"This is simply who I am. I have no other option": Indigeneity, 'Nation-ness,'
and Decolonization in Indigenous Activism in Russia

By

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Abstract:

This study examines why people who once identified as national minorities have redefined themselves as Indigenous. Unlike Indigenous activism worldwide, which is often sparked by extractivism, Russian Indigenous activism has been uniquely catalyzed by the war in Ukraine. This shift allowed activists to reclaim a suppressed self and offered a framework to see the revival of disrupted traditions not as invention but as transformative continuation. Strategically, by appealing to the UN, activists challenged Russia's narrow definition of Indigenous peoples as only KMNS and aligned themselves with a global Indigenous movement. Despite critiques of the UN's limited inclusion (Corntassel, 2008), this engagement made their existence visible, countering the Russocentric narrative of a multinational Russian state that undermines the autonomy formally granted to republics. Indigeneity empowered activists to articulate their core goal—decolonizing Russia—not as a struggle for power but as dismantling colonial hierarchies. Even calls for republic independence are framed as expressions of Indigenous sovereignty, promoting radical diversity, overlapping autonomies, and non-exclusion, thereby challenging the nation-state model. I apply Brubaker's concept of *nation-ness* as a *contingent happening* to emphasize Indigenous nationhood as fluid and event-driven, not fixed by static cultural traits. This is enriched by Ivakhiv's *decolonizing democracy*, which views nation-ness as grassroots agency extending beyond the conventional, exclusionary idea of "the people," embracing diverse and even non-human actors. This also reframes nation-ness as a process rooted in collective memory and actively expressed today. While acknowledging Indigeneity can be exclusionary, activists have found in it a pathway to emancipation.

Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, Marika Semenenko, candidate for the MA degree in Nationalism Studies. declare herewith that the present thesis titled "This is simply who I am. I have no other option": Indigeneity, 'Nation-ness,' and Decolonization in Indigenous Activism in Russia is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography.
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Vienna, 5 June 2025

Marika Semenenko

Acknowledgements

It was a difficult journey lasting 10 months. By the middle, I realized I had sacrificed more than I could gain here. Unfortunately, the academy did not become a place where I could go beyond stagnant knowledge. I had extensive experience in activism in Russia—I survived in that inhuman, toxic environment—and I was looking for a place where I could find like-minded people to support me in my attempt to resist colonialism. Sadly, my expectations were mistaken. Some professors confirmed it: academia is an army. But must knowledge really be guarded, regimented, and disciplined like a battlefield?In the end, I was often ill, and I had to finish my diploma while running a fever of 38°C.

However, I came to academia primarily because of the topic of this thesis. I'm glad I had the chance to make it. I wrote about people who are fighting for their survival—and for the survival of others. They have always been oppressed, unheard, unseen. They were denied a voice, their cultures erased, their lives taken. And this continues.

During this difficult time, what helped me most were my loved ones—especially my partner, Ilya. He supported me from the very beginning and stayed behind in Yerevan with quiet strength, walking our dog every morning and evening—even though, as he likes to remind me, "he is my dog." Every time I felt crushed I called Ilya. He always calmed me down. Thank you to my mom, who always worries about me; my brother, who helped transfer crypto so I could pay for housing; and Aunt Lyusya. They're in Moscow, and I can't visit—especially Aunt Lyusya, who can no longer travel to see me in other places. I'm afraid I won't get another chance to see her. Thank you to my dad, who had to flee Moscow due to persecution and now lives under bombing near the front line in Ukraine. At 84, he started learning English and sends me messages saying he believes in me.

Thank you to my friends—especially Nuriya, without whom I wouldn't have made this research. Thanks to my friends in Ukraine who insisted it was important to write about Russian colonialism. To my interviewees—thank you for your trust and stories. To Melita and Ulku—for making it bearable. And to everyone who reminded me I'm awesome—thank you.

Like many of my interviewees, I don't believe things will ever improve. But I'm glad I wrote this thesis. I truly hope they find this work meaningful. I wrote it for them—and for myself.

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Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, catalyzed the emergence of new forms of activism among Indigenous peoples from Russia. Initially, activists organized anti-war initiatives to oppose the conscription of Indigenous peoples into a war justified under the pretense of "*protecting Russians*."[1] As early as March 2022, Ukrainian mass media began circulating narratives about "*Putin's Buryats*."[2] The Buryats, an Indigenous people living in the Republic of Buryatia in Eastern Siberia—approximately 7,000 kilometers from Ukraine— became a focal point of this discourse. In response, activists from the Free Buryatia Foundation, an anti-war movement, challenged the myth of "*Putin's Buryats,*" arguing that "*the legacy of colonization and many years of Russification made the Buryats part of the Russian military machine.*"[3] In September 2022, following Putin's declaration of partial mobilization, Buryats were conscripted at a rate three times higher than in regions predominantly inhabited by ethnic Russians[4]. As Maria Vyushkova of the Free Buryatia Foundation stated, "*The Kremlin seeks to*

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[1] Deutsche Welle. 2022. "'Помощь Донбассу, ответ НАТО, смена власти в Киеве: как менялись цели РФ в войне.'" *Deutsche Welle*, July 25, 2022.   https://www.dw.com/ru/pomoshh-donbassu-otvet-nato-smena-vlasti-v-kieve-kak-menjalis-celi-rf-v-vojne/a-6258511

[2] Sukach, Tetiana. 2022. "'Українські військові взяли у полон першого бурята.'" *24 Канал*, February 28, 2022. https://24tv.ua/ukrayinski-viyskovi-vzyali-polon-pershogo-buryata_n1883814.

[3] Zverko, Nataliya. 2025. "Ученый из Бурятии: 'Российская оппозиция порой ксенофобнее, чем власти.'" *LRT.lt*, March 25, 2025. https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/2519540/uchenyi-iz-buriatii-rossiiskaia-oppozitsiia-poroi-ksenofobnee-chem-vlasti.

[4] Meduza. 2024. "'Our Guys': In Russia's Buryatia, High Military Death Rates Make the War Impossible to Ignore." *Meduza*, July 11, 2024. https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/07/11/our-guys.

wage the war by exploiting the most vulnerable people. Unfortunately, Indigenous peoples are among them."[5]

Notably, at that time, many of these activists had not yet explicitly identified as Indigenous; instead, they were in the process of exploring an appropriate mode of self-identification. Their initial response was a reactive assertion of their ethnic non-Russianness. For instance, in reaction to pro-war posters in the Republic of Kalmykia that declared, "*I am Kalmyk, but today I am Russian,*" the Kalmyk brand 4 Oirad produced T-shirts bearing the phrase "*Nerusskiy*" (I am not Russian) in Russian[6]. Consequently, members of the brand were forced to leave Kalmykia due to criminal prosecution related to the design. With the growth of anti-war activism, activists from various places, republics, and regions began identifying themselves as Indigenous.

Putin's official justification for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine—framed through the discourse of *"denazification"*[7]—also provoked strong reactions from Indigenous activists, who began criticizing the government for its perceived cynicism. In response, Indigenous activists shared personal accounts of discrimination and systemic racism, arguing that Russia itself required *"denazification."* [8] Highlighting the high levels of xenophobia toward ethnic non-Russians, many Indigenous voices were particularly outraged by a statement Putin made in 2022: *"I am a Russian man, but when I see examples of such heroism as the feat of a young man —*

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[5]Zverko, Nataliya. 2025. "Ученый из Бурятии: 'Российская оппозиция порой ксенофобнее, чем власти.'" *LRT.lt*, March 25, 2025.
https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/2519540/uchenyi-iz-buriatii-rossiiskaia-oppozitsiia-poroi-ksenofobnee-chem-vlasti.

[6] Caucasus.Realities. "Ethnic Kalmyk Founder of Clothing Brand Flees Russia Amid Threats." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 25, 2022.
https://www.rferl.org/a/kalmyk-nonrussian-brand-xenophobia/31820307.html.

[7] BBC News. "Ukraine war: Russians fed twisted picture and one voice - that of Putin." *BBC News*, April 7, 2022.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61008293.

[8] Indigenous of Russia. "Существует ли расизм в России? | Расисткая Федерация." YouTube video, 37:47.
Streamed live on Jul 2, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/live/6Pv-5mkGwWI

Nurmagomed Gadzhimagomedov, a native of Dagestan, a Lak by nationality, our other soldiers, I want to say: I am a Lak, I am a Dagestani, I am a Chechen, Ingush, Russian, Tatar, Jew, Mordvin, Ossetian... I am proud that I am part of this world, part of the mighty, strong, and multinational people of Russia."[9] In response, Alexandra Garmagapova, head of the Free Buryatia Foundation, remarked: *"When the war needs soldiers, Russia suddenly becomes a multinational state. The essence of the empire is that Indigenous peoples are needed only to die for it."*[10]

Beyond the Free Buryatia Foundation, a range of other Indigenous grassroots initiatives have emerged in resistance to the Russian imperial project[11]. These include Indigenous of Russia, Beda Media, the Free Yakutia Foundation, the Free Kalmykia Foundation, New Tyva, From the Republics, Komi Daily, Re.public Speaking, as well as independent activists. This emergent activism is marked by its pronounced heterogeneity and diversity, manifesting in a multiplicity of forms, expressive mediums, and political articulations. Rather than presenting a unified ideology, centralized vision, or singular demand, it is animated by a plurality of imaginaries for the present and future. The only shared declaration is encapsulated in a manifesto asserting that the fate of Indigenous peoples cannot be determined without their direct involvement[12]. What binds these varied actors together is a common resistance to Russia's ongoing colonialism.

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[9] Diplomatrutube. Владимир Путин: "В Дагестане я аварец, в России я дагестанец, за границей – русский."YouTube video, 6:57, Streamed live on Sep 28, 2023 https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=g6eGY3KEbTU

[10] Скрябин, Иван. "Боевые буряты Путина: как мертвый миф пропаганды." *Rus.Postimees*, 11 августа 2022. https://rus.postimees.ee/7580473/boevye-buryaty-putina-kak-mertvyy-mif-propagandy

[11] Beda.media, "About," accessed June 5, 2025, https://beda.media/ru/about.

[12] "Ничего о нас без нас". Открытое письмо коренных, национальных и деколониальных активист:ок из России. *Indigenous Russia*, 3 апреля 2023. https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/32368.

Officially, Russia is an asymmetrical federation composed of various subjects, including

republics with their constitutions, national symbols, languages, as well as oblasts, krais, and

federal cities. According to the 2020 census, 193 ethnicities reside within the Russian Federation.

Among them, only the so-called "Small-Numbered Indigenous Peoples of the North" (*korennyye*

malochislennyye narody, KMNS) are officially recognized as Indigenous by the Russian state[13].

Other Indigenous peoples with populations exceeding 50,000 are not formally recognized as

Indigenous; instead, they are categorized as ethnic minorities and included in the broader list of

193 ethnicities. However, members of the emerging activism assert their Indigenous identity

regardless of official classifications, emphasizing that they are the original inhabitants of their

lands, long predating Russian colonization.[14] For the first time, individuals who had previously

accepted the state-imposed label of *ethnic minorities* have begun to redefine themselves as

Indigenous peoples, thereby establishing a powerful counter-discourse.

Although activists from different republics and regions articulated diverse aspirations for the

future of their respective areas, they unanimously identified the decolonization of Russia as their

common objective. The public response to this stated goal has been varied, with reactions

ranging from skepticism to direct accusations of extremism and separatism. The Russian

government has designated many Indigenous activist projects as terrorist organizations[15]. The

Russian liberal opposition often brands Indigenous activists as separatists intent on dismantling

the Russian state. In 2024, during her speech at the Bled Strategic Forum in Slovenia, Yulia

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[13] Федеральная служба государственной статистики (Росстат). *Всероссийская перепись населения 2020*.

[14] Indigenous of Russia (@indigenousofrussia). "August 9th was the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. In the cards, read our message to the world." Instagram post, August 12, 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C-ko_XsP6g8/?img_index=4&igsh=bXliOW5ncjUxbHZy

[15] Leyla Latypova. "Russia Labels 172 Indigenous Groups as 'Terrorist' Organizations." *The Moscow Times*, November 22, 2024.
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/11/22/russia-labels-172-indigenous-groups-as-terrorist-organizations-a8716

Navalnaya, widow of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, criticized "*decolonizers*" for their aspiration "*to split our vast country into several smaller, safer states.*"[16] Her remarks sparked backlash from Indigenous activists, who argued that the pro-European Russian opposition was often more openly xenophobic than the state itself—willing to scapegoat *wild* Indigenous peoples as responsible for the war[17]. Rejecting the label of *separatists*, which had borne a negative connotation—equated with banditry—since the Chechen wars, activists began to articulate what they truly meant by *decolonization*. Several Indigenous initiatives issued public statements clarifying their aims. They emphasized that decolonization is not the same as secession. Secession alone may still leave newly independent states dependent on former metropoles in both domestic and foreign affairs. Instead, decolonization seeks more profound transformations: political and economic autonomy, as well as the revitalization and preservation of local languages, cultures, and forms of governance[18].

Born in Moscow and self-identifying as Ukrainian, I was previously engaged with Soviet colonialism and post-Soviet postcoloniality within the Ukrainian context as an art activist and researcher. Being Ukrainian with a Russian passport, I saw it as my duty to reveal the neocolonial and neoimperialist nature of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By explicitly expressing my perspective on the war, I found that my position was marginalized. As soon as I

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[16] Shuraleeva, Gulnara. "Navalnaya's Decolonization Critique Proves That Russia's Liberal Opposition Hasn't Been Listening to Indigenous Voices." *The Moscow Times*, September 6, 2024. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/09/06/navalnayas-decolonization-critique-proves-that-russias-liberal-opposition-hasnt-been-listening-to-indigenous-voices-a86280.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Asians of Russia (@asiansofrussia). "3 сентября Юлия Навальная выступила на стратегическом форуме в Бледе (Словения)." Instagram post, September 4, 2024. https://www.instagram.com/p/C_fY3RFo-n7/?img_index=8

became aware of the Indigenous activism in Russia, it immediately caught my attention. Similar experiences, sorrows, and the legacy of colonization became apparent. I realized how important it was for me to think about Russia's future not from a Moscow-centric perspective. Initially driven by personal interest, I decided to make the Indigenous activism the focus of my academic research. The tension between activists' self-determination as *Indigenous* and *decolonial* and their external categorization as *separatists* became my starting point for examining the issue.

Indigenous activism in South and North America, as well as Australia, have been extensively studied. In contrast, Indigenous activism in Russia remains largely underexplored. Some researchers who focused on specific regions of Russia concluded that peoples not officially classified as KMNS are nevertheless Indigenous according to the UN definition. Other studies, however, limited themselves strictly to the KMNS category. This is a recent phenomenon, provoked by the full-scale invasion, in which Indigenous peoples outside the KMNS classification have begun to self-identify as Indigenous and actively advocate for their Indigeneity. Ekatherina Zibrova was the first scholar to highlight how the war in Ukraine spurred forms of ethnic identification that had not previously existed, reframing protest through the lenses of social inequality and cultural discrimination. (Zibrova, 2023). Vlada Baranova examines minor languages in Russia, revealing the emergence of decolonial discourse among "*grassroots ethnic language initiatives*"[19] that she frames as a political shift in language activism (Baranova, 2024). My primary research interest lies in examining why and how Indigenous activists in Russia challenge state-imposed national minority identities by constructing a counter-discourse rooted in Indigeneity. How does this form of self-identification influence the

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[19] Vlada Baranova, "Turning Point? The Ethnicization of Social Issues and What Indigenous Communities Think About It," *Russiapost.info*, February 21, 2024, https://russiapost.info/regions/ethnicization.

nationhood claims articulated by Indigenous activists? In what ways is this connected to decolonization of Russia, and why does it hold significance? My study seeks to explore how activists mobilize *nation-ness* by engaging with such notions as *Indigeneity*, *nation* and *decolonization* as categories of practice (Brubaker, 2004). I aim to examine how these identities are invoked and negotiated by participants within their specific socio-political and cultural contexts, in order to understand how activists' articulations contribute to existing scholarship on Indigeneity and decolonial thoughts.

The outline of my thesis is as follows: In the literature review, I begin by examining the concept of Indigeneity and the complexities involved in articulating Indigenous identity. I then explore how the recovery of Indigeneity diverges from modernist notions of recovering old traditions. This discussion leads to an analysis of how claims to Indigenous sovereignty fundamentally differ from the sovereignty of nation-states, which is rooted in the Westphalian system. I argue that the social-historical perspective on nationalism by Anthony Smith (1986) is inadequate—if not entirely irrelevant—when applied to Indigenous nations, whose ontologies and political imaginaries significantly depart from the logic and structure of the nation-state. In the final section, I analyze how the articulation of Indigeneity is linked to *decolonial insurgency* (Walsh, 2018), distinguishing it from anticolonial movements aimed at national independence. I explore the concept of the *decolonial habitus* (Walsh, 2018), examine how *decolonizing democracy* (Ivakhiv, 2023) differs from conventional democratic frameworks, and argue that these distinctions are essential for understanding Indigenous activism.

