

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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# Saami reindeer pastoralism & the Norwegian state, 1960s-1990s

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## Introduction

Across the breadth of Finnmark, Norway's northernmost province, scores of herds, thousands of animals and hundreds of pastoral families move each year from the reindeers' winter grazing grounds in the interior to summer pastures on coastal peninsulas and islands. They may cover five hundred kilometres – less or more – on this annual round: *Herds of the Tundra* (Paine 1994) offers a detailed account. The focus in this article<sup>1</sup> however, is on the imperative experienced by the state – with its effects on herd management – of containing Saami reindeer pastoralism within the terms of a dominant Norwegian political philosophical code.

What Charles Taylor writes of the tension between "politics of equal dignity" (or, politics of sameness) and "politics of difference" provides an appropriate point of departure. For the social democratic tradition of Norway struggles with the tension, and contradiction, between these two positions, especially when faced with the un-Norwegian (in so many ways) Saami reindeer pastoralism. If the first of them is likely to be recognized – justifiably or cynically – as "a reflection of one hegemonic culture," the other leads the state into acknowledging values that are not universally shared by its citizens (Taylor 1994: 43). But in the end, or really from the beginning, the struggle is an uneven one. The Norwegian ideal is one of the "politics of equal dignity" – of sameness – and it prevails.

And, as Tzvetan Todorov argues, far from there being "equal dignity" in sameness, it likely becomes a politics of "identifying the other purely and simply with one's own 'ego ideal' (or with oneself)" (Todorov 1984: 165). Sadly, Todorov's view, I think, is the key to understanding much of official Norwegian policy regarding Saami pastoralism.

## Herd management from the 1960s to the 1990s

I begin with what I see as a diachrony of changing arrangements of *herd management* from the 1960s to the present day, bringing in state policy at the appropriate junctures.

The account of herd management from my fieldwork in the early 1960s was written with the model of "commensurate proportions" in mind (Model 1 of Fig. 1). While it may not have been achieved too often, all owners strove towards it. Increases in herd size were to be expected, on account of the pronounced tendency to attach value to the self-reproductive capacity of pastoral capital, and the model foresaw commensurate increases in personnel through the recruitment of children and – most critically – in pasture through expansion (although this was already beginning to become a limiting factor). A hallmark of such herd management was the responsibility it gave to the head of a family herd for just about all decisions.

Such a model, however, becomes obsolescent in a situation where, as herds continue to increase, pasture either remains constant or actually diminishes. Such was soon to be the situation in Finnmark (Model 2). Intrusion of non-pastoral interests, both private and public, reduced the expanse of seasonal pastures and/or diminished their pastoral utility even as state subsidies to pastoral family economies inadvertently stimulated herd sizes. Further 'damage' was done to the model of commensurate proportions through weakening of the indigenous system of checks and balances on account of the state beginning to assume responsibility for various pastoral decisions.

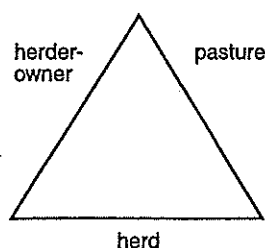
In response to a deteriorating situation (readily read by some as beckoning

a tragedy of the commons: Paine 1993) the state took control over decisions affecting two of the three factors of production: herds and personnel (i.e. herder-owners); respecting pastures, traditional usufruct rights continued to be exercised. This development is represented by the clipped Model 3. Even in the marketing of their animals, once a prerogative to which they held dearly to themselves, herd owners find that the state has a decisive 'say'. With such erosion of the pastoralists' responsibilities, 'irresponsibility', in the form of asocial individualism, likely follows.

Such is the dismal situation at the time of writing, but I wish to hypothesize a future development. In Model 4 the incommensurable values of Model 2 are corrected, and pastoral responsibility,

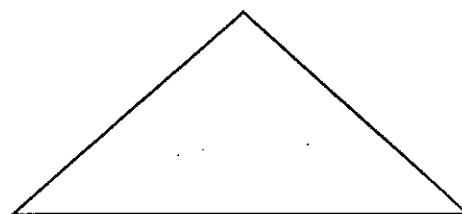
Fig. 1: Models of Herd Management

**Model 1**



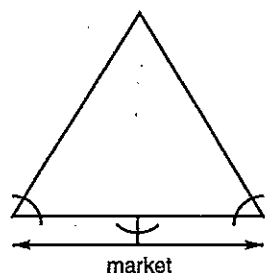
commensurate proportions of traditional pastoralism

