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## **SAAMI TODAY - HISTORY TOMORROW? The Construction of Ethnicity in Saami Politics\***

### **Introduction**

While watching the televised evening news on October 22, 1992, I saw a young Saami man - well known to me - burning a copy of the recent Swedish government proposal entitled "The Saami and Saami Culture". This event occurred at an extra meeting called by the National Association of Swedish Saami (SSR) in response to the release of this long-awaited proposal. At the same meeting, the vice president of the association accused the conservative coalition government responsible for the document of Stalinist policies. The TV news gave no reason for these demonstrations, but both the Minister of Education, Per Unckel, and the Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, demanded an explanation and a public apology. Two days later, the other national Saami organization, Sami Átnam, washed the Swedish flag and on August 26, 1993, three Saamis went on a hungerstrike outside the opening ceremony of the new Saami Parliament. The Swedish King and the Queen stayed a long time talking with the hunger-strikers and this talk got a lot of publicity in the Swedish media.

What are these actions all about?

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Why did they burn a book?  
Why did they wash the flag?  
Why did they hunger-strike?

In December, 1992, the Swedish Parliament decided the future of the Saami people when they voted on the proposal about Saami culture. Consequently, the book is very important to the Saami. It concerns not only the formation of a new Saami Parliament, but a fundamental law addressing such issues as who is Saami, who has the right to herd reindeer, who has hunting and fishing rights in the mountains, etc. The question of who will legally be able to hunt and fish on governmental land west and north of the so-called "cultivation boundary" (*odlingsgränsen*) and in the reindeer grazing areas of the mountains is particularly upsetting for the herders. The government proposes retracting these previously exclusive Saami rights and making them available to the general public; what has not been addressed, however, is whether the government actually owns the land in question. Although I will not discuss this particular issue further in this paper, it is one extremely important to us, and serves to demonstrate the difficulties we face in light of the new proposition. One area which has not received much attention, however, from either the National Association of Swedish Saami or the media is how the proposal defines Saami ethnicity and the will of government policy in Saami affairs. I will, therefore, try to describe the position as it stands in the proposal and relate it to the current situation as I see it.

Native populations in the north in general have faced severe pressure from the outside, the implications of which are difficult to adequately appraise. As Svensson has observed, "indigenous peoples have experienced a general process of transformation from a state of relative autonomy, both in cultural and political terms, to that of encapsulation" (Svensson 1988:77). This point of view has some basic features which are common among circumpolar peoples. Such features are:

1. a low degree of self-determination, i.e. decision-making power in their own affairs, and
2. no, or very poorly developed, negotiation power vis-à-vis the larger society. (*op cit*)

As an *encapsulated* culture, then, according to this perspective at least, the Saami have little control over those policies of the dominant society which most affect them.

According to outside researchers and writers, the Saami have been a dying people for at least the last 150 years. In fact the title of this paper is taken from the report of two writers who visited my *sameby*<sup>1</sup> one year and called their work *Lævas - Sameby idag, historia i morgon* (*Lævas - Sameby Today, History Tomorrow*, Reichwald & Svedlund, 1977). This type of writing about the Saami by outsiders has encouraged a mental exoticizing and objectification, which, in turn, has led to new official policies based on segregationist ideas (Kvist 1992:61). To emphasize this point, historian Roger Kvist has described the Swedish government's policies toward the Saami between 1846 and 1971 as a series of actions which were fundamentally prejudicial. According to Kvist:

The assimilation policy (1846-1913) added discrimination of the Saami people on ethnic grounds. The more appreciative stand arrived at through the paternalistic segregation policy (1913-1971), in practice created a system of institutional racism. (Kvist 1992:7)

It was during this same period, in 1868, that we Saami were awarded a new *cultivation boundary*, at which time the land north and west of an imaginary line was declared exclusively for Saami use - all colonization would stop at this border. In subsequent years (1886, 1898, 1928 and 1971), various Reindeer Herding Acts were passed, however, which dramatically affected our livelihood and our culture; The Reindeer Herding Act 1928 contained the first official definition of Saami, one which was exclusively restricted to those who lived by herding:

In this law, "Lapp" means each person who, according to what is now declared, has the right to herd reindeer; and that Lapp who, himself

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<sup>1</sup>*Sameby*, is a geographical area, an economic and an administrative association. The territorial zone defines both a reindeer grazing area and social unit, where inly saami sambymembers have the right to herd reindeer. This was regulated for the first time in 1886. (Prop 1992/93:32:28; Beach 1994:172-174)

or through members of his household, engages in reindeer herding shall be called a 'reindeer herding Lapp'. (SFS 1928:309 §1)

(Med lapp avses i denna lag en var, som enligt vad nu är sagt äger rätt till renskötsel; och den lapp, som själv eller genom medlemmar av sitt hushåll driver renskötsel, kallas renskötande lapp. (SFS 1928:309 §1)

Such governmental acts essentially divided the Swedish Saami in half: the rights to land and water were only for the reindeer herders, while others had no such rights. As Beach has noted, this phase-out mechanism remains one of the most destructive forces in Saami society today.