I then present my research questions and outline the methodological approach used to address them. This is followed by the empirical section, where I analyze data drawn from thirteen in-

depth interviews—each approximately 1.5 hours in length—with Indigenous activists from Russia. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical concepts introduced in the literature review.

The analysis chapter is divided into several subsections. The first examines the difficulties my interviewees faced in articulating their Indigeneity, and how these struggles align with patterns identified in existing scholarship on Indigenous activism. The next subsection explores the motivations behind their decision to reclaim Indigeneity, what this process involves, and how their engagement with tradition diverges from the modernist framework proposed by Hobsbawm (1983). I then analyze how and why their demands for self-governance align with the concept *grounded normativity* (Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 2016), which contrasts sharply with the logic of the nation-state. This analysis sets the stage for the final chapter, where I explore the meanings behind activists' calls to decolonize Russia and how these demands connect to *decolonial insurgency* (Walsh, 2018). Particular attention is given to how the concept of *nation-ness* (Brubaker, 2004)) helps illuminate the ways in which Indigenous activists perceive themselves as a distinct nation—while avoiding the limitations of modernist theories that conceptualize the nation as a fixed and static entity, rather than as a dynamic and ongoing process. In the concluding section of the analysis, I demonstrate how this conceptual framework can be further enriched through the lens of *decolonizing democracy* (Ivakhiv, 2023), which offers a more accurate and nuanced understanding of Indigenous political imaginaries.

Literature review

Challenges in Articulating Indigenous Belonging

In the upcoming chapter on scholarly literature about Indigenous activism worldwide, I first focus on the challenges Indigenous peoples encounter in asserting their selfhood. The discussion begins with the colonial nature of internalised shame (Coulthard, 2014; Leanne Betasamosak Simpson, 2011; Audra Simpson, 2020) followed by an examination of how top-down, imposed categorical identities (Calhoun, 1993) frame Indigenous peoples as outside modernity (Warren and Jackson, 2002; Graham, 2002) and exclude those with mixed backgrounds, fostering intercommunity tensions (Weaver, 2001; Oksanen, 2020; Leanne Betasamosak Simpson, 2011).

Scholars such as Coulthard (2014), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011), and Audra Simpson (2020) place particular emphasis on the internalised shame caused by colonially rooted stereotypes that Indigenous peoples confront when asserting their Indigeneity. In part, Coulthard (2014) argues that a distorted self-image is not a personal failing but rather a consequence of colonialism. Indigenous peoples internalise the misrecognition imposed on them, adopting a self-perception aligned with the coloniser's view. Audra Simpson, in *Empire of Feeling*, (2020) echoes this argument by discussing how internalised shame emerges because the state frames it as an individual problem. Indigenous people are portrayed as needing repair, while the colonial structures that cause these feelings of marginalisation and "backwardness" remain unquestioned. In her book *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, Simpson (2014) introduces the concept of *cognitive imperialism*, a process through which colonial visions reshape Indigenous self-image, leading to feelings of inferiority. Like other scholars, she emphasizes that this shame is a construct imposed by colonial violence rather than an inherent issue within Indigenous individuals.

To deepen the understanding of how systemic colonialism imposed a certain self-perception on Indigenous peoples, I turn to Calhoun's concept of *categorical identity*. These issues arise from — a process that Craig Calhoun terms *categorical identity* (Calhoun, 1993). Calhoun emphasizes the pivotal role of Western cartography in promoting a classificatory worldview, where space and its inhabitants were organized into a grid of discrete territories occupied by supposedly homogenous populations. These state-imposed classifications have transformed Indigenous peoples into members of fixed, bounded categories, thereby replacing their fluid and subjective relationships. Similarly, Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, highlights the census, map, and museum as tools through which colonial states imagined and governed their dominions (Anderson, 1983). Regular censuses reinforced imposed identities, which colonized peoples gradually internalized. Cartography desacralized land by converting it into measurable units, while museums and archaeology tied colonized subjects to curated ancestral narratives, crafting a controlled national imagination. Through these practices, European powers imposed rigid identity frameworks, projecting their own imaginaries onto diverse populations and geographies. As Calhoun notes, *categorical identities* not only reflect perceived sameness and difference but also actively construct them (Calhoun, 1993). Furthermore, this process gives rise to two interrelated issues: the framing of Indigenous peoples as outside modernity, and their internalisation of rigid, state-imposed identities that constrain the inclusion of Indigenous individuals with diverse and mixed backgrounds.

Regarding the first issue, Warren and Jackson's volume *Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation, and the State in Latin America* (2002) examines the dynamics between Indigenous peoples and state-settler actors, aiming to destabilise the perception of Indigeneity as a fixed, static embodiment of archaic authenticity. These scholars argue that such an attitude on

purpose excludes Indigenous peoples from contemporary political and cultural life. Following a similar line of thought, Laura Graham's (2002) analysis of Amazonian Indigenous communities highlights the need to move beyond the modern nation-state's expectations that Indigenous identities conform to externally imposed notions of authenticity. Lakota scholar Hilary Weaver (2001) discusses how external categorisation influences the internal self-understanding of Indigenous peoples. She argues that they internalise imposed images and reproduce outdated forms of authenticity expected of them in order to meet externally defined criteria.

Considering internalization of narrow authenticity criteria, such scholars as Weaver (2001), Audra Simpson (2014), Aslak-Antti Oksanen (2020) raise the issue of intra-community disputes over who is deemed truly Indigenous. Weaver (2001) argues that some community members reinforce rigid identity boundaries, thereby denying those with more heterogeneous or mixed backgrounds the right to identify as Indigenous. Exploring the experiences of mixed-blood and urban Indigenous peoples in Canada, in her *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, Audra Simpson (2014) challenges the reliance on phenotype and proximity to reservations as markers of Indigeneity. Rather than engaging with state mechanisms that constrain Indigenous identity, Simpson advocates for Indigenous communities to assert their right to self-identify on their own terms. Focusing on the case of the Sámi peoples, Aslak-Antti Oksanen (2020) highlights the internalization of state-imposed authenticity policies, which create a distinction between "*strong*" (engaged with reindeer herding) and "*weak*" (urban or mixed-blooded) Sámi identities. Importantly, because the state seeks to integrate Indigenous peoples into the national political framework as cultural minorities—thereby limiting their claims to sovereignty— Sámi peoples must actively resist the erosion of their self-image as distinct peoples. When these boundaries are blurred by so-called "*plastiq*" Sámi, tensions can arise

alongside the criterion of authenticity in their Indigeneity (Oksanen, 2020, p.1154). This framing risks casting Indigenous peoples as cultural minorities instead of distinct with sovereign epistemologies. As the following discussion will demonstrate, such a perception undermines resistance to ongoing colonialism and weakens efforts to assert Indigenous autonomy and sovereignty. However, before addressing these issues, I will explore how Indigenous activism engages with the broader literature on struggles for dignity and what new perspectives it offers on the restoration of Indigenous cultures and traditions. In the upcoming subchapter, I will discuss the concepts embedded in the process of reclaiming Indigeneity.

Recovering Indigeneity

Indigenous efforts to assert their identity against imposed classifications may seem to align with social movement theory. In particular, Polletta and Jasper's (2001) framework might offer a useful theory lens to explore Indigenous activism . This framework links self-interest and altruism in asserting self-worth, leading to collective pride and its demand for public recognition. Aligning with Polletta and Jasper's (2001) notion of collective identity as a "*field of contestation*", which is shaped by internal dynamics and external pressures, Lakota scholar Weaver (2001) highlights the interplay between personal and collective Indigenous identity assertion. She argues, "*individual cultural renewal and collective cultural renewal are intertwined*" (Weaver, 2001, p.245). Weaver emphasizes the importance of public recognition for an individual's self-esteem, which influences their strategy to either assimilate within the dominant culture or resist it. Asserting Indigenous identity, according to the scholar, can be seen as a counter-action against assimilation. Moreover, some other scholars of Indigenous activism draw on Polletta's (2006) insights on *narrative agency* exploring how personal and collective

stories of survival and resilience shape the collective identities that underpin Indigenous resistance (Joanne Barker, 2018; Kim TallBear, 2019; Margaret D. Jacobs, 2021). The demand for recognition of Indigenous identity, while crucial, may inadvertently function as a limitation rather than a means of empowerment, as it confines Indigenous activism within the boundaries of state recognition policies. In contrast, some scholars (Alfred, 1999; Coulthard, 2014; Andersen, 2010; Simpson, 2011) emphasize the significance of Indigenous ways of being that transcend the state, highlighting the value of Indigenous epistemologies as alternatives to state-centered frameworks.

Indigenous struggle for self-worth also differs from broader demands for the recognition of collective pride—conceptualized by Fukuyama (2018) in *Identity* as the pursuit of dignity. This distinction is important to clarify, as misunderstandings can lead to misconceptions of Indigenous activism as simply an anticolonial struggle for independence. Fukuyama sees the demand for dignity recognition as a central force behind resistance to oppression, framing it as the foundation of 19th- and 20th-century national liberation movements. He argues that mid-century anti-colonial movements mirrored the European experience, with the pursuit of dignity as a driving force. Intellectuals in former colonies, caught between imposed Western identities and Indigenous traditions, sought to reclaim pride in their heritage and overturn colonial denigration. In contrast to Fukuyama, Anderson in his foundational work *Imagined Communities* argues that national liberation movements originated in the colonies (Anderson, 1983). Despite their cultural and phenotypic similarities to Europeans, creoles were denied equal status solely because of their birth in the colonies. Unlike Indigenous peoples, who were subjugated through military conquest and cultural imposition, creoles faced oppression due to their shared *"fatality of trans-Atlantic birth"* (Anderson, 1983, p.56). With the advent of modernity—marked by the

emergence of a standardized language and enhanced social mobility—creoles were prompted to envision themselves as a distinct nation and pursue liberation from the colonial metropolis. The creoles' position, situated between colonized Indigenous peoples and Europeans with whom they shared similarities yet were denied equality, drove their struggle for independence. In Fukuyama's terms, this can be seen as a fight for the recognition of their dignity. The Indigenous struggle against oppression and for recognition of identity—as articulated on their own terms— and the reclamation of pride through cultural resurgence may, on the surface, appear to align with what Fukuyama or Anderson describe.

However, equating Indigenous activism with national liberation or anti-colonial movements risks oversimplification or inaccuracy. The political struggles of creoles—or postcolonial intelligentsia—were grounded in colonial frameworks and often sought to inherit, rather than dismantle, the colonial matrix of power. As a result, even after gaining independence, colonial dependencies often remain intact. National liberation and anti-colonial movements sought recognition without dismantling colonial power structures, preserving both epistemologies and colonial borders as foundations of postcolonial nation-states. The modern nation-state is viewed as "*the continuation of coloniality*" (Dragoș, 2024, p.5), even when it claims to promote independence, as it continues to "*organize and control human life*" (Dragoș, 2024, p.5) and shape global power dynamics. Although Anderson describes the concept of imagined communities as modular, "*capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains*" (Anderson, 2006, p. 4), he overlooks the colonial foundations from which this idea emerged. Indigenous peoples — whose ways of imagining community were shaped by distinct epistemologies — were initially excluded from this very module. As a result, the struggle for dignity within the framework of the nation-state,

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which was fundamentally built on Indigenous exclusion, does not reflect the nature of Indigenous activism. As discussed above, the damaged self-esteem of Indigenous peoples stems from systemic colonialism. Therefore, to restore their dignity, Indigenous communities must dismantle colonial hierarchies and dependencies. National states, however, often operate as extensions of colonial structures, perpetuating ongoing systems of oppression.

The restoration of Indigenous self-dignity closely ties to the revival of Indigenous traditions, cultures, and languages. To prevent misconceptions, I intend to clarify how this process differs from Hobsbawm's (1983) modernist concept of *invention of tradition*. Hobsbawm emphasizes how elites adapt old traditions to new contexts to legitimize authority and rally popular support. However, such utilitarian approach scarcely reflects Indigenous pursuit of reawakening their own traditions. First, actors of Indigenous activism do not constitute an elite; rather, they occupy an in-between position that can be understood through Victor Turner's concept of *liminality* (1969). This concept emphasizes the activists' fluid position within society, occupying an intermediary space between established norms and emerging alternatives. Second, unlike the elite-driven imposition of *invented traditions*, the activists' return to tradition can be seen as a form of resistance, reassertion of Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood. This perspective is articulated by Nepia Mahuika (2019), a Māori scholar, who emphasizes that Indigenous traditions represent a *creative continuation* rather than an invention. Focusing on the orality through which Māori transmit knowledge, Mahuika argues that oral stories persist not because Indigenous peoples are allegedly uncivilized or failed to develop written archives like Europeans, but because orality serves as a method for recording and transmitting deeply embedded lived experiences, practices, and collective memories. For Mahuika, tradition is a living, evolving process—far from being a construct merely assembled for political or social purposes.

Unlike Hobsbawm, Hutchinson (1999) argues that nationalism was driven by educated youth, who do not replace old traditions but merge them with modern narratives to construct new national identities rooted in a sense of continuity. Hutchinson argues that, particularly in times of crisis, romantic nationalists, as he calls the youth, mythologize a national *golden age* as a source of inspiration and legitimation. At the same time, Balzer (2021), in his study of Indigenous mobilizations in Siberia before 2022, introduces the concept of *romantic nostalgia*—distinct from Hutchinson's romantic nationalism—to explain how Indigenous communities invoked an idealized past to cope with ongoing discrimination. Meanwhile, Diana de Vallescar Palanca (2000) contends that Indigenous returns to tradition should not be seen as nostalgic, but as active, transformative acts of revitalizing and affirming identity in the face of colonial and hegemonic structures. Thus, Indigenous activism views traditions not as tools for mobilization or power, but as sacred, lived practices that affirm their belonging.

The Indigenous struggle for self-worth also includes efforts to secure meaningful representation within the United Nations and other international forums. Scholars have noted that these arenas present both opportunities and limitations. Alice Feldman (2002) highlights the opportunities provided by the United Nations and introduces the concept of *critical geography* as a tool for Indigenous peoples to create new spaces for self-representation and claims-making within this international arena. She argues that Indigenous movements of the 1970s and 1980s led to the emergence of *the Fourth World*, a public space for Indigenous international representation on equal footing with nation-states. As a result, the Fourth World, as an alternative space created by the subalterns, allowed Indigenous peoples to reposition themselves within the world of nations.

Given that the United Nations is grounded in a nation-state framework, scholars such as Corntassel (2008) and Andersen (2010) argue that the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in shared

spaces with nation-states remains limited in its transformative impact. This presence has not led to a reconfiguration of state structures that would equitably incorporate Indigenous governance systems. Scholars argue that UN-level gains, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), have had limited impact within Indigenous communities. According to Andersen (2010), although Indigenous peoples have made significant achievements within the UN, neoliberal nation-states have only symbolically recognized Indigenous rights in official documents, while continuing to disregard or violate them in practice. Jeff Corntassel (2008) critiques these UN achievements as offering merely the *illusion of inclusion*, arguing that international participation still confines Indigenous peoples within state-centered, rather than community-centered, frameworks. Both scholars call for the revitalization of Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty to restore the cultural and ecological systems essential to Indigenous well-being. Thus, it is insufficient to merely uphold international Indigenous rights—though significant—without genuine engagement with and recognition of Indigenous sovereignties as distinct political frameworks.

In discussions of Indigenous activism, scholars Martin Andersen (2010) and Julia Martínez (1997) have also raised concerns about the term *Indigenous* itself, arguing that it was constructed to unify diverse agendas under a single umbrella. Martin Andersen, in *Peoples of the Earth: Ethnonationalism, Democracy, and the Indigenous Challenge in 'Latin' America*, (2010) critiques the use of the term *Indigenous* as a homogenizing label that groups diverse peoples together, often implying that they make the same claims. Acknowledging the existence of both minor and major Indigenous communities, the scholar raises the question whether such heterogeneous diversity can be democratically incorporated into the existing political framework of the liberal nation-state. In *Problematising Aboriginal Nationalism*, Julia Martínez (1997)

argues that the modern nation's unified culture fails to reflect Aboriginal 'love of country' and calls for reimagining Australia with Indigenous cultural diversity—and its distinct sense of community—at the centre. Thus, although the diversity of Indigenous practices and strategies complicates engagement with the settler-state, scholars caution against efforts to reduce this complexity. Furthermore, they critique the politics of recognition for assimilating Indigenous peoples into a nation-state fundamentally built on their exclusion.

