

Ellos Deatnu and Post-State Indigenous Feminist Sovereignty

Rauna Kuokkanen

Abstract

The chapter considers an Indigenous resistance and resurgence movement, the Ellos Deatnu (Long Live Deatnu) camp and moratorium in Sápmi on the border of Norway and Finland. Employing Indigenous feminist analysis, it argues that rather than civil disobedience, Ellos Deatnu represents an endeavour to move beyond normative conceptions of nation-state, its colonial and patriarchal institutions, laws and practices and conventional Indigenous politics. The principles, values and practice of Ellos Deatnu movement reflect what I call post-state Indigenous feminist sovereignty; a deliberate engagement in ‘alternative’ modes of organizing beyond the state, and drawing on preexisting governance practices and structures while questioning the violence of settler colonialism and its concomitant heteropatriarchy.

Introduction

In Summer Solstice 2017, a small group of mostly young Sámi women and men set up a camp called Čearretsullo siida and moratorium on an island in the Deatnu (Tana) River near the town of Ohcejohka (Utsjoki) in Sápmi,¹ Northern Scandinavia. They called their movement Ellos Deatnu! (translated into English, Long Live Deatnu!) and declared autonomy on the island and the waters surrounding it, stating that instead of the states, the area is now governed by customary Sámi law. They announced a moratorium on recreational fishing around the island, which implied that fishing licenses purchased from the state were no longer valid. Instead, such permit holders were expected to ask permission to fish from local Sámi and especially those families whose traditional fishing sites are in question.

First of its kind in Sápmi, Ellos Deatnu emerged to resist, challenge and undermine the assertions of sovereignty of Nordic settler colonial states in general and the 2017 Deatnu Fishing Agreement in particular. The movement, however, was quickly categorized as mere civil disobedience by media and some scholars. In this chapter, I suggest that Ellos Deatnu exceeds the idea or practice of refusing and resisting the law and order of the state. Indigenous activists frequently emphasize

that for one, they are following their own rule of law (that precedes the state laws) and second, they neither have consented to nor participated in shaping the state laws that oppress them as a people. Rather than civil disobedience, I argue that Ellos Deatnu represents an attempt to regenerate a new vision of Sámi self-determination and jurisdiction and to recover traditional Sámi structures of governance regardless of the law and order of the state. As an Indigenous movement, Ellos Deatnu endeavours to move beyond the state and thus, become 'post-state'.

The rejection of Indigenous politics and political institutions as usual has characterized many recent Indigenous grassroot movements particularly in North America, including the most well-known Idle No More in Canada and Standing Rock in the US. Inspired and informed by these movements, Ellos Deatnu emerged from the desire to start a new sovereignty discourse vis-a-vis the Sámi in Scandinavia. Direct action of declaring autonomy and moratorium on the island of Čearretsuolu was unparalleled and extraordinary in Nordic standards. By foregrounding the resurgence of Indigenous concepts and practice of nationhood that do not acknowledge colonial and patriarchal institutions, laws and practices, Ellos Deatnu aspires to critically interrogate and expose the hypocrisy of the supposedly just and fair Nordic nation-states.

By deliberately engaging in 'alternative' modes of organizing similar to other Indigenous movements or 'protests', Ellos Deatnu represents an attempt to generate a new vision of Sámi self-determination and sovereignty based on the *siida*, traditional Sámi social and political organization.² Central to this vision is to reclaim and reengage with local traditional and kinship-based governance practices such as consensus and collaborative decision-making; spiritual leadership and ceremony; art and practical creativity, gift economies, and relationship-building with people and the land. I suggest that Ellos Deatnu does not only resist the colonial state but more importantly, centres the resurgence of Indigenous concepts and practice of nationhood at the intersection of eliminating colonial and patriarchal institutions, laws and practices.³ Like Indigenous feminism, Ellos Deatnu critically interrogates and exposes, through lived practice of localized resistance and resurgence, the hypocrisy the supposedly just and fair 'democratic', patriarchal settler colonial state that is predicated on the elimination and dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous feminist analyses are not limited on discussing women's participation, roles or views. Thus, to examine Ellos Deatnu through the lens of Indigenous feminist analysis is not to focus on the efforts of Indigenous women in the movement to the exclusion of Indigenous men. Among the central figures of Ellos Deatnu were young Sámi men whose public demeanor was notably different from the typical male Sámi political leadership of earlier times often characterized by self-aggrandizing conduct and old boys' networks. The male members of Ellos Deatnu appeared in public unflinching and smart yet unpretentious, modest and respectful. Unlike their predecessors, they also took guidance from their female elders. My intention is not to designate Ellos Deatnu as an Indigenous feminist movement but rather, consider the ways in which its motivation, core principles, activities and efforts attest to an ethos of Indigenous feminist theory and practice of sovereignty struggles, which differs from conventional Indigenous politics and the rights-based, electoral politics driven approach.

