



PHOTO: STAFFAN WIDSTRAND/IMAGEBANK SWEDEN/SE

The reindeer remains a strong symbol of the Sami culture.

## SAMI IN SWEDEN:

# PRESERVING INDIGENOUS CULTURE IN THE ARCTIC

Archaeological finds suggest that the Sami people have lived in the Arctic region for thousands of years. The Sami today maintain their rich culture and long-established traditions, but are as much part of modern society as any other person in Sweden.

Sami country – known as Sápmi – stretches across the northern part of Scandinavia and Russia’s Kola Peninsula. The Sami have been recognised by the United Nations as an indigenous people, giving them the right to preserve and develop their crafts, languages, education, reindeer husbandry, traditions and identity. There is no census for the Sami, but the population is estimated at around 80,000 people, spread over four countries with approximately 20,000 in Sweden, 50,000 in Norway, 8,000 in Finland and 2,000 in Russia.

### A semi-nomadic people

The Sami were originally nomads, living in tents during the summer and more sturdy peat huts during the colder seasons. Today, the Sami live in modern housing and only use tents as very temporary accommodations during reindeer migrations if they don’t already own

cottages in the mountains and forests. Most Sami live in the north but there are Sami all over Sweden. Today, only ten per cent of Swedish Sami earn a living from the reindeer industry, and many combine their family businesses with tourism, fishing, crafts and other trades.

### Reindeer husbandry

The Sami reindeer industry has specific seasons for calving, marking, counting, castrating and slaughtering.

Changes in grazing rights and logging territories have historically been a dispute between reindeer herders and land-owners in Sweden. In 2011, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Sami, giving them common law rights to a specific area of land – possibly the most important modern verdict regarding Sami issues of law.

Much of today’s reindeer industry is meat production. In the past, during the

migration of entire reindeer herds, the herders and their families would move by foot or on skis. Nowadays, reindeer herders use snow scooters and all-terrain vehicles to drive the herds. In rare cases trucks are needed to transport the reindeer to new grazing grounds.

### Business and politics

A *sameby* – ‘Sami village’ – is not a traditional village but a complex economical and administrative union created with the intention of keeping reindeer. It is regulated by a Swedish law called the Reindeer Husbandry Act. Members of a *sameby* are entitled to engage in reindeer husbandry in this particular area, including building and setting up whatever facilities they need for their reindeer, in addition to fishing and hunting rights.

Towards the end of the 19th century, many Sami permanently kept both farms and reindeer (mixed husbandry). ►



PHOTO: LOLA AKINMADE AKERSTROM/IMAGERANK/SWEDEN.SE

The Sami have their own folk costume, the *kolt*, which they wear at special occasions. The traditional costume differs in style for men and women, and the design also varies depending on geographical origin. A child's *kolt* with accessories is an exact copy of an adult one, only smaller.

- The previous nomadic lifestyles of some, however, led the authorities to make some contentious decisions, the repercussions of which extended well into the 20th century. The reindeer pasture law of 1928 limited reindeer ownership and membership in any Sami village to herders and their families. The new restrictions forced mixed husbandry farmers to choose between reindeer herding only or other forms of agriculture.

Today, younger generations are finding other professions, and the Sami are trying to ease the regulations so people can belong to a Sami village without having to own reindeer.

### The Sami languages

The Sami's own languages stretch across Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. Sami is divided into three main languages: Eastern Sami, Central Sami and Southern Sami. These languages are further divided into nine distinct variants.

The Central Sami language is divided into two varieties: North Sami in

the northernmost area, and Lule Sami around Jokkmokk, Gällivare and parts of Tysfjord in Norway.

The North Sami variety has the most speakers with an estimated 17,000 native speakers across the Sápmi region. Of that estimate, roughly 6,000 are based in Sweden. Over time, North Sami spread into areas where Lule Sami and Southern Sami are spoken as a result of governmental relocation of the Northern Sami people to these areas during the 1930s.

Southern Sami and Lule Sami are spoken on both sides of the Swedish-Norwegian border from Arjeplog-Saltfjäll in the north to Idre and Røros in the south. Southern Sami and Lule Sami are both estimated to have around 500 speakers each in Sweden.

The Sami languages are rich. There are, for instance, more than 300 different ways of saying snow – from describing sticky snow to snow that looks like powdered sugar. But despite its abundance of descriptive words, the languages are genderless: for example, the personal

pronoun *son* can mean him and her, as well as an animal or an object.

