

Loss of language, culture, and community in the Skolt Sámi film *Je'vida*

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1. Introduction

The film *Je'vida* (2023) tells the story of a Skolt Sámi woman who is joining her niece to clear out her childhood home before it is sold. The house is located by a lake in Finnish Lapland. During her time at the house, Je'vida faces her painful memories and finds healing, while the niece discovers her Skolt Sámi identity. The Skolt Sámi are one of the many Indigenous Sámi people that traditionally reside in Northern Fenno-Scandia and Russia. They have a distinct language spoken by 300 people in Finland and Russia (see Figure 1).

Je'vida is the first Skolt Sámi feature-length production. It is an account of forced post-war Fennicization of the Skolt Sámi, especially through boarding schools, which led to community ties being broken, and the language and culture being lost among younger generations. The film is a work of fiction although it is based on the stories the director Katja Gauriloff heard from her relatives and friends. The experience of the assimilatory and oppressive boarding or residential schools is not unique to the Sámi people – other Indigenous peoples have been subjected to it as well, for example in Canada and Russia. This is why the film has wider appeal.

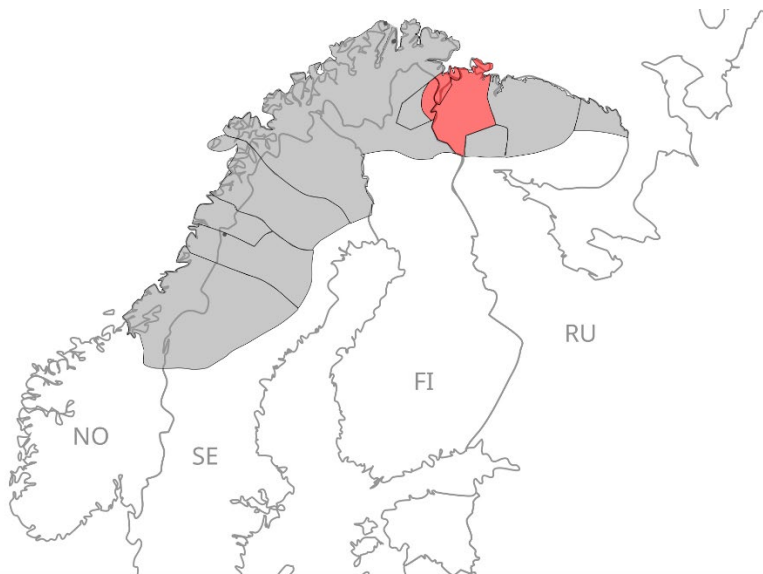


Figure 1. The historical Skolt Sámi area in red is in Russia, Finland, and Norway. The cultural Sápmi area is marked in grey and various Sámi languages are separated by lines in this area. (Skolt Sami language locator map By The mighty quill, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=131223144>)

2. Theoretical concepts

This article adopts a decolonial lens to socio-cultural linguistic and cultural practices, and thus challenges the prevailing perception of the Nordic countries as homogenous and utopian (cf. Lóftsdóttir and Jensen, 2016). The goal of the essay and the film is to challenge linguistic imperialism, i.e. the effect of majority cultures' expansion at the expense of linguistic and cultural minorities (Robertson, 1992), which in the Nordic context has led to a linguistic and

cultural erasure. In Finland, the assimilatory force was the nation state rather than a larger linguistic empire. In the most extreme cases assimilatory or colonial state policies lead to language death (Crystal, 2014) and complete cultural assimilation. In practice this happens when a generation stops passing a language and cultural practices on to the next generation, which leads to intergenerational transmission being disrupted and consequently to language shift (Fishman, 1991). In other words, majority societies can make a minority language and culture endangered and lead to the loss of Indigenous knowledge and community ties.