In this chapter, I examine how Indigenous feminist analysis enables a more informed and in-depth understanding of Ellos Deatnu's goals and intentions. I am interested in the ways in which the key Ellos Deatnu objectives correspond to central Indigenous feminist ideas of (1) challenging particularly the normativity of the settler state but also unsettling conventional Sámi politics as usual; and (2) articulating and embodying explicitly anti-oppressive alternatives for Indigenous governance. The chapter begins with an overview of the main tenets of Indigenous feminism. Second, it considers the Ellos Deatnu movement and the context it emerged in. Third, I discuss Nordic settler colonialism as it applies to Ellos Deatnu and the Nordic context. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Ellos Deatnu's two strategies, resistance and resurgence, in light of what I call post-state Indigenous feminist sovereignty.⁴

Indigenous Feminist Analysis and Resurgence

From its 'tribal feminist' roots in the U.S. (Allen 1986), Indigenous feminism has grown into a substantial field of global scholarly inquiry arguing for the inclusion of colonialism as an analytical category for conceptualizing Indigenous peoples' subjugation in general and Indigenous women's oppression in particular. Indigenous feminism has illustrated how colonization radically

undermined and transformed gender relations to subordinate, marginalize and exclude Indigenous women irrespective of their precolonial political and economic positions. Indigenous feminist theory has simultaneously challenged the unexamined racism, colonialism and white privilege in feminist theory and movements and the sexism and misogyny in Indigenous leadership and communities (e.g., Green 2007; Hernández Castillo 2010; Huhndorf and Suzack 2010; Lawrence and Anderson 2005; Maracle 2006; Moreton-Robinson 2000). Indigenous feminist activists and scholars have also long questioned misguided, sexist and discriminatory ideas and practices of Indigenous sovereignty and tradition and called for an interrogation of forms of violence underlying them (Monture 2004; Nahanee 1993; Snyder et al. 2015).

Indigenous feminist analysis has established that Indigenous sovereignty struggles are always gendered. Historically, Indigenous nations were typically characterized by governance structures where men, women and two-spirit people had their specific roles and responsibilities. These duties were usually gender differentiated but considered equal and complimentary. The repressive settler state and its institutionalized heteropatriarchal structures (see MacKinnon 1983; MacKinnon 1989) (Monture-Angus 1995; Simpson 2016) have systematically compromised Indigenous social, political and legal institutions and kinship structures (e.g., Turpel 1993). Throughout history, settler colonial states have sought to restructure Indigenous polities in their own mirror image while removing all *bona fide* power and authority from Indigenous polities (Rifkin 2011). Sometimes this has occurred through explicit physical violence and genocide, sometimes through less obvious structural coercion through laws and policy.

Indigenous political institutions created to replace existing political orders were commonly patriarchal and either actively excluded women or marginalized them indirectly. As a result of the colonial imposition and subsequent adoption of patriarchal values characterized by a hierarchical and rigid gender binary, early Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty movements were frequently male-dominated, replicating the exclusion and marginalization of women and their contributions to nation-building and governance. Today, sexism, homophobia and even misogyny are common concerns in many Indigenous communities (Barker 2006; Denetdale 2009; Napoleon 2009; Ramirez 2007).

Simultaneously, Indigenous women's self-determination has been contested and denied first by patriarchal colonial law, policies and institutions and later, by Indigenous men who have internalized and adopted the norms and values of patriarchal colonialism. As a result, Indigenous women's rights – or perhaps more correctly, their practices and responsibilities to their territories have been erased. Indigenous women's participation, human rights, political status and wellbeing have been radically curtailed. Indigenous women's self-determination is represented as an individual(istic) right in opposition to the a priori right of self-determination of Indigenous nations and communities.

