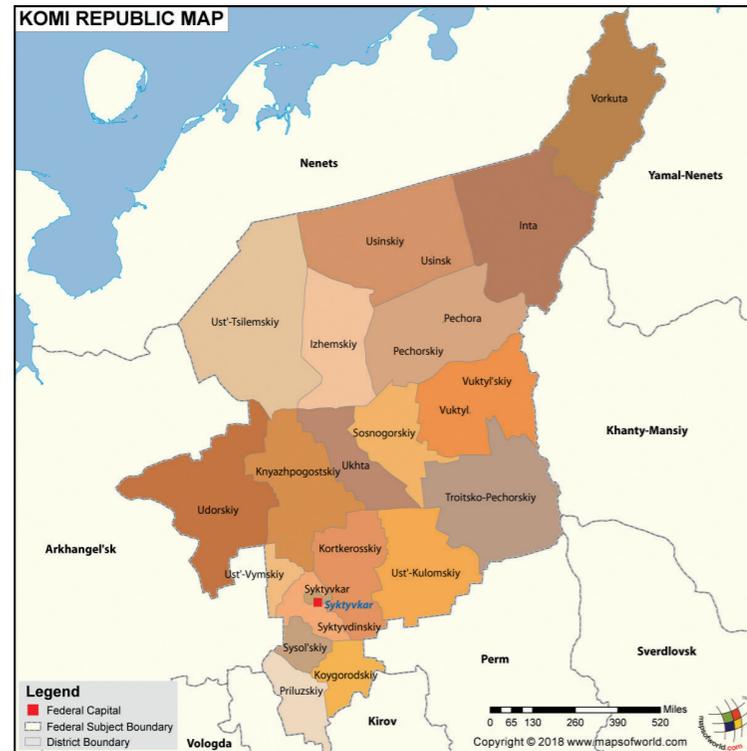


Linda T. F. Kristoffersen

Master student in Social Anthropology, UiT - The Arctic University of Norway

## This is My Motherland

In May 2018 an interdisciplinary fieldwork, «Living in the Landscape » (LiLa), took place in several villages in the Knyazhpogost District, Komi Republic, Russia. The findings from the project was subsequently exhibited at Syktyvkar State University. In the following I will present some of the results from a social anthropological perspective, both theoretical, empirical and practical.



Map of the area

Map from <https://www.mapsofworld.com/russia/federal-subjects/komi.html> [05.06.18]

### SENSE OF PLACE

*Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all — to exist in any way — is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. (Casey 1997, p. ix)*

Places, that is stable, bounded and historically continuous entities that have been inscribed with meaning, (Lewicka 2011, 210) have their own identity. This identity is created by the fact that places have their own names and are perceived as unique; there are not two identical places. (Lewicka 2011, 223; Thuen 2003, 59.) Place identity helps to categorize the citizens through a social affiliation that is usually stated in contrast to the others, and local communities are formed from a background of mutual identification. One is «equal» because they're from the same place. (Bjerkli 1995, 66; Thuen 2003, 64-65.) Place attachment, then, defined as the emotional bond people develop with specific areas or settings (Hernández et al. 2007, 310; Lewicka 2011, 219) can be a fundamental component of self-definition and personal identity, «(...) which develops according to the elements that typify a specific area and the nature of the interactions that occur there». (Hernández et al. 2007, 311.) Such attachment has been studied across different disciplines using various scales of measurement, divided between physical and social dimensions. Residents of «traditional places» such as small towns and villages report the highest attachment, (Lewicka 2011, 210) and length of residence is consistently found to be the best place attachment predictor: (Hernández et al. 2007, 311; Lewicka 2011, 225)

*Places in which people reside for many years acquire meanings associated with several life stages, such as growing up, dating partners, marrying, having children, and getting old, which results in a rich network of place-related meanings (...) (Lewicka 2011, 224).*

Although in the majority of research the most common aspect of attachment is sociocultural factors, some studies indicate that natural environment dimensions, such as access to nature (i.e. parks, gardens and forests) contribute to higher scores than the social features scale (Lewicka 2011, 214, 217). This coincides with our findings from one of the villages, where we visited an elderly Komi<sup>1</sup> lady. Her husband had recently died, which led to a somewhat involuntary relocation to the city as she didn't feel safe alone in the village. Now she only lives in the village during the summer, when there are more people in the area.

«This is my motherland», she said, «I know everything here». She says she knows where to find berries and mushrooms, and she also has a small garden and a greenhouse for growing different kinds of produce.