Critique of state recognition policies is a common theme among many scholars of Indigenous activism. In addition to Andersen (2010), this has also been discussed, for example, by Taiaiake Alfred (1999), Glen Coulthard (2014), Kymlicka (2007), Hale (2005), Temin (2023), Corntassel, (2008). In his *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, Taiaiake Alfred asserts,"*We do not need to be included in the white man's institutions. We need to dismantle them. We need to recover our own ways of being and governing*" (Alfred, 1999, p. 23). This idea—that Indigenous freedom should not be contingent on state approval—is further echoed in Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* (Coulthard, 2014). Coulthard argues that liberal multicultural recognition often co-opts Indigenous claims into the state-centric system and thereby reproduces colonial power structures. He critiques the way state recognition can produce forms of economic and political dependency. This, in turn, undermines the radical potential of Indigenous demands for self-governance rooted in land-based relationships and community-based practices.

Furthermore, other scholars highlight the problems with framing Indigenous peoples as minorities, arguing that such an approach oversimplifies their distinctiveness and undermines their claims to autonomy. In *Multicultural Odysseys*, Will Kymlicka (2007) argues that Indigenous peoples have often been marginalized and excluded from the processes of state

formation. Distinguishing them from migrants, he emphasizes their unique status as national minorities with distinct cultural and territorial identities shaped by colonization. Kymlicka further advocates recognizing their inherent rights to self-governance as a safeguard against assimilation by the state. Since the making of nation-state boundaries often excludes Indigenous peoples from full inclusion within the state, Martin Andersen (2010) questions whether the politics of multiculturalism, as practiced by liberal democratic states, can effectively address this issue of exclusion. This perspective resonates with Charles Hale (2005) in his critique of what he characterizes as *neoliberal multiculturalism*. While states appear to accommodate Indigenous and minority rights, they often impose limited, depoliticized governance models that leave little space for Indigenous-led initiatives. Despite formal recognition of Indigenous identities, underlying structural inequalities persist. By confining cultural expression within state frameworks and suppressing other forms of resistance, Charles Hale argues that multiculturalism functions more as a mechanism of control than genuine empowerment. Thus, scholars critique multiculturalism for appropriating Indigenous cultural identities on state-sanctioned terms while sidestepping demands for land rights, sovereignty, and structural change.

Another perspective through which scholars critique the state-recognition framework is its prioritization of individual rights over the community-based responsibilities central to Indigenous worldviews. In part, David Myer Temin (2023), focusing on twentieth-century Indigenous theorists from Canada and the United States, argues that dominant civil rights frameworks in both countries limit Indigenous self-determination. These frameworks prioritize individual rights over collective autonomy, often repackaging Indigenous assertions of sovereignty into state-led development initiatives. The Indigenous thinkers analyzed by Temin view self-determination as a community-based practice grounded in relationships with the land.

What sets Indigenous political thought apart in this context is its focus on kinship with the land and the responsibilities that arise from this relationship, rather than a claim to the right to govern a territory. Therefore, these thinkers emphasize a duty of care and reciprocity with the land as central to Indigenous governance. In turn, Corntassel (2008) advocates for sustainable self-determination, moving away from a rights-based discourse. He asserts, "*Rather than seeking recognition of our 'human rights' from colonial institutions, our focus can be redirected towards local, Indigenous-centered, responsibility-based movements*" (Corntassel, 2008, p.122). Highlighting examples of sustainable self-determination among Indigenous peoples in Peru, Hawai'i, and Turtle Island, Corntassel calls for a radical shift—decentering the state in favor of community-based Indigenous action.

The concept of sustainable self-determination (Corntassel, 2008), which is distinct from state recognition, has prompted further scholarly discussion by Bauder and Mueller (2023), Shrinkhal (2021), Branch (2012), Andersen (2010), Radhuber and Radcliffe (2022), and Oksanen (2021) on the distinctions between Indigenous sovereignty and Westphalian sovereignty. Indigenous sovereignties (in the plural, as their definition remains fluid and encapsulates the diverse realities of Indigenous communities) remain in tension with the state. As Iorns (1992) argues, the latter considers Indigenous sovereignties as claims of secession and perceives them as a threat to its global dominance. Although UN documents explicitly affirm the right to self-determination, it remains an organisation fundamentally structured around nation-states that uphold the principles of Westphalian sovereignty (Bauder & Mueller, 2023). These principles, in turn, resist recognizing Indigenous peoples as legitimate subjects of self-determination. States frequently invoke two key international norms that maintain the existing world order of nation-states: the principle of territorial integrity and the doctrine of *uti possidetis*, which limits the right to

independence to pre-existing colonial administrative boundaries—effectively solidifying them as the borders of newly independent states (Shrinkhal, 2021). As Bauder and Mueller observe, "*The legal claims of Westphalian states over their territories sidelined Indigenous perspectives of sovereignty*" (Bauder & Mueller, 2023, p.166) The fundamental issue lies in the fact that Westphalian sovereignty, by design, excludes Indigenous sovereignties that transcend the realm of state. Rooted in the affirmation of the nation-state as the primary subject of international legitimacy, this model leaves little room for alternative forms of political governance. Incorporating Indigenous sovereignties on equal terms requires challenging the state-centric sovereignty dominance—a necessary but profoundly difficult transformation to realize.

The very structure of Westphalian sovereignty inherently constrains the recognition and realization of Indigenous sovereignties. Scholars (Douglas, 2005; Branch, 2012; Bauder & Mueller, 2023) contend that modern state sovereignty has been significantly connected with the colonial subjugation of Indigenous peoples, for whom the concept was alien. As Shrinkhal states, "*In connection with indigenous peoples, traditional notion of sovereignty carries the unpleasant traits of colonialism*" (Shrinkhal, 2021, p.79). Westphalian sovereignty was not simply imported from Europe, but actively shaped through colonization, particularly in efforts to legitimize control over Indigenous lands in the Americas, giving rise to the modern concept of state sovereignty (Branch, 2012). Committed to preserving their global superiority, nation-states tend to misinterpret Indigenous claims to sovereignty as mere appeals for recognition. They offer only limited autonomy to Indigenous communities, viewing them as subordinate to the dominant state sovereignty (Bauder & Mueller, 2023). In doing so, nation-states often overlook or marginalize Indigenous concepts of sovereignty rooted in contextual, non-Western epistemologies.

Indigenous sovereignties, with their diversity and contextual grounding, are often overshadowed by the standardized concept of state sovereignty. Using the case of the Mapuches—divided by the Chilean and Argentine borders—Martin Andersen (2010) illustrates how their activism transcends the imposed boundaries of modern states. He argues that Indigenous conceptions of governance and sovereignty are essential to reimagining liberal democracies in more pluralistic and inclusive terms. Focusing on the cases of Ecuador and Bolivia, Radhuber and Radcliffe (2022) argue that Indigenous activism has uniquely foregrounded agendas for pluralizing resource governance. However, these efforts have not achieved their goals, as they are often seen as conflicting with nation-states governance rooted in extractivism. Even with the inclusion of plurinationalism in both countries' new constitutions, resource governance was not restructured to acknowledge the multiple sovereign rights of diverse Indigenous communities. This occurs because plural sovereignty—rooted in the interdependence of multiple political actors— challenges the dominant binary model that subordinates diverse Indigenous lands to a single national authority. Unlike the cases of Ecuador and Bolivia, Aslak-Antti Oksanen (2021) affirms that Sámi activism in Norway represents a successful example of plurinationalism. He argues that the Sámi's success stemmed from effectively mobilizing international Indigenous rights law in their domestic struggle. Norway, eager to preserve its reputation as a global advocate for human rights, integrated Sámi customary practices into its national legislation. However, despite this relative success, the political architecture of nation-states is fundamentally structured to preclude plural and overlapping forms of Indigenous governance.

Given that Indigenous peoples assert demands for autonomy and self-identify not as cultural minorities but as distinct nations, I intended to seek a concept of nationalism that reflects the Indigenous perspective. I recognized that the modernist framework, while describing the

experience of nation-states, excludes the colonized experience of Indigenous peoples and therefore fails to capture the complexity of Indigenous understandings of nationhood. I will begin my inquiry by exploring Smith's (1986) understanding of ethnic nationalism, which he characterizes as cohesive and culturally rooted, distinguishing it from territorial nationalism typical of postcolonial states. Smith's (1986) ethnic nationalism follows a *triple transformation*—from ethnic group to nation, nation to state, and state to nation-state—based on shared culture and identity. In contrast, territorial nationalism, driven by state boundaries, lacks this historical and cultural continuity. The argument that former colonies couldn't transform an ethnic group into a nation, as in the West, due to state formation based on territory, is valid when the West is used as a reference. However, this view undermines the cultural and historical processes of oppressed peoples, positioning them as perpetually behind the universal Western perspective. Such a stance diminishes alternative experiences, including those of Indigenous peoples.

Although differing from Smith's account, the normative division between civic and ethnic nationalism still views the West as the model. Western nationalisms are deemed *civic*, complete, and legitimate, while non-Western ones are labeled *ethnic*, either morally questionable or historically underdeveloped (Ignatieff, 1993). The civic-ethnic dichotomy has been widely criticized for oversimplification (Brubaker, 2004), with critics arguing that the Western civic model often obscures racial and cultural tensions and pressures other identities to assimilate (Yael Tamir, 2019). Despite significant critique, this division persists (Ignatieff, 1993; Laitin, 2001; Arel, 2006). This Eurocentrism in nationalism theory highlights the need for frameworks that acknowledge Indigenous nationhood on their own terms.

Smith's (1986) account of ethnosymbolism, which defines the nation through the *ethnie* as "*collective cultural units that may evolve into a nation*" (Smith, 1986, p. 13), overlooks the fluid, relational nature of Indigenous nationhood, framing the nation instead as a fixed, bounded entity. Brubaker (2004) critiques such static conceptualizations, noting that the nation is often treated as a stable and enduring structure. Viewing Indigenous sovereignty claims as stemming from neatly bounded, given-for-granted groups risks distorting their complexity. To avoid essentialization on Indigenous appeals for sovereignty, I draw on Brubaker's (2004) notion of *nation-ness as happening* to examine how Indigenous activism enacts nationhood as a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a stable object of analysis. To understand Indigenous perspectives on nationhood, it is essential to focus on its processual and relational dimensions, rather than define it in static terms.

The application of the concept of *nation-ness* (Brubaker, 2004) to Indigenous nationhood can be further enriched through the notion of *grounded normativity*, introduced by Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2016). This concept refers to the everyday, land-based practices that sustain Indigenous ways of being. While rooted in place, it is not defined by cartographic territory but by ethical relationships forged through ongoing interaction with land and community. Rather than being rooted in abstract rights or fixed legal codes, grounded normativity is a lived practice in which land is not treated as a resource, but as a relative and teacher: *"Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner. Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which we practice solidarity"* (Coulthard and Simpson, 2016, p. 254). In turn, Corntassel (2008) emphasizes that Indigenous nationhood is

sustained through relationships rather than fixed geography. By highlighting cases of sustainable self-determination among Indigenous peoples in Peru, Hawai'i, and Turtle Island, Corntassel (2008) advocates for a radical shift: decentering the state in favor of community-based Indigenous action. These appeals inevitably confront dominant practices rooted in universal, Western-centric knowledge systems—anchored in discourses of individual rights, territorial sovereignty, and hierarchical power. In the upcoming chapter, I will discuss how this aligns with broader efforts to decolonize hegemonic, universalist knowledge systems that were established during the colonization of Indigenous peoples. I find it important to distinguish anti-colonial movements that merely shifted power without restructuring knowledge from decolonization, which calls for a radical epistemic transformation. This involves dismantling colonial hierarchies and enabling Indigenous knowledge to exist autonomously and on equal footing with state systems.

Decolonial Insurgency

Examined scholars within the decolonial turn such as Catherine E. Walsh (2018), Walter D. Mignolo (2018), Madina Tlostanova (2018) advocate for epistemic justice by creating space for Indigenous knowledges that have long been marginalized. While it may appear impractical from the perspective of political feasibility, they contend that the deconstruction of Western rationality is essential. In *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis,* Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo (2018) argue that coloniality is an ongoing, embodied experience that shapes ways of knowing and being. Walsh (2018) introduces the concept of *decolonial insurgency* to describe the shift from the struggle 'against' to 'for', which Indigenous resisting actions across South and Northern Americas have made since the 1990s. It goes beyond merely rebelling against systems

of oppression proactively reconstructing Indigenous worldviews and practices, asserting their validity and relevance in contemporary society. As Walsh asserts, "*Insurgency urges, puts forth, and advances from the ground up and from the margins, other imaginaries, visions, knowledges, modes of thought, other ways of being, becoming, and living in relation*" (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p.34). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which is shaped by past conditions and guides present and future actions, Walsh introduces the idea of a *decolonial habitus*. This habitus is developed through Indigenous decolonial insurgency as a means of survival and a vehicle for transmitting resistance across generations. Walsh's *decolonial habitus* does not aim to abolish Western ideas, but rather transcend them by "*building own houses of thought*" (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p.44). This process seeks to create an entirely new framework—what Walsh refers to as a *decolonial otherwise* that aims at: *"procuring the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity and self-determination, while at the same time confronting the bio-politic that controls, dominates, and commodifies subjects and nature"* (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p.44)

Decolonial insurgency thus integrates and embodies linguistic, aesthetic, environmental, and political dimensions to foster new decolonial forms of intellectual, emotional, and existential agency. Observing the Mapuche people, José Bengoa states that "*a new political actor [has emerged] that challenges the traditional ways of making political decisions*" (Bengoa, 2007, p.17). Indigenous activism manifests as *decolonial insurgency* that subverts multicultural recognition politics and resists the compartmentalization of Indigenous knowledge, asserting an integrated plural decolonial subjectivity. While labels may assist in navigating within Western epistemologies, they risk reductive classification. Incorporating Indigenous perspectives into Western categorization can lead to the stigma and demonization of Indigenous peoples. What

matters is to listen with respect and acceptance, without compartmentalization. As Corntassel (2008) asserts in his concept of sustainable self-determination, Indigenous demands for governance encompass ecology, language, economics, politics, rights, and culture—not as discrete spheres but as interwoven, dynamic assemblages. This holistic approach reflects a manifestation of the decolonial otherwise (Walsh, 2018). Although embracing epistemological and ontological pluralism presents significant challenges, Martin Andersen (2010) calls for reimagining liberal democracy to incorporate diverse Indigenous worldviews on equal footing.

Democracy need not solely revolve around the right to express one's voice; it can also manifest a decolonial turn. This is what Adrian Ivakhiv (2023) articulates through their concept of *decolonizing democracy*, which surpasses the European Enlightenment model grounded in Ancient Greece. In this context, democracy broadens the concept of "peoples" to encompass not only those, who vote, but also non-humans, and redefines "rule" as extending beyond voice representation, incorporating relational and sensory dimensions that shape self-governance and our interactions with the surroundings. Emphasizing the processual nature of this phenomenon, akin to Brubaker's notion of *nation-ness as a contingent happening* (Brubaker, 2004), *decolonizing democracy* emerges from within society, not externally. However, While Brubaker appeals to contingency, Ivakhiv argues that this emergence is an eruption of agency rooted in the past—community acts of resistance and self-governance preserved in memory. Ivakhiv highlights that *decolonizing democracy* manifests as a fleeting eruption of societal agency, a peak of activity that need not evolve into a permanent institution. Yet, despite its transience, this moment endures in the collective memory of generations, ultimately resurfacing to exert its influence at a later time, reawakening the memory of resistance. At its zenith of activity,

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decolonizing democracy radically extends the scope of agency, encompassing individuals, phenomena, perspectives, and relations that were once marginalized or excluded.

To synthesize the literature on Indigenous activism, scholars pose critical questions about who has the authority to define Indigeneity and how Indigenous ways of being and knowing diverge from Western-centric epistemologies. They critically interrogate state-imposed criteria of authenticity, arguing that such frameworks underpin the logic of multiculturalism. Rather than empowering Indigenous peoples, multiculturalism often functions as a means of control, reducing their status from distinct nations to cultural minorities within the nation-state.

By portraying the UN's international protection of Indigenous rights as an illusion of inclusion, scholars underscore how plural Indigenous sovereignties are systematically marginalized. This marginalization is reinforced by the dominant Westphalian model of sovereignty, which subordinates Indigenous governance and resists the structural transformations necessary for the equal recognition of multiple forms of sovereignty.