**Model 2**



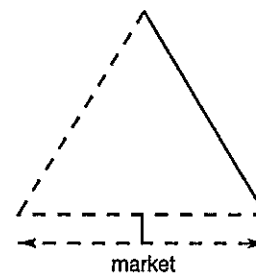
incommensurate herd growths with pasture as limiting factor

**Model 3**



state-determined proportions and state-directed market (the "clipped" model)

**Model 4**



flexible self-adjustment to pasture as limiting factor

*Note: Models of herd management. In variations of Model 2 there may be an incommensurate increase of herder-owners or both herds and herder-owners.*

taken away in Model 3, returned. The key is to make the values attached to pastoral capital and to the marketing of animals mutually supportive (this is indicated in Model 4 by the broken lines – suggesting choice, initiative, and flexibility). At the moment they are too often in opposition to each other. There is a need here for flexibility from the side of the state: For instance, it would help were a pastoralist able to bank money from marketing animals and be taxed on it only when it is withdrawn from the account: “simply put, the deer could be slaughtered according to ecological factors but utilized according to herder needs” (Beach 1992: 13).

Model 4 presumes, however, the resolution of several problems by the pastoralists. One is the organization of extensive herding with its *periodic* work commitment. There is the risk of breakdowns, both in the coordination of work teams and in herd knowledge, so that pastoral production deteriorates to a catch-as-catch-can. (I observed as much, from time to time, in the 1960s.) But there is another side to it. The large separation corrals with their multiple pens (introduced at about that time) were making the herders learn new techniques and routines, and learning they were. Differences in herd management that I observed at that time, also spoke of capacity for change and adaptation and strategic planning (Paine 1994: chap. 9). It was a capacity that flowed from pastoralists who were their own managers. There was little state tutelage or control.

Model 4 also leaves crucial decisions about optimal numbers to be resolved – of animals in relation to pastures, for example. Responsible pastoral praxis will return, I believe, with decisive weight being given, once again, to the input of groups of practising pastoralists regarding such an issue.

In the situation as it is at present there are those who urge the placing of controls for the purpose of dampening pastoral competition. Model 4 would draw upon pastoral competition. In the past, the competition has assured the ecological and cultural health of the pastoral enterprise; and in the future that I envisage – with value attached to both pastoral capital and the marketing of animals – the importance of competition will be no less.

Is there, then, a release for the state from the problems it faces by leaving it to the pastoral practitioners themselves to find the solutions? The answers flow from the presuppositions. A government presupposition is that the tenets of social democracy must prevail and for that to happen there must be an administrative ability and authority such that the pastoralists do not possess. Along with that goes the presupposition (with currency beyond government circles) that, left alone, Saami pastoralism will bring the tragedy of the commons down upon itself and upon others who also use the tundra (Paine 1994: chap. 15).

There are Saami who agree with that, but there is a strong countervailing presupposition among them, too. Fundamental to it is, first, that the pastoralists themselves identify the problems for which a solution is needed – they will not always be the same problems that are of concern to the state; second, that pastoralists having identified pastoral problems in their current situation will be able to evolve the appropriate institutional ability and authority with which to address them. Something different from both “traditional” Saami pastoralism and pastoralism by state fiat would emerge.

However, the political reality is, of course, that the likelihood of the problem-solving being left to the pastoralists

themselves is infinitesimal, whereas the continuation of the state as *formal* problem-solver is a firm likelihood. This being so, it is appropriate to return to a brief review of the prevailing relationship between state and pastoralists.

### The Norwegian state and the pastoralists

The first feature that comes to notice is the degree of abstraction with which the state (and its consultants) discuss (and plan for) its pastoral clients. It is a "they" that is written about. Perhaps planners are not aware of this, but many Saami are. Mutual cultural misapprehension is sewn. I think this helps to explain why many positions adopted by the planners are ignored, whereas in other circumstances they would evoke understanding from the 'target' audience. Spencer's observation, from East Africa, that "the real boundary that exists is not around the scheme, but between planners and planned" strikes a chord here (Spencer 1984: 72).