By moving to the city all of these ecological aspects are lost, and in some ways she loses parts of herself as well:

*When forced to move, people lose not only their social contacts or the familiar view from the window, but they must rearrange their entire set of daily routines and adaptations, and shift to entirely new habits.*

*Some people, particularly older ones, never achieve this. (Lewicka 2011, 226)*

«There are too many people in the city», she says, «they give me a headache».

<sup>1</sup>Komi people are the indigenous population of the Komi Republic. They belong to the group of the Finno-Ugric peoples.



Garden and greenhouse Image: Linda T. F. Kristoffersen

### RETHINKING ANTHROPOLOGY

Even though visual ethnography has had an increase in popularity lately, the most common outlet for anthropological research is still the text. While some think that «(...) written anthropology and visual ethnography are complementary (...)» (Nijland in Postma & Crawford 2006, 3) and «the visual is such an important component of human culture, cognitive and perceptual processes, that can be relevant to all areas of anthropology» (Morphy & Banks 1997, 2–3), others argue that «visual anthropology [is] an altogether different discipline, outside, written anthropology, as audiovisual representations address us differently than words and written texts» (MacDougall in Postma & Crawford 2006, 2) and as such using visual media can leave our data open to interpretation and might lead to «(...) losing one's author-



Visiting the Komi lady. The branches she carries are used to remove spiderwebs. Image: Linda T. F. Kristoffersen

ity over the understandings people form (...)» (Madden 2010, 112). However, long texts are difficult to present at an exhibition, so we had to find a more accessible way to communicate our findings. In some ways the solution was to go back to what could be considered the earliest days of anthropology; the ethnographic museum. Placing material on display is a form of interpretation where storytelling takes form by defining, segmenting and grouping objects together to illustrate ideas and create a visual experience for the visitors. In situ displays, that is installations such as period rooms and dioramas, recreate a virtual world into which the visitors enter. Thus, exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical displays with certain conceptual frames, where the objects, determined by ethnographer, are the actors. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 3, 20.)

During our fieldwork in the villages we quickly got acquainted with the Russian tea culture. Our very first experience after arriving in the countryside was with the samovar; a heated metal container designed to boil water for tea. Pinecones were used as fuel, by setting them on fire and dropping them in the metal pipe. A small amount of concentrated tea was poured from a teapot into a cup, then hot water was added from the samovar to dilute the tea to the appropriate strength. Even though today samovars mostly have fallen out of everyday use, they are still considered a symbol of Russian hospitality and an indispensable element of Russian culture.

During our visit to the aforementioned Komi lady we unfortunately had very limited time, and the visit was cut short when one of the project participants advised us to leave before she offered us tea. Declining such an invitation would have been considered disrespectful. With this in mind we came up with the idea of creating a museum-like tea table at the exhibition.

We incorporated details from our visit to the Komi lady, such as quotes and images from her house. By setting up a chair at the table we invited the visitors to sit down and in some ways participate in the embodied experience which one could argue is the very essence of anthropology:

*It is a practice that values the idea that to know other humans the ethnographer must do as others do, live with others, eat, work and experience the same daily patterns as others. This approach is called participant observation, and it has been a fundamental aspect of ethnographic research over the past century.* (Madden 2010, 16)



Boiling water in samovars. Image: Emma Mustajärvi

Tea time installation, Image  
Linda T. F. Kristoffersen



## REFERENCES

- Bjerkli, B. 1995.** Identitet og stedstilknytning - om kulturarrangementer som identitetsmessig uttrykk, I G. Arnestad (red.): *Kultur- og regionalutvikling*. Oslo: Tano
- Casey, E. S. 1997.** *The fate of place : A philosophical history*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press
- Hernández, Carmen Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, and Hess. 2007.** Place attachment and place identity in natives and non-natives. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 27(4), 310-319
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. 1998.** *Destination culture : Tourism, museums and heritage*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press
- Lewicka, M. 2011.** Place attachment: How far have we come in the last 40 years. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 31(3), 207-230
- Madden, R. 2010.** *Being Ethnographic. A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications
- Morphy, H. & Banks, M. 1997.** *Rethinking visual anthropology*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press
- Postma, M. & Crawford, P. I. 2006.** Introduction. *Visual Ethnography and Anthropology*. In (eds.) Postma, M. and Crawford, P. (eds.) *Reflecting Visual Ethnography - using the camera in anthropological research*. Denmark: Intervention Press
- Thuen, T. 2003.** Stedets identitet, I T. Thuen. (red): *Sted og tilhørighet*. Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget