

# **GOVMAT – The Governmateriality of Indigenous Religion**

**Seminar in Umeå, 26 September 2025**

## **Program (preliminary)**

Friday 26 September

Time: 10.15 am to ca. 5 pm

Place: Umeå University, Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Room **HUM.J.118** (for directions, [click here](#))

The topic of the seminar is GOVMAT-related research, that is, governmentalities, materialities, indigenous religions, etc. The aim is to present and discuss ongoing research and common research interest among the seminar participants.

The format is 20-minute presentations followed by questions and comments. For more details on the presentations, see abstracts below.

**10.15–10.30:** Welcome, introduction, “The Governmateriality of Indigenous Religions” (Olle Sundström and Hannah Kristine Lunde)

**10.30–11.00:** Helge Årsheim, “Sacred sites and Indigenous rights”

**11.00–11.30:** Ingvild Jensen Haldorsen, “Kven hymns as governmateriality”

**11.30–12.00:** Hannah Kristine Lunde, “A Sami altar in Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim”

**12.00–13.30:** Lunch break (We will go to a lunch restaurant nearby; everyone eats at their own expense)

**13.30–14.00:** Konsta Kaikkonen, “Historical and contemporary understandings of “sacred” landscapes in Unjárga, Finnmark”

**14.00–14.30:** Liudmila Nikanorova, “Governmateriality of *algys*”

**14.30–15.00:** Coffebreak

**15.00–15.30:** Anna Westman Kuhmunen, “Ritual meals and household utensils in Lule and Pite Sami Religious Practices (1670–1750)”

**15.30–16.00:** Arkotong Longkumer, “Revival of Naga tattoos”

The seminar will be followed by dinner for participants (catering at the seminar venue) at approx. 18.00.

## About the GOVMAT-project:

### GOVMAT - The Governmateriality of Indigenous Religions

How are instances of indigenous religions and related entities assembled, and what do they do? This project researches co-constitutions of indigeneities and religions and their roles in contemporary cosmopolitics.

The GOVMAT project is built on case studies with local communities (in Costa Rica, Ethiopia, India, Norway, Peru, Russia, USA, and elsewhere), joint fieldwork at international events (venues of art, ecumenism, environmentalism, politics and scholarship), and explorations of networking (through different kinds of activism, media, education, cultural exchanges, legal processes, missionising, and more).

With the concept of governmateriality, we try to open a new horizon for inquiries into the constitution, recognition, agency and command of contested bodies, practices, and situations. It allows us to investigate how instances of indigeneity and religion materialise as acts of governance in struggles over the definition and control of subjects, objects, and environments, and to address the ambivalent effects of these manifestations: Their ability to generate rights and privileges for bodies, practices and spaces that come across as indigenous and religious, but also the risk of rejection or persecution since there are those who still believe that such bodies, practices, and spaces are primitive and irrational.

Our aim is to provide nuanced descriptions and analyses of complex processes. To achieve this, close collaboration between project participants from different fields is crucial.

The project is led by Bjørn Ola Tafjord, professor in religious studies, University of Bergen and is supported by The Research Council of Norway (FRIPRO).

### Abstracts from participants in the GOVMAT-project taking part in the seminar:

#### **Helge Årsheim, professor, Department of Social Sciences, Religion and Ethics, University of Inland Norway**

My field of specialization is the relationship between religion, law, and human rights, and I have worked extensively on the interplay between international, regional and domestic legislation and jurisprudence concerning religion and religiosity. In recent years, I have explored issues related to the human rights of Indigenous peoples, with a particular focus on the significance of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples for domestic legislation and jurisprudence in the Nordic countries, especially Norway. In 2024, I published an article in *Temenos* about Sámi sacred sites and the expansion of wind and hydropower in Northern Norway. I am currently working on a book manuscript about the international movement that has emerged to protect sacred natural sites, where I examine how this movement has interacted with rights discourses related to biodiversity, cultural heritage, and Indigenous rights. In the seminar, I will (briefly) present the book project.

**Ingvild Jensen Haldorsen, PhD candidate, Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion, University of Bergen**

**Preliminary title:** Kven hymns as Governmateriality

**Project:** My PhD project revolves around a collection of Kven hymns (Kvääni virsihäfti), the constituting process(es) of its materialization, and its place, role, and participation in the governing of Kven relations in Northern Norway today. I am interested in examining how Kven identities, religiosities, and environmentalities materialize as acts of governance through this specific case.

In 2020, a committee appointed by the Nord-Hålogaland diocese handed in the collection of Kven hymns they had been collecting and working on for many years. On the background of an evaluation by an Icelandic hymnologist who found the collection to be “too pietistic and influenced by Læstadianism” and that there “lacked professional Kven quality”, the diocese hence decided that the collection would not be printed after all. This caused strong reactions both within and outside the committee and the Kven community, resulting in intense criticism against the Norwegian Church with accusations of Norwegianization and religious discrimination. In my project, I am interested in the different processes that finally led to the publication of the Kvääni virsihäfti in April 2022. Through which forces, powers, or politics (ideas, documents, thoughts, songs, agendas, environments, practices, and situations) both human and nonhuman or other-than-human, did the hymn collection materialize? The second part of my project examines how the Kvääni virsihäfti today participates in the governing of Kven relations in Northern Norway. However, this will primarily be based on empirical fieldwork that has yet to be conducted.

