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## Contextual sites of acknowledgement? Kven heritage and contemporary identity articulation processes

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### ABSTRACT

It is more than 20 years since Kvens were recognized as a national minority in Norway, yet there is still a need for acknowledgement of Kven culture and heritage. This article discusses contemporary processes of identity articulation related to Kven heritage. Based on interviews with people who relate to a key Kven place in Varanger, we discuss people's identity articulation processes in different contexts. Specifically, three contextual sites for identity articulation processes are discussed in detail: family, public institutions and discourse, and multicultural society. We maintain that the family site has a pivotal role when it comes to heritage and identity articulation processes, but it can also be a source of pain and struggle. Public discourse and institutions such as media, museums and schools can provide authoritative acknowledgement of identity, but they come with a risk of reducing nuances in identity articulation processes. Within multicultural sites it can be a struggle to find room for people's ethnic complexities. Across contextual sites, finding support for identity articulation processes is key to acknowledgement of Kven heritage.

### KEYWORDS

Kven heritage; national minority; Norwegianization; contextual sites; identity articulation processes

## Introduction

“We do not call ourselves Kven in my family,” observes Lajla (a pseudonym). Lajla has recently discovered her Kven heritage, but during an interview she tells us how difficult it is for her to embrace her ethnic identity because of potential reactions from her own family. However, the local museum has come to represent an important site for Lajla's identity articulation processes, and thus Lajla's quote serves as a fitting introduction to this article, in which we explore contemporary identity articulation in different contexts.

The backdrop for this article is a history of systematic and lasting Norwegianization policies leading to suppression, discrimination, and marginalization of Kvens<sup>1</sup> and other minorities, and with this a silencing of ethnic minorities' voices (Ryymim 2019). As Wilhelmsen (2021, 25) says, “Through Norwegianization, not only have Kven language and culture

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become increasingly erased, but the process of finding an answer to the question “What does it mean to be Kven?” has also been complicated.”

Importantly, Norwegianization has reinforced categorization among Norway’s minority populations by situating individuals and groups differently in colonial and nation-building processes, and by making ethnicity a particularly important organizing principle (Olsen 2010).<sup>2</sup> In response to these processes, as Stubberud (2021) points out, strategic essentialization has emerged as a form of resistance to assimilation policies, giving priority to the shaping of unified collective representations and clear ethnic categories. However, such ethnic categories created in political discourse, while potentially strengthening visibility, can reinforce ideas of clear separation, possibly creating dilemmas for people with multicultural backgrounds. Clearly defined categories can be seen to hide kinship to several ethnic groups, and identity articulations of importance to individuals can disappear into political hierarchy. This can have profound consequences for heterogeneity within minorities, such as Kvens, and potentially make way for uncertainty or conflicts, since, as Anttonen (1998, 53) rightfully explains: “[t]he Kven ethnic group is not an entity with solid boundaries, but rather a set of loosely-knit groupings with moving, overlapping and fuzzy borders.”

Following this, while recognizing the need for acknowledgement and visibility of Kven culture and heritage, in this article we would call for an openness toward multicultural and flexible identities as part of Kven heritage processes. Importantly, as identity articulation processes are relational, situational, and negotiated, rather than pointing to categories or symbols of Kven-ness, or any other ethnic identity for that matter, we are interested in processes of contemporary identity articulations related to Kven heritage in context. Specifically, we ask how people’s identity articulation processes play out in different contextual sites. The objective is to provide knowledge on how complex identity articulation processes linked to Kven heritage play out in contextual sites, and thus to better understand how Kven heritage can be acknowledged and nourished across contexts in contemporary society.

## Background

Since 1999, Kvens hold the status of a national minority in Norway,<sup>3</sup> a status which entails governmental responsibility in the application of political and financial instruments to ensure that groups can maintain and develop their identity and culture (Council of Europe 1995).<sup>4</sup> During the last 40 years, there have been what could be referred to as several phases of Kven mobilization, with increased focus on Kven culture, language and heritage in academic writing and ethno-political movements (Niemi 2001; Ryymin 2001, 2004, 2007; Aarekol 2009; Mellem 2020).<sup>5</sup> Ulrich (2003, 141) highlights the crucial role played by public institutions that have mastered the “language of recognition” (such as schools, museums, cultural centres, and media) in articulating Kven identity and making it visible and accessible. The term Kven has resurfaced with positive meaning in both academic publications and ethno-political activism, even though in some regions there are still ethno-political disputes over the use of “Kven” as an ethnonym and also the introduction of Kven language in the educational system (A. Berg and Rahkonen 2020; E. Berg 2022; Vaara 2022). Recent research, however, indicates that young people are positive to the use of the term Kven, even among those who refer to themselves as Finnish descendants (Skardal 2022).