In response, Indigenous activism emerges as a decolonial insurgency—advocating for the dismantling of colonial hierarchies and the recognition of Indigenous epistemologies as autonomous and equal. Scholars contend that Indigenous knowledges must be respected and integrated in order to move beyond the limitations of liberal recognition politics. This requires reimagining democracy itself, so that it includes diverse Indigenous worldviews and lived practices grounded in communal reciprocity and deep relationships with the land.

These practices, central to the concept of decolonizing democracy, may appear as spontaneous bursts of agency. Yet they are in fact intergenerational, deeply embedded in communal memory, and spiritually rooted in place. While scholars examine a variety of cases across different

contexts, they share a commitment to confronting the enduring legacies of Western colonialism. To advance the decentralization of dominant epistemologies and governance structures, they call for the respect and incorporation of the diverse and overlapping sovereignties of Indigenous peoples.

Context Chapter

Situating Within Global Indigenous Activism: The Russian Context

Scholars (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999) emphasize that the study of Indigenous activism is deeply contextual and must account for specific historical, social, and political dynamics. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) asserts, "*The struggles of Indigenous peoples are situated within specific historical and social contexts, and the outcomes of decolonization will look different depending on the place, time, and nature of the colonial encounter*" (Smith, 1999, p.48). The Russian context is particularly shaped by a range of distinct factors, including the frequent exclusion of discussion on Russian colonialism from imperial-colonial discourse (Tlostanova, 2018); the enduring legacy of Soviet national policies that continue to influence the perception of Indigenous peoples within Russia; and the ongoing, and increasingly severe, political repression directed at Indigenous activism.

The first distinction lies in the fact that Russia is often excluded from settler-colonial contexts commonly applied to Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and states in Central and South America. While these countries are commonly framed as embodiments of Western colonialism, Russia is frequently positioned as an anti-colonial alternative to the West (Moor, 2001; Tlostanova, 2018; Ivakhiv, 2023). Such a perception of Russia is further burdened by the "*Russian imperial mythology as a saviour of suffering peoples*" (Tlostanova, 2018, p. 8). In practice, Indigenous peoples understand that Russian colonialism is not an alternative to Western colonialism, but rather replicates it. This is compounded by a sense of secondariness in relation to the West, as Russia itself was positioned lower within *imperial difference*, within the hierarchy of empires in global colonialism (Tlostanova, 2012). Thus, excluded from colonial

critiques centered on the West, Russia masks itself as anti-colonial, forcing Indigenous activists to confront a dual critique of both Western and Russian colonialism.

Indigenous activism in Russia, catalyzed by the country's invasion of Ukraine, remains a new and largely understudied phenomenon. While global Indigenous movements often respond to internal challenges, in Russia the invasion of Ukraine acted as a key external catalyst. Although World War II fostered a sense of dignity among Indigenous peoples, it did not provoke a comparable mobilization (Poyer, 2017). Globally, Indigenous activism has largely been anchored in anti-extractivist resistance. Similar protests have taken place in Russia, but were typically framed as environmental or limited to the "Small-Numbered Indigenous Peoples of the North" (*korennyye malochislennyye narody*, KMNS). These movements have not since evolved into the broader phenomenon I examine: an Indigenous activism that moves beyond the KMNS framework and explicitly demands the decolonization of Russia. Russia rejects the international definition of Indigeneity, narrowing it to KMNS who maintain a traditional lifestyle. Although Russia has refused to sign the UNDRIP or ILO Convention 169, this is ostensibly compensated for by Article 69 of the Russian Constitution, recognizing the need for state support in protecting Indigenous rights. However, lacking effective implementation mechanisms, in practice, this law remains only on paper and has little effect beyond its symbolic value (Donahoe, 2019). Other Indigenous peoples whose populations exceed Russia's official threshold of 50,000 are not recognized as Indigenous under state criteria. They are rendered invisible and pressured to assimilate into mainstream society (Zibrova, 2023). As Fondahl emphasizes, the relationship between the Russian state and Indigenous peoples continues to be shaped by colonialism, embedded in the system of governance (Fondahl, 2015). Thus, Russia's narrow legal definition,

denial of its colonial legacy, and lack of specific policies result in the systemic marginalization of many Indigenous communities and violation of the rights of Indigenous peoples.

The second key distinction concerns the ongoing impact of Soviet nationalities policy. Larger Indigenous populations are categorized as *natsional'nosti*—a Soviet-era term similar to ethnicity. As Brubaker emphasizes, the Soviet Union uniquely "institutionalized territorial *nationhood* and ethnic *nationality* as fundamental social categories" (Brubaker, 1996, p.17) In addition to dividing the Union into various national territories officially assigned to specific ethnic communities, the regime also recorded each citizen's ethnic identity, which was used not merely as a *statistical category* but as *obligatory ascribed status* that had to be indicated in all official documents (Brubaker, 1996, p.18). Similar to Brubaker, both Terry Martin (2001) and Francine Hirsch (2005) highlight the paradox of Soviet nationalities policy, aimed to suppress nationalism while promoting ethnic identities—but in a controlled manner to establish a cohesive Soviet identity. Scholars examine the role of ethnography in codifying national identities by Soviet authorities, as well as the co-optation of local ethnic elites into the Soviet political system, positioning them as intermediaries between the people and Soviet power. This leads to the conclusion that national identities were artificially constructed by the state, often detached from the real cultural distinctions. In seeking to suppress nationalism, the Soviet Union paradoxically entrenched it through deep institutionalization.

Modern Russia continues to reflect the enduring influence of Soviet nationalities policy. The state's structure remains committed to facilitating the self-determination of national minorities. Although constitutionally defined as a multinational state, Russia functions in practice as a Russian national state, working to assimilate cultural distinctiveness into a singular, centralized institutional framework. As Kathryn E. Graber (2020) notes in her book *Mixed Messages:*

Mediating Native Belonging in Asian Russia, this Janus-faced approach produced *mixed messages* that national minorities must navigate daily—even within a single interaction. The same practices can be perceived as both progressive and backward, depending on the context— for example, speaking the Buryat language may be deemed as progressive when used among local intellectuals, yet viewed as backward in interactions with Russian speakers (Graber, 2020). Echoing Graber's observations, Alexia Bloch (2004) highlights the paradox of post-Soviet Buryat identity. She emphasizes how Soviet-era cultural stigmatization of Buryats as backward and primitive was ironically coupled with their political inclusion as model minorities within the Soviet project. In modern Russia, while the Buryats strive to overcome the Soviet-era distortion of their identity, they are also compelled to navigate the pressures of the Russian state's centralization. In asserting their native belonging, post-Soviet Buryats are confronted with the dual legacies of Soviet-era categorization and post-Soviet Russian nationalism. Simultaneously, the Soviet legacy is manifested in the fact that all these national minorities, who do not fall under the category of KMNS (including the Buryats), possess territorial autonomies. Since the invasion, non-Russian national communities have been exploring new modes of identification and, for the first time, have converged around a shared Indigenous identity. However, global Indigenous activism typically comprises communities that often exist across multiple nation-states and centers on advocating for Indigenous sovereignties that differ from the Westphalian model. Shaped by the legacy of the Soviet era, the Russian case is marked by a dissonance between nominal national territorial autonomy and Indigenous sovereignties.

A focus on ethnic identity, combined with the goal of decolonizing Russia, frames Indigenous activism from Russia as a novel phenomenon. In her recent study, Zibrova (2024) frames the articulation of ethnic identities as a pivotal moment in Indigenous activism. Emphasizing its

emergence in the wake of the invasion, Zibrova (2024) illustrates how ethnic identity has become a central instrument of anti-war activism. She examines how ethnic and racial discrimination has shaped Indigenous anti-war activism in Russia, turning personal experiences into catalysts for political mobilization. Zibrova (2024) underscores a significant shift: activists, who once concealed their ethnic identity out of fear, now assert it with pride. However, while Zibrova (2024) characterizes this phenomenon as *Indigenous activism* and employs the term *ethnicity*, she does not critically engage with these concepts as categories of practice within the activism of those involved. Given that activists from national republics were actively searching for the appropriate term to define their identity, my focus is to explore why they ultimately settled on *Indigenous*. I aim to understand how Indigenous activists mobilize *nation-ness* and engage with the concept of *decolonization*. Taking into account the issue of *double critique* (Tlostanova, 2018), I seek to understand how decolonization is framed within the Russian context. In doing so, this exploration will contribute to the study of movements in regions beyond those directly impacted by Western colonialism.

At this stage, I am expected to present activism as a political movement, detailing its support base, opposition, and organizational structure. However, this proves difficult due to the nascent nature of the phenomenon, which has thus far been addressed in only one published article—by Ekaterina Zibrova (2024). Moreover, activists operate within an increasingly authoritarian state, where many have been labeled as terrorists, extremists, or foreign agents. These designations significantly hinder public support. Despite this, activists remain deeply engaged in their national republics, where they are frequently contacted for assistance—primarily to help individuals avoid military conscription. As detailed in the methodology chapter, most activists requested anonymity, limiting access to information about their organizational structures due to safety

concerns. In general, these individuals come from various republics, regions, and rural areas across Russia. While ethnically non-Russian, many were raised in Russian-speaking urban contexts. Their activism often began as anti-war and gradually evolved into Indigenous advocacy, conceived as a long-term project. They do not self-identify as part of the political opposition. This is not a centralized movement; each activist primarily focuses on their respective republic. Nonetheless, horizontal communication has emerged through shared experiences, struggles, and aspirations, fostering mutual support. Activists have created Instagram pages, YouTube channels, and other platforms to speak out about Russian colonialism, coordinating primarily via Telegram and Signal. Joint events are occasionally organized, though participation varies and no fixed group structure exists. Some activists maintain public visibility where relative safety permits. Overall, Indigenous activism in Russia operates as a decentralized network open to all who share its core principles, including ethnic Russians. Both the Russian state and the opposition are viewed as conditional adversaries. Activists often reject the distinction between "bad" and "good" Russians, as both tend to exclude Indigenous perspectives from dominant narratives of Russia's present and future, uniformly labeling them as separatists. While some continue to pursue dialogue with the opposition despite past setbacks, most prioritize engagement with their own communities and with genuinely supportive Russian allies.

Another reason I avoid describing this as a conventional political or social movement is that it contradicts decolonial research principles, as emphasized by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). Academia is not neutral; knowledge production is political and often serves state interests, potentially contributing to the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. This structural bias, as I've experienced, resists critique through a decolonial lens, as it challenges core academic

assumptions. I carry a responsibility for how knowledge about Indigenous activism in Russia is produced. I refuse to adopt frameworks that serve academic conventions but risk harming or misrepresenting those who have shared their experiences with me. These activists reject imposed categories and definitions. To force them into pre-existing academic models would undermine the purpose of this research. My aim is to understand Indigenous activism on its own terms.

While this may seem provocative or radical—and some scholars acknowledge it—I have observed through my limited academic experience that the colonial foundations of knowledge production remain insufficiently addressed. Therefore, I do not seek to frame activism as a social or political movement, though I acknowledge its inherently political nature, in case we agree that academia is political as well. I also find it unnecessary to quantify the number of supporters or measure the resonance of Indigenous initiatives across national republics, as this falls outside the scope of my research. I view such an approach as contradictory to decolonial methodology, as attempts to measure phenomena often rely on classificatory logics that seek to determine whether a group holds the power to influence others. From this perspective, I see no clear justification for pursuing such data. My current focus is on understanding the discourse without imposing categories that activists themselves resist. In this context, even a single voice carries significant analytical and ethical weight.

Research questions

My primary research interest is in examining how Indigenous activists in Russia challenge state-imposed definitions of their identities by constructing a counter-discourse rooted in Indigeneity. This study explores how activists mobilize their *nation-ness* by engaging with notions such as

Indigeneity, and *decolonization* as *categories of practice* (Brubaker, 2004). While not assuming these meanings to be analytically fixed, I examine how they are invoked and negotiated by actors within their specific socio-political and cultural contexts. My research questions are:

1. Why did national minorities (a term they had previously identified with) collectively choose to redefine themselves as Indigenous?

2. How do Indigenous activists mobilise their *nation-ness*?

3. Why do activists advocate for the decolonization of Russia, and how is this connected to the previous two questions?

Methodology

This chapter is dedicated to presenting my method. I discuss my reasoning for choosing the qualitative research method, sampling, data collection, analysis strategy, and ethical considerations.

Why qualitative?

The qualitative method allows me to uncover the personal backgrounds of activists, helping to understand why they engage in collective action. It also gathers data on the personal motivations, expectations, and interpretations that activists associate with their participation. Equally important, qualitative data enables me to delve deeply into the personal thoughts, feelings, and emotions that may drive such actions. As Donatella della Porta states, "*Qualitative interviews are beneficial for understanding the sense that actors give their actions*" (della Porta, 2014, p. 231). In my study, the qualitative data provide insight into how people from diverse backgrounds and places of origin engage with notions such as *Indigeneity*, *nation-ness*, and *decolonization* within their activism, which constitutes the core focus of my research.

Meanwhile, the qualitative method encourages greater care and emphasizes the significance of each voice I hear. However, this approach still does not fully align with decolonial methodologies, which require deeper attention to how knowledge is produced—particularly when researching colonized peoples who actively resist colonial influence. I recognize that my own knowledge is situated among other knowledges, as articulated by Donna Haraway in *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial*

Perspective (1988). It is therefore crucial to reflect on the dynamics of my own knowledge production. Specifically, I must be aware that I view Indigenous activism through the lens of what I already know, which is shaped by my background, education, culture and position.

This issue is further developed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, where she challenges institutions to reconsider whose knowledge is valued, the criteria by which it is recognized as legitimate, and who ultimately benefits from the research process. Smith argues for the transformation of normative frameworks, power hierarchies, and relational dynamics embedded in knowledge production, rather than simply changing research techniques. Therefore, the qualitative method is only partially aligned with how I intend to approach my research question. At the same time, I remain aware of the risk that—even with good intentions—I may inadvertently reproduce forms of knowledge that suppress my interviewees' voices or undermine their resistance. This risk emerges from the pressure to align my work with existing academic standards and frameworks, which have historically objectified Indigenous peoples and silenced their ways of knowing. I will most likely make mistakes and only realize them over time because decolonization is an ongoing process of self-reflection, addressing the knowledge already ingrained within me. However, maintaining constant awareness of this is essential.

Sampling

My population consists of Indigenous peoples from Russia who identify as participants in Indigenous activism within the Russian Federation. I do not limit myself to specific geographical regions or particular initiatives. The movement is still young, loosely organized, decentralized, and under-researched. I also aim to include a diverse spectrum of activists who meet my

selection criteria. Overall, my interviewees come from various regions of Russia and are involved in different initiatives pursuing diverse goals, all united by one primary aim: "decolonizing Russia."

My selection of interviewees is based on the following criteria:

- Identifying as Indigenous from any region of Russia;

- Self-defining as a participant in Indigenous activism in Russia;

- Engaging in various roles within activism (e.g., as founders or members of organizations or grassroots initiatives, individual contributors, or independent activists);

- Having emigrated from Russia to other countries and being able to speak freely without fear for personal security;

- Being over 18 years old;

- Identifying as male, female, or non-binary;

- Coming from diverse personal backgrounds and life histories;

- Representing a range of occupations;

- Using various mediums and tools to pursue their goals;

- Demonstrating different levels of engagement in activism;

- Holding diverse views on the specific goals pursued by the movement;

- Being able to speak either Russian or English.

I used a snowball sampling technique to identify interviewees. I began with the most accessible individuals—those I already knew or who shared mutual acquaintances with me. Given the sensitivity of the topic, it was essential that I be introduced to activists as a researcher they could potentially trust. Through this approach, I relied on existing social networks within activist circles to reach additional participants. I sought out common acquaintances and asked them to recommend me as a trustworthy researcher to those I hoped to interview. In particular, a close friend—who is herself Indigenous, identifies as an activist—served as my initial point of contact. I asked her to help facilitate introductions to other Indigenous activists.