Indigenous feminist analysis enables us to deconstruct the normativity of the nation-state and also addresses heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy within many Indigenous nationalisms. The key feminist insight of heteropatriarchy as a logic that naturalizes gender hierarchy both within the family (the male head of the household) and in the state structures (the male lawmakers and leadership) has been employed by Indigenous feminism to expose the heteropatriarchy's central role in colonizing Indigenous communities. In order for the colonial rule to be successful, Indigenous societies had to be restructured on the basis of strict gender binary and hierarchy which makes the patriarchal control appear natural (Simpson 2017; Smith 2008).

What is more, most existing self-government institutions are modeled after the logic and governance structures of the colonial state instead of drawing and building on practices of diplomacy and systems decision-making that Indigenous peoples had in place in the past. It has been suggested that contemporary self-government arrangements “serve as extensions of the colonial project” (Nadasdy 2017: 315). Given how gender has played an integral part of colonization, many Indigenous self-determination struggles have also internalized and replicate the structures of racialized and gendered hierarchies and domination they claim to dismantle. As my research shows, many contemporary Indigenous political orders have been deeply influenced by patriarchal gender regimes (Kuokkanen 2019).

By establishing a *siida* on an island and declaring autonomy called *Čearretsuolu* and a moratorium on recreational fishing licenses issued by the states, the *Ellos Deatnu* movement demonstrated a yearning and determination to move beyond Indigenous politics and existing Sámi political processes and institutions. Reflecting Indigenous feminist aspirations to disrupt and unsettle normative conceptions of the nation and nation-state, *Ellos Deatnu* refused to follow or imitate the organizational principles, structures and leadership of the nation-state, much of which characterizes formal Indigenous political bodies today. The movement did not expect or depend on the support of their respective official political bodies (the Sámi Parliaments in Norway and Finland), yet it did not denounce them either. *Ellos Deatnu* welcomed the support of their own political institutions and were open to collaborating with them notwithstanding that the movement is premised on their inadequacy not only in providing viable solutions to pressing issues in Sápmi but also more fundamentally, creating social and political structures that better reflect Sámi values and ways of deliberation and governance.

The River Deatnu and the 2017 Deatnu Agreement

The Deatnu River, located in Northern Scandinavia at the heart of the Sámi territory, is often regarded as one of the best salmon rivers in Europe. It also signifies the border between Norway and Finland. For local Sámi, however, Deatnu is not a border but a bond that connects people. Before roads were built along both its banks after the second world war, the Deatnu was the main channel and connection for everything: people, news, provisions, mail, building materials. The Sámi have been living and fishing for salmon along the 200-kilometer long Deatnu for thousands of years, building deep knowledge of and connection with the river and its fisheries, as well as developing specific fishing methods and systems of salmon fishery management and stewardship. One the last wild Atlantic salmon rivers in Europe, Deatnu has also long been a popular and well-known river for recreational fishing.

In the 1751 Strömstad Peace Accord, the Deatnu river was made into an international boundary, becoming one of the oldest political borders in Europe (Müller-Wille and Aikio 2005). An addendum to the 1751 Strömstad Peace Accord called the Lapp Codicil granted free passage for reindeer herding Sámi to cross the newly established state border migrating with their herds

between their winter and summer pastures.⁵ Later border closures and political changes, however, resulted in deliberately ignoring the Lapp Codicil, although it has never been formally repealed. Yet it was not until post-World War II when the border of Finland and Norway was patrolled more closely and states established a more permanent presence in the region. New laws were passed to regulate land ownership and citizenship (Müller-Wille and Aikio 2005: 49-50).⁶

Since 1873, salmon fishing in the Deatnu River has been regulated by bilateral agreements negotiated by the governments of Norway and Finland. A bilateral agreement regulates the fishing season, methods and the fishing rights of the local Sámi and recreational fisheries. In Spring 2017, the governments of Norway and Finland approved a new Deatnu Agreement, which radically restricted traditional Sámi fisheries and fishing rights. Traditional Sami fishing rights have belonged to and were passed down within families. In the new Deatnu Agreement, renegotiated to heed the scientists' warnings of declining salmon stocks, certain traditional fishing methods were banned altogether, fishing season was shortened and the fishing rights of non-resident local Sámi⁷ curtailed. Sámi traditional fisheries were restricted twice as much as recreational tourist fishing in addition to the creation of a new category of fishing rights, on the Finnish side of the river, belonging to non-local property owners (Aikio et al. 2016).⁸ The new Deatnu Agreement results in Sámi families losing their traditional fishing rights and eventually ending the Sámi fisheries in the Deatnu river will end as the younger generation are deprived of a range of skills and knowledge related to various traditional fishing practices (Satokangas 2017).