Despite the developments outlined above, Kvens are still described as invisible in public spaces (Olsen 2021). The number of Kven speakers dropped with

Norwegianization, resulting in a language shift whereby older generations only spoke Norwegian to the younger generation, in order to release them from “burdens” associated with Kven language (Lane 2010). Today, Kven language is endangered, with a low number of mother-tongue speakers, particularly in younger generations (Lane 2010, 2011; Räisänen and Kunnas 2012; Huru, Räisänen, and Simensen 2018; Niiranen 2021). The desires of younger generations to revitalize the language are constantly challenged (Skardal 2022), limiting possibilities for speaking Kven. In 2017, the Norwegian Parliament established the Norwegian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with a mandate to investigate the effects of the Norwegianization policies on several minorities in Norway, among them Kvens. Research conducted in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission shows that only about one in ten Norwegians are aware of Norwegianization of Kvens (Josefsen 2021). Calls for greater visibility of Kven culture in public discourse have been voiced from inside Kven communities. For instance, May-Britt Blomli, representing the Kven youth organization *Kvääninuoret*, has said that deeper and more widespread knowledge about Kvens is needed, and that it would be easier to be a Kven today if more people had knowledge about Kvens (Lanes 2020). Now, more than 20 years since Kvens were recognized as a national minority in Norway, concepts such as “revitalization,” “awakening” and “spring” are often used in public discourse related to Kven culture, indicating ongoing negotiations and mobilization efforts to secure the rights to maintain and develop Kven culture, language and way of life (Fadnes 2021; Vaara 2021; Varanger Museum n.d.).

### **Kven heritage and identity articulation processes**

The research literature relating to Kven identity articulation processes has been both sporadic and often connected to debates about expressions of ethnicity. Scholars have paid attention to what can be considered Kven culture, the mediation of material Kven culture in museums (Aarekol 2009), and the cultural traditions and expressions of Kvens as a distinct group (Bratrein 1980; Olsen 1982; Saressalo 1986). Debates regarding what it means to be and be called Kven have been addressed (Niemi 1991), as have disputes concerning the use of the Kven ethnonym and the introduction of Kven language into educational programs (Olsen 1982; Niemi 1991; Karikoski and Pedersen 1996).

In the northern part of Norway, a great number of people have mixed Kven and Sámi heritage as well as Norwegian and/or other backgrounds (Huru, Räisänen, and Simensen 2018; Dankertsen, Pettersen, and Otterlei 2021). As Dankertsen, Pettersen, and Otterlei (2021, 154) observe, it is “a complex ethnic situation where many people have an ethnically mixed background.” It is not surprising, then, that several critics have problematized the ethnic categories and material symbols that represent Kven identity in ways that leave less room for multiple, or alternating, belongings (Anttonen 1998; Megard 1999; Maliniemi and Kristiansen 2018; Stubberud 2021). Clear categories created in political discourses are seen to create dilemmas for people with mixed backgrounds (Kramvig 1999; Stubberud 2021), since such categories hide or gloss over mixed ethnic kinship and discourage or undermine multilingualism (Eidheim 1971; Olsen 2010; Keskinen, Skaptadóttir, and Toivanen 2019; Dankertsen, Pettersen, and Otterlei 2021).

Importantly, however, as Stubberud (2021) points out, the practice of strategic essentialization has emerged as a form of resistance to Norwegianization and assimilating

policies. This practice and the perspectives it implies give priority to the shaping of unified collective representations using clear categories, with profound consequences for heterogeneity among minorities. Personal attributes disappear into a political hierarchy, making way for ambivalence, disagreements, and disputes. Similarly, choosing to learn, use and advocate for the Kven language also highlights and sharpens border lines. As Megard (1999) has shown, claims to ethnicity in northern Norway reveal different strategic options for shaping identity and belonging. These options offer the possibility to choose several and conflicting ways of being Kven in a context, where moulding an identity can be problematic.

Along with the local and national developments mentioned above, globalization impacts contemporary identity processes in interesting, and potentially productive ways. Specifically, intensified globalization processes can bring about “mixed or ambiguous identifications” (Featherstone 2001, 523), reinforcing poststructuralist notions of identity as “relational, situational, and negotiated, rather than innate, fundamental, and absolute” (Thuen 2003, 21–22). This is of relevance to contemporary Kven identity articulation processes since globalization in many ways intensifies cultural homogeneity and multicultural contexts; that is, globalized contexts expand the context within which identity articulations take place, allowing new configurations of ethnic complexity to be involved in identity articulation processes (Belay 2018; Cleveland 2022).

To this end, Hiss, Pesch, and Sollid (2021) identify two processes taking place simultaneously around the world: on the one hand, to a far greater extent than before, national minorities and indigenous people are receiving positive juridical and political attention and are reclaiming their minoritized languages and cultures; on the other hand, “linguistic diversity is increasing through transnational migration and global communication” (Hiss, Pesch, and Sollid 2021, 2). Similarly, Ryymin (2001, 51) points out that globalization brings with it a loosening of national identity bonds, giving more space to emerging supra- and sub-national identities, such as those of the Kvens. What it means to be Kven is not something that can fit into a category of Kven-ness, and rather than look for what is typically Kven, we should instead endeavour to investigate “different manifestations of identity in their historical context, and to see them as contingent on that context” (Ryymin 2001, 52).