Data collection

The qualitative data for this study were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in Indigenous activism in Russia. The semi-structured format offered several advantages that aligned well with the goals of my research. It allowed me to frame the interview as a conversation, enabling interviewees to speak openly without the constraints of rigid questioning. At the same time, I could guide the conversation to stay focused on the core research themes. This flexible format allowed for the reordering, modification, and adaptation of questions as the dialogue unfolded. Semi-structured interviews also prompted the emergence of new and significant topics that I could not have anticipated during the planning stage. One of the key strengths of this approach is that each question in the interview guide was optional, allowing each interview to unfold uniquely—an important feature given the diversity of my sample. Some interviewees were perceived as experts and offered more elaborate responses, while others engaged differently, which the format accommodated well. This approach also allowed for

flexibility in the language I used to formulate questions, enabling me to tailor the interview guide to each participant. It helped create a more relaxed and conversational atmosphere, which was crucial not only for the comfort of my interviewees but also for myself as a researcher navigating sensitive topics. Given the diversity of my participants and the varying terminology they used, the informal tone of the interviews helped me adapt to different conversational dynamics with greater ease. Importantly, many of the people I interviewed had experienced discrimination, oppression, and marginalisation. As someone who is not Indigenous, I was aware that some participants might be hesitant or suspicious about being interviewed. The semi-structured format helped to reduce perceived hierarchies and build trust. I encouraged interviewees to ask me questions as well, designing the interview as a two-way exchange. This approach reflected my commitment to being attentive to the emotional weight of the subject matter and respectful of participants' experiences. Ultimately, the semi-structured interview method enabled an open, trustworthy, and non-standardized yet guided dialogue. It provided space for improvisation and allowed me to uncover insights that would likely have remained hidden in a more rigid research format.

My semi-structured interview guide includes the following questions:

- Where are you from?

- How do you present yourself abroad? What do you usually say when foreigners ask where you are from? (for activists living abroad)

- How do you imagine or envision your land?

- What does it mean to you to be Indigenous?

- Why did you start your activism? Do you have any role models? If so, who and why?

- Are Indigenous traditions important to you? Why or why not?

- What goals do you pursue through your activism? Why are these goals important to you?

- How do you seek to achieve these goals? Do you appeal to international support or collaboration?

- What is your perspective on the Russian liberal opposition?

- How do you imagine the future of your land?

- What do you mean when you talk about the decolonization of Russia?

Before collecting data, I conducted a pilot interview with my close friend, previously mentioned in the sampling subsection. This pilot interview allowed me to test the relevance of the questions, assess the clarity and appropriateness of the language used, and determine whether the interview guide adequately covered all the key topics of my research.

I conducted a total of 13 interviews via Zoom in Russian, each averaging approximately 1.5 hours in length, with the longest lasting three hours. Some participants agreed on speaking openly, and their real names are used in the analysis chapter. Other participants consented only to anonymous participation. I chose not to employ pseudonyms, as I considered even this potentially unsafe; there may be individuals with the same names, and I aimed to avoid creating any situation that could compromise one's safety. Furthermore, it was important to underscore the context in which activism operates, where—due to repressive state policies—many individuals are unable to speak openly.

The interviewees include:

Vika Maladaeva, founder of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, Burayt, from the Republic of Buryatia;

Sargylana Kondakova, founder of the Free Yakutiya Foundation, Sakha and Yakagir ethnic background, from the Republic of Sakha;

Seseg Jigjitova, an illustrator, Buryat from the Republic of Buryatia;

Leila, a journalist, Tatar from Bashkortostan;

a female anonymous activist, Kalmyk, from the Republic of Kalmykiya;

a male anonymous activist, Kalmyk, from the Republic of Kalmykiya;

Lana, founder of Komi Daily, Komi, from the Republic of Komi;

a female anonymous Tatar activist born in Uzbekistan who has lived in various Russian cities;

a female anonymous activist, Tatar, from Kazan, capital of the Republic of Tatarstan;

Marina, an activist with a mixed and partially unknown background due to lost family history;

Anya, an artist, Udmurt activist from the Perm region;

Lena, a writer and English teacher, from Izhevsk, a capital of the Republic of Udmurtia;

a female anonymous Udmurt activist from an Udmurt village, located in Kirov Oblast.

Data analysis approach

This data analysis approach enables me to identify relationships among various meanings, intentions, consequences, and contexts (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Qualitative content analysis is a valuable method for examining "how knowledge is created or understood by those without power" (DeFilippis, 2015, p. 176), which is particularly important in my research, as I focus on peoples that have been marginalized and suppressed.

I employ a deductive thematic analysis approach that uses existing theories as a starting point to develop a coding strategy for examining the data. While drawing on established knowledge, I maintain flexibility and openness to new ideas and concepts that may challenge or problematize existing theories and categories. Nonetheless, the theories presented in the theoretical chapter provide the foundation for identifying key concepts to investigate the collected data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

I have designed the following coding map:

- Challenges arise in articulating my interviewees' non-Russian ethnic identities, particularly regarding whether they experience internalized colonial shame and how they navigate or resist state-imposed categorical identities.

- Why do they reclaim their indigeneity, including their perspectives on cultural revival and the role of tradition, as well as the importance they place on engaging with the United Nations or other international bodies.

- My interviewees' vision of the future and whether this correlates with Indigenous sovereignty?

- Whether their activism can be understood as a decolonial insurgency.

Although the deductive approach includes analysis of "the latent content" (e.g., silence, sighs, laughter, and posture), my emphasis is on "the manifest content" (DeFilippis, 2015, p.176) to see how my interviewees frame their thoughts, formulate the significant concepts, and in what language they explain the goals of their activism.

Although content analysis is a valuable tool, it has several limitations when researching Indigenous activism. It can reduce complex narratives into codes, potentially stripping away the rich contextual knowledge that Indigenous activism is deeply rooted in. Content analysis often focuses on producing static texts, which may conflict with the relational and fluid nature of Indigenous knowledge. Additionally, because interpretive power is placed in the hands of the researcher, there is always a risk of reproducing the hierarchies that Indigenous activists seek to dismantle.

Besides deductive content analysis, I also employ narrative analysis. Narratives convey the complexity, context, and relational aspects of Indigenous experiences, ensuring the analysis is conducted with greater respect, precision, and depth. Focusing on narratives helps me avoid overlooking unique phenomena that may emerge in a single interview but carry significant meaning for the research as a whole. Narratives enable a deeper understanding of personal and collective struggles, centering my interviewees' aspirations within the research.

Ethical considerations and challenges

From an ethical perspective, it was essential to be transparent with interviewees about the motivations, interests, and aims of my research, as well as how the results would be published. I provided each participant with a written consent form to sign prior to the interview. Given that many Indigenous initiatives have been labelled as "foreign agents" or "terrorist organizations" by the Russian state, I only interviewed individuals who were in a secure position to speak openly. As I previously mentioned, interviewees were given the choice to remain anonymous or to be identified by name. While some activists preferred anonymity, others insisted on being named, viewing the research as a platform to amplify their voices publicly. Negotiating these ethical considerations required significant time and emotional energy.

As I began sending out interview requests, I encountered an ethical challenge: Indigenous activists are understandably cautious about engaging with non-Indigenous researchers. Throughout the data collection process, my attitude shifted several times. At times, I questioned whether I had the right to study Indigenous communities without being Indigenous myself. At other times, I felt that my personal background enabled me to approach the topic with empathy and to foster trust with my interviewees. I was born in Moscow but identify as Ukrainian—an identity that has led to experiences of discrimination by the dominant Russian culture. This positionality, I believed, made my interest in Indigenous activism appear less suspect. Additionally, my activist background and established contacts within activist circles helped affirm my trustworthiness. However, I remained acutely aware that being Ukrainian is not equivalent to being Indigenous. Each time I was declined or ignored, I questioned whether my role as a researcher risked replicating the very power dynamics that Indigenous activists seek to

dismantle. This was a central ethical concern: how to study Indigenous activism without reproducing neo-colonial attitudes.

In approaching interviewees, I chose to be honest about my position. I made it clear that my primary motivation was to contribute meaningfully to their activism, rather than to exploit their experiences for the sake of academic advancement.

Analysis Chapter

Challenges Articulating Non-Russian Selfhood

This subchapter is analyzed through the lens of scholarly debates on the challenges in articulating Indigenous belonging. When my interviewees began to speak about their Indigeneity, I observed a pattern similar to those identified by scholars: they often initiated their narratives by recounting the personal and structural struggles they faced before they could identify as Indigenous. The rigid, state-imposed "categorical identity"—a concept introduced by Craig Calhoun (1993)—has contributed to internalized feelings of inferiority among Indigenous individuals, as discussed by Alfred (2005) and Coulthard (2014). Similar to the observations made by such scholars as Warren and Jackson (2002), as well as Graham and Weaver (2001), my interviewees echoed narratives that portrayed them as archaic and incompatible with modernity—challenges they had to overcome.

My analysis of empirical data reveals a common, prolonged struggle among all my interlocutors to accept their own Indigeneity. This struggle arose from internalized colonial shame about expressing their ethnic belonging, deemed backward, and from the dominant Russian language and culture shaping their upbringing. This shame had been internalized over time — a product of externally imposed narratives that cast their ethnicity as inferior: rural, unfashionable, and ultimately irrelevant. Lana, a Komi activist, shares an in-depth personal testimony: "*In Russia, I was always made to feel ashamed of being Komi. We were labeled as uncivilized. I was frequently told that I was 'too intelligent for a Komi,' and that I was 'as smart as a Russian.' This internalized sense of inferiority, shaped by such dismissive perceptions, accompanied me*

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throughout my upbringing." Furthermore, my interviewees recall that being ethnically non-Russian was viewed as a disadvantage, prompting their parents to enforce Russian-only speech to prevent accents that might invite prejudice and hinder future opportunities This point is emphasized by an activist from Tatarsran, who shared the following: "*My mother wanted me to learn Russian as well because all the schools and universities in Kazan were conducted in Russian. It felt as though the Tatar language was unnecessary.*" Thus, internalized colonial shame, rooted in perceptions of being backward relative to Russians, compelled activists to disavow their belonging.

Interviewees describe a range of strategies used to distance themselves from their ethnic background in an effort to avoid feelings of shame. For those seeking to preserve their otherness without being seen as second-rate, adopting a European identity emerged as one of the few viable ways—an identity associated with prestige, seen as 'first-class.' For example, a Tatar activist, speaking on condition of anonymity, explains how being seen as a foreigner allowed her to overcome shame but emphasize her distinctiveness: "*Being Tatar meant being an unattractive girl who didn't speak Russian well. Naturally, I wanted to distance myself from it. I was often told that I looked like a Western girl, like a foreigner. And I liked that. In post-Soviet culture, a foreigner is almost always seen as something better. Even the very word 'inostranka' — 'foreigner' — carries that implication.*" The other strategy involved attempts to assimilate into the Russian dominant majority. However, especially when visible phenotypic differences were present, such efforts ultimately proved futile, as full inclusion remained out of reach. An activist from Kalmykia, providing testimony anonymously, illustrates this point with the following: "*I rejected my Kalmyk identity, but at the same time, I couldn't completely pretend. Everything around me was Russian, and society would constantly remind me, showing me that I was not one*

of them. But then, who am I?" Despite efforts to distance themselves from the public image of their ethnic origin as backward, activists carried an indelible sense of never being fully Russian, resulting in a loss of self. This was compounded by all education, social, and official activities being conducted solely in Russian, leading to their inevitable immersion in Russian language and culture.

Being fundamentally shaped by the dominant Russian cultural environment, my interviewees lost their ties to their native language and cultural heritage. As a Tatar activist asserts: *"Russian culture, through its language, inevitably infiltrated my life. I won't deny this influence or claim it didn't exist, but, intrinsically, it wasn't something that should have been part of me."* Upbringing within Russian culture and the education system fostered the emergence of a hybrid identity, which Seseg from Buryatia defines as "Russified non-Russians." She states: "*My identity is mixed. We were raised in Russian culture, yet at the same time, my family environment was deeply Buryat. We consumed Russian media and listened to Russian music. I perceive many Buryats and other Indigenous peoples as having been 'contaminated' by Russian ideology.*" Despite being initially socialized in their native languages, Indigenous activists were ultimately compelled to internalize a Russian identity.

Education, which is by default conducted in Russian, plays a pivotal role in the hybridization of identity. An Udmurt activist shared a personal story of her time at a boarding school, where children from ethnically non-Russian villages were housed. Given the isolation of these villages, lacking both roads and transportation, the children were compelled to reside in the city's boarding school from grades 5 through 11: "*From the 5th grade onward, I lived at a boarding school, which served as a typical example of how hybrid identities were formed. It was a place where I wasn't allowed to speak my native language. The school housed only non-Russian*

children from mono-ethnic remote villages. We were told that speaking in our own language was inappropriate, as Russians might suspect we were saying something negative about them."

Accordingly, my interviewees perceive themselves as products of systemic Russification—a policy that gradually erased native languages, traditions, and modes of self-understanding. Interviewees frequently mention the russification of native names that occurred for multiple reasons. Primarily, it was a strategy to protect themselves from potential repression, stemming from a lingering fear that non-Russians might again face persecution—a fear transmitted through generations. Furthermore, names were russified as a result of internalized colonialism, where Christianization and the adoption of Russian names allowed so-called '*inorodtsy*' (foreigners) to demonstrate their loyalty and secure upward mobility within Russian society, whether imperial, Soviet, or contemporary. For example, Sargylana, a Sakha activist, underscores this issue: " *I am Sakha, but now I'm considered Russian—which means I'm expected to follow the Russian world and, if necessary, die for it. In the Sakha Republic, all of my relatives were baptized and given Russian names. The issue of the russification of names lies in the fact that individuals adapted to the pressure, effectively erasing any remnants of their original identity.*" Thus, the interviewees discuss the ongoing policy of Russification, which has persisted for centuries, emphasizing that the internalization of the dominant culture and language helps explain why Indigenous peoples perceive themselves as Russians.

Beyond the internalization of colonial policy, asserting Indigeneity is further complicated by the absorption of imposed categorical identities—state-defined boundaries of Indigenuity. Departing from international norms, Russia defines Indigeneity narrowly through the category of KMNS (*korennyie malochislennyie narody severa,* the *Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North*)—communities numbering under 50,000 and presumed to uphold a 'traditional' way of

life. This framing has given rise to internal disputes within communities—an issue mentioned by Simpson (2014), Oksanen (2020), Weaver (2001)—over who is considered "more Indigenous." This state-led definition is usually internalized and reproduced within Indigenous communities themselves, excluding individuals, who are not classified as KMNS, with mixed identities or those raised outside traditional communities, particularly in urban settings. My interlocutors argue that this approach essentializes and immobilizes Indigeneity, precluding its expression in contemporary and evolving forms. Lana, a Komi activist, asserts: "*The KMNS framework effectively renders Indigenous identity as something akin to a museum artifact. This logic reflects a broader impulse to fix indigeneity in time, denying its capacity to exist as dynamic and modern.*" Rather than fostering solidarity, adoption of the rigid definition of KMNS fragments Indigenous activism in Russia and ultimately serves the interests of the repressive state. Sargylana, a Sakha activist, explains that this was deliberately done to maintain control: "*To be recognized as KMNS, a population must number fewer than 50,000. This categorization, however, embodies a 'divide and conquer' strategy. It was intentionally designed to create distinctions and foster separation among different communities.*"

Since Russia has not ratified the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, those outside the KMNS category—who do not meet its narrow criteria—are excluded from Indigeneity both domestically and globally. This echoes Zibrova's (2023) observation that peoples meeting the UN's criteria for Indigeneity had been rendered invisible—a condition that broader Indigenous activism later began to challenge. Vika, a founder of "Indigenous peoples of Russia", states: "*We were indoctrinated to believe that we were not Indigenous—or that only the 47 officially recognized small-numbered Indigenous peoples qualified. In effect, the state decided for us who counts as Indigenous and who does not. Yet, according to UN standards, it is clear*

that all of us meet the criteria for Indigeneity. This stems from a broader lack of awareness and the deep influence of propaganda that instilled a colonial mindset in us." This lack of awareness, as activists have admitted, has been internalized by Indigenous peoples within Russia due to the ongoing colonial policies of the Russian state, as Fondahl (2015) has also noted. This has also forced Indigenous individuals abroad to confront and challenge ignorance about their very existence, disrupting entrenched perceptions of who is considered to inhabit Russia. To illustrate, Leila, a Tatar from Bashkortostan, expresses her astonishment: "*While studying at a university in Boston, I was stunned to discover that even among those specializing in political science — and even Russia specifically — there was virtually no awareness of the Tatars or Tatarstan. As if we have never existed.*" Due to widespread unfamiliarity, activists are frequently compelled to either repeatedly explain their context or misstate their origins to align with external expectations—for instance, identifying as Mongolian because of their Asian features.