Prior to the signing of the Deatnu Agreement, local residents and Sami traditional rights holders lobbied extensively and met with various state officials and agencies through their organizations. Even though the Finnish and Norwegian negotiation teams had Sámi representatives, they were excluded from the most important negotiations and state representatives negotiated the final deal by themselves. Local Sámi were not able to participate in the drafting process (Aikio et al. 2016). The Deputy Chancellor of Justice in Finland confirmed that the consultation of the Sámi, a legislated requirement, had been deficient. Because of this, according to him, the parliamentary process leading to the new Deatnu Agreement has been unconstitutional (Wesslin 2017).

Regardless, the parliamentarians refused to reconsider the agreement, arguing that “regardless, we now have to live with it” (Aikio 2017, Lakkala 2017: online).

The encampment at Deatnu at Summer Solstice 2017 emerged first as resistance to the structural violence of the state that the new Deatnu Agreement represented. However, it was equally about resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination and the resilience of Indigenous peoples as self-organizing social and political societies. Ellos Deatnu and the Čearretsullo siida were a grassroots and direct enactment of Sámi self-determination, which had not taken place in Sápmi before. The movement immediately gained strong local, national and international support and the siida was frequently visited by local people, Sámi leadership, other supporters and international Indigenous allies. At a town hall meeting in Ohcejohka,⁹ fifty people gathered to discuss and support the moratorium and to draft and sign a statement that stipulates:

The Deatnu water system belongs to the local people who has the sole right and responsibility to decide, manage, care, look after and study their own waters and income. We do not accept the state ownership and management of our lands and waters. The Deatnu water system and all activities on it are not the business of the states. (Cited in Alajärvi 2017a: online)

Despite its precedent-setting character – for example, such straightforward public denouncements of state ownership of land, water and resources by the Sámi as above have been extremely rare in Scandinavia – law enforcement or other state officials did not intervene or interfere with the Čearretsullo siida. Neither police nor politicians publicly reacted to Ellos Deatnu declarations of autonomy and Sámi self-determination, nor intervened in the moratorium of recreational fishing. Such benign neglect is somewhat unusual, given the state’s readiness to step in on and police Indigenous ‘protests’. Possible reasons for the lack of concern include the remoteness of the location and the minimal public inconvenience of the action. According to the Ellos Deatnu participants, the few recreational fishers with whom they came into contact in the declared moratorium area were mostly collaborative and respectful.

In their efforts to highlight the fact local Sámi were the rightful owners and managers of the Deatnu River and its fisheries, the movement requested the governments of Norway and Finland

to provide them with legal proof of the transfer of the ownership of the Deatnu River to the states from the local Sámi siidas.¹⁰ Also a symbolic gesture, the point was to expose the Nordic legal fiction of the establishment of state ownership over the Deatnu River and its world-renowned salmon fisheries by unilaterally imposing state sovereignty and authority without a due process or consent of the traditional owners. In support and solidarity, another moratorium was declared on another island upstream from the Čearretsullo siida later in Summer 2017. The movement also reached out to Sámi fishers upstream critical of the Ellos Deatnu movement and who considered the new Deatnu Agreement a positive development. A public meeting was held in Kárásjohka to hear the opposition and discuss the issue. At the meeting, Ellos Deatnu members stressed that what is at stake in the new Deatnu Agreement is much greater than individual catch of salmon.¹¹

As planned, the Čearretsullo siida was closed down by the participants at the end of the fishing season in August 2017. Closing the siida, however, did not mean ending the moratorium or the movement. In a recorded statement, an Ellos Deatnu participant noted that the moratorium continues until the Deatnu agreement has been renegotiated and adopted at the local level and the process is led by Sámi of the Deatnu valley (see Ellos Deatnu 2017). Although the siida was taken down, the moratorium continued the following summer on and around the island of Čearretsulo.