With the birth of the Swedish welfare state in the 1950s, the first immigration wave from the eastern Mediterranean and Finland arrived, and introduced a new problem. These immigrants were granted rights under a Constitutional Act protecting ethnic minorities. As a result of this legislation encouraging the retention of language and culture among immigrant populations, the government created a new difficulty regarding its indigenous minority, which did not enjoy similar rights. Consequently, the government issued the 1971 Reindeer Herding Act, which introduced a number of organizational changes in herding communities and granted theoretical herding status to all Swedish Saami, who had at least one of his grandparents working with reindeer herding, while still strictly controlling the actual number of active herders. Equally important was the *Sameutredning*, an official report in support of Saami language and culture (SOU 1975:99, 100). This report included a census listing 17.000 individuals, all of whom, according to the 1971 Act, were herders. Thus, the *Sameutredning* established reindeer herding as the official criterion of Saami ethnicity - in short, nothing new since the 1928 legislation.

The 1970s was a decade of struggle and awakening for the Saami people, but it wasn't a symbolic ethnicity; it was the real start of pan-Saami activity. In 1971, the Nordic Saami Council created a cultural Saami political program, and one of the resolutions says that the Saami:

- \* are one people,
- \* have their own native country (which includes northernmost Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola Peninsula),
- \* have their own language,
- \* have their own culture,

- \* have their own life in society,
- \* have their own history, and
- \* have their own industry.

The Saami have chosen "to emphasize ethnic identity, using it to develop new positions and patterns, to reorganize activities in those sectors formerly not found in their society or inadequately developed for new purposes." (Barth 1982:33). In 1980, the Nordic Saami Conference adopted a program of Saami policy. The latter defines as Saami any person who

- has Saami as his first language, or whose father, mother, or a grandparent had Saami as their first language, or
- considers himself a Saami and lives entirely according to the rules of Saami society, and who is recognized by the representative Saami body as a Saami, or
- has a father or mother who satisfies the above-mentioned conditions for being a Saami. (*The Sami People* 1990:11)

The latest investigation by the Saami Rights Commission, *Samerättsutredningen*, resulted in a similar definition. The Commission proposed three different criteria for Saami ethnicity for registration for the future Swedish Saami Parliament: one is a Saami when he considers himself Saami and

1. has Saami as his first language
2. has a father, mother, or a grandparent who have or had Saami as their first language.
3. has a father or a mother registered for the Saami Parliament (SOU 1989:41:133)

The new government proposal, the Saami Proposition, mirrors these criteria, but substitutes "home language" for "first language" (Prop 1992/93:32:35).

This latest situation, with the government revealing yet another 'face', raises new questions. What does this official definition mean for those who have already lost their language due to past assimilationist policies? Many

Swedish Saami do not speak Saami as a home language, nor have they for the past two generations - where do they fit in this ethnic scheme? When a language is only symbolic, is it still a language? Furthermore, the implication of the third criterion is clearly that the government expects the number of qualified Saami electors, as defined by the first two criteria, to decrease. What does this say about official expectations regarding the Saami population in the future? Far from providing the answers to these and other questions, the government's latest proposal strongly suggests that the Saami issue should be hidden and questions of immemorial rights neglected. Nothing about the Saami people is in the constitutional law. The definition of Saami electors to the Saami Parliament is based on language after hundreds of years fighting against the native language. Compared to Norway and Finland, the situation is even worse, because they have a law of native language. As the government expert in Saami affairs, Hans Dau, declared: If you can't see any differences between the ethnic groups, it's better for everybody to go hunting and fishing in the mountains. But, on the other hand, it is important to make these differences for the registration to the Saami Parliament (*Länstidningen* 1992:26 october p.8). As if to underline this position, the proposition includes the government's recommendation against ratification of an important new international instrument protecting the rights of indigenous populations, ILO 169, the International Labour Office's Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention.

### **Ethnic expressions**

As I see it, there are three different ways to express Saami ethnicity today besides the reindeer herding culture. According to Barth,

some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied. The cultural contents of ethnic dichotomies would seem analytically to be of two orders: (i) overt signals or signs - the diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, often such features as dress, language, house-form, or general style of life, and (ii) basic value orientations:

the standards of morality and excellence by which performance is judged (Barth 1982:14)

These are the nativistic idioms like, language (*sámegiella*), the folksong *joik* (*juoiggus*) and the dress (*gákti*). As I mentioned before, the governmental definition of the criteria Saami is based today on the language. When we are talking about Saami culture, we don't talk about one single culture. There are many different groups occupying several different ecologic niches within the Saami Nation, for instance Mountain Saamis, Forest Saamis, Coastal Saamis, and in recent decades, a new group is growing, the Urban Saamis. Gustav von Düben (1977 [1873]) a researcher at Uppsala University did some fieldwork in northern Sweden in the middle of 19th century. He made a dichotomy of different lifestyles among the Saami people, in Sweden and Finland, there lived the mountain-, forest- and fishing Saamis, in Norway, coastal-, mountain- and river Saamis, and in Russia, fishing- and coastal Saamis. What ties these groups together? Of course, the three nativistic idioms, language, dress, and the folksong.