It follows from the above understandings that knowledge of one’s own and others’ identities is culturally specific and must be understood in light of certain discourse(s) and contexts. In this article, we thus take a cultural critical approach to identity, aligning ourselves with Hall (2020, 226), who explains that identity articulation is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” and not an essence but a positioning “made, within the discourses of history and culture.”

## Methodological procedures

For the purposes of this article, we conducted nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with persons who in some way or another relate to Kven heritage.<sup>6</sup> We recruited participants associated with Vadsø. Vadsø is part of the Varanger region, which is an area regarded as a Kven stronghold and a key place in scholarly research relating to Kven heritage (Rudie 1962; Megard 1999; Niemi 2002, 2010; Sundelin 2007; Paulaharju 2020). Vadsø has been referred to as the “Kven Capital,” and Kven history and culture are particularly strong in the area, for instance with Vadsø Museum – Rujia Kven Museum located here

as well as an annual Kven festival and a Kven brewery. In regard to minorities in general and indigenous peoples in particular, such key places are often upheld as “ethnically marked” – in contrast to the rest of society, which is regarded as belonging to the majority culture – and tend to become sites to which many “attach” their ethnic heritage, regardless of their contemporary relation to the place.<sup>7</sup>

We recruited participants regardless of the specific terminology they felt comfortable using; in addition to “Kven,” some preferred “Norwegian-Finnish,” “of Finnish descent” or “Finnish.”<sup>8</sup> All participants were related to Vadsø in one way or another (that is, lived in Vadsø, used to live there, visited regularly, or had family there). The interviews were conducted between the years of 2018 and 2020, a period that saw increased focus on Kven culture and language in public discourse.

We were interested how their identity articulation processes played out in different contexts. That is, we were not looking to compile a list of what is “typically Kven,” nor to categorize people into different ethnic categories, but to learn about practices and experiences in the participants’ heritage identity articulation processes.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging that identity is articulated in contexts and that contexts matter to the identity articulation processes that take place, we analyzed the materials produced during the interviews with an eye toward different contexts – what we call contextual sites – that our participants described as central in their own identity processes.

Our approach and design carry some limitations which readers should be aware of. When dealing with identity articulation, it is important to recognize that we are not dealing with a linear, uniform process that is equal everywhere and to everyone. Different people relate to cultural heritage in different ways. Other experiences could have been mentioned had we interviewed other people, and it could be other contextual sites might have stood out as important to the identity articulation processes. Furthermore, we chose participants with some connection to a specific area, and it is possible that if our informants were from another geographical area, other issues would be brought up. Also, as the researchers initiating and conducting interviews, we ourselves influence the interviews – for example, via our institutional affiliation or our own identity articulations (Øyen and Kvidal-Røvik 2021). In the following, we present key points about identity articulation processes, specifically as they play out in the three contextual sites: family, public institutions and discourse, and multicultural society.

### **The family contextual site – a key to identity articulation processes**

Several of our participants bring up the family as important for identity articulation processes; in fact, in many ways the family is seen as the most important context to our informants’ identity articulation processes. For instance, some speak of the family as having a pivotal role when it comes to speaking the Kven language, which is said to be central to their identity articulation process. Some of the participants have grown up with Kven language as part of their family relations, often as a “kitchen language,” as Gunn explains: “The generation I belong to answered in Norwegian when our parents spoke in Kven.”

One informant, Kaja, while acknowledging the importance of learning Kven language in school, points to the essential role of the family when it comes to learning and using a language. She says, “Well, a child might learn as much Kven language as they desire [in

school], but if it is not relevant at home in the family, it does not matter." In other words, according to Kaja, it is important that the Kven language is acknowledged and recognized in the context of families.

Several informants explain how family is important for relating to Kven heritage in other ways as well. One participant, Kari, talks of how she relates to Kven heritage as something normal in her family, and thus it is not marked as heritage: "At home I don't really care about what we call it or how we define it; I don't go around in my own home calling things we do Kven or Finnish or Norwegian." In the family, Kven heritage is not presented to her as such, it just is part of what they do.

In a different vein, Lajla, whose quote opened this article, expresses some of the tensions that might come up in a family. She says, "We do not call ourselves Kven in my family." Yet we learn from the conversation that Lajla may not agree with her family's stance on this. Having dug into the family roots and discovered different ethnic markers, Lajla attempted to make an argument to her family that they were both Kven and Sámi. Her family replied that it did not matter now anyway, "because now we are Norwegians!" Lajla was frustrated with their downplaying of the ethnic dimension as insignificant. Lajla's story demonstrates that frictions still exist between generations in how they relate to family descendants, with older generations looking upon themselves and their past differently than younger generations. This shows that the family can be a site where people experience struggle or sorrow in their identity articulation processes.