**Konsta Kaikkonen, associate professor, Department of Pedagogy, Religion and Social Studies, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences**

Konsta Kaikkonen is a historian of religions who received his master's degree from the University of Helsinki in 2014 and his doctorate in 2020 from the University of Bergen. His research interests have centred around the history of Saami indigenous religion, and especially how it has been described in historical texts and academic research.

At this event, Kaikkonen will shed light on his ongoing research project, which concentrates on cultural landscapes in the municipality of Unjárga (Nesseby) in Northeastern Norway. Within its frames, Kaikkonen has extended his reach from studying historical texts and archives to include a variety of other approaches, including document analysis, fieldwork, and interviews.

The landscape formations in Unjárga, often categorised as «sacred» by different actors, offer an entrance point to both local and global changes and continuities. In this presentation, Kaikkonen will concentrate on some key reasons and consequences for historical and contemporary categorisations and translations of natural landscape formations in Unjárga. This will, in turn, open up for new interpretations of how the category of “sacred” can be understood in different contexts.

**Arkotong Longkumer, professor of Anthropology and Modern Asia, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh**

What are tattoos? This question is quite obvious in a straightforward sense, particularly because tattoos represent and symbolise ink on someone's skin. Yet, tattoos in Naga tradition were vital to rites of passage and they acted as symbols of honour. Over the years, due to Christianity tattoos have lost their place in contemporary Naga society. This presentation traces the work of Mo Naga - a Naga tattoo artist - and how he is attempting to revive tattoos, through the idea of gift. He gives - and one cannot ask - for a Naga tattoo. But by giving the tattoos, they unleash questions around cultural appropriation, creative imagination, and tracing the trajectory of one's life when they receive Mo's tattoos.

**Hannah Kristine Lunde, postdoctoral research fellow, Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion, University of Bergen**

I hold a PhD in Cultural History from the University of Oslo (2022). My fields of interest include cultural heritage, religion and politics and the intersections between material culture, narratives and performance. In my PhD project I explored the development of pilgrimage as a contemporary phenomenon in Norway from the 1990s.

My postdoc-project is part of the GOVMAT-project. It explores ways in which Sami religiosity and church life are made visible and accommodated for within Den norske kirke (the Church of Norway). I focus on the South Sami area, which also includes the Swedish side. A comparative perspective on the churches in Norway and Sweden is therefore relevant, specifically through looking at collaborations between the categorial congregation Saemien Ålmege and Härnösands stift. The case that I currently focus on, that will be the topic of the seminar presentation, is the Sami altar in Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim.

**Liudmila Nikanorova, lecturer in religious studies, The Open University, UK**

Abstract for her chapter in the planned GOVMAT-volume:

“Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there has been a growing resurgence of the Sakha practice known as *algys*. Typically, *algys* is addressed to more-than-human members and ancestors of the Sakha community – *ichchi* and *aiyy*. Scholars have been continuously categorising *ichchi* and *aiyy* into ‘spirits,’ ‘gods,’ and ‘deities,’ whereas *algys* into a ‘prayer.’ Such translation into Eurochristian lexicon not only limited Sakha practices and more-than-humans into the universals of Western knowledges but also led to the suppression of *algys* during the Soviet period since the 1920s. Performers of *algys* – *aiyy oiun* – were categorised into shamans, and thus criminalised as ‘class enemies.’ The dissolution of the Soviet Union triggered once again extreme transformations within the Sakha public leading to the Sakha revitalisation movements in the 1990s. *Algys* was not an exception and also reflected the changes in the Sakha community. Performers of *algys* began identifying themselves as *algyschyt* instead of *aiyy oiun*, thus moving away from the histories connected to the translation of *oiun* into shamans. *Algys* (in its oral, written, and digital forms) gradually began to gather hundreds of thousands of people and enter both public and private spaces within the Sakha Republic. The increasing demand for *algys* performers has resulted in the institutionalisation of training programs for *algyschyts*, who can now enroll in courses and become certified practitioners. Additionally, the

rise of *algys* has contributed to its diversification and is no longer limited to the form of spoken words. With the rise of social media, it is now disseminated through digital texts, images, videos, and voice messages that are widely and regularly shared in group chats. In this chapter, I explore the various ways *algys* is materialised and what work it does in the Sakha community. How did *algys* returned to the Sakha public space and how did it embody the Sakha revitalisation movements? How does it move beyond the category of religion, and what opportunities or limits does this enable? How does *algys* participate in the co-constitution of the Sakha knowledge systems and what impact does it have on the Sakha community at large?”

**Anna Westman Kuhmunen, PhD student in the History of Religions at Stockholm University and a curator at Ajtte, Swedish Mountain and Sami Museum in Jokkmokk**

In her research she focuses on indigenous Sami religions. Her forthcoming doctoral thesis deals with Sami foodways from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.