Written Sami was not linked to the Swedish alphabet until 1950. The languages were then also given an additional seven letters, pronounced with lispingsounds not found in Swedish. Sami became a subject at Swedish schools as late as 1962, and guidelines for the languages' orthography were not printed until 1979. These are some reasons why many older Sami today can neither read nor write their own language.

On 1 April 2000, Sami was recognised as one official minority language in Sweden, and the government has given the Sami Parliament (*Sametinget*) greater influence and financial resources to preserve the Sami languages.

### Education

There is one Sami upper secondary school in Jokkmokk in the very north of Sweden. It offers training in reindeer husbandry, traditional cooking, handicrafts and the Sami languages.

For schoolchildren up to the age of 12, there are five Sami schools in Sweden, in Karesuando, Kiruna, Gällivare, Jokkmokk and Tärnaby in southern Sápmi. Sami childcare also helps maintain the Sami languages and pass them on to the younger generation, and is offered in some municipalities.

In Sweden, academic courses in the Sami languages can be taken at Umeå and Uppsala universities. The Centre for Sami research, CeSam, in Umeå coordinates research in Sami culture, languages, history and communities, and initiates new research.

### The Sami Parliament

The Sami political struggle for increased influence and autonomy began in the 1950s with the establishment of Sami

## TRADITIONAL SAMI DRESS WORN BY THE YOUNG TOO

Pride in Sami heritage can sometimes be seen in traditional dress, particularly the Sami folk costume called *kolt* or *gákti* which has gone from being work clothing to a festive garment.

The design of the *kolt* varies depending on its geographical origin. The traditional costumes have at least 12 different styles

and differ for men and women. Some have been redesigned and given characteristic family patterns. Contemporary fashion is also an influence.

The *kolt* is always worn at special occasions such as baptisms, funerals, weddings and confirmations. The male version is shorter than the female one, but tends to be longer

in southern Sápmi than in the north. A belt, lace-up shoes, a shawl or bib, decorative collars and hat are worn with the *kolt*.

Decorations vary but North Sami usually wear silver while South Sami and Lule Sami use pewter embroidery. However, all use colourful fabrics with handmade edging.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- There are some 260,000 reindeer in Sweden. Natural predators such as the wolf are seen as a major threat to reindeer owners.
- Reindeers eat mushrooms, lichen, grass and herbs.
- *Suovas* is a protected word which refers to smoked reindeer meat fillets.



PHOTO: JAKOB FRIDHOLM/IMAGEBANK SWEDEN/SE

Reindeer meat is rich in minerals and very lean.

- Reindeer milk tastes sweet and looks like melted ice cream.
- There are 51 Sami villages, the largest one being Sirkas in Jokkmokk.
- Sami shoes and gloves are made from reindeer hide.
- You can determine which region a Sami member comes from by the *kolit* they are wearing.
- The Sami national song was written by Isak Saba.
- Typical Sami first names are Ante, Ristin, Sunna and Aslak. Double names such as Per-Anders, Lars-Nila and Elle-Maret are also common.



PHOTO: PATRICK TRÅGÅRDH/TT

Sofia Jannok started to sing and yoik at Sami school in Gällivare where she grew up. She has been working with music full time since 2005.

► associations. Today, there are eight political parties within the Sami Parliament of Sweden (*Sametinget*) and the Sami are largely represented through four stakeholder organisations: the Sami Council (*Samerådet*), two national federations (RSÄ and SSR) and a youth organisation, *Saminuorra*. These focus on different areas of interest and might best be described as lobby organisations.

As of 1993, the Sami have elected their own parliamentary body by popular vote. The Sami Parliament's task is to safeguard, develop and coordinate all matters concerning Sami areas of interest.

Elections to the Sami Parliament are held every four years. The parliament has 31 members who gather three times a year in different locations around Sweden. The parliament also serves as a government agency with 50 civil servants. Over the years, the political parties have changed, both in policy and number. The Sami Parliament is financed by grants from the Swedish Government and has one full-time politician, the assembly chair.

Those on the Sami electoral register – open to those who speak Sami and define themselves as part of Sami society through cross-generational connections – are eligible to vote. The numbers registering to vote have increased in recent years, not least because of a growing interest in political issues among young Sami and a growing willingness among older Sami to embrace their ethnicity.

### Aims for greater autonomy

The Sami Parliament has expressed its wish to build a Sami-influenced parliament building in Kiruna. Among the

various issues, one goal unites all the political parties: greater autonomy. At present, the parliament is empowered only to deal with matters concerning hunting and fishing, reindeer herding, compensation for damage caused by predators, and Sami language and culture.

