

# TOPONYMIC NOTIONS OF SÁMI PAST(S): KARL NICKUL AND THE HISTORICITY OF SKOLT SÁMI PLACE NAMES

## ABSTRACT

The Finnish geodesist and self-taught ethnographer Karl Nickul (1900–1980) studied the Indigenous toponymy among the Skolt Sámi in northeastern Finland. This article analyses Nickul's early publications and international correspondence, focusing on the ways Nickul framed Sámi notions of the past as reflected in their toponymy. Nickul argued that the Sámi possessed the 'moral right' to name their own region and advocated for keeping these names in cartographic representations. According to Nickul, studying and documenting Sámi place names was a gateway to the mental imagery of the Sámi. Place names did not merely reflect the area 'as it was', but also reflected ancient events, beliefs, and livelihoods.

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**Keywords:** Sámi history, Sámi toponymy, situated knowledge, Indigenous toponymy, Karl Nickul, Skolt Sámi, Petsamo, Suenjel, Suonikylä

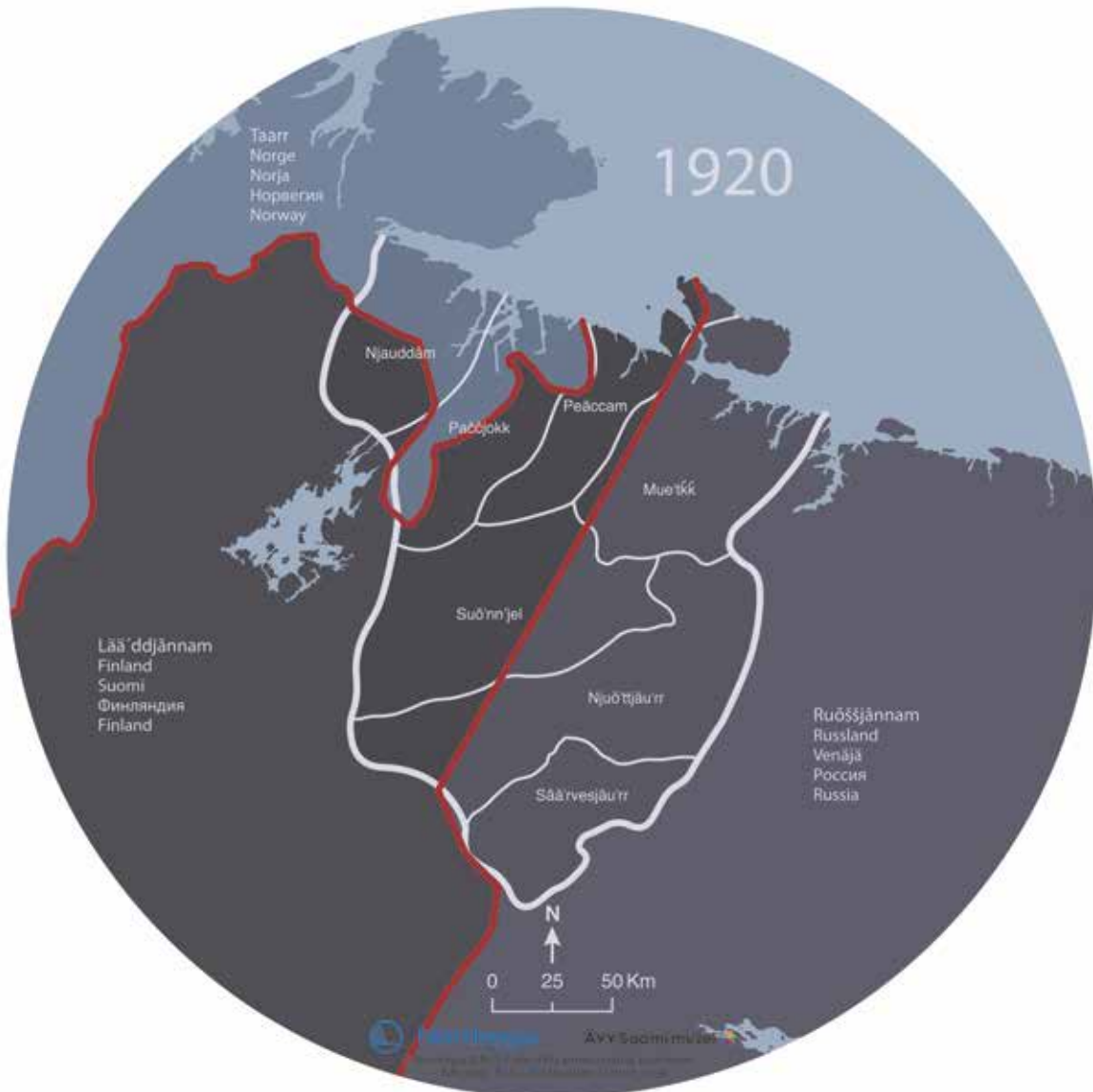
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## INTRODUCTION