Thus when the expert-fuelled Reindeer Administration says of something – a herd size, for instance: *'That may be all right for the individual but not for the livelihood as a whole,'* herder/owners may well ask themselves: *'What is really being said?'* *'What does the Administration really have in mind?'* And the planners, puzzled and shocked by the Saami system, make their own pastoralist models for the Saami. A research team commissioned jointly by the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Association of Saami Reindeer Owners (NRL) took as its "purpose ... to reduce the resource-destructive, cost-intensive and conflict-generating competition." Accordingly, it was proposed that "no distinction will be made between 'my' reindeer and 'your'

reindeer" (NIBR 1990: xxviii-xxix). From the culturally indigenous perspective, this is *tabula rasa* 'planning' with a vengeance. But there is, of course, a political ideal behind it all.

The state defines public morality, and the practice of reindeer pastoralism is to be no exception (Paine 1994: chap. 13). Indeed, far from being privileged as an exception the pastoralists are seen as presenting special problems: They are *on the move*; they lay claim to *so much space*; they appear to *lack social cohesion* and would *defy regulation*. At the root of the problem, as the state sees it, is the free-for-all competition between herding groups (whose compositions and combinations are liable to change seasonally) over 'shared' pastures. This situation lends itself to unbridled expansion of herds for some (it is thought), impoverishment for others. So together with an ecological crisis from over-grazing (as it is seen to be), there is an equally pressing social problem. Hence the Reindeer Management Act (1978). In addition to regulating access to the livelihood, the Act, with its subsequent additions, is directed to the realization of the state's political philosophical code in which the notion of equal well-being is central.

Here it should be stressed that a bed-rock commitment of the state is to 'play fair' by the pastoralists, albeit according to Norwegian norms; and a 'natural' corollary is the state's concern to see that the pastoralists, too, 'play fair' by those norms. But this means, *pace* Todorov, the state imposes upon the pastoralists its understanding of utility and reward, predicated on a universalistic notion of the rational: Like it or not, the state finds itself assuming the superordinate authority of a *patron*.<sup>2</sup> Thus the 1978 Reindeer Management Act is spoken of (without irony) as giving the livelihood "a legitimacy it has never before had" (Kosmo 1986: 35). This patron-client relationship



between state and pastoralist is also characterized by an asymmetry concerning the knowledge each has of the other. Paradoxically perhaps (but a logical outcome of the structure of the relationship between them), here it is the state, not the pastoralist, who is the more 'unknowing' of the other.<sup>3</sup>

But to turn the issue around: The state may well ask (as has Beach, arguing from the other side of the case) what, then, constitutes an ethical minority policy? "Should cultural self-determination gain precedence over individual well-being, or should the ideal of the socialistic welfare state be prior to those of cultural pluralism?" (Beach 1983: 9)

In a formal way, the state acknowledges Saami ethnicity. In practice, though, I think the state view the Saami as *Norwegians* – but lacking in organizational skills, all the same. The question then becomes one of how much discretion over the affairs of their livelihood should these pastoralists, as practitioners, be allowed? Quick reference to other primary livelihoods in Norway, such as fishing and farming, suggests that the answer is, to a notable extent, a political one: *Those* practitioners have powerful political lobbies. Seen from the Saami point of view, an essential part of the problem is one of *minority* politics: The pastoral Saami have no political lobby comparable to that of the other primary livelihoods. It is particularly in this political context that they are hampered by their acephalous tradition.

The continuing 'deaf ear' – on the part of many of the pastoralists – to what the state decrees or experts advise is a legacy of minority politics as well. Thus the warning from a well-informed source that "moves to increase guidance over the reindeer management will awake opposition... on account of the unclear relationship between the Saami as a minority people and the state as their guardian,

together with the historical experiences of this relationship" (Meløy et al. 1987: 658).

For the state, on the other hand, the imperatives have been those of intervention, and by 1988-89, faced with pastoral defiance, the kid gloves were off. The Reindeer Administration enforced – but not without difficulty – a compulsory account of all animals (Paine 1994: chap. 14). From the state's point of view, the question was not 'Is intervention justifiable?' but 'How, even with the pastoralists' (and not the state's) own situation in mind, can there not be intervention?' The state is swayed by the evidence that "they" – the pastoralists – want to modernize; therefore, surely, "they" realize that their "traditional values" may be seriously inadequate in their contemporary circumstances? "Objectively," the state see pastoral defiance as a minor feature of relations with the state when weighed against the dependence on the state.