The Sami parliaments in Finland, Norway and Sweden have drawn up a joint Nordic convention to strengthen their position as a minority people and influence decisions on Sami-related matters. The convention has not yet been approved by the Nordic governments.

### New ways and old traditions

The government bill, Strategy for the National Minorities, established in 2010, has created opportunities for the Sami people to care for their culture, traditions and language by designating certain municipalities as administrative centres. Minority reform is important because it also provides financial resources to help preserve minority languages. Nineteen municipalities have been selected to protect, promote, retain and develop Sami culture, and to form consultative groups.

This has meant new opportunities to further Sami interests and include Sami-speaking staff at nursing homes, Sami history in primary schools, and Sami information signs in schools and other municipality premises.

Another focus area is traditional Sami food. Previous generations grew up using everything from the reindeer, the meat being a permanent feature in Sami cooking. Many young Sami want to re-discover dishes that were disappearing, and traditional, local recipes have found new followers among both Sami and ►

## MUSIC, THEATRE AND DANCE

Yoik is traditional Sami singing, and was originally closely linked to Sami religion. It is one of the oldest forms of music in Europe. Seen as a pagan and uncultured activity, it was long banned by the Swedish Lutheran Church. Yoiks are deeply personal and often dedicated to a person, animal or part of a landscape as a way of not forgetting. A yoik is passed down through generations, its style determined by its origin.

Sami music today is often a blend of yoik, rock and contemporary music. Sofia Jannok, for example, performed the ABBA hit 'Waterloo' in Sami at the Swedish selection

contest for the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest. Other singers who mix traditional yoiks with pop music are Mari Boine and Wimme Saari. Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, better known as Áillohaš, saw the yoik as an art form early on and created many works of poetry.

Theatre is a newer Sami art form, often based on old legends or stories. The Sami have a rich storytelling culture which has gained new perspectives through theatre. The Giron Sami Theatre in Kiruna (*Giron* is the Sami name for Kiruna) puts on several productions each year.

## LEARN MORE

## THE SAMI FLAG



PHOTO: ESPEN BRATLIE/SAMFOTO

The colours of the Sami flag from 1986 (blue, red, yellow and green) are those most commonly found on traditional Sami garbs.

The circle derives from the sun, in red, a symbol appearing on many shaman drums. The blue half of the circle represents the moon.

The Sami have 11 flag days, one of which is 6 February, the Sami National Day. The flag and flag days are for all Sami, regardless of which country they live in.

## SAMI ACTIVITIES

Jokkmokk Market,  
February.  
[www.jokkmokksmarknad.se](http://www.jokkmokksmarknad.se)

Sami Week in Umeå,  
February/March.  
[www.sahkie.se/ubmejen-biejviah](http://www.sahkie.se/ubmejen-biejviah)

International Festival  
of Native People,  
July.  
[www.riddu.no](http://www.riddu.no)



PHOTO: JESSICA LINDGREN/IMAGEBANK.SWEDEN.SE

Handmade Sami knives with reindeer horn handles. The decorations are traditional Sami carvings.

- ▶ non-Sami. Classic dishes are also being given new twists, one example being reindeer carpaccio.

## Sami handicrafts – Duodji

Reindeer are a big part of Sami culture, providing food and raw materials for everyday use. Sami pass on knowledge about reindeer through formal education and from generation to generation. Traditionally, every part of the reindeer was kept and used – skin and horns for making shoes and knives, meat to cook or for further processing.

Sami handicrafts, *duodji*, use natural materials and often have soft rounded shapes, pleasing to the touch but func-

tional. Elaborate ornamentation was, and is, important, for showing off the maker's skills and to preserve family and cultural designs.

Many Sami supplement reindeer husbandry with secondary employment such as making handicrafts or tourism-related activities. A certificate of Sami handicraft quality guarantees authenticity for the buyer, and indicates that the maker is recognised within the industry.

New styles and materials have made their way into Sami crafts, and today, a variety of techniques such as metal casting, visual arts and photography are used. ■

## USEFUL LINKS

[www.ajtte.com](http://www.ajtte.com) Sami Museum, Jokkmokk

[www.ajtte.se](http://www.ajtte.se) Sami cuisine

[www.oddasat.se](http://www.oddasat.se) Sami news

[www.samer.se](http://www.samer.se) About the Sami

[www.sametinget.se/english](http://www.sametinget.se/english) The Sami Parliament (in English)

[www.saminuorra.org](http://www.saminuorra.org) Sami Youth Organisation

[www.samiteahter.org](http://www.samiteahter.org) Sami Theatre

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