He asked. I don't know, I replied.

What about this?

I actually don't know.

My father and I stood next to a rock the size of a four-story building, so close that we could smell it. Our feet were planted in wet moss that grew on top of a big rock, that layed on top of even bigger rocks. The whole forest was probably growing on rocks. We had to be careful when walking around since it was easy to misstep on moss that grew between the rocks instead of on top of them, making it a possibility to fall. I turned around instinctively facing the orange trees as if there was a third person present that would give me the answer that we needed. The forest did not reply, and I turned back to the rock with a vaguely frustrated sigh and no conclusion. The only sound bearing through the forest was the river running down from the melting glaciers hundreds of meters above us, crystal clear water. Even the silence was filled with the presence of the high mountains.



Ullsfjord, Moskivuono mostly consist of high mountains and deep fjords. The roads and houses clings to the coastline, but some places the steep mountainsides continue straight down in the ocean. The road is closed several periods each year because of rockfalls and avalanches. On the east side of the fjord, the mountains shapes the highest point of the North of Norway: Jiehkkevárri. The Sami name of the fjord is *Moskavuotna*, one of many examples where the Sami and Kven cultures overlap.

THE STRIVING SEARCH OF THE AUTHENTIC

It has been four years since I started to contextualize myself within the Kven community, slowly learning about the historical and contemporary challenges of the culture. When growing up, the Kven people was always referred to in the past tense and it left an impression of a culture being museal and outdated. I wanted to get my head around what it meant to be a Kven today, and how to express this in the field of art, reaching out to the Kven communities, talking to people that might have something to show me.

For a long time, I was clinging hard to the concept of searching the authentic stories, materials, and techniques of the Kven community. I was longing for the Kven version of the Japanese Kimono, the Sami yoik, or the Native American Powwows. The thought of what was right and what was wrong was obsessing; the search for objects and stories that were so authentic that no one could discuss, dissect or argue that they were something other than «pure» Kven¹.

It took me a while to realize that most objects categorized as Kven were only Kven if you in addition to seeing the object, also knew the object's context. A leather shoe, a knife. A specific type of sem or a wooden door. They all looked like regular objects, until knowing who created it, how or why. But even if the Kven community saw them as Kven, the majority did not caused by the lack of context.



What makes an object Kven? Does the object have to be old?

Mary Kristiansen showing a coffee grinder and two candle holders. These are the objects she fetched when I asked her if she had any authentic Kven objects. When asking why she saw them as Kven, she referred to her grandfather who made them. The picture was shot as a part of my photo project *Kven er Kven* that addressed what it means to identify as a Kven today.

COFFEE GRINDERS AND TILTED FRAMES

There are some common features about all traditional Kven crafts - Käsityö. Most objects are purely pragmatic, with no significant aesthetic value, and they are all created because the creator needed it. J.A Friis describes a specific kind of tilted window frame when he visited the Kven village of Vadsø in 1867²:

The window frames in Kven livingrooms are quite thin and tilted so the water of melted ice can drain easily. The Norwegians prefer broad and horizontal window frames because of their affection for flowers.

This can also be transcribed to most of the Kven object I have been shown in terms of "this is Kven": They are all created because of pragmatic needs, and the flowers, or decor, are not prioritized. People have shown me clothing mended - or tools forged - by a Kven ancestor, which in their eyes makes the object itself Kven. The same as for Mary that showed me the Kven coffee grinder: Her grandfather was Kven, ergo, the coffee grinder is Kven.

Footnotes:

2: J.A Friis 1867, Finnmark, Russisk Lappland og Nord-Karelen p.85

This makes a foundation for an interesting thought about what can be defined as Kven and how to create something Kven in a contemporary context. In some ways, it is challenging to create a specific Kven object that all, both minority and majority, see as Kven. But it is possible to create something in a *Kven way*.

The one element combining the Kven objects is that they are all pragmatic. In 2020, we do not need to create everyday objects such as candle holders or knives. These are objects that you now can buy at the supermarket. But as an artist of 2020, I am in need objects, or *something*, that makes it possible to express and visualize the Kven culture in the context of contemporary art.

Another element is the creative ways of using common materials. Birchbark was a typical roofing material. Log building (lafting) was a common technique for constructing buildings, but Kven households also used these materials and methods when constructing basements³. The materials and methods in themselves are not Kven, but the way of using them shows a creative way of pushing the components to create new solutions.

Footnotes:

3: Hage, 2008, p. 264

THOUGHTS INTO PRACTICE

When creating the piece *Ilman sana* I translated my so-called guidelines of *why* traditional objects were made (pragmatic values) and *how* the materials and methods were used (creative to cover needs) into my own process of creating. My intention was to research the traditional process of bark braiding, but I soon realized that either my skills or my materials were able to proceed with the process. The birch bark was collected from a renovated house at Ringvassøy, with an estimated age of about 110 years. This made the bark crispy and fragile, causing it to break easily.