Another informant, Stein, shares a similar experience, specifically a confrontation between himself and his grandfather regarding ethnicity. When Stein told his grandfather about his interest in, and engagement with, Kven cultural issues, the grandfather replied, "But you are not a Kven." The explanation the grandfather gave for Stein in terms of not being a Kven was, "I am not a Kven and so you are not one either." Despite his coldness towards the idea of Kven identity, Stein says his grandfather is proud of having Finnish ancestors. Stein's love for his grandfather does not appear to discourage him from embracing his Kven heritage in his identity articulation processes. Describing himself as Kven, Stein explains that there is tension associated with this in his own family: "In a way it was not something one ... I was not told I was Kven at home. It should actually have been a natural part of an upbringing, that one in some way are taught about this identity." Stein states that his parents do not self-define as Kven, but that "they in a way accept that they have Kven heritage and in a way are proud of it. They are not ashamed over it." Even so, says Stein, "whenever a question about Kven identities comes up, you feel the tension increasing in a sense ... Then it is easier to avoid all of it and start talking about something completely different." Stein also talks about how he has found his Kven heritage mostly without the help or encouragement of his family, and that his own efforts have brought him to the conviction "that one in a way should find the courage to say [that one is Kven] without feeling shame over it."

Lajla and Stein attempt to articulate Kven identity but feel that they are turned down by their elder family members, who tend to respond by identifying as either Norwegian and/or Finnish kin. One interpretation of the strong refusal of a Kven connection ties it to experiences of stigma surrounding Kvens, which moved older generations to assimilate into the Norwegian majority. When Lajla and Stein challenge their established positions, they are met with a perspective on identity as determined and frozen. Their families "show

off their Norwegianness” and reproduce some of the same cognitive systems that Eidheim (1969) identified among Sámi-Norwegian relations, whereby experiences of sanctioning modes serve to delimit and discourage change in identities. In addition to regarding ethnic identity as a stigma, family sites can discourage expression of and communication about ethnic identity. Importantly, however, Lajla and Stein have access to other sites than those of their family for their identity articulation processes, and we will learn later how they draw on other contexts for their Kven identity articulation processes.

For another informant, Theo, the issue is almost the opposite. Theo explains that his family has discussed how their heritage should be expressed, and that they have landed on “of Finnish descent” as they have decided the term *Kven* is problematic. When asked why, he explains that his father experienced the term *Kven* being used toward him as a term of insult growing up, and that when they spoke Finnish, people would make fun and ridicule them. Theo shares with us that the decision to not use the term *Kven* came about at a gathering of his relatives: “I recall it being around 12–13 of us there, both [my] family and other Finnish-Norwegian families, all of Finnish descent. Everyone there could have communicated in Finnish. And they were very clear that they we ... they ... did not want to be named *Kven*.” For Theo, the wishes of his family are key, and he adjusts his behaviour accordingly. His story highlights the power and potential impact of the family site in regard to people’s identity articulation processes.

For Gunn, although she gave a similar account of experiencing the negative associations of the *Kven*-term growing up, the outcome has been different: “When it comes to the *Kven*-term, many say it was a term of abuse. My older siblings talk about how – for our parents, when they were young – *Kven* was a term of insult. It was a term of abuse, and you were not to say that you were *Kven*.” Even so, today Gunn describes herself as a “*Kven* girl,” and she does not say her position creates problems in her relationship with her family, as in Lajla and Stein’s cases. However, it should be said that Gunn is also older than the other two, so perhaps she feels less dependent on her family’s approval, or perhaps she does not have as many elderly family members left.

For several of the participants, their family name is an essential element in their own identity articulation processes. Theo says: “My surname is a very, very strong marker [of my heritage].” Similarly, alluding to the symbolic meaning of her surname, Nina says: “I am fortunate to have inherited from my father’s side, from [a place] which is Finnish. It is a way to display one’s identity every day ... It is a very nice way to be *Kven*, in the everyday.” For Nina, being able to speak *Kven* language and having a *Kven* surname make a powerful symbolic duo: “I have the power of the language and the name ... I know my identity.”

The family site is key to identity articulations and can provide fertile ground for identity processes linked to heritage. Both decisions made by current family members regarding how they refer to their own ethnic and cultural identity and decisions made by previous family members – for example, in terms of altering or not altering a family name – come to matter for participants in our study. Family practices are also important cultural heritage practices and can thus act as a resource in participants’ identity articulation processes. People’s identity articulation processes seem intertwined with what goes on in the family, and identity articulation processes that are not aligned with those of key family members can come with significant costs.

## Approval and alienation – the contextual site of public discourses and institutions

Many of the participants describe contexts outside the family as central to processes of identity articulation, especially in terms of gaining a sense of belonging to a group that is seen and taken seriously. Nina relates: “As a child, I searched profusely for an acknowledgement of Kven culture ... I lacked a confirmation from someone with a bit more status [than my family].” It was important to Nina, because “as a child you need a confirmation that this is a proper language and a culture belongs to a people, not just your family.” Nina says that she did not receive the acknowledgement she needed from others at a young age – not from her teachers, nor from the media or in her local museum.