The language situation today in the southern part of Sápmi is problematic. In some areas there is already a language shift and in other areas, language shift processes are going on. I spoke earlier about those who already lost their home language. Actually, a lot of this depends on the government policy, which prohibited Saami children talking the Saami language in school and in the schoolyards. It was prohibited until 1956. Thus, the language was forced to be regarded a secret language or code, regularly used only in situations where trusted Saami identities were involved. These children did not teach their children their home language, because there was a social stigma to speaking the Saami language (Eidheim 1982:44). Well, languages may die, but are they killed off by the government or is it a kind of suicide? As Edwards (1989:51-53) discussed, this kind of issue did the south Saamis commit language suicide. But a language suicide is always under pressure of another language which creates language shift.

Wearing the Saami dress, *gákti*, is also a signal advertising ethnicity. In Skånland community, north of Narvik, the situation was tense when a lot of the younger people decided to wear the *gákti* every Sunday in the 70s. But it wasn't only the Norwegians who were upset. The assimilated Saamis, or those who wanted to be assimilated, reacted aggressively against

their own people. It was an insult to be reminded of their own past. Asle Høgmo (1986) has described the cultural assimilation in a Norwegian-Saami setting which explain such reactions when Saami heritage is exposed to a strong stigma. Wearing the dress every Sunday was a breakthrough in this community for an ethnic revival. The Saami heritage wasn't a hidden culture anymore and this was connected to a movement \_SV (\_ájet Sámi Vuoigna [Show Saami Spiritual Identity]). It was a part of a rebuilding of Saami identity, a movement without leaders, rules, or official definitions. This was shocking, not only to the non-Saami population, but also to much of the Saami population, as well. I know myself today, if I wear my dress in unexpected moments, people will ask what kind of *coup* I'm going to make, or others will say "Oh, you look so nice in your colourful dress". In short, the dress causes reactions, different reactions because of differing contexts.

The third expression is the folksong, *joik*. The *joik* is a part of Saami ideology, it's a way to remember things, people. (*Okta muitingoansta nuppiid olbmuid* (Turi 1987 [1910])). In its most traditional performance context, *joik* is an unaccompanied solo vocal form which may or may not include text. *Joik* are descriptive in nature; one does not *joik* for someone or something, one *joiks* it into being. Thus, the *joik* serves as a connective device which spans the past and present. Any given *joik* performance is part of a non-ending whole that exists in a realm accessible to those who can interpret it; the performer and the audience. To *joik* implies being a participant in that realm (Jones-Bamman 1992:1 5). You must be a part of it; when you sing you communicate, even if the person is dead. If you sing a personal *luohti*, he is still living inside you. Thus, the *joik* is a question of life and death. You live as long as you are remembered. That means, also that, if you are forgotten completely, you don't exist anymore, even if you are still walking in the street, in the mountains or in the forests. The Nordic national states and their churches have tried to annihilate the *joik* for over 300 years, but in 1993, the Year of the Indigenous People, the archbishop of Sweden, Gunnar Weman, declared officially his admiration for Saami music. So officially, the *joik* is not a sin anymore, according to the Swedish State Church. Today the *joik* is a symbolical weapon. In the struggle for the Alta river, the *joik* was the message to the surrounding world that we existed. In 1992, in Stockholm, Sáminuorra (The Saami Youth Organisation) demonstrated at the Swedish Parliament and the *joik*



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was the succeeded message of the demonstration. The *joik* is a part of the younger generation's identity. The emergence of new interpretations of *joiking* should be regarded as effective tools for reaffirming modern Saami identity by demonstrating a connection with a collective past (Jones-Bamman 1992:15).

### Conclusions

After years of both segregation and assimilation policies, where official Saami ethnicity has been based solely on one's connection to reindeer herding, we now have a new set of criteria proposed which essentially redefine our ethnic identity. Will this open up the possibility for Saami "wannabees"; what are the long-term effects on Saami ethnicity - will there be a Saami population in the future? This may sound a bit pessimistic, but such questions are being discussed within Saami circles. An indication of our internal struggle is the current argument between urban and rural Saami populations, being recorded in the pages of our magazine, *Samefolket*. In short, some rural Saami feel that the urban Saami represent a threat to the "real" Saami culture (cf *Samefolket* 1991-93). Such opinions are expressed at national Saami meetings as well. To end on a optimistic note, however, I would like to emphasize the ability of the Saami to adapt and develop their culture and survive. Such has been our past, and such will be our future or as Valkeapää mentioned

We have lived in Samiland since the dawn of time, and we live and dwell here still...(Valkeapää 1983:28)

Or as I will say it, as long as we sing our songs, the *joik*, we remember who we are. I haven't discussed Saami humor, which is the cement of a movement, but it is said that, "When people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive" (Deloria Jr 1989:167). Saami humor is actually one expression that could well be in a paper, but I leave that paper for somebody else to write.

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