It then became natural to push the materials into this new direction. Instead of braiding, I cut the bark into strips the same way as used for braiding, but instead of bending them, they were woven into a warp of an old loom. In this way, I created an object that fulfilled my need of having something to exhibit in an art/Kven context, and the materials and methods were pushed in a new direction to make this happen.



Process detail of *Ilman Sana*:

By using Kven titles, an intangible part of the culture is immediately present in the exhibition space, connecting my works directly to the Kven setting. *Ilman Sana*, meaning "no words", was exhibited at Nord-Norsk Kunstmuseum in the summer of 2020. This became the first time the museum texted a full exhibition in Kven in addition to their common texting in Sami, Norwegian, and English. The finished piece measured 50x250cm.

GAP OF GENERATIONS

The piece *Twentythree attempts, combined* (2019-2020) is another example where the Kven guidelines turn visible. The small construction, measuring 20x30cm, is a combined piece of my first twentythree attempts of root binding, *tegerfletting*.

In addition to practice my two guidelines of *why* and *how* to create, both the bark loom and the teger sculpture becomes a visualization of the gap of knowledge splitting the old and new generations. Both pieces consist of traditionally used techniques and materials, but they are constructed by a young Kven artist that do not hold the traditional knowledge of how to practice the craft the "right" way.

When searching for knowledge about the materials and methods in conversation with the elders, I only get vague answers. Wanting to learn from someone that may know something - *anything* - about the materials or their connection to the Kven culture, I often get referred on to somebody else, and this someone refers me to somebody else that might know something about it⁵. Unlike my questions about the culture that also received vague or unsatisfying answers, the tangible materials are something I can test out myself before knowing all the answers. I have the materials, and the only thing I need is to trust my own perception of the Kven culture. This manifests my own position as Kven of today as part of my own works.

Footnotes:

5: To the point that this *somebody* turned out to have passed away decades ago.



Twentythree attempts, combined full image and details.

Kven title: ***Kaksikymmentäkolme eksperimenttia, kombineerattu***

Another aspect is that the knowledge of the materials does in fact still exist, but it would be necessary to go outside the borders of the Kven culture to reach it. There are several people in Norway and internationally that are still performing the arts and crafts of teger and bark braiding⁶. By allowing myself to create using traditional materials, but with my own constructed methods, I enlighten the lack of knowledge which has occurred from one generation to the next.

The presence of the gap of generations is highly visible in other elements of the culture; the language, the religious traditions, the stories, conversations, and politics. It is only natural that it is seen in my works as well, showing the world that we in fact make the attempt of creating something new, by the fragments and the knowledge that still are available.

6. Elle Valkeapää is one example of an artist using teger in a modern context of crafts. She combines metal and teger to create earrings. Norsk Husflid also holds workshops in the south of Norway to avoid the teger techniques from extinction.



The construction clearly show signs of the lack of knowledge about the selected material, but this can also be seen as a hopeful statement: The yearning of creating *something* even if you do not have all the necessary pieces to execute it the "proper" way is superior to the missing information.

WHAT I WISH SOMEONE TOLD ME ABOUT TEGER BEFORE I EVEN STARTED

Teger is the name of the freshest roots that shoot out of the tree stem in search of water. They are elastic when wet and traditionally used for making detailed and aesthetically pleasing baskets, brooches, or other small objects. The methods of collecting, preparing and using the teger to create objects are seen globally in different shapes and variations depending on which kind of trees are available. In *Ruija*, the North of Norway, the birch roots are most common to use. Teger was a coveted material before the war, some even collected teger as their second income. In Kven objects, teger is often seen used as sewing threads for bark works, such as the backpacks made of birch bark, the *käyläkkö*.

LITERATURE

There are no shortcuts when collecting or prepping the teger before use. I have tried. It does exist some literature about the teger processes, mainly introduction courses for middle school classes. The illustrations are fine but old. Searching for "teger-binding" at the National Library is the easiest way to access them, but the best way of learning is to experience the process with your own hands: Feel it, touch it. Do mistakes and do better next time around.

WHERE TO SEARCH

The most important element of gathering teger is to know where to go. By using Google Maps or another platform of satellite images, you can spot the points of intersection where the birch forest meets the mires. The best mires are the soaking wet ones, where the water is just two inches underneath the moss. Then the roots will not have to go long to collect water and will grow slim and long, just underneath the surface. Birch growing on clay will also make the roots easy to pull up, but these will be darker in color.