A divide exists that privileges those whose physical appearance aligns with the dominant image of being Russian, while marginalizing those who visibly deviate from it. The latter routinely encounter confusion from others when attempting to articulate their belonging. For instance, Vika Maladaeva, a Buryat activist, remarks: "*I've always identified myself as Buryat, yet few people are even aware that Asian populations exist within Russia.*" Alongside Asians from Russia, those whose appearance closely aligns with the typical representation of Russians, such as Tatars, Udmurts, and Komi, found it essential to emphasize that they are not Russian. A Tatar activist asserts: "*Every time I mention that I'm from Russia, I'm often automatically perceived as ethnically Russian — a misconception that distorts my belonging. That's why I've chosen to foreground my Tatar-ness instead.*" Faced with surprise and skepticism about their origins in Russia, Indigenous activists are effectively rendered invisible by prevailing global conceptions of

being Russian. Sargylana, a Sakha activist, reclaims: "*No one knows about us, the Indigenous peoples. One often tells me that I don't resemble a Russian, but rather more like someone of Chinese descent. In such moments, I am compelled to explain that, despite living on our ancestral land, we have lost our identity.*" As expressed by all interviewees, the existence of Indigenous peoples in Russia is scarcely acknowledged, which complicates the articulation of their non-Russian selfhood.

Similar to Tlostanova's (2018) observations, activists have also argued that asserting their Indigeneity is further complicated by Russia's frequent exclusion from global colonial debates and its self-positioning as an alternative to Western colonialism. However, the narratives of Indigeneity shared by interviewees inevitably engage with the realities of Russian ongoing colonialism. Activists drew on multiple historical periods, invoking examples from both the imperial and Soviet eras to underscore the continuity of colonial practices. By doing so, they aimed to emphasize that Indigenous peoples were subjected to coercive colonization, challenging narratives that portray Russian expansion as peaceful or voluntary. Opposing this official narrative, activists emphasized that before colonization, Indigenous communities had their own governance structures, cultural systems, and political autonomy. Sargylana, a Sakha activist, states: "*The Russian Empire is a colonial empire as well. For centuries, it expanded eastward, labeling us, the Indigenous peoples, as "inorodtsy" (aliens), while calling those who conquered and killed us "pioneers." How can you discover land where people have lived for over a thousand years?*"

Activists have also found it difficult to assert their Indigeneity, as they live within so-called national republics that are nominally autonomous on paper, yet in reality, they remain a minority with no real decision-making power. This observation aligns with Zibrova's (2023) analysis,

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which highlights that Indigenous peoples outside the KMNS classification are systematically pressured to assimilate into dominant Russian society. It also echoes arguments made by scholars such as Hale (2005), Coulthard (2014) and Andersen (2013), who contend that state-driven multiculturalism often serves to marginalize, rather than meaningfully include, Indigenous populations. While Russia does not formally implement a multiculturalism policy, the framework of national republics—an institutional legacy of the Soviet era—effectively renders Indigenous peoples minorities within their nominally autonomous regions. As a result, they are denied substantive self-governance, and their cultural practices, languages, and epistemologies remain structurally marginalized. An important part of the narratives surrounding Russia's colonial legacy centers on explaining how and why Indigenous peoples became minorities on their ancestral lands. For example, Lana, a Komi activist, explains: "*During the Soviet era, the Russian-speaking population in the Komi Republic grew significantly. Cities were built along the Sysola River and largely populated by Russian-speaking settlers. These newcomers neither spoke the Komi language nor intended to learn it. Today, as a result of these historical processes, Komi people have become a minority on their own ancestral land.*"

Additionally, activists have highlighted the challenges arising from the borders of national republics established by Soviet power, which disrupted the fluid and relational nature of Indigenous identities. Soviet boundary-making parallels what Anderson (1983) describes in *Imagined Communities*, where tools such as the census and mapped borders were employed as mechanisms of colonial control, managing territories and populations through fixed boundaries and rigid categories. Activists pointed to this top-down imposition of territorial divisions as a contributing factor in the emergence of interethnic conflicts, particularly in contexts where imposed boundaries did not reflect historical or cultural realities. Leila, a Tatar activist from

Bashkortostan, stated: "*Before the Soviet period, there were no clear boundaries between Tatars and Bashkorts. For many, their identity was a fluid and dynamic concept. Since the formation of the Tatar ASSR and the Bashkir ASSR, Bashkortostan has maintained areas with compact Tatar settlements. There was always a fear that Tatarstan might seek to annex these lands due to the presence of ethnic Tatars. We must move away from this colonial mentality, which attempted, by all means, to create ethnic conflict, particularly between the republics.*" After the Soviet imposition of rigid administrative borders, many Indigenous populations ended up living outside their national republics, in areas officially designated as 'Russian'.

According to activists, the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous peoples—whose status has been denied by the Russian state—culminated with the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Interviewees noted that this moment made particularly evident how the Kremlin has exploited their national republics—both territorially and demographically—as strategic resources in the service of its expansionist military objectives. For instance, Sargylana from Sakha asserted: "*The suffering of the Ukrainian people became a powerful catalyst, bringing into sharp relief the colonial nature of the current war—one driven by territorial conquest and destruction of human lives. We, as Indigenous peoples, lost our war 400 years ago. We lost our land. Today, it is being extracted and exploited, with its profits funding the war. In effect, Moscow is waging war at the expense of our lands.*"

Voicing concern over the limited discourse on the fundamentally colonial nature of Russia's war against Ukraine, my interviewees became active in resisting the state's aggressive policies toward Indigenous peoples following the full-scale invasion. As articulated by them, it was profoundly distressing to witness the disproportionate mobilization of Indigenous individuals, who were sent to the frontlines in larger numbers than ethnic Russians. As Vika, a Buryat

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activist, remarked with a sense of bitterness: "*Our culture was taken from us, and now we are being sent to war as cannon fodder. No one cares about us—we have always been treated as second-class.*" Indigenous peoples, whose populations were already in decline and on the brink of extinction, are disproportionately affected by the war. Furthermore, as Seseg from Buryatia highlighted, the war has disrupted and destroyed Indigenous communities, which serve as vital archives of Indigenous knowledge.

While emphasizing that the state exploits Indigenous peoples as a human resource in its warfare, interviewees criticized the Russian opposition for failing to acknowledge the colonial nature of the war. They argued that this omission perpetuates colonial narratives about Indigenous peoples and further entrenches their marginalization. My interviewees critiqued that the Russian opposition sought to exonerate ethnic Russians by subordinating Indigenous peoples through discourses that depict them as primitive, thereby explaining Indigenous participation in the war. This idea is incisively developed by Seseg from Buryatia: *"When it became evident that many Buryats, Tuvans, and Dagestanis were dying in the war, the Russian-Moscow intelligentsia began to label these peoples as uncultured. They distanced themselves, implying that only they— as well-educated individuals—are capable of protest."* My interviewees expressed dismay at the statement made by liberal opposition leader Kara-Murza before the French Parliament. The latter asserted that Indigenous peoples were deployed to fight because it was easier for them to kill Ukrainians, given the shared cultural affinities between Russians and Ukrainians, whereas Indigenous cultures were seen as alien. In response, activists emphasized that these choices stem not from cultural predispositions or lack of intellect, but from the structural poverty imposed on Indigenous regions by Russia's colonial policies. An Udmurt activist frames this as "*embodied inequality.*" My interviewees criticize the Russian liberal opposition for failing to address the

root causes shaped by colonialism and internalized Russification—both of which have produced the harsh living conditions that make war one of the few available sources of income. Instead, as activists argue, Russian liberals reinforced colonial attitudes that portrayed Indigenous communities as backward. An activist from Kalmykia resents: "*I am confident that any Muscovite who claims that those from the regions who went to war are foolish—if they were living under the same conditions as those from Kalmykia—would likely think in the same way as they do.*"

The stories I have heard suggest that contemporary Russia continues to keep Indigenous peoples in a colonial state, with the war starkly exposing this harsh reality. In addition to the pervasive poverty, Putin's ongoing policy aimed at the suppression of Indigenous languages further exemplifies the colonial stance of the Russian government. A Tatar activist states: "*Putin's neocolonial policy began with the suppression of Indigenous languages, starting as early as the 2010s, when writing academic texts in national languages was prohibited. This was followed by the law making the study of national languages optional in schools, reinforcing the idea that Russian is the sole language of official state communication.*" According to the interviewees, not only were they denied education in their native languages but also deprived of knowledge of their own lands. For instance, an Udmurt activist shared her experience of attempting to find information about the Udmurt people in the local library, only to encounter a single book on cranial studies of the Udmurts. Initially, local languages and the production of Indigenous knowledge were relegated to an optional status, yet today, they are framed as acts of separatism. Sargylana's statement reflects this shift in attitude: "*God forbid someone says something in Yakut now—they're immediately labeled a separatist. It's completely absurd; people just want to speak their own language.*"

Thus, unlike Indigenous activism elsewhere, which was often provoked by extractivism, in Russia it was directly sparked by the full-scale invasion. For many of my interviewees, activism began as an anti-war response and later evolved into a broader, long-term struggle for preservation of culture, languages, ancestral land, and Indigenous autonomy. However, World War II, as noted by Poyer (2017), fostered a sense of dignity among Indigenous peoples who volunteered for national armies and contributed—among other factors—to the rise of Indigenous activism, though it did not serve as a direct or immediate catalyst. In the Russian case, the situation is reversed: extractivism did not provoke broad activism, whereas the invasion did. In this manner, the war emerged as a potent catalyst that, as articulated by Vika, a Buryat activist, "*roused Indigenous activists from their colonial slumber*" and compelled them to seek avenues for resistance and emancipation. An Udmurt activist further states that "*aggressive state policy*" that labeled Indigenous peoples with the mantra "*we are all Russians, God is with us*" must be actively opposed. Reasserting their Indigeneity became a pivotal means for them to achieve this goal.

Conclusion of the subchapter

My analysis reveals that Indigenous activists in Russia have faced a complex and prolonged struggle to reclaim their identities. This struggle has been shaped by deep-rooted internalized colonial shame and systemic Russification—an observation that aligns with broader scholarly analyses of Indigenous activism globally. Russian-language education, the erasure of Indigenous histories, upbringing within a Russo-centric information environment, and the Kremlin's systematic suppression of Indigenous languages have collectively contributed to a widespread crisis of self-identification among Indigenous activists. Even when they sought assimilation, phenotypic difference and early socialization anchored them to their ethnic origins, leaving them

in a persistent state of in-betweenness. Scholar observations that top-down definitions of

Indigeneity reinforce internal conflicts over who is considered 'truly' Indigenous—often

excluding those with mixed identities—also resonate with my analysis. My interviewees face

greater constraints because Russia rejects the international definition of Indigeneity, using

instead the narrow KMNS category that excludes Indigenous communities with over 50,000

people. This exclusion applies both within Russia and internationally, where until recently only

KMNS representatives were recognized—until activists began actively reclaiming their

Indigenous identities. Internalizing the KMNS category fuels internal conflicts by excluding

those with mixed identities, urban backgrounds, and those living in national republics with

populations over 50,000 from Indigeneity. The Soviet legacy of national republics also hindered

their assertion as Indigenous, as it expected them to assimilate as national minorities within the

dominant Russian society. However, while many Indigenous peoples officially had autonomous

republics on paper, in practice these entities were ineffective, leaving them marginalized. This

reflects scholars' observations that multiculturalism policies often exclude Indigenous peoples,

even though Russia is officially defined as a multinational state. In practice, however, everyone

except the dominant Russian nation is marginalized. Unlike Indigenous movements elsewhere,

often sparked by extractive activities on their lands, activism in Russia was ignited by the trauma

of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which exposed and intensified existing colonial dynamics.

In this context, Indigenous resistance has evolved from anti-war protest into a broader struggle

for Indigenous rights, land, and genuine self-governance. Activists criticize the lack of

discussion around the colonial nature of the war, which revealed to them, the Indigenous

peoples, that they are viewed merely as resources exploited by the Kremlin to wage its

aggressive military campaign. Meanwhile, as activists claim, the Russian opposition has been

largely insensitive to the true reasons Indigenous people participate in the war, often echoing colonial narratives that portray them as primitive and inherently violent. The framework of Indigeneity has enabled activists to resist the state's aggressive colonial policies.

Reclaiming Indigeneity

The following chapter analyzes why activists reconstruct themselves as Indigenous. The discussion centers around the idea of reclaiming the self, which in turn influences collective self-determination. This aligns with Weaver's (2001) view that Indigenous revival emerges from interaction of internal and external, echoing Polletta and Jasper's (2001) framework linking self-worth, self-interest, and altruism to collective pride and the pursuit of public recognition. By reclaiming their selfhood through cultural revival and shedding the stigma of backwardness from their cultures and languages, activists create shared patterns and foster collective pride within their Indigenous communities. As outlined in the literature review, where I examine Fukuyama's concept of the struggle for dignity as a catalyst for national liberation movements, my empirical findings similarly indicate that this framework does not fully capture the nature of Indigenous resistance. Indigenous activism in Russia primarily seeks to dismantle the colonial hierarchies that underpin the nation-state and were built on the oppression of Indigenous peoples. My interviewees aim to restore cultural and linguistic knowledge as a way to recover ancestral ties that were violently disrupted by colonialism. As I previously discussed in the literature review, the turn to tradition may initially appear to align with Hobsbawm's (1983) modernist concept of *invented tradition*. However, Indigenous activists from Russia are not inventing new practices,

but reviving and reconnecting with traditions that have persisted despite colonial disruption. Their goal is not to create traditions for mass mobilization or political power, but to reclaim a selfhood erased by colonialism. This aligns with Nepia Mahuika's (2019) perspective, which sees tradition not as invention, but as a creative continuation—a lived source of historical knowledge essential for restoring and sustaining Indigenous identity.

By reviving Indigenous orality, my interviewees lay the groundwork for their self-determination. This echoes Nepia Mahuika's (2019) argument that Indigenous oral history is neither fleeting nor inferior to written records; instead, it serves as a vital means of transmitting knowledge across generations. For example, a Bashkir activist shared how oral musical storytelling preserved the historical memory of Bashkir and Tatar resistance to colonial domination. According to him, this fluid form, unintelligible to colonizers, enabled knowledge encoding for future generations and helped preserve it from total destruction. Russian musicologists tried to transcribe and translate the songs but failed, dismissing the oral chants as uncivilized and too simple to produce the complex sounds they expected. The activist explains that, in reality, the Bashkir monophonic tradition included polyphonic elements unintelligible to the Russian colonial ear. While this unintelligibility helped preserve the tradition from destruction, it also confined it to being labeled as uncivilized and backward. Reviving Bashkir oral sound storytelling helps the activist restore self-worth through a tradition that is complex yet labeled uncivilized by Russian colonization.

The stories my interviewees shared—about their desire to learn their native language to restore disrupted knowledge—echo Diana de Vallescar Palanca's (2000) observation that returning to Indigenous traditions is not nostalgia, but a transformative act of affirming a long-suppressed selfhood. The erasure of knowledge is felt as a profound longing for something deeply embedded in interviewees' being, taken from them against their will. As Lana, a Komi activist, states:

"Komi tradition means as much to me as my hand. Living without Komi culture is like living without a hand." My interviewees restore Indigenous cultures to heal ruptured generational ties. In doing so, they create channels for transmitting ancestral knowledge. This point is vividly illustrated by the story shared by a Tatar activist: "*Once, having found a diary of my Tatar grandmother, who wrote in Arabic script, I translated it. Tatarness overwhelmed me; I could no longer cease being Tatar.*" As she elaborated, her great-grandmother died of throat cancer, unable to voice the violence she endured at the hands of the Soviet KGB because of her Tatar ethnicity. Seeking to give voice to her great-grandmother and others silenced by colonial violence, my interviewee organized a public performance. Individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds read stories encoded in poems, songs, and narratives written in non-Russian scripts. Notably, as the activist explains, the performance brought together diverse individuals to collectively give voice to the colonized.

Echoing earlier scholarly observations that reviving Indigenous culture, language, and tradition is a means of reclaiming selfhood, my interviewees describe cultural restoration as a form of emotional liberation. They seek to release something deeply rooted since childhood, long obscured by colonial shame. As Lena, an Udmurt activist frames this: "*Despite its apparent practical insignificance, learning Udmurt is a struggle against meaninglessness, yet in reality, it carries profound internal significance.*" My interlocutors note a transformation in how they perceive and relate to Indigenous cultures. As an activist from Kalmykia explains: "*It turned out that I simply knew nothing about my own culture. My understanding of it was primitive—not the culture itself.*" A Tatar activist states that they are now freeing their Indigenous cultures, once "*forcibly hidden away in the rural house.*" By doing so, they seek to preserve their selfhood, which they lose as Indigenous cultures fade. As Lana, a Komi activist, concludes: *"This is simply*

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who I am. I have no other option." Therefore, activists do not revive traditions in the modernist

sense described by Hobsbawm (1983)—as a unifying, mobilizing tool—but instead restore their

selfhood by reclaiming knowledge of their traditions. The direction is not a linear progression

from being to becoming, but a return from becoming to being.