An important point for Nina is that “people in general know too little” about Kvens and Kven culture. Similarly, André says it is problematic that “people don’t know who the Kvens are, not even in Northern Norway.” Lajla says, “It would have been easier for me to say I am Kven if I could identify something in my everyday life which is typically Kven.” Stein says that even if many of his peers learned Finnish in elementary school, discussions of Kven heritage were missing in the community.

Some participants explicitly talk about the importance of Kven culture being visible in a place in order for the place to feel like “home.” Nina explains how, although she has related to several places over the years, she feels more connected to places that are somehow marked as Kven:

It is there I feel at home. I can speak in my own language. It is visible in the community. In signposts. I can speak [Kven] in the grocery store. I can go to the museum and see [Kven culture] there ... So, when I can, I prefer that I come from [this place]. I do have two grandmothers who come from there, and in this sense, it is mainly where my body comes from.

Nina also points to how Kven heritage in a place like Vadsø can be both visible, specifically in Vadsø Museum-Ruija Kven Museum, and also invisible in the public sphere: “Signposts are not in Kven ... You do not have a Kven café or Kven food.” Indeed, the signs Nina refers to as missing are ways for one to be seen and acknowledged in one’s identity articulation process: “You need others in order to see yourself.”

Several participants are searching for ways to display and present their own cultural heritage. In fact, several of them underscore the same message which has been presented in public discourse by key Kven institutions and spokespeople, namely that there is a need for Kven identity markers – a call for Kven symbols. Nina says, “As much as you yourself have to accept that you are something, you can’t really be it until others have accepted that you are it.” Kari, regarding the importance of outsiders recognizing a place as being Kven, says: “There is an interaction between how those who live in a place regard the place as Kven, and if those from outside actually interpret it as Kven. One needs, in a way, to see oneself as well.”

Several participants confirm that heritage institutions, such as the local museum in Vadsø, are important for their displays of Kven culture and the important role they can play by acknowledging Kven heritage in identity articulation processes. In Nina’s words, “Kven culture is not very visible in Vadsø ... but at the museum it is visible!” For Lajla, the local museum has also played an important role in her own getting to know Kven culture: “At the museum I started to think ... gosh, this is my story too.” This arena

made visible and accessible something important for her, which her family could not provide at the time.

For André, the museum also is important in that it tells stories of why things are the way they are for Kvens today and can help people understand “why there are many traces of Kven culture that are invisible to us today.” Nina also points to the importance of museums and universities as representations of institutional power based on history and science. Museums, Nina says, are important “because they, too, present the truth.” Such institutional sites bring a certain persuasive authority to acceptance and acknowledgement of ethnic identities.

Some of the participants refer to language as one of the ways in which Kven culture is (or is *not*) made visible in the public sphere. Thinking back to her younger years, Nina explains how the Kven language was invisible in public discourse: “I did not hear anyone outside my own house speak Kven. [...] I did not hear it in the store, never saw it in the newspaper, never saw it on TV, nor in school, nor at the museum. It is odd.” Nina wondered if it was useless that she herself could understand it. Who should she talk to? Was there a larger Kven community to identify with? Was it just herself and her family? Later in life, Kven language has become a powerful symbol that Nina uses to make visible her Kven identity, something that trumps other markers of Kven-ness. She offers an example: “Many ask me, ‘Don’t you have the Kven costume?’ – and then I can reply in Kven language and say, ‘No, I don’t.’” For Nina, it does not matter how recognizable a visual Kven marker might be, for she can rise above it with language; apparently, for her there is nothing more powerful than language when it comes to Kven identity articulation processes.

The importance of language to the articulation of Kven identity is not very surprising, as research has established that language plays a pivotal role in heritage processes. Investigating language in a Kven community in Northern Norway, Lane (2022, 199) shows “how individuals value their languages used in their community and how they position themselves vis-à-vis these languages.” According to Lane (2022, 199), in Kven communities, attitudes to both Norwegian and Kven languages have been ambiguous:

On the one hand they both had negative connotations as Kven was stigmatized and Norwegian was a language not mastered by the majority of the population; on the other, both had positive connotations because Norwegian was seen as the language that opened up for possibilities and progress, and Kven was *hjertespråket* “the language of the heart.” (emphasis in original)

Being “seen” and “called upon” in the public discourse is important – that is, that one is *someone* to address. Nina shares how *Ruijan Kaiku* represented an acknowledgement of Kven language when she was growing up:

Dad ordered *Ruijan Kaiku* – the Kven publication – when he learned that it existed. There was not as much Kven language in there to begin with, but we have had it for as long as I can remember. And suddenly there was a newspaper where it was printed something in Kven language. I could not read it at the time; I had not read Finnish or Kven, but I used to look in it. ... We have sent in drawings from our Finnish class in school to [*Ruijan Kaiku*]. I think it is important that teachers and other adults find such outlets.

Our informants also see media and organizations as playing important roles in identity articulation processes. André explains how the organization *Kvääninuoret* has been

particularly important to him because it is so active in social media. Stein observes that knowledge of his Kven heritage was unavailable to him as a child, and that he first understood his Kven connection when he learned about Kven culture via newspapers and when his school class visited the museum in Vadsø. André shares a similar story and talks about how cultural identity was not much discussed in his family: “Had I not had Finnish [in school], I would probably not have identified this way at all ... I identify much with Finnish, Norwegian-Finnish, Kven culture, mainly due to having learned Finnish in school for 13 years.”