Perfect teger location spotted on images taken by plane. Marked areas show great potential in finding birch trees great for gathering teger⁷.

WHEN AND HOW TO HARVEST

The teger are at its best when the birch trees are blooming. When producing green leaves, the birch need as much water as possible, making the thin teger roots exemplary. From late summer and fall, the teger is still there, but it will become stiffer and harder to prep. The best way of spotting the difference between a fresh and old teger is the color where the newest being more red or brown, and the older ones looking more like normal roots, with a harder layer of bark. I recommend bringing a seating pad wrapped in a plastic bag to keep under your knee. This will prevent getting soaked in mire water.

To access the teger, find a mid-sized birch tree that you wiggle back and forth until it leaves a small gap between the ground and the stem. If the tree is bigger, you will not be able to wiggle it. Lead your hand down between the stem and the ground until you feel the teger going straight out from the tree. Follow the teger with your fingers, and remove grass or other vegetation to expose it. There are stories of certain tools developed for this specific task of collecting teger. It is similar to a spear or a scythe, and it made it possible to collect teger while standing up straight. Without any proper introduction to this tool, I choose to use a screwdriver to help with extracting the teger when my hands are sore. When exposing the whole teger, you cut it off close to the stem and put it in a bag where you also keep some moss or other wet materials. This to prevent it from drying before prepping. Do not harvest all the teger and/or roots from the same tree. Leaving some of them makes the tree able to establish new ones.



Patience and caution is important while collecting teiger. Even if the teiger itself are strong the material will snap if you force it.



FROM NATURE TO MATERIAL

The image shows a freshly collected teger that will be put in a moist bag for safekeeping. When returning from the mire, the teger will be soaked in water before the brown outer layer is scraped off. The backside of a butter knife works just fine to do this. When the brown layer is gone the teger can be coiled together and stored in a dry place. The skin will become hard to remove if the teger dries up between harvesting and cleansing.

The teger are coarsely sorted by length and thickness, five and five are coiled together. Cleansed and coiled teger can hang on a stick or be placed in a box for safekeeping. They will not go out of date and can be stored for decades.



When the time comes for further production of objects, the coils can be placed in a bowl of water to make them elastic and flexible again. They will be ready to use after one hour of soaking. There are several "right" techniques to use, especially when creating specific objects. It is also recommended to get hold of a teger object for a close-up study and go for a simple structure as a first attempt. Make sure to keep the teger and the structure wet while working. You can also follow the intuitive structures of how the teger want to function together. I tend to start with a clove hitch (dobbel halvstikk) to secure the ends. The finished object should be oiled to prevent cracks and bends.

THE OPPOSITE OF US AND THEM

Along with using the arts as a channel to convey the Kven culture, I am also engaging in politics and institutional structures affecting the national minorities of Norway. The structure in these meetings and dialogues are often offensive and polarized, a battle of David and Goliath. The Kven language and culture are in need of revitalization. In many ways the focus is about decolonization to fix whatever was done wrong before and now⁸. Yet, in my art practice, I do not have the same wish or desire to keep this offensive wall, but rather see the potential and inspiration that lies in the Kven culture, history and communities.

In conversation with art historian Mathias Danbolt, I was introduced to the concept of indigenization as a more nuanced term than decolonization. Indigenization is not a fully established term in the context of arts and if you look it up you will mostly find articles about indigenization as a pedagogic strategy⁹. Yet, the concept in itself is fascinating.

While decolonizing focuses on revitalization and making right from wrongs, indigenization focus more on how to make indigenous topics a more natural part of the majority perception of the society. Instead of seeing the indigenous peoples as "something else", it is seen as beneficial for all to make it become a more visible and accessible part of the society. Even if the term is not established in the art community, I choose to interpret indigenization into the arts as a more welcoming and open approach, both from the artist and institutions. This is contrary to a more set point of view where it is "them against us", where *they* are wrong, and *we* are right.

If both the institutions and the artists see the value of lifting the minority and indigenous topics to give a more nuanced image of the society, it will soon be a more natural collaboration instead of a forced one.

Joar Nango's work *Girjegumpi* is an example where the audience will have the opportunity to learn about - and discuss - the issues connected to Sami architecture¹⁰. By having the traditional and appealing Sami construction *gumpi* as a conceptual base, he both gives the audience a direct insight into the concept of the *gumpi*, while giving the opportunity to learn even more through the books in the library. This gives an appealing and interesting approach to topics that in general can be difficult to access for a broader audience.