The following year the movement morphed into a mobile Moratorium Office with the objective of sharing information about Sámi self-determination. The ‘office’ is a suitcase with information that can be taken to events by Ellos Deatnu participants to provide guidance and support to those individuals and communities who wanted to establish their own moratoriums or decolonized Sámi areas. According to their website, the Moratorium Office provides “a decolonialist self-determination service” and “solutions for ending colonial power”:

By declaring a moratorium, you can finally take control. Nobody knows your native lands like you and your community do. So why not decide for yourself how to use and manage it? A moratorium will ensure that not only your community but also your land will get fair treatment. (Moratorium Office n.d.: online)

The group of Sámi ‘artists’ behind the Moratorium Office also created a series of land-based art installations called *Rájáacummá* (Border Kiss) to call attention to the foundational values of Indigenous self-determination: reciprocity with and respect for the land, our responsibilities and balanced co-existence (Eira 2018). The land-based art installations seek to emphasize the connecting force of the river Deatnu and erase the colonial border – artificial to many local Sámi.

Nordic Settler Colonialism and 2017 Deatnu Agreement

The Ellos Deatnu concerns pertain to Sámi self-determination, traditional fishing rights and the local Sámi ownership and management of lands, waters and resources. The Nordic countries are not typically considered settler colonial states and there are historians in Finland who argue neither colonialism nor assimilation took place in the Sámi territory (Enbuske 2008; Hiltunen 2007; Lähteenmäki 2006; Vahtola 2014). Other scholars have, however, detailed the colonial history and present in the Nordic countries (Åhrén 2004; Arell 1979; Hansen and Olsen 2014; Lawrence and Åhrén 2016; Lindmark 2013; Lundmark 1998; Otnes 1970; Pedersen 1999; Sehlin MacNeil and Lawrence 2017).

Settler colonialism is an ongoing structure that requires the elimination of the ‘Native’ in order to obtain their land and resources (Wolfe 2006). Elimination implies a range of dynamics, including assimilation, integration, containment extermination and genocide (Veracini 2010). Part of the ‘settler colonial present’ (Veracini 2015) is to continually erase other histories and geographies as well as political and legal orders. Settler colonial states have long sought to undermine and eliminate Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty through various forms of structural state violence. In the Nordic countries, this takes place through repressive laws, policies and a deliberate failure to adhere to existing legislative obligations to ensure Sámi involvement in decision-making affecting them.

At the Deatnu River, the 2017 Agreement is a settler colonial structure, seeking to eliminate the Sámi by eradicating a traditional practice and livelihood and as the result, a central aspect of people’s identity who have grown up and learned to fish on the river. Deatnu is an inextricable part of who many Sámi are along the river. In the words of the Upper Deatnu Fishing Cooperative

in its letter to the Parliament of Finland: “The agreement robs Sámi of their rights and kills Sámi culture” (Satokangas 2017: online). The ongoing erosion of a unique fishing culture with its specific traditional knowledge and skills will only intensify as people are deprived of a range of skills and knowledge related to various traditional fishing practices, including weir, gill net, seine and drift net (Holmberg 2018). This is a serious concern particularly for the younger generation of Sámi from the river, many of whom are considered in the Agreement ‘tourists’ in their own river because they live elsewhere for their studies or work (Aikio et al. 2016). Days before the final approval of the Deatnu Agreement, Aslak Holmberg, a young Sámi man who grew up fishing in Deatnu and one of the organizers of Ellos Deatnu, pleaded on Facebook for international support in a filmed statement as the last resort:

Our way of life as Indigenous Sámi salmon fishers is being criminalised. ... It feels like [the governments of Norway and Finland] are killing us ... not by guns but slowly and silently. They’re claiming that we don’t have any knowledge of the river or the salmon in it. They say they’re protecting the salmon from us. (Holmberg 2017)

While the Tana Research Group (TRG), the scientific advisory group for governments of Norway and Finland, denies ignoring Sámi traditional knowledge of Deatnu fisheries, it constructs local Sámi knowledge a relativistic and descriptive belief system. For the TRG, only “natural sciences are concerned with finding objective truths” (Falkegard et al. 2016: 144).