With social media platforms like Facebook, it can seem that it should be even easier to find acknowledgement of one’s identity articulations in public discourse today; however, such forums can also seem to set thresholds which some find too high. For example, Lajla is hesitant to join a Facebook group for people who identify with Kven heritage because she does not know if she would be considered a legitimate member of the group.

On a related note, Gunn speaks warmly of festivals as an arena for inclusion and sense of belonging: “The stronger you are connected to it, the less you become an observing audience member – you identify with it.” Gunn mentions festivals in northern Norway in which she could take part as an audience member: “Yes, there I am an onlooker. Yes, it is nice and great and all, but if I go to a festival or something that has to do with Kven culture, then I am *involved!*”

There are also problems associated with public institutions playing a role in defining Kven culture and language. As Lajla observes, “There can be a conflict if you feel the museum is telling a story different from what you would about yourself and where you are coming from. My family can say, ‘It does not matter what the researchers are claiming about this or that, because it is false.’” Kaja states:

Museums really matter, museums are linked to the schools in other ways than many other institutions. They have kind of a way in. That is, schools are likely to visit the museum, they use the museum ... A museum is part of defining what they choose to see here, how they see this particular history [and] what we choose to emphasize.

Such statements remind us that institution sites also matter in defining what is and what is not to be considered Kven. Nina makes an interesting point in this regard when, explaining how some variations in the Kven language are not discussed enough, she remarks that there are “some nuances that are important to make visible.” Referring to recent official literature on Kven grammar, Nina points out that it is “published as something someone from the outside has seen and standardized,” and adds, “No one asked my family, ‘How do you speak? ... Which words do you use?’” The official version of the Kven language is very much founded on a specific regional variant of the language, but there are other Kven dialects that are left out. According to Nina, these other dialects “are made invisible.” In other words, when ethnic identity is articulated in the context of institutions, something is left out; nuances are sacrificed at the altar of visibility.

Although language is important for identity articulation processes, our interviews teach us that it can also function as a means to exclude people who do not know or speak Kven language. Language can symbolize and facilitate inclusion and empowerment, but it can also cause alienation and marginalization. Stein shares an experience of an informal situation where lack of competence in Kven language made him feel that he was “not Kven enough.” This experience and the feeling that he was not accepted by others led Stein

to reduce his engagement with Kven culture. Not knowing a language, or not knowing enough of a language, can be alienating. If the threshold for being Kven is too high – for example, if as in this case it requires mastery of Kven language – many will not fit in. Participants share some powerful stories with us about having to fight to gain access to learning the Kven language. Nina relates, “I have never had to fight for a Norwegian school book in the classroom – it has always been provided automatically. But I’ve had to fight for my Kven language and heritage since I was small.” Theo says that although many in his family speak Finnish, he has not learned the language, and explains: “I did not learn Finnish because I did not have that option.” Instead, he ended up learning German, like many of his classmates. If he could choose again today, he says, he would choose to learn Finnish. Stein shares a similar sentiment, although the decision to not (continue to) learn the heritage language seems to have been his own – although he did learn Finnish in school for some years, eventually he switched to Nynorsk: “Today, I regret this choice.”

Importantly, then, institutional power can be seen as both enabling and limiting – enabling in that recognition and validation seem to be increasingly common today, and limiting in that some of the multiplicity and complexity of identities is removed in the process of being recognized and validated by institutions.

Also, institutions can only do “so much,” as Ahmed (2017) reminds us. We need more, or we need to be conscious of institutional limitations. One possibly relevant limitation has been described by Øyen (2020) in terms of the requirements put in place for participation in Kven culture and language development activities. Øyen gives the example of a contemporary “Kven art” project calling for a professional setting and asks whether such requirements could make it less likely that people from inside Kven culture are eligible to take part. Similar issues arise in our study. Kaja observes that if a job related to Kven culture and language was listed with strict requirements in terms of academic credentials, it might be difficult to get job candidates from within Kven communities. Kaja asks rhetorically, “Which Kven has had a chance to get a PhD in Kven as of today?” Her point is that it is essential for administrators to think about these things when initiating projects on behalf of Kven communities.

Gunn also underscores the importance of language, and of learning it in kindergarten and school. She explains that the declining number of young people learning the language is a problem, because “it matters to identity. It has to do with who you are. Where are you coming from. Where are your roots. Language and traditions are key here. Right, you carry them with you. And the language is the most important, I think.”

Importantly, our participants also describe institutions as disciplining how they perform their heritage. Nina relates how her Kven language was perceived as improper during her first years in school, causing her to experience the education system as a site of alienation:

In school, my language became pushed toward Finnish. It was hard school policy. Teachers from Finland ... did not know what Kven language was ... With the red pen and corrections, they washed away much of my Kven language. It took away much of the status of the Kven language for me, and many times I thought, ‘The language of my grandfather and father is only rubbish ... It is nothing, only nonsense.’