The state, however, has not attained its own objectives. For one thing, it accelerated what it had intended to halt. A principal objective has been the reduction of the size of herds, and to this end various subsidies were offered in connection with the slaughter of deer. Yet the majority of the subsidies had no slaughter *quotas* attached to them. With the extra money coming in from the subsidies, families had reason enough to slaughter fewer animals (Paine 1994: chap. 13). Another principal objective has been to strengthen cohesion and trust among the pastoralists, but reducing the decision-making authority of the basic Saami herding unit (*sii'da*) – placing it at the bottom of a 3-tiered Norwegian institutional structure – undermined these qualities (Paine 1994: chap. 13).

In this connection, one may bear in mind the stricture that many of the problems (in the view of both administrators

and practitioners) besetting reindeer pastoralism today arise out of state intervention. The state sees a runaway system on the tundra. Some of the measures taken by the state helped to induce it, but the state, nevertheless, diagnoses it as a condition rooted in Saami pastoralism. Yet before state intervention, the Saami system with its own checks and balances was not a runaway one (Björklund 1990).

In its repetitive chant – “too many animals,” the state has been irresponsible in its cultural clumsiness and insensitivity. The sophistication of the pastoralists’ own methods of evaluating pastures was lost on the state; instead, mechanistic kilogram: hectare formulae were employed. Worse still, the state chose to attribute motives to the Saami (without any ethnographic fieldwork) as to why they have “too many.” This was crudely done, repeatedly falling back on the asocial individualism of Hardin (Hardin 1968; Paine 1993): An owner has to have as many animals as possible on account of zero-sum relations with all other owners. But most owners (at the time of my fieldwork and later) were parents and as such were custodians for the next generation, and the family herd was actually dispersed in their lifetime through anticipatory inheritance (family herd capital being redistributed as each child marries). Owners were accorded respect, perhaps most of all, on account of the quality of their husbandry in which herd *composition* is as significant as herd size (Paine 1994: chap. 1). These are social motivations playing into the determination of herd sizes and compositions.

Still today, the pastoralists (but not the state) also have in mind the situational context as to what “too many” means in any particular case. An owner losing animals to others may recognize that he has “too many” to handle: He may seek to employ a hired hand until his children begin to reach the age when

they can help with the herding. And when that time comes, there will not be “too many” animals – perhaps “too few.” Or, “too many” may mean “too little” pasture and the owner looks for access to other pastures at certain seasons. Much used to depend on the relations he had with other owners. Today, however, there may be no other pastures with a place for him: This is the limiting factor to which the pastoralist must now adapt.

Or one who has “too few” animals, may well find it worthwhile to echo the general statement of the state that there are “too many” for the bearing capacity of the tundra. His own chances will be improved by some overall reduction, he hopes. But with the fulfillment of such an expectation, he is likely to change his opinion about *what* is, and *who* has, “too many.” By no means all of the pastoralists opposed the compulsory count (*supra*), and reasoning along these lines, I suggest, helps explain why. It also suggests that those who supported the state in this issue were not necessarily endorsing the principle espoused by the state, but their own.

In each of these scenarios (which I believe are ‘true’ to the pastoral culture) the pastoralist is his own strategist. He takes responsibility for his own decisions. The state will take this away from him. It does so, in its own estimation, for the best of possible reasons: “to reach higher incomes with fewer animals [thus] making room for as many as possible pastoralists.” This could mean, however, that “the individual pastoralist cannot vary the size of his herd according to his own wishes” (NIBR 1990: 67). Nor is this the only price the pastoralist would have to pay: It is the state who makes that decision of principle, not the pastoralist. From everything that I have learned about the pastoral sense of self, this is a very high price indeed.

Many, perhaps most, of the pastoralists did not believe the state's message that the present number of owners will not be reduced along with the total number of animals.<sup>4</sup> That smaller herds (with improved productivity) allow for more herder/owners, was the message that the state wished to get across. But with regulated entry (by license) into the livelihood already introduced, the message that pastoralists were more inclined to hear was: 'too many animals and too many people'.

There is a still more interesting twist to this matter. The state assumes that "as many as possible" pastoralists is itself a pastoral value. My understanding is that this, too, is highly situational. Granted that fellow-pastoralists are competitors, then why would one want "as many as possible?" On the other hand, with pastoralism being pressed to the wall by other interests and the pastoral Saami being but a minority within the Saami minority, there are good reasons for wanting "as many as possible" – so long as they do not crowd one's own pastures. Further: What is supposed by the state to be a Saami value but, in actuality, is only so in a qualified way, *is* – provided the controls of "rational" herd management are in place – arguably a benefit (if an unintended one) for the state. It is so on two counts: It looks as though the state is responsive to Saami ethnicity, and it helps assuage the growing (un)employment problem in North Norway.