Post-State Indigenous Feminist Sovereignty

The constitutive feature of Indigenous feminist theory and the practice of Indigenous feminist sovereignty is the strive toward restoring Indigenous nationhood and self-determination beyond the settler state and the nation-state model in a way that rejects all structures and forms of violence, including sexual and gender violence against Indigenous women. In the Nordic context, Ellos Deatnu was precedent-setting in its endeavour for its place-based grassroots reenvisioning, rebuilding, and embodying ‘alternative’ polities and political structures. It was a first public effort to reclaim and restore the siida governance as a both resistance and resurgence.

Whereas the Sámi political institutions such as the Sámi Parliaments sought to resolve the matter through the establishment and usual channels of consultation, Ellos Deatnu adopted an

unconventional and unexpected approach in Scandinavian standards. Notwithstanding that Ellos Deatnu began as a reaction and resistance to the new Deatnu Agreement, the focus was expressly protecting a way of life and a relationship to a specific place as well as enacting and embodying forms of legitimacy and sovereignties alternative to the settler colonial state. Ellos Deatnu pushed for an opening for ‘a new political reality’, a possibility of engagement between different political and ontological orders rather than participating in and through the state structures and institutions. This does necessarily involve dismantling the state as much as moving beyond the options the state model has to offer. As Elizabeth Strakosch suggests:

Such possibilities do not necessarily involve tearing the state down in order to usher in a new political reality. In its own way, this approach accedes to the claim that the state exhausts politics – only when it vacates this space is a new politics possible. Besides, we are bound up with the state, and it holds enormous resources for change. What may be possible is to look beyond the state as the enable and sole site of politics, to consider it as one among several different political institutions and orders. In this conception, new political arrangements do not have to rise up above or flow down from the state, but can exist alongside it. (Strakosch 2015: 186)

‘Post-state’ acknowledges the existence of Indigenous polities and seeks to reclaim them. It may mean creating parallel systems of governance but in Indigenous feminist iterations, it always involves attending to the relations of domination and the structural violence of state and its institutions. Notably however, ‘beyond the state’ is not a naïve or misguided suggestion to reject the state altogether. While the motivating concerns for rejecting the state are understandable, it is, however, a double-edged sword. There is a danger of reifying the earlier masculinist nationalist discourse that male-led Indigenous organizations have employed against Indigenous women advocating for gender equality. These organizations argued that women have betrayed their communities by looking for support outside their communities (Barker 2006; Fiske 1996; McIvor 1995). A dogmatic stance that opposes any interaction with the state may create new exclusionary and hegemonic practices in which only the unproblematically ‘traditional’ approach is valid (cf. Hokowhitu 2012).

What makes Ellos Deatnu (and many other Indigenous resurgence or nationhood movements) ‘post-state’ is their deliberate departure from the state as the point of reference as well as the qualitative difference between resurgence and a form of resistance that says no to everything but has nothing to offer as an alternative. The latter informs today’s much of mainstream politics and has been considered by some the crisis of democracy. Recent analyses of the state of Western democracies point out that while people have always tended more readily to rally *against* something rather than what they are stand *for*, present-day politics are defined by much more intense opposition to a point of destruction and extreme partisanship, making cooperative governance increasingly difficult (Fisher 2019; Foa and Mounk 2017; see also Norris 2017). This is most glaring at the moment in Britain and the US but characterize a number of other countries globally, amounting to a growing disillusionment with existing systems of political authority and “a hollowing out of confidence in democracy itself” (Barry and Mueller 2019: online). Whether civil disobedience or a crisis of democracy, Ellos Deatnu is neither although it may serve as an inspiration for other, more mainstream movements.

Ellos Deatnu strives to move beyond not only the nation-state but Sámi also political structures currently in place. This is one of the central objectives of recent Indigenous feminist theory and activism. Modeled after the bureaucratic and administrative structures of state apparatus, Indigenous self-government bodies may serve a purpose in delivering services and programs (tribal governments in the U.S.) or communicating with and issuing statements to the national governments (the Sámi Parliaments in Scandinavia) but they have failed – or perhaps more correctly, do not consider important – in restoring and reclaiming place-based local Indigenous governance systems and political orders. For some Sámi, the lack of Sámi foundations is a major shortcoming of the Sámi Parliaments as contemporary Sámi representative and political institutions. They have also long been criticized by many Sámi for not being able to chart the path for, or explain the meaning of Sámi determination. (Kuokkanen 2011). At the Ellos Deatnu town hall meeting in Kárásjohka, long-time Sámi educator and activist Asta Balto noted, “we’ve spent decades talking about self-determination without knowing what we mean. Now we have a movement that is showing us, putting it into practice, implementing it” (Balto 2017 personal communication 25 July).

