The first inhabitants of Sør-Varanger

Thousands of years before Sør-Varanger was populated by Norwegians and other outsiders, the area was inhabited by skolts only. The skolts probably came to Kola, the northern part of Finland and Sør-Varanger during the last part of the Ice age, about 10.000 years ago. Archaeological research from the area indicates that the skolts have inhabited Kola and Sør-Varanger for many thousands years. In an unbroken line the Neiden skolts have been living in the Skolt village "Skoltebyen" for several thousands years. Few places in the world have such a continuity, and that is unique itself.

The skolt village has also today a great significance for the skolts' identity, and is still the most importent territory for the Neiden skolts. The colonisation of Sør-Varanger started after 1826, when the borders towards Finland and Russia were finally established. In the beginning of our century the Norwegian colonisation was speeded up.

The culture symbols for the skolts

The skolt culture has a number of characteristic culture symbols, which are different from the usual sami culture. Examples which show these differences can be seen in the skolts' dress culture, singing traditions, dance traditions, name traditions and religion. Traditionally, the skolts are orthodox Christians, while the rest of the sami population belongs to the Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia.

Regions and way of living

Up to 1826 the skolts had historical rights to the use of all land, sea, rivers and lakes, including fishing, hunting, herding and forestry. Before the border regulations the skolts were a semi-nomadic group and had established dwellings according to the seasons. As most aborginal peoples they were hunters and gathers who subsisted on what the land could yield. What distinguished the skolts from other groups was this semi-nomadic seasonal cycle. Their summer dwellings were here in Neiden, and the river and the waterfall "Skoltefossen" was an essential part of their lives.

The fishing with net in Skoltefossen was one of the reasons they went to Neiden early in the spring to have their summer dwellings in the Skolt village ("Skoltebyen"). During the hundreds of years before the region became Norwegian territory, the skolts traded with russians and other seafaring merchants. The skolts territory was parted into areas called "siidaer" of which the Neiden siidae was the smallest, and western most region. The Neiden siidae was parted in two in 1826, and little by little the Norwegian authorities took over the skolts rights, that up to then had been the rights of the skolts, and thus depriving them of their livelihood. The skolts who became Norwegian after 1826 are a small minority in Norway. They have been forgotten and attempted by the Norwegian government. Later, the Norwegian sami have carried out a similar policy, which has made the skolt culture invisible. However, the sami have now changed their policy and have in recent years done a lot to make the skolt culture visible, something this collection is an example of. Many elements of the skolts' traditional siida arrangements have been used in order to reconstruct the sami siidas. It has been maintained that the skolt culture can in fact contain the origins of the sami culture.

Religion

At the beginning of the 16th century, the apostle of the skolts, Trifon, came to Petschenga in order to christianise the skolts to the orthodox faith. The Holy Trifon had a church erected at Petschenga which was called The Holy Trinity Church. Petschenga monastery was established in connection with this church. In 1565 the Holy Trifon had St. George's chapel built in the Skolt village.

With its more than 400 years, it is the oldest wooden building in north Norway. From 1826 the government's norwegianization policy made the skolts take Norwegian names and refused them to practice their orthodox faith. On july 25th 1992 several skolts converted to their forefathers' faith and established "the St. George's church association". This area, which is a symbol for the skolts' history and culture, is about to be preserved as a national heritage center. A quotation from the report which suggests the preservation, written by the sami council for cultural heritage, reads:

"The Skolt village by the Neiden river is the most important area for cultural preservation of the skolts' history, and for the preservation of the remaining skolt culture in Norway. This indicates the status as a national heritage center. It is a unique area, both as a sami and as a national cultural memorial."

The present situation

The skolt associations, the sami associations, and representatives from the sami council for cultural heritage agree that there must be close ties between the preservation of the skolt village and "development of a culture and museum center" in the area.

They also agree that the area will be administered by the skolts themselves. The plans for this museum at the skolt village has long been in a vacuum.

I hope that the guidelines that have been agreed upon regarding the progress of establishing the culture and museum center in connection with the preservation of the skolt village are followed, especially the first phase which includes improved local competence. The plans for the museum grounds have reached the stage where an initial draft has been made. The next step, which includes financing a preliminary project and ultimately the realisation and operation of the whole project, is so far non-existent.

The skolts in Sør-Varanger is the only minority group in Norway who still in 1996 are neglected and forgotten by the Norwegian parliament and government. We feel, however, that this trend is about to change.

As a spokesman for the Neiden skolts I hope that the local authorities and the Norwegian government will give sufficient priority and grant sufficient resources so that this project can be realised, and thus create a new positive development for the skolt culture, the community in Neiden, and for Sør-Varanger municipality.

Unfortunately, the trend has not changed in the last years!