

Safe Haven for an Indigenous Fugitive: Indigenous Internationalism and Illegal Protests

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In investigating the case of Niillas Somby, a Sámi activist who sought asylum with North American indigenous groups in the 1980s, this article finds it to be a grassroots exception to the how “indigenous internationalism” is usually understood: that is, formal bodies that support indigenous rights through legal means in international forums. In an effort to stop the Norwegian government’s construction of the Alta-Kautokeino Hydroelectric Project, Somby’s radical protest at the dam went terribly wrong. Evading the Norwegian police and ultimately fleeing the continent to avoid long-term imprisonment, Somby received a great deal of assistance, both official and unofficial, from the World Council of Indigenous Peoples and its network of allies. Somby’s story highlights the ways indigenous internationalism can operate at both grassroots and highly personal levels. Significantly, his interactions with indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest helped reinspire Somby’s sense of indigenous identity and spirituality, while his ceremonial adoption by several indigenous nations also supported their cultural and political resurgence as sovereign peoples.

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