This article studies the ways in which the Finnish geodesist, pacifist, and self-taught ethnographer Karl Nickul (1900–1980) framed Sámi notions of the past as reflected in the toponymy of Petsamo, a strip of land between modern-day Finland and the Arctic Ocean. I argue that Nickul's publications and correspondence convey a combination of three views of *historicity*. Firstly, Nickul considered Sámi place names as capable of conveying something about actual historical events or practices in the area. Secondly, aside from actual historical occurrences that could be confirmed from other sources, the place names carried information about Sámi religious life, reflecting both the Russian Orthodox faith most Petsamo

Sámi practiced and the pre-Christian Sámi religion. Thirdly, place names, according to Nickul, situated the Petsamo Sámi, and especially the *siida* of *Suenjel*, as a 'relict culture', a belated culture preserved in place names during the era of modernity.

In what follows, I examine Nickul's notions of Skolt Sámi pasts as reflected in their place names in three separate but related cases: Skolt Sámi toponymy reflecting 1) the actual 'factual' Sámi past, 2) what the Sámi religion(s) say about the past, and 3) the Sámi past as a relict. The research question guiding this analysis in all three cases is as follows: In what ways did Nickul consider the Sámi toponymy as reflecting the past of the Sámi in the southern Petsamo area?



The location of Suenjel (in its modern-day Skolt Sámi spelling Suõ'nn'jel), in the Skolt Sámi area (white borders) with national borders (red) in 1920.

Cartographer: Linus Rispling, Nordregio; Design: Martin Skulstad, Rethink. and Ruth Thomlevold; Concept:

Yngvar Julin and Honna Havas, Ä'vv Skolt Sámi museum; Data source: Nordregio. 16 January 2018. <https://nordregio.org/maps/saa'mijannam-borders-1920/>.

Nickul's views on place names is first and foremost indicative of his own view of how toponymy reflected Sámi historicity. Place names also say a great deal about how the Sámi

viewed history as reflected in the toponymy given that Nickul received most of the information about place names in the Petsamo area from Sámi individuals.

## BACKGROUND

Finland acquired the Petsamo area in 1920 and ceded it back to the USSR following the Finnish–Soviet conflicts of the Second World War. During its rather short period as a part of Finland, Petsamo emerged as the focus of Finnish industrialisation and modernisation projects, including those in the fishing industry, nickel extraction, and infrastructure projects such as building roads and schools. Many scholars and scientists travelled to the area, since it was considered the only truly Arctic part of Finland with access to the Arctic Ocean. Many Finnish scholars studying the development of human cultures developed a keen interest in Petsamo’s multicultural population, and especially the Skolt Sámi minority. This Sámi population speaking the Skolt variety of Sámi in particular attracted the attention and interest of a number of geographers, linguists, and ethnologists (Vahtola 1999: 485–501; Stadius 2016). Karl Nickul became the foremost expert on this population. Following the example of geographer Väinö Tanner who published on the Skolt Sámi of the Petsamo area, Nickul chose a route that took him beyond the areas studied by earlier scholars, easily accessible via newly built roads to and in the Petsamo area. Instead, Nickul travelled to the Sámi regions further away from the road network and other infrastructure (Nyyssönen 2016: 20–34).

Nickul’s interest was especially focused on one specific *siida*,<sup>1</sup> the Skolt Sámi *siida* of Suenjel (Suonikylä).<sup>2</sup> Nickul perceived Suenjel as a ‘relict’ of the age-old and ‘original’ Sámi life cycle, a half-nomadic lifestyle alternating between summer and winter villages. Whereas other Skolt Sámi *siidas*, and Sámi *siidas* in general, had moved away from this traditional way of life due to intensified contact with other, ‘modern’, populations, Suenjel kept this

life form alive. According to Nickul, the *siida* was a valuable example of an ancient life form unparalleled in Europe (Lehtola 2000: 58–59).

Nickul became an internationally esteemed scholarly expert on the Skolt Sámi population of the Petsamo area, and the *siida* of Suenjel specifically. Nickul’s contacts ranged from Skolt Sámi individuals to renowned international scholars. Nickul corresponded, for instance, with the first curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, Henry Balfour, and the American-British anthropologist Ethel John Lindgren (editor of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*). The Swedish ethnographer Ernst Manker, one of the most important scholars on Sámi culture around the mid-twentieth century, and the head of Sámi collections at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, dubbed Nickul the ‘foremost expert’ on the Skolt Sámi population (Manker 1946, Lucy Cavendish College Archives [LCCA], University of Cambridge [UC]). Nickul later served as the secretary of the transnational organisation, the Nordic Sámi Council, and was a pivotal figure in the process whereby the Sámi were recognised first and foremost as an Indigenous population rather than a minority in northernmost Europe (Andresen 2016). Nickul’s Skolt Sámi as well as national, Nordic, and international contacts made him a key figure or gate keeper between Sámi notions of the past and the international scholarly community interested in the Sámi culture or cultures.