However, it was also in school that things later changed for Nina, and she encountered more enabling contexts. A teacher in high school “realized it was Kven I was speaking,” Nina says. The teacher’s understanding of the cultural context and recognition of the

issues associated with being a minority helped change Nina's experience of the educational site into one of acknowledgement rather than alienation: "She showed me, for the first time, Kven language written as a text, and was positive and encouraging about the Kven words I still had the courage to use in the classroom." By supporting Nina's Kven language development, the teacher played an important role in her identity articulation processes.

For other participants, the main obstacle to Kven language and culture was not explicit dismissal of Kven language and culture in school, but rather how such topics were presented by teachers. When Stein's class went to the museum in Vadsø to take part in activities designed to increase knowledge and visibility of Kven culture, the trip, he recalls, was compartmentalized as something of little relevance beyond a break from that which really mattered in school. The teachers communicated to the students, "This is not useful, but it is a way to get out of school." According to Stein, the teachers' attitudes strongly affected students' level of engagement. In this way, institutional limiting played out in the educational site, undermining a potentially enabling context.

The contextual site of public institutions and discourses can mean a great deal in terms of validation and recognition, which are important for identity processes linked to heritage. For the participants in our study, this site matters for their feelings of being accepted, enabled, and encouraged. However, public acknowledgement inevitably comes at the cost of inclusiveness, as the representations that circulate as part of this public site define the "real" or "correct" elements of cultural heritage, thus limiting what is included and what the "official" version of cultural heritage is.

### **A multicultural contextual site – room for more?**

For our participants, multicultural society, of which our informants certainly are part, also represents an important context for identity articulation processes, albeit perhaps in more implicit ways than family and public discourse and institution sites. While globalization has given rise to ambiguous identity processes and political social movements in Norwegian, Sámi, and Kven communities, emphasizing hybridity and simultaneous belonging to different ethnic groups, it does not automatically produce contexts that welcome or facilitate multicultural identity articulation processes. In fact, the contexts our participants relate to in multicultural sites are not always easy for them to handle.

Several of our participants state that they resist categorization and labelling and call for more multiculturalism. As Kari puts it, "I'm not just a Kven, I'm also other things" – implying a need to be understood as more than Kven. André talks about his family relations in historical perspective and explains to us, "They were originally from the Tornedalen area, so there was probably both Sámi and Finnish and a bit of everything there." Significantly, this is a point André feels a need to emphasize today.

Several of the participants emphasize how they have both Kven and Sámi kin. For example, Stein explains: "I didn't have the strongest relation to being Kven when I was a child. The relationship I have to myself as Kven and to my family as Finnish, is my one and in this sense a deliberate move to create my identity. In the same way, I also have a Sámi identity." Active involvement in identity articulation processes relating to both Sámi and Kven heritage requires courage and self-confidence from our participants.

Some of the participants talk about how they feel they must "choose between" different ethnicities. Stein shares how he had to make a choice of outfit for his confirmation, and that

the choice he had to make was either a Kven or a Sámi outfit, even though his identity articulation process is linked to both Sámi and Kven heritage. He tells of how he eventually decided to wear a *gákti* (Sámi traditional dress) rather than a Kven outfit, both because he liked its aesthetic and because it was easier for others to recognize what it was.

The complexity that must be handled is not only due to aspects of Sámi identity, but also to differences in approach to Kven-ness. Different participants describe their identities using different concepts, even when their relation to very similar heritage seems clear. For example, some say they are Kven, while others describe themselves as of Finnish descent. Gunn tells us that even though she “calls herself Kven,” she tries to stay clear of “the debate on Finnish-Norwegian, because it is actually so that people have to find their identity the way they want, because it is not that big of a difference, right?” Gunn explains further: “I think that belonging and identity bring with them much of the cultural codes; whether you say you are of Finnish descent, or if you are Kven, it is pretty much the same.” There must be room for variations, Gunn seems to suggest, underscoring the importance of contexts that allow for multiple cultural identities where intercultural interaction can take place. As Gunn says, “When people meet, these debates [about being either this or that] become less important.” Meetings such as those Gunn talks about can happen via language practise, and these meetings can be positive even when people disagree on terminology, labels and other aspects of Kven culture, origin, name, and language. As Gunn puts it, “In the meeting between persons, the disagreements do not matter.” In this sense, the “complicated Kven controversy” that Anttonen (1998, 43) refers to matters less when language(s) are spoken, regardless of what it is called.

In a similar vein, Nina calls for more acceptance of the multicultural:

I very much front the multicultural, and I think it is important that there is a mix and not placing people in boxes. Multicultural identity is almost gone today, in the people who are traditionally from here [the North]. People [think they must be] either Sami or Kven. Or Norwegian. Or Finnish. They [fail to see they can be] several things. That is because we have forgotten how to be multicultural.