Ellos Deatnu efforts to enact an ‘alternative’, anti-oppressive mode of Indigenous Sámi governance correspond to the central Indigenous feminist tenets. One of the most striking departures from Indigenous politics as usual is the way in which Indigenous women have articulated their resistance to the state’s coercive measures in terms of love. This became pronounced at the height of Idle No More in Canada in Winter 2012-13 when love of the land, their children, future generations and their communities were frequently discussed as the reasons for Indigenous women to take a stand and the streets (Nanibush 2014; Nason 2014; Simpson 2013; Wilson 2015).

The Čearretsullo siida code of conduct established a normative framework that is premised on principles of justice, love and respect, reciprocity, safety and security. The code also recognized siida’s embeddedness in and interdependence with the land and non-human beings. At the closing of the siida in August 2017, Ellos Deatnu issued a statement that was distinctly political yet premised on a different ethos, set of values and ontology than conventional Sámi political statement:

We thank Čearretsuolu – our partner, friend, spiritual source and siida. We thank the birds, animals, plants, and other blessings that belong to the island. We need this connection to a healthful life. Thank you for the peace we enjoyed this summer. We have now taken down our lávvu structures on the island and cleaned up after ourselves as we wait for the winter. The Čearretsuolu moratorium will remain in force during the next fishing season, and we intend to continue to advance self-governance in Čearretsuolu and in all of Sápmi. (Ellos Deatnu 2017)

By creating, presenting and enacting an alternative, Ellos Deatnu’s critique of existing self-government politics is implicit yet obvious. Through the lived practice, whether in ceremony or carrying out the daily chores of running the siida, Ellos Deatnu seeks to advocate and uphold relationships with the land and one another informed by interrelatedness, responsibility and mutual respect rather than coercion, hierarchy and domination.

In the Ellos Deatnu movement, Indigenous feminist sovereignty is about refusing the violence of the colonial border on the river Deatnu, as well as reclaiming and putting the ‘alternative’ into lived practice (alternative to the colonial structures but from a Sámi vantage point, the normal and normative ground). In its different iterations, Ellos Deatnu envisions, visualizes, carries out and exercises local Sámi autonomy on and with the land and the river that is so central to how Sámi along the river see themselves as individuals and in relation to others. The movement’s beauty – and also its fragility – is in its multiple facets. On the one hand, the movement is grounded on ethics of subtlety and on the other, forceful in its departure from Sámi politics as usual and its method of simply doing it instead of expecting or awaiting external recognition or approval, be it by the state institutions or Sámi political bodies. Further, Ellos Deatnu is a representation of Indigenous feminist sovereignty for it subtly (that is, without vehement declarations or formal statements) refuses those previous expressions of Indigenous sovereignty that are characterized by formal political processes, procedures and institutions as well as the informal old boys’ networks, grandstanding and sexist (or homophobic), patronizing behaviour toward others than cis-hetero men.

Conclusion

By their very existence, Indigenous peoples have always threatened, whether explicitly or implicitly, the fiction of state sovereignty. Indigenous political discourse, grassroots political activism, activist scholarship and especially the recent lived practice of Indigenous resurgence movements increasingly challenge the legitimacy and universality of the sovereign settler state (Coulthard 2014; Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014; Manuel 2015; Simpson 2014). Although Ellos Deatnu first emerged as resistance to state violence – specifically, opposition to unilateral, repressive legislation and negotiated agreements – it was equally (if not more) about resurgence of Sámi sovereignty and resilience of Sámi social and political orders.

Ellos Deatnu is an example of an Indigenous movement in a specific settler colonial context in which colonialism has been conventionally denied and the Nordic states have represented themselves as ‘Indigenous friendly’ and global leaders in advancing Indigenous rights. Drawing on Indigenous feminist theory and practice, I have suggested that the Ellos Deatnu movement is

not about mere civil disobedience within the framework of laws and policies of the nation-states. By exceeding such framework, it embodies the intent and aspirations of Indigenous feminist sovereignty in its challenging the legitimacy of the settler colonial state as well as decolonizing existing Indigenous governance structures. This is done through envisioning and embodying ‘alternatives’ that draw on preexisting Indigenous political traditions and remind settler colonial states about the fiction of state sovereignty on their territories.¹² By evoking other polities and authorities than the nation-state, these ‘alternatives’ denaturalize the patriarchal settler colonial state as the normative political and social framework.