In contrast to most Finnish scholars studying populations linguistically related to Finns at the time, Nickul, a pacifist and internationalist, was not interested in Finnish-nationalist ideals of reconstructing large Finnic or Finno-Ugric groups indicating connections and, eventually, cultural and even territorial claims to the home areas of these populations. Rather, Nickul contextualised the Skolt Sámi

within a wide international setting. Fuelling this interest was Nickul's study of Skolt place names, in which Nickul identified an intimate connection between the population and nature, comparable to that amongst Native American populations. His mapping of the Petsamo area and contact with the local Skolt Sámi and their information regarding place names led to his realisation that he was not mapping an empty space of nature, but rather a rich culture that had existed in the region for a very long time (Lehtola 2000: 61–77; Kortekangas 2021: 786).

The study of place names served as the gateway for Nickul's scholarly interest in the Skolt Sámi culture. He travelled the Skolt Sámi areas in the 1920s, as a geodesist appointed by the Finnish government to measure and map the area the USSR ceded to Finland in 1920. When Nickul first travelled in Petsamo, he assumed that he was mapping a region empty of any larger human influence. Soon enough, he began seeing and realising that the area was not empty, but the home of a specific Sámi culture that had lived in the Russian northwestern periphery for quite some time. This population, however, had relatively little contact with other populations when compared with the Sámi in the Nordic countries that lived closer to infrastructure and larger population centres. This, at least, was Nickul's impression. Talking to the local Skolt Sámi in order to collect names to appear on the maps produced for the area, Nickul was fascinated by the Skolt Sámi way of life, which he perceived as resembling the most original Sámi way of life. Their way of life followed a half-nomadic yearly pattern between winter and summer villages. These place names initiated and launched the geodesist Nickul as a scholar interested in ethnology and anthropology.

The close connection that Nickul considered existing between the Skolt Sámi place names and the physical landscape lead

him to becoming the primary planner of cultural preservation projects. He developed his ideas as the secretary of the Finnish 'Society for the Culture of the Lapps' (*Lapin Sivistyseura LSS*),<sup>3</sup> in political initiatives in the form of indirect rule (referencing the Native Americans and British subject populations under the indirect rule principle), and subsequently, as the first secretary of the Sámi Council. The place names and the intimate connection to the environment and the history of the Skolts served as the starting point for Nickul's career as an ethnographer, even if self-taught in an academic sense (Susiluoto 2003: 75–101; Lehtola 2000: 33, 38; Nickul 1934: 7–19; Kortekangas 2021: 787).

## RESEARCH TASK, METHODS, AND QUESTIONS

This article examines Nickul's views on the Skolt Sámi place names, and, more specifically, his understanding of the historicity they transmitted. This focus opens up a larger analytical horizon about questions related to the relationship between the Sámi and other populations historically and those existing in Nickul's own time. An important theme running through Nickul's publications and correspondence is the relationship between the Sámi and the area in which they lived. As Nickul wrote in German to Czech cartographer and professor Jaroslav Pantoflíček, 'the place names allow us to gain insight into the essence of the culture of the nomadic Skolt Sámi' (Nickul 1937a, Karl Nickul's archives [KNA], The Sámi Archives of Finland [SAF]).

In my analysis, I read Nickul's early publications and correspondence on the Skolt Sámi toponymy, specially focusing on the ways in which Nickul thought these names reflected the history of the Sámi population, whether 'mythical' or 'factual'. Nickul was a professional

geodesist, as well as an amateur ethnographer, a fact he openly discussed and candidly admitted. His toponymic notions of Skolt Sámi pasts were coproduced with the Skolt Sámi themselves. As such, Nickul described his method for collecting place names as sitting down by a campfire, where the ‘Skolts would tell their stories’. This is a rather apt example of what Kapil Raj, following Michel Callon, calls ‘open air practices’. Such practices consist of Western amateur scholars coproducing scholarly knowledge with locals, knowledge that would then travel—through publications and correspondence in the Skolt–Nickul case—to Western scholarly centres, and thereby influence the history of Western science itself (Raj 2007: 14–19). As discussed by many science and technology studies (STS) scholars, such as Sheila Jasanoff and Bruno Latour, all scientific knowledge is always coproduced in the sense that we are always affected by the social, economic, and political structures of the places we inhabit. Knowledge is produced within and in relation to these structures. In Latour’s words, there is no outside view of the planet, since our knowledge is always situated (Jasanoff 2004: 1–12; Latour 2016). Within Indigenous studies, the notion of coproduction has been used to resuscitate historical and contemporary Indigenous voices and epistemologies traditionally ignored by Western research (see, e.g., Hill et al. 2020).