This more open and accessible way of giving insight to indigenous or minority cultures and issues have also expanded rapidly in social media through 2020. Shina Nova is one of many young indigenous peoples using social media such as Tik Tok to convey their cultures and thoughts of what it means to embrace your indigenous background¹¹. By combining commercial Tik Tok trends with easy facts and lectures, Nova inspires more people to connect or re-connect with their own heritage. Nova and others show how their culture still is alive and relevant. It also gives the viewers from outside the different cultures a possibility to learn and understand more about how it is to be a part of these communities today. This initiates paths of tolerance and awareness of differences and nuanced history.

HOMEMADE FLAGS AND SOFT ACTIVISM

Even if it is not my goal to become a Tik Tok influencer, I intend to use my art practice as a starting point of a nuanced and appealing understanding of the Kven culture, bringing up issues for a healthy and balanced discussion. In the exhibition space the artist, the gallery and the viewer are at the same time dependent and independent parts of the unity. This is an advantage that is not seen in the political processes of disagreements and discussions where the conversation is polarized. In these settings, the minority is also seen as the lesser party, and strongly dependent in terms of funding and recognition to even exist.

I want my practice to be a starting point of a more nuanced understanding of the Kven concept, and to bring up a healthy and balanced discussion in a more suited space than the political and polarized debates. By using my created objects and placing them in an exhibition setting, I wish to open up to curiosity, and a curiosity of knowing more about the Kven culture, instead of focusing on the split ideology of *them* and *us*.



Berg, 2.-5. juunikuuta - 2020 consists of several plant dyed textiles combined into a larger piece of fabric. The object in itself is soft but tells a story about the need of creating something when in need of it. It is a memento of my grandfathers' homemade flags that he created prior to the official Kven flag being formally elected in 2018. Small notes are attached to the different colored textiles telling the name of the plant used for dyeing, both in Norwegian and Kven.

TEST, TRY AND FAIL IN THE NAME OF ARTS

There are several examples of artists and projects that use the exhibition space to express thoughts, stories or reflections about minority and indigenous topics. The exhibition *I Craft, I Travel Light* (2017) show works by fifteen Norwegian and Russian artists inspired by the nomadic and indigenous cultures in the north¹². The project itself went deeper than a normal exhibition where the artists met, shared and learned from each other. In a publication with the same name as the project, Mikkel B. Tin asked important questions when viewing the exhibition:

How are we to understand works such as those we see before us in *I Craft, I travel Light*? And how are we to understand the project itself? Is its aim to rescue values of the past, to reflect essential features of the present, or does it perhaps carry an ambition of pointing out a course into the future?

In the same publication, Sigrid Høyforslett Bjørbæk states that "Traditions contain history, but they will disappear if not given new bodies to inhabit and new means through which to express and manifest themselves."

The questions and statements by Tin and Bjørbæk are important, addressing the questions of why it is necessary to include the indigenous and minority topics in the contemporary art scene. Why is it important for the cultures in question, and why is it important for the audience and the majority? You can also read Bjørbæk's sentence as an encouragement to bring traditional and sometimes heavy historical aspects into the context of contemporary art. Here you will have the opportunity to test, try and fail in the name of arts, while you develop and transform traditions into new bodies and shapes. This is a crucial act for the cultures to continue to stay relevant for coming generations.



Inger Anne Nyaas, *Laatikko* 2016. One of fifteen works shown in the *I Craft, I Travel Light* exhibition. Bottom sections of milk cartons are stitched together with plant dyed yarn. The cartons can be mistaken as wood cubes from a distance, but the true material exposes itself when seeing the work up close. Even though the material is not connected to any specific indigenous group, it still conveys the nomadic way of living, using whatever material you have close by.

THE QUESTION OF WHY, AND WHAT NOW

Even if it sometimes feels like being a part of a rescue team, dealing with issues that feel only important for the community itself, it is also inspiring being a part of a revitalization and innovational journey of exploring the Kven culture into the field of arts.

The Kven culture is one of many nuances of the heritage of Northern Norway that still needs time and space to be preserved and developed. Instead of only seeing the negative aspects of a minority that has gone through assimilation and wrongdoings, there is also a great potential to see the culture as something important and a source of inspiration to create new connections. By making the Kven culture more present in the society of today, others will find joy in their own heritage and see that it is valued. Others will be given an insight into a culture that is, as well as being a minority perspective, a part of the common heritage of its area.

I do not have all the answers yet, but this is a lifelong journey of exploring, preserving and developing the Kven heritage. To repeat my statement from the preface, I do not only want to, but I also feel entitled to create a space of exploring and lifting my culture within the fields of arts. A culture that is still important, relevant, and by all means still growing.



The stone lichen collected in Ullsfjord, *Moskivuono* will be used to dye a bigger piece of fabric, showing the flaming nuances that the lichen provides when dyeing. The image shows the second of several dye tests done this semester. The finished fabric will be a part of the graduation exhibition in May 2020.

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