Post-state Indigenous sovereignty movements reject mainstream politics both in substance and as practice but also markedly differ from it by not only presenting, but living the ‘alternative’. Obviously for Indigenous people, proposing ‘alternatives’ is not that difficult because the ‘alternatives’ often are already existing practices that have been undermined, erased and sometimes forgotten (and thus, are not alternatives at all, hence the quotation marks). Reclaiming them, however, is painstaking and takes effort and time. Importantly, the lived or attempted Indigenous ‘alternatives’ cannot be idealized or romanticized. Ellos Deatnu was and is an experiment that no doubt, like all movements, has had its specific challenges and shortcomings both internal and external to it. With its imperfections, however, Ellos Deatnu represents a radical and bold attempt to enact a specific Sámi vision of alternative political order beyond the violence of state sovereignty.

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¹ Sápmi is the territory of the Indigenous Sámi people, spanning the present-day northern Norway, Sweden and Finland and the Kola Peninsula, Russia.

² Siida comprises of a small number of extended families and their territories. Historically, Sápmi was organized into dozens of siidas. The siida governance system allocated lands and resources to the use of individual families. The siida governance was never formally repealed but rather, increasingly overlooked and eroded. In the 19th century, the siida structures had been undermined to a point that the imposition of the settler colonial administrative system was relatively easy. The imposition and reorganization of colonial borders in Sápmi also played a role in the erosion of the siida system.

³ For Indigenous resurgence see, for example, Coulthard (2014), Simpson (2012) and Waziyatawin (2012).

⁴ Many Indigenous peoples assert their pre-existing sovereignty, evident in the fact that at the time of contact they were politically independent societies or nations, governing themselves and their territories under their own laws. Indigenous sovereignty is typically considered qualitatively different from the Westphalian concept of sovereignty characterized by geographically separate territories and jurisdictions the related doctrine of non-interference in the domestic affairs of a state. Most Indigenous scholars and activists maintain that sovereignty for Indigenous peoples seldom calls forth independence or non-interference.

⁵ In addition to transboundary rights, the Codicil included provisions on, inter alia, Sámi internal autonomy, citizenship and taxation (Åhrén 2004; Pedersen 2006).

⁶ For a discussion on the effects of the state borders partitioning Sápmi and the enforced citizenship of the Sámi, and Sámi responses to this development, see Lantto (2010).

⁷ The term ‘non-resident local Sámi’ refers to those individuals who are from the Deatnu River, whose families live there and continue to have traditional fishing rights in the river. Due to limited educational and employment opportunities, many Sámi have moved to urban areas but return home regularly, especially in the summer to practice fishing.

⁸ The traditional Sámi fishing rights in the Deatnu are tied to the ownership of property (land) along the river. Given the centrality of salmon fishing in the local economy, each property was granted certain fishing rights and sites in the river. There is a decades-long tradition of local Sámi individuals selling off small parcels of their property to mainly fishing tourists who have built holiday cabins along the river.

⁹ Ohcejohka (Utsjoki) has a population of approximately 700 people.

¹⁰ The Deatnu valley was historically governed by Ávjovárri, Deatnu and Ohcejohka siidas, which in the 17th century banned non-siida members (Sámi and non-Sámi) fishing in the river. As part of the siida governing structure, the Sámi Court approved the collective salmon fisheries in the Upper Deatnu Vuovdaguoika region up until the mid 19th century (Pedersen 1986; Solbakk 2003).

¹¹ Some local Sámi fishers upstream Deatnu praised the new agreement for increasing their catch of salmon. They argued that thanks to the restrictions downstream, salmon have a better chance to get upstream (see Alajärvi 2017b; Alajärvi and Tammela 2017)

¹² The legal fiction of “terra nullius” employed for the purposes of distributing sovereignty among settler states and of justifying ongoing state policies has been rejected also by a number of legal scholars (see Macklem 2015; McAdam 2015; McNeil 2013).