Here, the discussion above directs me to reflect upon how Nickul’s own previous understandings of history and historicity blended with the history of the Sámi, accessible to Nickul through Sámi toponymy and discussions with the Sámi around toponymy.

Ethnographic and anthropological studies of place names represented a field active in early twentieth century Europe and North America. In fact, mapping and cartography were immensely important parts of the emerging field

of ethnography already in the mid-eighteenth century (see, e.g., Vermeulen 2015). As Thomas F. Thornton (1997) points out, within American anthropological research, the study of Indigenous toponymy was a rather inactive field of study for a large part of the twentieth century. Early in the century, however, Franz Boas and many of his followers (e.g., Thomas Waterman) regarded place names as an excellent area where the culture and history (including religion) of native populations could be studied (Thornton 1997: 209–212). Along a similar vein, both Keith H. Basso (1996) and Peter Nabokov (2002) noted the close connection between cartography and mapping of the ‘historicity’ of Indigenous populations in the North American context, whereas others like Sergei Alymov (2019) established a similar link in the Soviet context, albeit during a somewhat later period.

Moreover, in the Nordic countries, the study of Sámi linguistics and place names was one of the most active fields within the study of the Sámi culture around the turn of the twentieth century. The Norwegian linguist and folklorist Just Qvigstad and the Swedish professor of Finno-Ugric languages K. B. Wiklund both studied and published important analyses of Sámi place names during the early decades of the twentieth century. Nickul’s correspondence on toponymy was initially primarily directed toward cartographers. Quite soon after his first contact with the Skolt Sámi, however, Nickul extended his correspondence to linguists in Norway and Sweden, including both Qvigstad and Wiklund, and somewhat later, to renown anthropologists around Europe (Kortekangas 2021: 788).

In his 1934 article, *Petsamon eteläosan koltankieliset paikannimet kartografiselta kannalta* (“The toponymy of Southern Petsamo from a cartographic perspective “PEKPKK””), Nickul made clear that he thought that the local



population in each area had the ‘moral right’ to name the area, which extended to the Sámi of the Petsamo area as well. According to Nickul, it was paramount that these local names, rather than Finnish translations or altogether new Finnish names, were also used in the official map of the area. Nickul thought that it was ethically and cartographically erroneous to translate the names. The attitudes of Finnish authorities who took control of the Petsamo area after 1920 were rather ignorant of the inhabitants. Nickul represented another line of thought, highlighting the value of listening to existing inhabitants rather than importing Finnish values, mindsets, economic practices, and place names<sup>4</sup> (Stadius 2016). This issue also relates to a topical theme regarding the ownership of the Sámi history, which I discuss in detail in the section about the Sámi religion (see, e.g., Evjen and Beck 2015: 51–52).

## SKOLT SÁMI TOPONYMY AND THE ‘FACTUAL’ SÁMI PAST

The first research question relates to Nickul’s view of the Skolt Sámi toponymy as a gateway to determining what the ‘original’ Sámi past looked like. Here, I mean to say that Nickul was convinced that the way of life of the Suenjel Sámi represented the last fragment of what remained of the way of life and mix of livelihoods characterising the Sámi before intensified contact with other populations. As Nickul wrote to many scholars, including curator of the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Cambridge (today, the MAA) Louis C. G. Clarke, Sámi ‘social conceptions’ still existed amongst the Suenjel Skolt Sámi, whereas the same conceptions of daily and yearly life were disappearing from other parts of Sámi society. To Cambridge anthropologist Ethel John Lindgren, Nickul (1937b, 1937c)

emphasised the originality of the Suenjel Skolts, maintaining that they represented the last fragment of the Sámi ‘race’, interesting especially in scholarly terms, and something was needed in order to preserve this race.

These letters to two important international contacts from the late 1930s already point toward a later phase in Nickul’s career, where he actively worked on a protection plan for the Suenjel Sámi, for scholarly purposes and for the sake of preserving the population for its own sake. Prior to this period, however, Nickul was primarily interested in the toponymy of the Skolt Sámi areas in Petsamo. The main source for studying Nickul’s notions of Skolt Sámi place names lay in his 1934 publication in Finnish, *Petsamon eteläosan koltankieliset paikannimet kartografiselta kannalta*, (“The toponymy of Southern Petsamo from a cartographic perspective “PEKPKK”).