Some of the mechanisms leading to language endangerment are urbanisation, an unsupportive or downright hostile school system, and intermarriage which all lead to minority-language speakers being exposed to or shifting to a majority language. Sometimes the minority language is seen as having low status and not being useful for work or prospects, or it is associated with a backward or undesired culture, which in turn has negative consequences for minority people's self-image and wellbeing (see Bradley and Bradley, 2019). Conversely, it has been noted that being able to use one's language and express one's culture correlates with mental and physical wellbeing both in terms of physical indicators (e.g. lower rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes) as well as mental and behavioural indicators (e.g. lower rates of drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide) (e.g. Walsh, 2018; Jara and Phan, 2024). This loss of identity, negative self-image and suffering is evident from the very start of the film meet the main character Je'vida, also known as Iida, in front of a block of flats where she smokes cigarettes looking worn out and anxious. She has been through the boarding school system where she was forced to use Finnish. Later she marries a Finnish-speaking engineer and moves away, leaving her language, culture, and community behind.

This negative process can be reversed with reclamation and revitalisation of language and culture. Language reclamation refers to a 'larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives' (Leonard, 2012: 359), which is by its very nature decolonial (Leonard, 2017). Language reclamation can happen on an individual level as a type of emancipation and desire to explore one's heritage. A clear symbolic example of language reclamation is taking back your original name like Je'vida does in the film by burning the house sales contract that contains her Finnish name Iida Lehkonen. Revitalization, on the other hand, can have the goal of creating new speakers or reversing language shift (Hinton et al., 2018). Revitalization measures can vary from the more formal (e.g. Skolt Sámi as a school subject) to informal (e.g. singing or listening to songs in Skolt Sámi).

The film *Je'vida* is a prime example of both reclamation and revitalization. The filmmaker reclaims her past by tackling the most painful history of the Skolt Sámi and exposing the wrongs of the Finnish majority society. It also serves revitalisation purposes as most of the film is in Skolt Sámi. The director and some of the actors did not know the language and they learned the lines phonetically. The film brings Skolt Sámi to new domains (areas of use) thus further increasing its status. It also increases exposure to the language as the film can inspire those with a Skolt Sámi heritage or members of the majority who want to learn the language.

3. Skolt Sámi (and some Finnish) culture and history

Having been part of the Swedish Kingdom since 1100s, Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire in 1809. The 1800s saw Finland experience a national awakening in the spirit of National Romanticism which focused on the role of Finnish language in the nation. This process led to the country's independence in 1917.

After Finland's independence in 1917, Skolt Sámi people resided in four villages in Pechanga (Finnish: Petsamo) and became de facto Finnish citizens in 1920 following the Treaty of Tartu. The border was drawn in the middle of the Skolt Sámi area without consultation and the free movement following reindeer herds ended. Another blow to the Sámi in Finland after independence, was social Darwinist thinking in the 1920s and 30s. National identity became the focus of research and public debate, and Finns wanted to clearly distinguish themselves from Russians, Swedes, and Indigenous peoples. During this period, the majority population was prejudiced and nationally minded, and the literature from this era set in or about Pechanga contained contemptuous and even racist depictions of the Skolt Sámi. (Lehtola, 2012; 2015.)

In WWII, Finland fought against Soviet Union in two rounds: Winter War 1939-1940 and Continuation War 1941-1944. During the Continuation War, Finland entered a military alliance with Nazi Germany, and German military command was in charge in Lapland. After the peace treaty with Soviet Union, the German soldiers stationed in Finnish Lapland destroyed houses, bridges, and other infrastructure when retreating to the Arctic Ocean. Following WWII, the Pechanga area was ceded to Russia and the Skolt Sámi were evacuated to villages in Inari, Finland's northernmost municipality. Some Skolt Sámi remained on the Russian side. This forced and complicated resettlement was traumatic for the Skolt Sámi community, although they were consulted in the process (Mazzullo, 2017; Lehtola, 2018).

The post-war destruction was followed by the reconstruction of Lapland, which brought more Finns to the area. The development of the road network made it possible for postal services, the police, border force, and healthcare to reach Lapland, and the language of all these state institutions and services was Finnish (Lehtola, 2015: 87). Typical Finnish houses were built, and they were equipped and adorned with Finnish things, while Sámi clothes were replaced by Finnish clothes, partly because they were easier to access but also because they were seen as fashionable; Sámi people started attending dances and visiting other non-Sámi-speaking towns (Lehtola, 2015: 88). The Sámi no longer lived in summer and winter dwellings following their reindeer, instead they started to farm and took on paid work and earned money that they used to buy fabricated products (Lehtola, 2015: 88). The absence of the father in *Je'vida* could be explained by the fact that he is working elsewhere. Importantly for our understanding of the film, the law on compulsory schooling in 1947 led to the end of the old system where Sámi-speaking teachers had visited the children in remote areas. Instead, the Sámi families were obligated by the law to send their children to Finnish-speaking boarding schools in towns.

