A newlywed Sami couple crossing a river at the edge of the world heritage site Laponia.

SAMI IN SWEDEN:

INDIGENOUS CULTURE IN SWEDEN

Archaeological finds suggest that the indigenous Sami people have lived in the Arctic region for thousands of years. From losing land to farmers and industries, to being subjugated to racial biology and having their religion, culture and language suppressed, the Sami culture and lifestyle has survived into modern society.

Sami country – Sápmi – stretches across the northern part of Scandinavia and Russia’s Kola Peninsula. The Sami have gradually been forced to give up land, first to farmers starting in the 1650s and later to industries such as forestry and mining. 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.

Reindeer husbandry traditions

Originally hunters and gatherers, the Sami turned to herding of domesticated reindeer in the 17th century. Reindeer naturally move across huge tracks of land to graze, and the Sami historically lived nomadic lives.

The modern norm is instead to have a permanent home and a cabin in the mountains for the herding season. And those who remain in the business have long since replaced the skis with snowmobiles, AWD vehicles and helicopters. Only some ten per cent of Swedish Sami earn a living from the reindeer industry, and many reindeer owners supplement their income through tourism, fishing, crafts and other trades.

Many have been forced to look for income elsewhere as a result of ongoing challenges to the reindeer trade, including disputes with the government over grazing rights, restrictions as to who may legally be involved in reindeer husbandry, and loss of land.

There’s a historical dispute between reindeer herders’ grazing rights and landowners’ logging rights. 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.
Business and politics

A sameby – ‘Sami village’ – is not a traditional village but a complex economic and administrative union within a specific geographical area. Its members have the right to engage in reindeer husbandry in this area, including building whatever facilities they need. In certain areas they also have fishing and hunting rights. It is regulated by a Swedish law called the Reindeer Husbandry Act.

Towards the end of the 19th century, many Sami permanently kept both farms and reindeer (mixed husbandry). The government, however, would 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 or other forms of agriculture.

For generations, people have been turning to other professions, and the Sami are trying to ease government regulations so people can belong to a Sami village without having to own reindeer.

Truth and reconciliation

The Sami have long been in contact with the nation states that were established on the land they called home. Through these encounters, the Sami have been forced to change their way of life.

It’s a history filled with abuses, violations and racism, and one that the Swedish government still has to deal with. In 2019, the Sami Parliament submitted a formal request to the government for a truth and reconciliation commission to be established.

The Sami Parliament

The organised Sami political struggle for increased influence and autonomy began in the 1950s with the establishment of Sami associations that eventually lead to the establishment of Sametinget (Sami Parliament) in 1993. The parliament’s task is to safeguard, develop and coordinate all matters concerning Sami areas of interest.

Today, there are eight political parties within the parliament, which consists of 31 members who are elected every four years and convene three times a year. The parliament is financed by grants from the Swedish government, and also serves as a government agency with 50 civil servants.

Those on the Sami electoral register – open to those who speak Sami and define themselves as part of Sami society – 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.

SAMI ACTIVITIES

Jokkmokk Market,
February.
www.jokkmokksmarknad.se

Sami Week in Umeå,
February/March.
www.sahkie.se

International Festival of Native People,
July.
www.riddu.no

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.

Contemporary Sami music is often a blend of yoik with rock, pop or hip hop, with representatives such as Maxida Märak, Sofia Jannok and Jon Henrik Fjällgren.

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 that puts on several productions each year.
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**Greater autonomy**

One political 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, and Sami languages 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.

Sweden’s constitution was amended in 2011 to affirm the obligation of public power in Sweden to promote the opportunities of the Sami people to preserve and develop a cultural and social life of their own.

**New ways and old traditions**

The government bill Strategy for the National Minorities, established in 2010, provides financial resources to help preserve minority languages and has created opportunities for the Sami people to care for their culture, traditions and languages.

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.

The Sami culinary tradition has also found new followers among both Sami and non-Sami while new twists have appeared through international influences.

**The Sami languages**

In 2000, Sami was recognised as an official minority language in Sweden, and the government has since given the Sami Parliament greater influence and financial resources to preserve the Sami languages, which are rich in variation. Just imagine more than 300 different ways of saying snow – from powder to slush.

The Sami languages are divided into three main strains: Eastern, Central and Southern Sami. These languages are further divided into nine distinct variants, of which the North Sami is the most widely used, with an estimated 17,000 native speakers across the Sápmi region (6,000 based in Sweden).

Written Sami was not linked to the Swedish alphabet until 1950. The languages were then also given an additional seven letters, pronounced with lisping sounds 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 in their language.

**Education**

At present, the only Sami upper secondary school in Sweden is in Jokkmokk in the very north of the country. Apart from the general curriculum, the school offers training in reindeer husbandry, traditional cooking, handicrafts and the Sami languages.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

- 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.
- The Sami national song was written by Isak Saba.
- There are 51 Sami villages, the largest one being Sirges in Jokkmokk.
- You can determine which region a Sami member comes from by the traditional kolt dress they are wearing.
- 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. 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 edgings.

**TRADITIONAL SAMI DRESS**

Pride in Sami heritage can sometimes be seen in their 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.
DID YOU KNOW?

There are some 260,000 reindeer in Sweden. Natural predators such as the wolf are a major threat to reindeer owners.

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

Academic courses in the Sami languages can be taken at Umeå and Uppsala universities. There is also a Centre for Sami research, Vaartoe, that coordinates research in Sami culture, languages, history and communities, and initiates new research.

Sami handicrafts – Duodji

Reindeer are a big part of Sami culture, providing food and raw materials for everyday use and crafts. 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 that are still functional. Elaborate ornamentation is used to show off the maker’s skills and to preserve family and cultural designs.

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.

Sami culinary ambassador Ann Sparrock introduces Sami food culture to public places such as schools and hospitals.

Suovas is a protected word which refers to smoked reindeer meat. Reindeer meat is rich in minerals and very lean.

USEFUL LINKS

www.ajtte.com  Sami Museum, Jokkmokk
www.samer.se  About the Sami
www.sametinget.se  The Sami Parliament
www.samiteahter.org  Giron Sami Theatre
www.sapminature.com  Sami eco-tourism