Describing the dimension that place names provided for a map, Nickul compared them to topographical markings. Whilst topographical contours produced an illusion of topography, place names created the illusion of time, and, hence, an experience of the past. Nickul was well aware of the problems associated with attempting to uncover most original name forms, and followed a pragmatic principle in this case. As such, the current name form used by the local population should be printed on a map aiming for accuracy. The current name form reflected the history of the place and the people as experienced at the moment of drawing the map. A map, and more specifically the place names, provided an image of development, as well as of the expansion of agriculture and infrastructure, changes to language, and the ‘conquering of the cultural landscape in general’ (Nickul 1934: 8–11).

Nickul also provided an example for how Finnish and Norwegian mistranslations of Sámi names wiped out their original meanings. This

also served as an example of the toponymic subjugation, and, more severely, silencing, which Rautio Helander (2014: 336–340) noted in the Norwegian context. Specifically, first assigning the Sámi names a secondary status to the majority-language names, then completely discontinuing the use of the Sámi name form, silenced the Sámi toponymy and everything it carried. Nickul (1934: 9) provided the example of *Muetkevarr*. The Sámi word *muetke* translates to a tract of land between two bodies of water. A Finnish map translated the word mistakenly as *mutka* (*Mutkavaara*) in Finnish, meaning a curve, a corner, or a hook ('Curve mountain'). This mistake was then reproduced in a Norwegian map, which took the Finnish *mutka* and translated it to the Norwegian word for corner or hook, *krog*<sup>5</sup> (*Krogfjeld*) (Nickul 1934: 9).

For Nickul, the place names characterised the 'human influence in the landscape, that is, culture'. But, there was a significant difference between different kinds or levels of cultures (Nickul 1934: 12–13). In the conclusion to Nickul's article, he stated that, even in the case of a 'higher civilisation', place names told the story about the humans in the region, of their actions and their state of mind. According to Nickul, this was even more so with the 'primitive' Sámi region, where names reflect the people, their 'character, world views, history, livelihoods, [and] culture' in a much more accurate manner than in modernised regions. Citing the Norwegian professor of Finno-Ugric languages at the University of Oslo, Konrad Nielsen, and Finnish–Swedish geographer Väinö Tanner, Nickul stated that the level of specialisation and detail the Sámi demonstrated when naming their home area was completely unique in the Northern European context. The life conditions of the Sámi had developed their observation skills to an admirable subtlety. Nickul (1934:

12–13, 17) paraphrased Tanner, maintaining that no other Northern European language could demonstrate the level of specialisation related to geological forms and sizes, and vegetation in their home region as accurately as the Sámi languages.

This richness in detail for Indigenous place naming is something other scholars noted in other contexts. In the 1920s, American anthropologist Thomas Waterman described the Native American place naming practices, especially amongst populations in the Puget Sound area. Waterman, like Nielsen, Tanner, and Nickul in the Sámi case, was impressed by the subtlety and accurate descriptiveness demonstrated in the toponymy of Native Americans. Waterman spoke of abundant or even excessive native place names. This subtlety was also noted by Nickul in the Sámi case. Interestingly, Waterman was one of the first anthropologists to produce a typology of Native American place names. Waterman's typology systematically shows what the most prominent and frequent subjects for place names were in the Puget Sound region. In order of frequency, these consisted of, first, the rather general category of 'descriptive names' (202 names), followed by 'references to mythic episodes' (67 names), then 'references to animals' (35 names), and, finally, 'references to the food supply' (Thornton 1997: 214–216).

Nickul included a rather similar, yet more extensive typology of Skolt Sámi place names in his article. In Nickul's table, names based on livelihoods were followed by names depicting older religious forms and 'factual' historical events such as encounters with Russian monks. For example, two such categories consisted of names consisting of various fish species, suggesting a relationship with fishing, as well as names with the words *pass* ('holy / sacred') and *paas* ('something to be aware of and wary about').

Encounters with Russian Greek Orthodox monks travelling in the areas were normally peaceful according to the toponymic records of these encounters. Nickul described the way Skolt Sámi place names preserved the memory of the Orthodox hermit monks travelling in the area in a rather illuminating way. These hermits were a nuisance in the sense that they used the traditional Skolt Sámi fishing lakes and rivers. Yet, their influence was tangible in the sense that monks converted the first Skolts, leading to the conversion of the entire population over time. This process was traceable, according to Nickul, via place names. Many places on the shorelines and in bodies of water along the riverine and lake routes the monks travelled bear the word ‘*söörnets*’, derived from a Russian word for monk, *чернец* (*tsernets*). The earliest place names reflecting the introduction of the new religion are, according to Nickul, names which include the word ‘*kaavas*’, depicting a small icon that people carried with them during their travels. According to Nickul (1934: 20), these kinds of names with Russian Orthodox elements mixed with names bearing witness of older belief systems tell us about the ‘nature, child-like devotion’ with which the Skolt Sámi adopted external forms of the Greek Catholic religion, while maintaining much of their older religion.