The Skolt dress, food, and customs have been influenced by coexistence with Russians and Karelians. Dancing has been important, as depicted in the midsummer scene in the film. Many Skolt Sámi are Russian Orthodox, unlike the majority population and other Sámi people of Finland that are Lutheran. The Orthodox church has been credited as being good for the preservation of language and the *leu'dd* singing tradition (Lehtola, 2015: 110). *Leu'dds* are

songs about people, places, and events, and they can be seen as central to the Skolt people's memory tradition (Jouste, 2022). The film *Je'vida* not only contains *leu'dd* singing but is a type of *leu'dd* itself containing collective memories and dedicated to one person, *Je'vida*.

This historical account above describes some of the reasons why Skolt Sámi language, and culture becoming marginalised and endangered. These experiences have been documented, for example, in several articles by a Skolt Sámi journalist Sara Wesslin who was listed by the BBC in 2017 as one of the 100 inspiring and influential women in the world. Her Finnish-language articles online focused on language loss, the boarding schools, and the transgenerational trauma (Wesslin, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c). In addition to the film *Je'vida*, there are various reclamation and revitalisation activities, e.g. language nests for children to learn the language and culture, Indigenous rewilding initiatives, powerful testimonies (Rasmus, 2014; Feodoroff, 2022), and an ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

4. Depiction of loss of language, culture, and community in *Je'vida*

The matrix story has two characters: the middle-aged *Je'vida/Iida* and her niece. Their time at the old house is intercepted by memories from the past: 1) a time when *Je'vida* is a child and her grandfather is alive, 2) a time at school and at home following the grandfather's death, and 3) *Je'vida* as a young woman working as a cook in the town of Ivalo. The other central characters in the past are *Je'vida's* sister *Anni*, *jeä'nn* 'mother', *ä'jj* 'grandfather', and *äkk* 'grandmother'.

When we meet *Je'vida*, the anxiety, trauma and experienced by the protagonist are obvious in her chain-smoking, sighs, and silence from the start. This impression is further supported by the grey-tone of the entire film that highlights the depression and suffering. The block of flats *Je'vida* lives in contrast with the house where she grew up: it is urban and anonymous, while the intimate house by the lake is in the wilderness surrounded by nature. The door to the house is closed when they arrive, just like the memories *Je'vida* has tried to guard. She unlocks the door with trembling hands and a fearful expression.

The niece had not heard about *Je'vida* before, let alone met her. We later discover that her mother *Anni* left the boarding school in a shiny black car while *Je'vida* watched from behind a window. They pretended not to know each other at school. *Anni* never told her daughter anything about her Skolt Sámi heritage, while the sister did not attend *Anni's* funeral. This can be interpreted to show that the sisters were traumatised and alienated to the point where they could not even face each other. The boarding school system forced them to hide their true selves and deny each other, thus breaking community bonds.

Language choices in the film are important. The fact that the niece speaks mostly Finnish shows how the language has been lost in her generation. She says in English 'No fucking way!' when she arrives at the house. The use of the global language English and the banal phrase show how far removed she is in from the Skolt Sámi language and culture in the beginning. *Je'vida*, on the other hand, reluctantly speaks Finnish and does not smile in the matrix story, while in the past she happily spoke Skolt Sámi with her family and beloved grandfather with a smile on her face. The older sister *Anni* only spoke Finnish, even to her mother. This shows she had

assimilated and aspired to a Finnish identity. The language of the school system and city life is Finnish, while language of the home is Skolt Sámi.

The niece represents the younger generations, who did not experience the oppression and assimilation first hand. She goes on a metaphorical journey to the past with the protagonist and enters the house that represents Je'vida's memories, much like the director has gone on a journey to understand the past and collective memories by making this film. The fact that the niece draws a picture at the house further underlines how similar to the director she is. In other words, the director and the niece can only depict what happened second-hand through art. The act of drawing could also suggest that art is a way to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma and explore one's past and identity. Opposite to the niece, Je'vida tries to forget and symbolically burns photos and other things she finds in the house. The two women do not get along initially.