Beyond enabling activists to reconnect with their selfhood through cultural revival, I observed

that the concept of Indigeneity also serves a more pragmatic purpose. This relates to their effort

to move beyond the state-defined KMNS category by aligning with the UN's global definition of

Indigeneity, thereby gaining visibility and the ability to claim internationally recognized

Indigenous rights. In this regard, their experiences resonate with Alice Feldman's (2002) concept

of *critical geography*, which enables Indigenous peoples to construct alternative spaces within

the UN for visibility and rights advocacy. Representation within the UN offers my interlocutors

an opportunity to reassert their Indigeneity and resist the Kremlin's aggressive policies targeting

peoples from national republics. It also enables Indigenous activists from Russia to join global

Indigenous movements and challenge the widespread ignorance of Indigenous peoples' presence

within the Russian state. As an Udmurt activist explains: "*Indigeneity seems necessary precisely*

because this global framework acts as a gateway into international structures like the UN."

As I noted earlier, the KMNS framework, along with a federal structure that exists only on paper

and designates national republics for non-Russian peoples, has long hindered activists from

seeing themselves as Indigenous. Therefore, UN-recognized indigeneity has become a tool to

resist state policies aimed at assimilating non-KMNS numeric minorities into a unified official

and administrative Russian space. Initially identified as minorities, my interviewees describe

how their identities shifted toward Indigenous as their anti-war activism grew. Vika from Buryatia explains, state mind control had prevented them from using this identification before: "*The state completely decided for us who is considered Indigenous and who is not. But according to UN standards, we are all Indigenous. It's all due to lack of knowledge— propaganda fully indoctrinated us with its colonial mindset.*" Interestingly, this shift occurred almost simultaneously and independently among my interviewees from various areas, as their reactive anti-war initiatives evolved into sustained Indigenous activism. Activists' appeal to indigeneity aligns poorly with Corntassel's (2008) critique, which describes such frameworks as an *illusion of inclusion.* The scholar argues that, as an organization composed of nation-states, the UN effectively excludes Indigenous sovereignty in practice. By contrast, for activists, the UN framework offers a means to reassert themselves as Indigenous nations rooted in their ancestral lands, rather than as minorities subsumed under the dominant Russian nation.

While the framework of Indigeneity unites diverse actors against Russian colonialism, some activists argue it still excludes those who do not meet its criteria. This partly aligns with Andersen (2010) and Martínez's (1997) critique that the term "Indigenous" oversimplifies diverse claims by placing them under a single agenda, which fails to fully reflect the complex realities of Indigenous peoples. For example, an Udmurt activist emphasizes the diverse nature of Indigeneity, highlighting that colonization as a framework for Indigeneity is inherently broad: "*I see this as a field with porous boundaries, where different actors can enter. They may form coalitions or, conversely, distance themselves from one another. Conflicting viewpoints may coexist.*" My interviewees also critique the term 'Indigenous' for carrying the legacy of colonization, functioning as a marker of opposition to settlers, which can in turn lead to exclusion. This perspective resonates with Weaver (2001), who argues that Indigenous peoples

should define their own self-naming, since different terms carry unique historical and political

meanings. This is most strongly expressed by the same Udmurt activist: "*The term 'indigeneity'*

carries an inherent quality of exclusion; it didn't arise on its own but always functions in

opposition to settlers. It is the same tool of categorization used to divide and hinder active social

action."

What I also observed is that, beyond helping activists reclaim their identity and resist

assimilation, Indigeneity provides a framework for articulating demands for self-governance.

Their vision aligns with Coulthard and Simpson's (2016) concept of *grounded normativity* and

Corntassel's (2008) notion of *sustainable self-determination*. Scholarship emphasizes that

Indigenous self-governance fundamentally differs from Western models, which are rooted in the

logic of individual rights. In contrast, Indigenous self-governance is grounded in collective

relationships to land, a sense of responsibility to the community, and culturally embedded

everyday practices. Based on my observations, activists frame their claims for self-governance

within the logic characteristic of Indigenous epistemologies. Across these perspectives, land is

treated as central to Indigenous self-governance, emphasizing not territory in the political sense,

but land as a relational and living entity. Sargylana's words echo this point: "*I feel deep pain for*

the land. Our land is contaminated—what we drink, what we breathe, what we eat—everything

has become poison to us." Similar to what is argued by Corntassel (2008), Indigenous self-

governance is pursued as a mechanism for ensuring the holistic and interconnected well-being of

Indigenous communities—one that encompasses land, environment, language, and culture

survival and protection. Vika, an activist from Buryatia, explains: "*The Indigenous peoples*

should have full control over their living areas, where they reside in compact communities. They

must have the right to learn and use their native languages. They should not experience any form of discrimination—economic, social, or otherwise. They must manage the resources of their land themselves. For example, if a pipeline is planned, the community should be full and equal participants in the negotiations."

The future political imagery shared by activists also aligns with broader conceptions of Indigenous sovereignty discussed by Andersen (2010), Oksanen (2021) and Radhuber and Radcliffe (2022), Bauder & Mueller (2023). Scholars argue that Indigenous sovereignties—marked by diversity, context, and plural governance—challenge the dominant binary concept of state sovereignty. This concept relies on territorial control and the subordination of non-state autonomies. My interviewees emphasize the imperative to establish overlapping pluralism and radical diversity across languages, knowledge systems, and cultural practices as a lasting normative principle.

Noting that diverse Indigenous communities often coexist even within a single national republic, activists claim that all such communities must be entitled to autonomous self-governance, regardless demographic size or the legal status conferred by the state. As Radhuber and Radcliffe (2022) observed in Ecuador and Bolivia—where activism claimed but ultimately failed to prevent Indigenous sovereignties from being subordinated to a single national authority—my interviewees likewise call for respectful co-existence without a unifying authority above them. For example, an activist from Kalmykia explains: "*I stand for solidarity among all peoples. For example, the Republic of Sakha is a multiethnic republic where diverse communities live together, and we must all respect one another. If the Republic of Sakha were ever to become an independent state, then all the peoples living there should be granted equal status.*"

Although some activists call for independence while others critique the nation-state model, based on my observations, these seemingly opposing visions do not, in fact, represent a fundamental contradiction. Opponents of the nation-state argue that its very nature inherently embodies the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, which aligns with Dragoș's (2024) critique that the modern nation-state is '*the continuation of coloniality.*' A Tatar activist asserts: "A *nation-state invariably functions as a mechanism for resource control. Its emergence inevitably produces an 'us versus them' dichotomy that aims to exclude someone.*" Those activists, who appeal to secession—which would lead to the formation of a nation-state—do not seek power but rather frame it as a way to protect their land, culture, and language. In articulating demands for independence, my interviewees envision a conception fundamentally distinct from that embodied by the nation-state. They explicitly reject exclusion, framing it as a principle historically produced through colonialism. Central to their activism is the resistance against entrenched, deliberate policies of division and the propagation of intergroup animosities, advocating instead for principles of coexistence. As Vika, a Buryat activist, states: "*We were cut off from one another, but we have dismantled the colonial narratives within ourselves. We need to renew a sense of unity—among Indigenous peoples, ethnic communities—we are all interconnected.*" Activists, whether advocating secession or not employing such frameworks, consistently advocate for the establishment of horizontal networks while preserving autonomy. Even if national republics gain statehood, activists often frame sovereignty in terms of decentralized, pluralistic governance rooted in mutual respect and coexistence—closer to Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty.

The attitude of my interviewees toward ethnic Russians in their republics challenges the widespread narrative that Indigenous peoples would expel Russians if granted power—a claim

activists frequently confront. This dominant narrative, rooted in fears of losing power and typical of nation-state power struggles, is strategically used by Russian authorities to justify the repression of Indigenous activists. My interlocutors emphasize that their demands for autonomy do not equate to separatism, echoing Iorns (1992), who argues that Indigenous sovereignty is often misinterpreted by nation-states as a threat or an act of secession. This is perpetuated through stereotypes such as "*rusorez*," as noted by a Kalmyk activist. However, the so-called 'expulsion of Russians' stands in direct opposition to a foundational principle advanced by activists—that of non-exclusion and mutually respectful coexistence. Therefore, my interviewees recognize ethnic Russians residing alongside Indigenous peoples within national republics as integral participants in Indigenous self-governance. As Sargylana, a Sakha activist, articulates, "*We must stand together. Indigenous peoples are not Russophobes. Russians are part of the same community—my own cousins are half Russian. How could I be against them?*"

Activists also reject accusations of ethnonationalism, which Ignatieff (1993) describes as often being framed as an underdeveloped form of Western civic nationalism. In my interviewees' narratives, the division is not between Western and Eastern European nationalism but shifts further east. It distinguishes Russian nationalism, seen as civic, from ethnic nationalism, the latter often used to describe Indigenous activism. My interviewees note that this comparison is made not only by the Kremlin but also by the Russian opposition, which they say differs little from the Russian authorities. As Leila, a Tatar activist from Baskotortan, asserts: *"The Russian liberal opposition demonized Indigenous initiatives. Diverse Indigenous communities, which pursue a wide range of distinct goals, present a far more complex reality than ethno-nationalism. However, it is easier for liberals to simply confine Indigenous aspirations within such reductive frameworks."*

Activists' critique of ethnonationalism also aligns with that of Yael Tamir (2019), who argues that the Western civic model masks cultural tensions and pushes other ethnicities to assimilate. For example, Seseg from Buryatia, states: "*If we're going to talk about our so-called ethnonationalism, we must also talk about Russian nationalism—both systemic and grassroots—at the same time. These two concepts need to be addressed together. We are ethnonationalists only within the Russian chauvinist state. In a Buryatia free from Moscow's control, we would no longer be seen as ethnonationalists, but simply as good citizens of a free and democratic country.*" Fundamentally, as previously noted, activists do not frame their aspirations as a pursuit of power; rather, even when asserting claims to independence, they express alternative political imaginaries. While the state narrative frames activists as separatists, Seseg, previously cited, further adds: "*Terms such as 'collapse' and 'separatist' are inappropriate in this context. The country has already been dismantled—Putin ensured that. Indigenous activism enables political emancipation for both Russians and non-Russians.*" Rather than seizing power, my interviewees advocate for its radical diffusion by granting autonomy to all diverse communities.

By seeing their activism as an opportunity for common political emancipation and collective empowerment, my interviewees position themselves as distinctive Indigenous nations resisting Russian assimilation policies. As I discuss in the literature review, contrasting nationalism derived from 'ethnie' with 'nation-ness' as a process, activists similarly do not present Indigenous nations as 'ethnie' with fixed boundaries or rigid cultural traits. Instead, their understanding aligns with Brubaker's concept of 'nation-ness as happening,' emphasizing Indigenous activists' view of the nation as a dynamic, ongoing relational process. This process has porous boundaries, normalizes non-exclusion, and embraces radical diversity and pluralism.

All these aspirations lead to the decolonization of Russia, involving the dismantling of existing colonial dependencies and the creation of communities without hierarchical power structures.

Conclusion of the subchapter

In reclaiming their Indigeneity, this framework helps my interviewees articulate the revival of culture and language as a means of repairing ancestral ties violently disrupted by colonialism and restore long-suppressed sense of self-worth. This return to Indigenous traditions is understood as a transformative affirmation of Indigenous being. Indigeneity, however, also holds strategic value, as activists seek to move beyond the state-imposed KMNS category by adopting the UN's global definition, gaining international recognition and rights. The UN framework enables my interviewees to assert themselves as distinct Indigenous nations tied to ancestral lands, not as minorities within Russia. Their self-governance claims are rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, viewing land as a living, relational entity rather than mere political territory. Activists stress that their demands for autonomy are not calls for separatism; even when advocating independence, they promote alternative imaginaries focused on dismantling power hierarchies that marginalize them. Crucially, Indigenous nations are seen not as fixed entities but as dynamic, relational processes with porous boundaries. This vision embraces radical diversity, overlapping pluralisms, and the normalization of non-exclusion as core principles of Indigenous sovereignty.

Decolonial Aspirations

Activists seek to dismantle existing power hierarchies that shape resource governance and knowledge production, where a single dominant version tends to prevail. In response, they call for the creation of democratic, decolonial, and autonomous communities—an approach that

aligns with Ivakhiv's (2023) concept of *decolonizing democracy*. This concept further elaborates on the previously discussed Brubaker's (2004) notion of *nation-ness*, specifically in relation to Indigenous activism in Russia. Particularly, the concept of decolonizing democracy allows activists to move beyond Western-centric understandings of democracy, which continue to exclude those not recognized as part of 'the people.' It also helps explain how nation-ness, understood as a 'happening,' grants agency to previously marginalized peoples—and can even extend to non-human beings. For example, the protest to protect Kushtau Mountain in Bashkortostan—frequently mentioned by interviewees as one of the most significant in recent years—illustrates how the mountain itself is seen as an agent. In this context, agency is not understood as individualistic, but as relational, as framed by the concept of *decolonizing democracy.* The mountain is believed to hold ancestral knowledge essential to the well-being of Indigenous communities. It becomes part of the protest not as a passive object, but as a sacred presence, around which people gather and articulate their aspirations for autonomy. Moreover, this concept suggests that such 'happenings' are not contingent; rather, they embody the memory of past manifestations of all-encompassing agency, during which the concept of 'the people' extended beyond voters to include a plurality of both human and non-human beings. These kinds of eruptions or 'happenings' have occurred in the past, been suppressed and forgotten, and then resurfaced—again and again, as discussed by Ivakhiv (2023).

Indigenous activism can be interpreted through the remembrance of prior eruptions of all-encompassing agency. My interviewees emphasize that such activism has always existed, although they did not fully recognize it themselves due to the enduring influence of imposed colonial mindset. Marina, an activist with a mixed background, expresses a similar view: "*It's a mistake to say that these are new debates. We don't have an archive of Indigenous activism, so*

we can't easily trace what practices existed before—but they were definitely there. If we search and ask, we'll uncover a lot." Protests for land, language, and culture have always been present—periodically subsiding, only to reemerge later. Today, activists have found a language to articulate these struggles, but this does not mean the protests themselves are new. Rather, what we are witnessing is a *decolonial insurgency,* as conceptualized by Catherine Walsh (2018). Decolonial insurgency implies resistance to the compartmentalization of Indigenous struggle into disconnected domains such as linguistic activism, cultural rights, or environmental concerns. This fragmentation reflects a Western-centric approach that facilitates continued control over Indigenous activism. In contrast, activists articulate Indigenous rights, autonomy, sovereignty, language, and culture as interconnected demands arising from oppression rooted in the legacy of colonialism. For example, Sargylana from Sakha explains that as long as any authority in Moscow views Indigenous land and its people as mere resources, the cycle will continue. She elaborates: "*The opposition that has left the country can't understand that the issue is not simply about Putin. If Navalnaya comes to power, Russians will effectively recreate Putin 2.0, and she too will launch the war. The Russian opposition believes that removing Putin will allow us to live in a big democratic country, but this will not happen. In a country rich in natural resources, the land can be readily exploited. Dictatorship is inevitable."* As a result, my interviewees identify decolonization as a primary objective, with the dismantling of hierarchies viewed as fundamental to achieving their other goals.

Another aspect of *decolonial insurgency*, according to Walsh (2018), is that activists are fighting not only against something but also for something. In particular, they strive for their imaginaries and knowledges to hold equal standing alongside others, rejecting the idea of one single 'correct' vision in favor of many diverse ones. This resonates with the positions shared by my

interviewees. As Lana, a Komi activist, states: "*Ultimately, we are talking about transforming existing relationships to include Indigenous perspectives—those that view the land not as property, but as a place with which we live in relationship.*" Activists also argue that a fundamental shift in consciousness is necessary, requiring a deliberate effort to respect other imaginaries and to resist control and homogenization. Sargylana, a Sahka activist, asserts: "*Indigenous peoples must engage as equals with settlers; only through such parity can mutual support and solidarity be realized.*"

The activist practices previously discussed—reviving knowledge of language and culture lost due to colonialism, and reconnecting disrupted ties with ancestors—align with the concept of the *decolonial habitus* formulated by Walsh (2018). The scholar describes this as a transformative process aimed at reclaiming inner dignity and self-worth while resisting colonial control. However, this process is not aimed at dismantling the Western-centric world, but rather at transcending it to create a *decolonial otherwise* (Walsh, 2018). This resonates with my interviewees' views, who describe decolonization as the reclamation of agency. However, as they explain, this should not be achieved through the acquisition of power, but through the articulation of one's own narratives as equally legitimate alongside those that dominate. As Masha, an Udmurt activist, articulates: "*I view decolonization as a grid with empty spaces that can be filled with our non-Russian stories. The deep inequalities between different narratives are evident, and addressing these gaps is key to initiating change.*" Similarly to Walsh's argument that listening with respect and acceptance allows for the manifestation of the *decolonial otherwise*, activists also demand that their storytelling be listened to and valued as serious and significant. My interlocutors assert that such diversity of perspectives, practices, and sensitivities can be cultivated through empathy. They resist having their narratives dismissed or invalidated

as "false." Therefore, activists' *decolonial otherwise* is reclaimed through empathetic and sensitive listening.

