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Komi through Knitting and Weaving

When you knit these logical and sophisticated [Komi] patterns, consider that they have been passed down through the generations in an oral rather than a written tradition (Schurch 1998, 6).

During the LiLa summer school, we all explored the landscape from different perspectives: anthropological, artistic, educational, touristic and local. The experience of Komi as a landscape turned out to be very complex, multilayered and controversial, which we all processed differently. I approached the experience by diving into the fascinating world and history of Komi handicraft patterns and processed them in my knitting.

COLLECTING THE THREADS TOGETHER

I had some prior knowledge of the Komi region's handicraft traditions and knew a few people and their skills in knitting, weaving and plant dyeing. I carried my knitting needles with me throughout the time I was at the school and knew I would somehow put my encounters with my old and new friends into stitches. I did not knit during my stay in Komi but collected intentional and unintentional material to be put on the needles after the trip.

The experience of the Komi landscape and the taskscape (Ingold 2002) determined the direction of my knitting. According to Ingold (2002), people are not only forming the landscape through their tasks but also by following the natural cycles. Although we were visitors, we had a chance to follow and take part in the taskscapes in the villages. I noticed how everyday life ran from Sunday masses to cooking meals and washing dishes. I saw beauty and abandoned landscapes. I paid admiring attention to the peaceful blue colour paint on the walls of the houses and quite the opposite in the rather interesting colour combinations in the local handicrafts. I listened to stories and songs, laughed at translated jokes and was overwhelmed of the heart-warming hospitality of the locals everywhere we went.

The past and the future were combined with the present (Ingold 2002) in different ways: the peace and the freedom of rural life in the villages had an undertow of the worry of desolation and children leaving the place. In the city, on the other hand, the joy of the comforts of the modern world mixed with frustration that nobody really cared about the common future of the place, leaving old houses to deteriorate and the cityscape to decline.

My knitting process started with these materials at hand. The colours I chose represented the landscape, while the items I knitted and weaved represented the people and living in the landscape. The forms and designs became a mixture of the past and future in the present, as well as a combination of my own knitting traditions and the ones I learnt in Komi. I knitted in honour of the people I knew, with each stitch reflecting on the encounters, the experiences and the landscapes. As in all my similar projects, studying local traditions through using locally produced yarn and distinctive patterns and having discussions with local artisans help me to pay my respects to the local people who have welcomed me into their places. It is an act of respect towards the culture I have been given a chance to become acquainted with.

Through this kind of knitting, the slow motion of stitching and the feeling of wool in my fingers give the space needed to process and understand the unfamiliar cultural features of the visited place. This also works as a counterforce to the hectic way of living. It is an effective way of paying honest attention to what has happened.



I bought the stockings from a local knitter and was fascinated by the color combinations and style that seemed to differ greatly from my own traditions. These stockings inspired my exploration to the secrets of Komi knitting styles.

In one of the master classes Lidia Kostareva showed the basics of cold dyeing with onion skins. Image: Tanya Kravtsov She also gave me her plant dyed yarn escorted with a note: "I am waiting for the result"

MORE THAN JUST A DIAMOND MODEL

My enthusiasm for learning the local Komi patterns and handicraft traditions started when I visited the ethnographic museum in Syktyvkar, which is filled with more complex and beautifully weaved belts and knitted items. Komi patterning has its own distinctive features, which make it stand out from any other. The reason for diagonal geometric reticulations is based on the old tradition that the patterns were passed on orally from one generation to the other and were easier to remember. More precisely, the fundamental design element of the Komi patterns is the diamond whose appearance in soft hand-crafts can be tracked back to the second century BCE (Schurch 1998).

Every Komi village used to have its own distinct variations in the basic patterning and the knitted garments, which often revealed where the wearers were from. According to Schurch (1998), not only the Komi region but also the other older Finno-Ugric textiles shared a similar ornamentation and, later on, influenced other internationally famous patterning. When I started finding references to the broader Finno-Ugric (that Finland and Komi share among other nations) knitting traditions, I started to feel connected. I was of the mind that learning these patterns was no longer only a visitor's tribute to an unfamiliar culture, but a way of placing my own cultural heritage in a wider context. I have found that showing interest in and sharing the joint heritage of knitting tend to connect people from different backgrounds. Knitting is a shared language, which is understood almost anywhere. If people do not knit themselves, they usually know someone in their family who has knitted. Schurch (1998, 8) puts it well: the common language of our stiches extends beyond the boundaries of time, cultural differences and geography.

I started to understand the Komi mindset better and find resemblances to my own cultural heritage. I realized that there had been hints to these throughout our stay in Komi, such as when I read the locals' dry sense of humour from their body language and laughed with tears in my eyes. I understood that we had many things in common, although the spoken language barrier hindered the fluency of communication.



To these slipper socks I combined all the elements. The colours of copper and ochre were plant-dyed yarn by Lidia and me but the blue represented the Komi landscape. The pattern was traditional but the slipper socks were more contemporary design

MORE SIMILAR THAN DIFFERENT

The aspects of cultural sustainability as described in the above situations interest me. It is essential in cultural sustainability to perceive how lives are lived and the ways in which identities and relationships are formed in certain parts of the world. It is not about experts defining and researching the values of heritage and landscape; rather, it is about creating a grassroots approach where the inhabitants themselves determine what they value and how they want to express their sense of place (Auclair & Fairclough 2015).

It transpires that the act of knitting is connected with dimensions of contemporary artworks, as it is an activity that encourages dialogue between participants from different cultural backgrounds. By approaching communities with familiar and basic handicraft traditions, low-threshold art activities can be easier to create. The handicraft-based contemporary art practices with place-specific approaches create an open space for dialogue where the values and perceptions of cultural heritage can be negotiated (Härkönen, Huhmarniemi & Jokela 2018.)

The process of knitting and weaving has materialized into five different items, which are connected by the colour blue. Although I have approached the Komi culture mainly from a visitor's point of view, I have seen this particular act of knitting as a shared heritage between Komi and Finland. Through studying the local handicraft traditions and patterns, I have found more similarities than differences between our regions. The people and their traditions, as connected to landscape, have become even more meaningful than before the process.

I continued to examine the patterns to traditional band weaving and the similar diamond element appeared in those patterns as well. I created my own combination from few different patterns.



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