Je'vida travels through clear pure water in her memories, we see an empty net and little Je'vida and her grandfather on a boat. The warm dialogue between the grandfather and granddaughter is in Skolt Sámi. Je'vida rows and descales the fish, she still has agency and looks like she belongs. The grandfather teaches about sustainable fishing and how you have to think about your grandchildren and their children and their children's children, and avoid fishing in the same lake every time. This scene underlines the loss of Indigenous knowledge that holds the key to sustainability. Grandfather says, 'A short ski doesn't carry far', perhaps criticising state policies. At the end of the fishing trip grandfather loses his knife in the water, another bad omen representing the loss of traditional culture.

Finnish state and modernity enter the idyllic setting in the shape of a black shiny car that the older sister runs to meet, once again showing how keen she is to embrace Finnishness. The two slick men have come to test Je'vida's intelligence by getting her to replicate shapes made by blocks. Je'vida does not do what is expected and says she wants to make her own shapes. This is the first indication of how the state expects a Sámi child to conform and how at odds the two types of knowledge, Indigenous and scientific are. The men speak Finnish and take photos without asking for permission.

The mother persuades the grandfather to let Je'vida to go to school so she learns to read. This shows that the intentions of parents were good. The mother asks her father in Skolt Sámi 'where will she learn proper Finnish?', the grandfather's response is that Finnish is 'a cold language'. The mother continues by asking 'how will you keep her warm?', meaning how will you provide for her if she doesn't know Finnish. The grandfather swears and suggests that fish are the solution. This scene shows how the traditional lifestyle could not in some parents' opinion provide a future for their children.

Finnish modernity is further encroaching on the Skolt Sámi way of life. The women of the family go to a Midsummer dance where someone starts playing a tango sung in Finnish on a record player. This highlights the intrusion of Finnish popular culture to Sámi lives and the destruction of minority cultural practices. In the next scene, the grandfather collapses and soon dies, further symbolising the death of traditional ways. Je'vida poignantly says to her grandfather 'I don't yet know how to fix a net', which encapsulates the way in which

knowledge is not passed on. After the funeral Je'vida asks her grandfather's ghost about the word 'Sampo' written on a matchbox. Sampo is, in fact, a mythical wealth-bringing device from the Finnish-Karelian national epic the Kalevala. In other words, it is another glaring symbol of Finnish nationalism that keeps creeping into the family's lives.

Before going to school Je'vida is wearing reindeer skin shoes filled with hay, just like her grandfather. She climbs onto the roof of the shed to avoid going to school and falls through. We see a reindeer calf struggling on thin ice like. Both these things symbolise the danger that entering the school system posed for a Sámi child. In school children are expected to stand in line, read a Finnish ABC book, and follow orders given in Finnish. Je'vida tries to talk to another Sámi boy in Skolt, but with the threat of a cane they are told not to speak Lapp, which is a very derogatory term for Sámi. The teacher claims that the Finnish language is like a warm piece of clothing that will keep them warm through their lives.

Je'vida is given liver casserole with raisins in school, which she has never had before and does not want to eat. That she is force-fed the food in a violent way by the matron, and the consequent vomit, symbolises the way in which Finnish language was forced down the children's throats. The female matron gives her the name Iida and utters the rudest sentence possible: 'A Russky Lappish evacuee brat can hardly afford to refuse a meal.' This shows how the Skolt Sámi were seen as Russians, Sámis, and poor, facing triple marginalisation. When the teacher arrives in the dining hall, the matron calls the situation in Finnish *väärinymmärrys* 'a misunderstanding'. The other girls later mock Je'vida for this and she tries to ask grandfather's ghost in a fever dream whether she is a misunderstanding. Grandfather comments 'is it a misunderstanding when a bird gets stuck in a net?' as if to say it is not Je'vida's fault, she is caught in the state machinery.