### The state as 'patron' of the pastoralists

My verdict on the "patron" relationship that the state exercises over Saami pastoralists is regrettably negative. First, it is *misguided*. Notable here are the subsidy policy and the misreading of pasto-

ral strategy; the plight of the basic herding unit at the bottom of a 3-tier authority structure, making the retrieval of the earlier sense of responsibility all the more difficult; and attempts to reinvent reindeer pastoral praxis through applying agronomic expertise, as though reindeer pastoralism can be managed in conditions similar "to the controlled environments of the barnyard" (Beach 1990: 290).

Second, it is *morally questionable*. What business has the state determining that certain ideas of prestige (as far as the state understands them) among the pastoralists are out-moded and should be squashed?<sup>5</sup> Likewise, what business is it of the state's to determine what *should* be the principle for the distribution of wealth among the pastoralists? And if the answer to both is, because the pastoralism takes place on Norwegian soil and the pastoralists are Norwegian citizens – what, then, does the state really mean when it talks of Saami rights of self-determination? Or, if it is because the pastoralists receive heavy subsidies from the state, is it, then, morally correct for the State to offer 'bribes' in this manner, to get people to do what many of them would otherwise oppose? And is it morally incorrect for pastoralists to take the 'bribes' but not heed the State's will?

Third, it is *legally questionable*. In regulating Saami pastoralism on the tundra and, at the same time, recognizing it as a citizens' commons (with due regulation), the state acts outside notions of Saami land rights that may be applicable (or become so) both in international and Norwegian law.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, it is both *over-exclusive* and *over-determined* in its authority and ideology – other parties with a warrant to be heard are marginalized (not only a rival to NRL but, most notably, the Saami Parliament<sup>7</sup>). It assumes (*vis-à-vis* the pastoralists) "a monopolistic right to sort out the 'fitting' from the 'unfitting', the



'worthy' from the 'unworthy' categories, and to spell out the conditions under which passage from the second to the first may take place" (Bauman 1991: 158).<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, though, the state shoulders the strong *inclusive* responsibility of linking together all the citizens of Norway within the social democratic embrace where *all* are "worthy" – and equally so. Thus the state is always on the edge of a double-bind situation in respect to the two constituencies: Saami pastoralists, Norwegian citizenry. A number of things the state gives to the pastoralists are not necessarily supportive of pastoral management – least of all of the kind of management the state seeks; but, the irony is, the state cannot (by the premises of social democracy) withhold from one group of its citizens benefits that the Norwegian public at large expects and enjoys.<sup>9</sup> Nor, vis-à-vis the non-Saami populations, can the state place the tundra 'off limits' to them – even though it likely means that historical Saami rights are being chiselled away in the process.<sup>10</sup>

The state is left in a no-win situation.

### The future of Saami pastoralism

Meanwhile, the future of Saami reindeer pastoralism remains deeply mired in unresolved questions. The authors of one report write: "The most important thing about the cultural goals of reindeer pastoral planning is not first and foremost to protect individual cultural traits, but to arrange conditions so that as many Saami as possible can continue with reindeer pastoralism in a manner that they themselves consider to be Saami" (Meløy et al. 1987: 68; my emphasis). Together, these authors are equally familiar with theoretical models of pastoralism and its

practice on the ground, and, furthermore, demonstrate an intuitive appreciation of individual pastoralists and differences between them. This is unusual. And their recommendation sounds seductively simple, but of course it is not. Too much has happened over recent decades for there to be a consensus as to what it is to be a Saami pastoralist and how the pastoralism should be conducted.

I have been conditioned to think of the earlier generation who were active herder/owners in the 1960s; but some herder/owners today, astride their snowmobiles, may well be thinking about eventual ownership of a helicopter. Sitting on a sled harnessed to a reindeer, as their parents did, may be laughable to them. *That's* not a part of being Saami, not for them. But among the variously-accented identities and aspirations that have since emerged: *Who* is (and for whom) the proper pastoral Saami today?