Despite the tensions and even conflicts mentioned in regard to the complexities of multicultural Kven identity articulations, there are moments in our conversations with participants where a sense of optimism emerges. For example, Gunn implies that she expects widespread subscription to narrow either-or boxes to decline in the future when she states, “Young people today are global.”

The multicultural site seems to be one of both promise and predicament, and so its impact on identity processes linked to heritage can seem ambiguous. It seems promising in that it allows our participants to think and envision themselves enabled in their own complex identity articulation processes, even when this process involves different ethnic or cultural positions. The predicament of the site emerges as the participants are pushed and pulled to make choices – in terms of both which group to identify with and which specific terms to use in reference to their cultural heritage.

### **Contextual sites of acknowledgement?**

Kvens have been at the receiving end of systematic Norwegianization policies which once near silenced them, but recently there has been an increased focus on Kven culture,

language, and heritage processes in the Norwegian public sphere. Even so, there is still a need in Norway for greater acknowledgement and visibility of Kven culture and heritage as well as openness in terms of multicultural and flexible identity processes.

In this article, we have addressed important, albeit complex contextual sites in which people's identity articulation processes play out and identified potential fertile grounds for identity processes linked to heritage. As we reiterate in the paragraphs below, family, public institutions and discourse, and a multicultural society represent powerful contextual sites for identity articulation processes for our participants.

First, the family is an important contextual site for heritage and identity articulation processes. The family can have a pivotal role when it comes to embracing one's heritage. Both current decisions made by family members and decisions made in earlier years come to matter, and family practices can be a resource in participants' identity articulation processes. Identity articulation processes not aligned with those of other family members can cause problems, exacerbate struggles, and come at great personal cost.

Second, the contextual site of public discourse and public institutions can be central to our participants' processes of identity articulation and mean a great deal in terms of validation and recognition. Public acknowledgement provided by authoritative institutions can give rise to strong feelings of being accepted, enabled, and encouraged; however, such acknowledgement also brings the risk of reduction of nuance and experiences of alienation in identity articulation processes.

Third, a multicultural society provides an important contextual site for contemporary identity articulation processes, although it can be challenging to manoeuvre. It can allow for complex identity articulation processes, for example by involving different ethnic and cultural positions; however, despite multicultural ideals, people still often find themselves called to fit into specific ethnic categories and struggle to find room to "be" all they are, with all the ethnic complexities their heritage brings with it.

Our research casts light on important contextual sites in which contemporary Kven-related identity articulation processes play out. More importantly, our research shows how these contextual sites can be enabling, acknowledging, and encouraging, but that they can also be limiting, disciplining and alienating. It reminds us of how identity articulation processes can be painful, and that people are still living the consequences of Norwegianization. We need more research on how people navigate and manoeuvre in the contextual sites we have looked at here – for example, through life changes and stages or across different places. In this regard, finding more inclusive contextual sites and acknowledging identity articulation processes that relate to ethnicity and terminology in broader ways might be particularly important.

## Notes

1. There is no exact information on the number of Kvens in Norway, but a "survey in the 1980s estimated the population in some areas, such as approximately 20–25% in North Troms and Finnmark, giving an approximation of 50,000–60,000 Kvens" (Huru, Räisänen, and Simensen 2018, 124).
2. While such processes also always include other aspects, such as geography, class and gender, we are particularly interested in Olsen's (2010) perspective on ethnicity as politically situated via symbols that simultaneously mark boundaries between selves and others while creating a sense of belonging inside the group.

3. When the Norwegian state ratified the multilateral treaty Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities under the Council of Europe, five national minorities were acknowledged: Jews, Forest Finns, Roma, Romani people/Tater, Kvens/Norwegian Finns.
4. The categories *national minority* and *indigenous people* share a history of extensive assimilation policies conducted by the Norwegian state. Although indigenous Sámi in Norway also qualify for the Protection of National Minorities under the Council of Europe, the Sámi Parliament chose not to be included in the Framework Convention, in order to maintain status as an indigenous group under ILO Convention no. 169 (Meld. St. 15 (2000–2001), 40). From 2022, however, the Sámi Parliament has approved Sámi inclusion in the reporting of the Framework Convention (ACFC 2022).
5. The Norwegianization policies were repealed in the mid-twentieth century (Iversen 2021). In the 1980s, an “ethnic renaissance” took root among the Kven, leading to the creation of the Norwegian Kven Association in 1987 (Niiranen 2021, 6).
6. Five women and four men volunteered to be interviewed. Three participants were between 20 and 30 years old, two between 30 and 40 years, two between 40 and 50 years, one between 50 and 60 years old, and one between 60 and 70 years old. Each interview lasted about one hour. The interviews were recorded on audio files, transcribed, and anonymized. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to provide anonymity.
7. For a Sámi example, see Nyseth and Pedersen (2014).
8. According to Karikoski and Pedersen (1996) the terms are used inconsistently in research and literature. Skardal (2022) demonstrates a similar vagueness among younger generations of Kven/Finnish language users.
9. During the interviews, we asked questions to generate a conversation about Kven heritage identity articulations in general, but also what was important to their *own* identity articulation processes and expression of their *own* ethnic identity.

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