The matron's prayers and good night wishes are at odds with the discipline of the school and her cruelty. The matron shouts *hiljaisuus* 'silence' at night, as if to echo the way the Sámi children were silenced. We hear 'good morning, sit down, take your ABC book, silence' in Finnish many times. This shows how assimilation occurs and how you become a Finnish citizen through repeated actions. In the end, Je'vida receives Finnish-style shoes from the matron and puts them on in silence. This scene suggests she accepts her fate. Denying her identity, she joins in with others to mock a Sámi boy as a punishment for wetting the bed. The scene suggests the only way to survive is to join the majority society and its cruel ways.

In the matrix story the middle-aged Je'vida burns those Finnish leather shoes with a look of pain and shame on her face. We find out the niece was called a runaway in Helsinki. Her art depicted forests and lakes, and she did not belong. We also find out she is pregnant but is unsure whether she will keep the child. Je'vida asks for the name of father and whether he can sing. We later find out this is what the grandmother asked Je'vida when she told her she was getting married because a man who sings has a warm heart. Apparently grandfather sung *leu'dd*, indicating that warmth comes from Skolt Sámi culture. The niece, in her turn, asks Je'vida: 'What do I need to ask? How do I need to ask? What is the right question? Is it who are we? Where do we come from? Or should it be who are you? Or who were you?' She says she has been grasping at air the whole of her life, looking for the forest and clear water. She tries to

burn the picture of Je'vida she has drawn but Je'vida takes it out of the fire. It is as if the knowledge about the pregnancy and the niece's questions make Je'vida reconsider things.

In the past, Je'vida's mother is pregnant again and Je'vida is visiting home. She asks for bread instead of dried fish, which is another sign of assimilation. She goes to look for grandfather's spirit, but he is gone, and the lake gives very little fish. The mother goes into labour and Je'vida has to row the boat across the lake to get help and row back in a thunderstorm. This shows that the young generation is helpless at the face of the changes coming. A seaplane arrives with a midwife representing modernity, yet both the baby and mother both die, and fish fall from the sky. They cannot survive on dry land, just like the Skolt Sámi cannot survive without their own way of life. Je'vida burying the baby and putting her mother's Sámi hat away seem to symbolise the final stage of losing her identity. Je'vida has become Iida.

Now we see Je'vida as a young woman. She works as a cook in a restaurant where her grandmother comes to ask for bread for the sheep. Je'vida pretends not to know her at first. Grandmother comes to Je'vida's flat and gives her money to buy gas bottles, but she spends the money on high-heeled shoes in the store in town. These shoes represent her aspirations to be fancy, Finnish, and desired. At the dance later, Je'vida is fully immersed in the tango music that was played on the record player earlier. She covets the engineer her friend the waitress dances with and ends up kissing him. Je'vida has been corrupted by the ways of the world and she seems to feel shame when grandmother sees her kissing the engineer. Her feet hurt from the fancy shoes as if the identity she has adopted does not suit her. Je'vida and the engineer begin exchanging letters. Their Finnish-language letters are read out loud over scenes of grandmother having to leave the house and her beloved sheep. There is no work for Je'vida's fiancé in the north and she comes to say goodbye to grandmother in the care home.

In the final act of the matrix story, Je'vida incredibly finds her grandfather's lost knife in the lake and sees his spirit again repairing a net in the shed. She gives the knife back to him. For the first time the middle-aged Je'vida speaks Skolt saying, 'I burned everything'. Grandfather says, 'you haven't burned anything important, you remember things, the lake is still here'. It is not too late for the middle-aged Je'vida who smiles for the first time in the film. Grandfather reminds her that a fully intact net won't give you as many fish as a net with marks of life on it as if to say we are still good, if not better, when we are broken.

Meanwhile the niece tries on a Sámi hat. Je'vida touches the drawing of her by the niece and says, 'you know what your mother and I would've drawn' and the niece says 'blocks of flats and apple trees'. They understand each other and their reverse desires. Je'vida says: 'You are not a runaway, you've been looking for a home. You know this is all yours and it belongs to you.' The women burn the sales contract. It starts to rain, and they go inside, and the house, like their Sámi identity, provides them with shelter. Together, they put the Mother of God icon back on the shelf. The niece shows Je'vida a childhood photo of her and says 'you'. Je'vida cries. She hears grandmother's spirit reciting a blessing. She sees her mother, the fish in water, herself smiling. She swims under water as child and the niece calls 'Iida, Je'vida, come and eat'. The painful journey is over, it is time to eat.

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