Let us suppose that the state hands over the whole package (along with the annual grants) labelled 'the pastoral problem' to the Saami Parliament. Remembering that the pastoral Saami are but a minority within the Saami national minority, how would Saami parliamentarians resolve matters? How would they define "traditional Saami pastoralism?" Would they restore the autonomy of the *sii'da*? Would they limit herd sizes? What policy would they adopt towards mechanization? It is most unlikely that they would reach uniform opinions and mutually consistent criteria in tackling such conundrums.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, how would the pastoralists themselves react to a Saami Parliament so empowered? For the moment, however, the state is not contemplating handing such responsibilities to the Saami Parliament. Instead, a new round of proposals to advance its "rationalization" programme is being

prepared for presentation to the Norwegian Parliament – leaving the Saami Parliament very much out on the sidelines.

## Notes

- (1) Drawn – with permission of the Smithsonian Institution Press – from the concluding chapter ("The Prejudice of Equality") of Paine 1994.
- (2) The decisive diacritica of a patron, in my use of the term, is that "only values of the patron's choosing are circulated" in a patron-client relationship (Paine 1988: 15).
- (3) This appears to remain true even when the state *does* try to learn what pastoralists think about current issues (Paine 1994: chap. 14).
- (4) And the scepticism has been proven well-founded, though official statements to this effect carefully speak simply of "reduced recruiting" (e.g. Storting 1991-92: 14).
- (5) At the same time, the conservationist lobby declares that Saami pastoralists should *keep* (or be kept) to their traditional technological means (Paine 1994: chap. 12).
- (6) See the ILO Convention no. 169 concerning aboriginal rights, as well as the on-going work of the Saami Rights Commission (NOU 1984; Eidheim et al. 1985; Paine 1991; Storting 1991-92). For historical and legal reviews, see Tønnesen 1977 and the essay collection in Thuen 1980.
- (7) Located in Karasjok, the Parliament was opened by the Norwegian king in October 1989. For the time being it is principally an advisory body to the Norwegian Parliament and state. See Brantenberg 1991; Haetta 1992; Thuen 1995.
- (8) Bauman is actually describing the pretensions of the modern state (though not in its emergent post-modern form), but I cite the passage for the way it catches an

essence of the state's dealings with the pastoralists.

(9) For example, standardized housing, schooling, and subsidized mechanization. The question here is not whether pastoralists should enjoy modern housing and schooling and avail themselves of mechanization, but the design and management of these amenities in optimal accord with the context of pastoralism.

(10) The issue of Saami land rights opens a Pandora's box. I have been speaking of the rights of the Saami pastoralists, but what of non-pastoral Saami of the tundra villages? And among the coastal population (with interest in the tundra), who is and who is not a Saami? And what of competing historical Norwegian rights? The Saami Rights Commission, struck in the fall of 1980, has yet to report on the matter of land rights (see NOU 1984). All the while, life goes on, new interest groups (regarding the use of the tundra, for example) enter the play, and pragmatic political and administrative decisions have to be taken.

(11) Perhaps this gives cause for pause when judging the Norwegian Parliament. Besides doing the bidding of its own will in these matters it also is in a predicament, precisely regarding the moral (if not also legal) claims of cultural pluralism. See Eidheim et al. 1985.

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## Résumé

L'auteur présente une esquisse des principes de l'élevage de rennes chez les Saami, des principes de l'Etat qui sont imposés aux Saami et du résultat malheureux de la rivalité de ces deux types de principes. Pour l'Etat aucun ordre n'est discernable dans les pratiques saami; les Saami, eux, considèrent l'intervention de l'Etat comme une subversion de leurs valeurs pastorales. L'Etat craint que les pratiques des Saami ne mènent à une destruction tragique des pâturages. L'auteur est d'avis – et là est l'ironie – que c'est l'intervention de la part de l'Etat qui pourrait rendre cette „tragédie“ imminente.

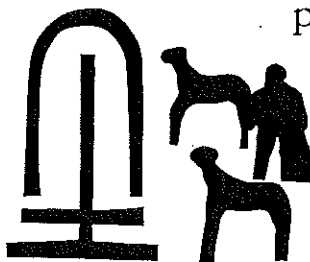
## Resumen

En el artículo se delinearán las lógicas Saami del pastoreo de renos, los principios introducidos por el Estado y los resultados lamentables que resultaron de la "colisión" de ambos sistemas. El Estado no puede "ver" orden en las prácticas pastoriles Saami, mientras que los Saami "ven" la intromisión estatal como una erosión de sus valores pastoriles. A diferencia del Estado que teme que las prácticas pastoriles Saami llevarán a una tragedia de los comunes, en el presente artículo se sostiene, que, irónicamente, son justamente las actividades estatales que están acercando los Saami más a la "tragedia".

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# DANISH NOMAD RESEARCH

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