In relation to travelling Russian monks, Nickul described the way he gathered and confirmed his name forms. When gathering a name, such as those reflecting the presence of monks, Nickul consulted the Skolt Sámi population to discuss the origins and possible dating of the names. In some cases, Nickul identified the specific individual that provided him with information regarding names. In most cases, however, Nickul used the collective form ‘the Skolt Sámi say that’ or a passive form such as ‘it is said that’. Nickul coproduced

the knowledge of place names with the Skolt Sámi through open air practices of discussing names with them. When reporting his results in scholarly publications, the role of the Skolt Sámi lay in the background, although Nickul did refer to his contact and the role of the Skolts in the coproduction process in a rather transparent manner.

When Nickul gathered information, he provided an interesting discussion regarding his views on the reliability of the Skolt Sámi expertise in previous times. Nickul wrote that some of the place names reflect the borders of various Skolt Sámi *siidas*, indicating which lakes each *siida* had the right to fish, for instance. But, these rights changed somewhat over time. As Nickul observed, a certain *siida* had abandoned a number of lakes for fishing, thus discussing these names with the ‘middle aged men’ of the *siida* was ‘in vain’. The oral tradition had, according to Nickul, collapsed; thus, in this case, talking to the Sámi yielded no results. This appears to be a pragmatic issue at first sight, but Nickul’s formulation reveals a certain attitude about the Skolt Sámi as mere informers. If the chain of the oral tradition was broken down, then the sort of abstract knowledge regarding things of the past was something that Nickul did not expect to find amongst locals. Whilst ascribing the Skolt Sámi a certain status and role as experts of the toponymy of their own region, Nickul viewed himself as capable of extracting this information, processing it, and passing it on to the scholarly community. Yet, the information of discontinued fishing practices on lakes also came from the Skolt Sámi, but for some reason Nickul did not single out the providers of this information. Clearly, this information was preserved amongst the Sámi, even if Nickul (1934: 22–23) thought that etymological information of place names was not.



One important interpretation that Nickul made regarding place names was that whilst wild reindeer were represented in a substantial number of place names (e.g., names including the word *reut* [‘wild male reindeer / male deer’]), the half-domesticated reindeer typical of the Sámi culture in the early twentieth century and today was not. Nickul’s conclusions, referring to some earlier records later confirmed by many researchers, was that reindeer herding in a more extensive form was a rather recent development in the Petsamo area than it was in other parts of the Sámi region. This serves as a prime example of Nickul’s skilful interpretations, as well as his belief in the power of place names to transmit factual, older events, livelihood patterns, and social structures (Nickul 1934: 24–25).

## SKOLT SÁMI TOPONYMY AND THE SÁMI RELIGION

Apart from the ‘factual’, chronological history—events and circumstances that Nickul could confirm had taken place—place names reflected Sámi historicity in other ways as well according to Nickul. Nickul quoted Finnish geographer Väinö Tanner, who wrote that the Sámi added a level of refined symbolism to their place names of which no other Nordic population was capable. This note on Sámi symbolism directs us away from the ‘factual past’ that Nickul saw reflected in place names, and toward another kind of notion of historicity, relating to the religious, and, more specifically, pre-Christian, past. One example of such a connection between beliefs and the physical landscape that Nickul refers to is the mountain *Kaarablekk*. Based on his discussions with the Sámi, Nickul understood that this name was composed of the Skolt Sámi names for a sail boat and its transom. The mountain name reflected its form: The mountain, which looked

like a stranded boat, carried the memory of a deluge in the distant past which obviously had left its mark on Skolt Sámi culture. The place names transmitted events and structures that had historically formed the Skolt Sámi way of life, revealing a longer time perspective on the culture of the Sámi by offering a glimpse of the layers of beliefs and religion that preceded the current state of the Russian Orthodox religion practiced amongst the Skolt Sámi (Nickul 1934: 13, 19).

Nickul’s discussion of religion, beliefs, and toponymy also includes an important comment on the ownership of Skolt Sámi history. This issue, who owns Sámi history, is topical, since many researchers within the Indigenous studies tradition have examined the question of who owns, participates, and makes scholarship on Indigenous populations such as the Sámi (see, e.g., Evjen and Beck 2015: 51–52). The Skolt Sámi, who, at least nominally, converted to Greek Catholic Christianity, still venerated or had at least until recently venerated and worshipped various spirits. According to Nickul, a common Skolt Sámi belief was that the pre-Christian deities and spirits worshipped at specific places had left these holy loci when such worshipping ceased. Their existence, at least locally, thus depended on the Skolt Sámi actively worshipping and remembering them. This is a relevant notion of historicity amongst the Skolt Sámi, and perhaps of historicity in general. When something disappeared or began fading from the collective memory and from everyday practices, its relevance diminished and vanished. The past—in this case, the past relating to religion and beliefs—is accessible and relevant to the present through functions and meanings that render the present more legible and liveable. When these messages from the past are no longer of any use given changing habits or physical relocations of the people

inhabiting a specific area, the past stops talking to the present.