Decolonization is simultaneously local, contextual, and global in nature. Indigenous activists engaging with decolonization in the Russian context often find themselves confronted with complex dilemmas. As this is an emerging discourse, there is an ongoing effort to identify appropriate vocabulary, sometimes leading to the adoption of theories that may insufficiently reflect the Russian context. Consequently, this can result in the reproduction of terms that are not entirely relevant. Within Russia, activists frequently face the misconception that critiquing Western-centrism is tantamount to endorsing Russian nationalism. However, both discourses represent nation-states whose foundations are rooted in the colonization of Indigenous peoples. Marina, who has a mixed background and currently lives in Europe, offers a more detailed explanation of the situation she frequently encounters: "*When adopting terms from the Global South, they often fail to fit our context due to their grounding in very specific local practices. Russian debates tend to fall into the trap of Marxist superficiality, which obscures the fact that being anti-Western does not necessarily mean being decolonial. When colonialism is discussed, people often say it's about Africa or the past—but it is happening now, and it is happening in Russia. European diplomats fear decolonial movements, often framing them as nationalist.*"

The testimonies of activists resonate with decolonial insurgency in that they seek to challenge ongoing colonialism. They explain that decolonization does not mean seeking protection from other nation-states, as all are founded upon colonialism targeting Indigenous and other marginalized peoples. Decolonization is not the act of aligning oneself with a different, more powerful nation-state. For example, Leila from Baskortostan, asserts: "*I perceive no genuine willingness on the part of European politicians or decision-makers to comprehend the*

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significance of Indigenous activism. I am particularly referring to Western Europe, perhaps because it has yet to fully reckon with its own colonialism." Activists argue that shared colonial mindsets lead Westerners to engage more readily with Moscow's liberal opposition or Putin's administration than with Indigenous activists, who raise issues similar to those of peoples the West has likewise colonized. By virtue of its colonial legacies, the West remains structurally constrained in its capacity to genuinely engage with Indigenous perspectives. Sargylana critically observes: "*Western politicians also consistently deceive themselves. For instance, Navalnaya— white, blue-eyed, blonde—conforms to the conventional image of a Russian politician. She receives funding to deliberate on Russia's future. This makes Europe feel good. Envisioning a positive future for Russia, however, this approach won't bring any bright future.*"

Activists arrive at a compelling conclusion with the potential to transform the entire Russian propaganda discourse that legitimizes the war—partly by framing it as a conflict with the West. Considering that the West, Russia's power, and the Russian liberal opposition are all beneficiaries of respective forms of colonialism, activists argue that the West does not seek Russia's disintegration. Instead, the narratives produced by the Kremlin, the Russian liberal opposition, and the West all perpetuate their antagonistic confrontation, rendering Indigenous voices inconvenient to all of them.

Nevertheless, my interviewees note that articulating colonial experience is complicated by the dominance of knowledge about Western capitalism-based colonialism. Although they don't use these exact words, this sentiment is evident throughout all their narratives. Since Indigenous peoples in Russia experienced Soviet modernization under state socialism, their experience is often seen as irrelevant or too complex for mainstream colonialism discussions. Activists encounter the challenge of asserting their colonial experience amid the Cold War–shaped

misconceptions about Russia that persist today. Competing colonialisms keep the colonized dependent and used as resources—a recurring theme in all interviews. Madina Tlostanova (2018) addresses this issue, emphasizing the need for a dual critique of both Western and Russian colonialism. She frames this confrontation as an *imperial difference*, rooted in the historical perception of the Russian Empire as inferior to its Western counterparts—a view that fostered a deep-seated complex. This complex helps explain Russia's colonial posture toward Western empires—perceiving itself as inferior—while simultaneously expanding its own colonial rule eastward by subjugating other peoples. Meanwhile, the decolonial lens makes it possible to recognize and include the colonial experiences of Indigenous peoples in Russia. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has emphasized, "*the outcomes of decolonization will vary depending on the specific context—shaped by place, time, and the nature of the colonial encounter*" (Smith, 1999, p.48). Therefore, decolonization is not a form of global unification in which specific experiences are reproduced across disparate contexts; instead, it entails recognizing the global plurality of complex socio-historical realities. Decolonization entails the inclusion of diverse contexts in a collective process of deconstructing colonial hierarchies—including the experiences of Indigenous peoples under Russian colonialism.

Conclusion of the subchapter

Indigenous activists in Russia advocate for democratic, decolonial, and autonomous communities that transcend Western-centric models of democracy, which often exclude those outside the dominant definition of "the people." Instead, they envision governance models that grant agency to previously marginalized communities—and even, at times, to non-human beings—aligning

with the Ivakhiv's (2023) concept of *decolonizing democracy*. This concept also frames their activism as a continuation of past eruptions of all-encompassing agency—memories that actively shape their present efforts. Following Walsh's (2018) notion of *decolonial insurgency*, activists articulate Indigenous rights, autonomy, sovereignty, language, and culture as deeply interconnected claims rooted in colonial oppression—not as separate demands. As a result, my interviewees identify decolonization as their core objective, viewing the dismantling of entrenched hierarchies as essential to realizing their goals. For them, decolonization is not a pursuit of power, but a reclamation of agency through asserting and legitimizing their own narratives. In advancing the decolonization of Russia, activists must navigate and resist reductive binaries—such as anti-Western versus anti-Russian, or nationalist versus leftist—that fail to account for the complexity of their position. Decolonization does not entail localizing global processes solely through the lens of Indigenous experiences shaped by Western colonialism. Decolonization, in essence, involves a global localization—an effort to value each localized experience of colonialism and to dismantle the power structures derived from them. The decolonial aspirations of Indigenous activism from Russia constitute a vital part of this process.

Conclusion

Starting this research, I had little idea of what I would need to accomplish in nearly a month. My research interest centers on Indigenous activism in Russia, and the first challenge I encountered among my peers was their lack of awareness about the existence of Indigenous peoples in Russia. I am referring specifically to my own department. With modest academic experience, I do not want to present this work as some abstract, universal knowledge detached from its production context. Such an approach would contradict the decolonial methods promoted by Indigenous researchers. Of course, there is substantial research on Indigenous activism within academia but I believe Indigenous knowledge itself remains scarce and is often forced to conform to general standards that marginalize it. Still, this knowledge is frequently rooted in the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples who have suffered—and continue to endure—the direct consequences of colonialism by Western empires and, more recently, Western liberal nation-states. My rapid research began with the need to clarify how Indigenous peoples differ from ethnic minorities, as I found that students and professors often treat these terms interchangeably. After one month, I now clearly understand that this approach is a misconception. Indigenous peoples are those who lived on the land before colonizers arrived. They had their own perception of the world but became victims of forced reshaping—of their bodies, spirits, and consciousness—to conform to the dominant Western concepts of the world, time, and space. Labeling Indigenous peoples as ethnic minorities essentially places them within the framework of state recognition policies they are striving to challenge and overcome. Of course, to some extent, Indigenous peoples are also ethnic minorities, with their minority status resulting from colonialism. Colonial powers sought to ensure their non-survival by poisoning their land,

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destroying their culture and language, reshaping their spirit to mirror that of the colonizer, and physically eliminating their bodies. However, they are not ethnic minorities in the sense of having migrated into a nation-state from another nation-state—that is, they did not cross a border; rather, colonialism imposed borders on them. These borders were both physical and symbolic. Physically, Indigenous lands were marked and divided into state administrative territories. Symbolically, the state defined what it meant to be Indigenous and who qualified under that definition. This process led to the internalization of colonial shame regarding Indigenous alleged uncivilized nature, inferiority, and backwardness. I found these patterns reflected in the testimonies of my interviewees. Many described feeling ashamed of who they originally were and experiencing pressure to become like "Russians," as only Russians were considered the normative or correct identity within the country. The only identity perceived as superior to that was the abstract figure of the European. These themes emerged clearly and consistently throughout their narratives. Nevertheless, even when they wanted to assimilate and be like Russians, they were often held back by phenotypical differences or by their early socialization, which continued to remind them that they were still not truly Russian.

The examined scholarship highlights how the rigid state-imposed framework of Indigeneity provokes internal conflicts within Indigenous communities. This framework often excludes individuals with mixed backgrounds or those who were born in, or reside in, urban areas. Indigeneity is frequently tied to non-urban environments, reinforcing the expectation that Indigenous people must engage in traditional livelihoods. Urban life is often perceived as disrupting the essential connection to the land that defines Indigeneity. My interviewees also highlighted the challenges posed by the rigid, state-imposed definition of Indigeneity. In Russia, this definition is narrowly limited to the KMNS (Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the

North) category, which excludes groups with populations over 50,000 or those who don't engage in traditional subsistence practices. Interestingly, none of my interviewees identify as KMNS; many grew up in cities and have modern identities in the contemporary sense. It is precisely these people who are starting to challenge the KMNS framework, arguing that it fails to adequately capture or represent their lived experience and understanding of Indigeneity.

At the same time, this critique can be challenged by the fact that many Indigenous peoples officially have autonomous national republics. However, this comes with several limitations, as mentioned by my interviewees: administrative boundaries do not accurately reflect the realities of how Indigenous peoples live across different regions of Russia, meaning that some Indigenous communities actually reside outside the borders of their designated national republics. Furthermore, this autonomy exists largely only on paper; in practice, these state divisions have been ineffective, leaving Indigenous peoples marginalized and subordinate to Moscow. With certain context-specific differences, this critique echoes what examined scholars have argued about neoliberal multiculturalism: that it does not empower Indigenous peoples but instead attempts to co-opt them into a unified state structure. These policies often serve to reinforce Indigenous marginalization and constrain efforts to reclaim Indigenous self-governance over their land, which, in contrast to the state's utilitarian view, is seen as integral to Indigenous world perception, a repository of ancestral knowledge, and a medium for transmitting distinct spirituality. My case study demonstrates that although Russia does not officially adhere to a policy of multiculturalism, and instead operates within the inherited framework of a multiethnic federal state from the Soviet era, the underlying logic remains largely the same. In practice, Indigenous peoples are still expected to integrate fully into a centralized state structure that is, by default, Russian. This is also tied to the lack of opportunities for Indigenous peoples to learn

their native languages, which have been relegated to the status of optional subjects. Education and the media operate almost exclusively in Russian. As one of my interviewees poignantly noted, this has produced "*non-Russian Russians.*" All of these factors have prevented activists from articulating their Indigeneity.

This is important to highlight that this differs from patterns identified by examined scholars studying Indigenous activism within Western colonial contexts. While state recognition policies elsewhere restrict Indigenous self-governance, they rarely deny the right to self-identify as Indigenous. In Russia, however, the exclusive KMNS category excludes many Indigenous groups entirely, and the inherited "multiethnic state" model offers no meaningful inclusion. Consequently, Indigenous peoples are paradoxically labeled as national minorities with titular republics yet remain marginalized within a centralized, Russocentric state. This results in their effective invisibility—denied Indigenous status and political empowerment, while being pressured to fully assimilate into Russian identity. The invasion of Ukraine starkly revealed these dynamics and triggered a wave of resistance against such policies. What started as anti-war efforts to protect Indigenous peoples from conscription and to oppose being labeled as Russians—forced to die for causes that are not their own—has since evolved into a broader movement. This activism now focuses on asserting Indigenous identity, demanding self-governance, revitalizing language and culture, and, more broadly, affirming their existence both within Russia and on the global stage. As one of my interviewees put it, "*we have awakened from the colonial sleep.*" One of the initial and most urgent tasks was, in fact, to articulate and make visible the colonial nature of the war—both in its predatory aggression toward Ukraine and in its internal colonial violence against Indigenous peoples within Russia, who were utilized as expendable resources in the conflict.

The testimonies of my interviewees, who described reviving their languages, cultures, and traditions as a way to heal their self and fully embrace their identity, resonate deeply with an Indigenous understanding of cultural revival. This perspective views cultural revival as a transformative continuation of ancestral knowledge, sharply contrasting with the modernist view that treats the revival of traditions merely as a socio-political construct.

Besides enabling them to reclaim parts of their identity alienated by Russian colonialism, Indigeneity also functions as a strategic choice. This allows activists to invoke the internationally recognized UN definition of Indigenous peoples, thereby helping to circumvent the restrictive KMNS framework. Despite Corntassel's (2008) critique of the United Nations for creating an illusion of inclusion—arguing that conditions on the ground within Indigenous communities remain largely unchanged—for Indigenous activists in Russia, however, the situation is somewhat reconfigured, largely due to the Russian context, which has not officially adopted the UN definition. By appealing to the UN, Indigenous activists can overcome the KMNS framework and assert their existence on a global stage. This move also positions them within broader colonialism debates, as, I have repeatedly noted, Russia portrays itself as the antithesis of the West and a defender of the oppressed. Consequently, Indigenous peoples face a *double critique* (Tlostanova, 2018) of both Western and Russian colonialism. Invoking the UN definition of Indigeneity has enabled activists to secure international recognition of Russia as a colonial state.

Indigeneity also functions to counter accusations of separatism. While some activists—though not all—support the independence of their republics, they understand autonomy through the lens of grounded normativity. In this perspective, the land is regarded as a living entity imbued with knowledge, rather than merely a resource. The understanding of the nation shared by my

interviewees reflects porous and fluid boundaries; it is understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed community defined by static cultural traits. Therefore, I interpret activists' demands for independence through the lens of *nation-ness as happening* (Brubacker, 2004), which highlights the dynamic and relative nature of nationhood. This vision embraces radical diversity, overlapping plural self-governance, and non-exclusion as fundamental principles that deeply resonate with Indigenous sovereignty.

The framework of Indigeneity allows activists to assert a *decolonial otherwise* (Walsh, 2018) by creating their own "*home of thought*" (Walsh, 2018) within a broader constellation of diverse epistemologies. My interviewees stress that their demands for autonomy are not calls for separatism; even when advocating independence, they promote alternative imaginaries focused on dismantling power hierarchies that marginalize them. My interviewees identified decolonization as their central objective, understanding it as a reclamation of agency through the assertion and legitimization of their own narratives. This vision resonates with a *decolonial habitus* (Walsh, 2018) that seeks not to erase Western knowledge, but to transcend it by situating it alongside other ways of knowing and being. In the case of Indigenous activists in Russia, this means confronting not only Western epistemologies, but also specifically Russian forms of colonial knowledge—highlighting the unique context in which they must resist reductive binaries—such as anti-Western versus anti-Russian, or nationalist versus leftist—that fail to account for the complexity of their position.

By articulating Indigenous rights, autonomy, sovereignty, language, and culture as deeply interconnected claims rooted in colonial oppression—rather than as isolated demands—activists align themselves with a decolonial insurgency. This insurgent perspective frames Indigenous activists as new political actors struggling not for segmented recognition, but for Indigenous

being as a whole, without compartmentalization. My interviewees advocate for democratic, decolonial, and autonomous communities. This vision aligns with Ivakhiv's (2023) concept of *decolonizing democracy*, which seeks to move beyond Western-centric models that frequently exclude those positioned outside dominant constructions of "the people." This concept offers a framework for understanding Indigenous activism in Russia as an eruption of memory—a resurgence of a once-suppressed, all-encompassing agency that periodically flares up and recedes, yet persists in collective memory.

Given that decolonization does not produce universal knowledge but rather fosters a horizontal network of local epistemologies, the experience of Indigenous activism in Russia is particularly significant. It represents yet another "home of thought" striving to dismantle power hierarchies and navigate overlapping colonial discourses—both Western and Russian—that compete with and exclude Indigenous peoples in Russia. Although this activism remains in its early stages and may wane at times, it is unlikely to be extinguished entirely; rather, it persists in memory, ready to resurge. Perhaps their decolonial otherwise will ultimately find tangible expression. In my current research, I aimed to understand why Indigeneity has become so significant for activists at this particular moment. I conclude that they have found in it a path to emancipation, along with the language and arguments needed to resist imposed narratives and accusations of separatism or nationalism with negative connotations. Nevertheless, I believe the next crucial step is to critically interrogate how Indigeneity itself can operate as an exclusionary category, shaped by colonial frameworks. By reinforcing a binary between colonizers and Indigenous peoples, it imposes boundaries that, as several activists noted, can feel constraining. Many expressed that they often have to "wear" these imposed identities in order to be heard—despite the fact that

such labels do not fully align with their broader objective: dismantling colonial power

hierarchies.

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