Ownership of religious history was also visible in another way. According to the Skolt Sámi, certain places named after deities or other sacred elements (such as names with the word *pass* ['holy / sacred']) had their own spells or curses attached to them. But these curses or spells applied only to those people who had knowledge of these forces. A stranger passing and violating a sacred place out of ignorance was not at risk of placing a curse on themselves. These observations supported Nickul's general thesis regarding the close connection he perceived between the Skolt Sámi and the area they inhabited: nature, its deities, and its spirits spoke to the 'real' inhabitants of the place and only to them. The landscape became active and alive only during encounters with local people, who coded it with meanings and signifiers that only they themselves could read and decipher. This also meant that place names were sometimes forgotten when their denotations no longer meant anything to the people. One example of this lies in the old fishing areas named after families. When these ownership relations ceased to matter, the names themselves were forgotten. Owning the place and the area was, in Nickul's early work, very much connected to naming it. The place names indicated the true ownership of the area, as the example of the Skolt Sámi toponymy describing the environment and history of their home area clearly demonstrated (Nickul 1934: 18–23).

## SÁMI PAST AS A RELICT: A 'BELATED' CULTURE PRESERVED IN PLACE NAMES IN THE ERA OF MODERNITY

Apart from the previous two points on the Skolt Sámi historicity as reflected in place names, one other notion of historicity appeared in Nickul's text, related to the place of the Skolt Sámi in the modern world. Nickul wrote that 'place names have brought us close to the Skolt Sámi him/herself. We meet him/her not only as a curiosity craving a moment of awareness without further depth, but rather as a belated representative of a culture tied to nature. The Suenjel names reflect their people, the people who live in a close relationship of dependence to their region.' The designation of the Skolt Sámi as *belated* points to a scientific discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century discussing 'native' populations as somehow inherently from, or of, the past, carrying in themselves a historicity that stood in stark contrast to Western modernity. This temporal limit between the modern peoples and the peoples of the past, famously dubbed allochronism by Johannes Fabian (1983) in his book *Time and the Other*, is a theme widely discussed in both anthropology and global history. Patrick Brantlinger (2003) noted this temporal limit as one singling out 'primitive' races or peoples, a term Nickul also used frequently. According to Brantlinger, nineteenth and early twentieth-century Western scholars and administrators considered native 'primitive races' as inherently living in the past, and they could not pass into modernity without losing their culture (Brantlinger 2003: 1–4). Bruno Latour and Siep Stuurman made similar observations. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour (1993) notes that 'savage' customs could not pass into a 'civilised' modernity. Stuurman

(2017), for his part, summarised the relationship between modernism and native peoples in saying that, in the eyes of ‘Westerners’, native populations were *in* this world, but not really *of* it (Latour 1993: 10–12; Stuurman 2017: 20–30).

Nickul viewed the Skolt Sámi culture as belated, attached to nature in a ‘mysterious’<sup>6</sup> way, substantially different than the ‘technological’ Western cultures. Nickul was an optimist, however, and he observed the intervention from the side of Finnish scholars and the Finnish government a possible recourse that could preserve the Skolt Sámi culture, and allow it to continue developing in its own way. Differently from the ‘Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races’ that Brantlinger identified in the British colonial context in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Nickul did not believe in the deterministic extinction of the Skolt Sámi population. Here, he also differed from most of his Finnish and international coevals within Sámi studies who believed that the Sámi’s time was running out. Rather, as he wrote to ecologist Kenneth Mellanby of the Royal Society, he did not consider the Sámi a ‘dying race’ (Nickul 1939).

Despite this optimism, Nickul nevertheless considered the Skolt Sámi and the Suenjel culture as existing on borrowed time. Without a scholarly and policy intervention, the culture would not survive the pressures of assimilation. Nickul wrote to the inspector of elementary schools in the district of Lapland, Antti Hämäläinen, that in all depictions of the Sámi one should be extremely careful and precise, since ‘no one among them [the Sámi] will rise up to defend their people’ (Nickul 1937d). Preserving the Suenjel culture would allow their further existence, but also an organic cultural development was possible. However, according to Nickul, driving this process required someone from the outside, preferably from the scholarly

community who knew the Suenjel culture well. The Suenjel culture, as vivid as it appeared to Nickul, was still a ‘belated’ culture, and place names reflected this belatedness in various ways.

Nickul argued that a ‘culture of nature’ was inherently more connected to the nature of the area they inhabited, and the physical landscape and its history, whether factual or ‘mythological’. The old names reflected the ‘magical might’ that nature holds over people. It was, then, nature that was the stronger party in this relationship, and human beings in the area had adapted to the unbreakable and unchangeable laws of nature in the region. This was reflected in the toponymy, and the technological names given by an ‘industrialised’ culture demonstrated an opposing relationship in which human beings conquered nature. According to Nickul, industrialised peoples detached themselves from the might of the landscape. Exemplifying this, Nickul (1934: 7) cited such disenchanting names as the Finnish-language ‘*Myllykoski*’ (‘mill brook’) and the Swedish ‘*Telegrafberget*’ (‘telegraph mountain’). What Nickul did not know was that the Petsamo area would soon acquire a new layer of highly technological and industrial names. After Finland ceded the area to the Soviet Union, one of the most important places of Petsamo area became ‘*Никель*’ (*Nikel*), named after the nickel deposits discovered in the area already during the Finnish period

## CONCLUSIONS

Nickul found history reflected in Skolt Sámi place names in three ways. First of all, Nickul considered it possible to decode factual historical events from place names and events which Nickul sought to confirm using other sources. Such place names included, for instance, those related to Russian monks travelling the areas, leaving behind place names that reflected

the process of conversion of the Skolt Sámi to the Orthodox faith.

Second, the names spoke of another type of history, namely, the past of the Skolt Sámi culture relating to beliefs and pre-Christian and Christian religions. Place names reflecting religious events or traditions could still reveal a great deal about the Skolt Sámi culture.

Third, another type of historicity that Nickul considered reflected in place names was the ‘belatedness’ of the Skolt Sami culture. These place names recounted a culture from the past, a life form that had been more widespread amongst the Sámi of the Nordic region and Russia, but which only survived amongst a small number of Skolt Sámi, under and threatened by mounting pressure from modernisation.

All three types of historicity reflected in place names can be contextualised in a larger anthropological and ethnographic discussion, active in the first half of the twentieth century, whereby Indigenous place names reflected the culture and historicity of the peoples inhabiting a specific area. Nickul corresponded with cartographers, geographers, ethnographers, and anthropologists on issues related to place names. As his letter to the Czech cartographer Pantoflíček indicates, he considered place names a key source for studying a ‘culture of nature’ such as the Suenjel Sámi. Place names carried within them ‘the essence of culture’, according to Nickul. Contrary to many of his coevals and the general trend in Sámi areas to rename places with majority-language names, Nickul emphasised the ethics of allowing each people to name their own home areas. In such framings, Nickul connected the Suenjel Sámi to nature, closer to the physical landscape than other Nordic populations.

Even if Nickul was in contact with Scandinavian linguists studying Sámi place names, in his early publications and correspondence

he remained very much self-taught. His ideas on Sámi toponymy as reflecting Sámi pasts in various ways should, for this reason, be viewed as a parallel case rather than directly a part of scholarly debates and observations of Indigenous toponymy and historicity in, for instance, North American anthropology. Still, there are striking similarities in the ways Nickul and North American anthropologists such as Waterman classified and treated Indigenous place names. More research on possible connections and shared influences could help further clarify the early twentieth century context of renaming, collecting, and preserving Indigenous place names.

OTSO KORTEKANGAS  
RESEARCHER  
CULTURE, HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY  
ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY  
okorteka@abo.fi

## NOTES

- 1 Traditional Sámi area, organisation, or ‘village’ used for fishing and hunting, and subsequently and today predominantly used for reindeer herding. According to him, the Suenjel *siida* Nickul was particularly interested in was in a more ‘original’ state than most of the *siidas* in Finland and Scandinavia based on reindeer herding.
- 2 Suenjel is the name form following the early twentieth-century Skolt Sámi orthography used by Nickul. The Finnish name of the *siida* is Suonikylä.
- 3 Nickul’s work led, for instance, to a proposal for the cultural preservation of the Suenjel area. See Karl Nickul, ‘Eräs Petsamokysymys. Suonikylän alueesta kolttakulttuurin suojelelue’, *Terra* 47, no. 3 (1935): 17–24.
- 4 For a discussion on the renaming of Sámi place names in a northern Norwegian context, see Kaisa Rautio Helander’s (2014) article ‘Sámi Place Names, Power Relations, and Representations’.
- 5 The modern spelling of the word is *krok*.
- 6 Nickul uses the Finnish word ‘*salaperäinen*’, which means ‘mysterious’, but also awakens connotations of ‘mystical’.

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