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The Swedish Sami consciousness

by: Lola Akinmade Åkerström
In Sweden there are about 20,000 Sami, recognized by the UN as an indigenous people. Many Swedes' understanding of the Sami lifestyle is limited to nomadic reindeer herding, which has been a strong symbol of their culture for centuries. The lack of a deeper cultural understanding feeds a generational divide between modern day Swedes and Sami.

A lack of understanding, and few opportunities to learn more in school, is part of the reason why many Swedes connect the Sami lifestyle with reindeer husbandry. Photo: Fredrik Broman

Peter Sköld, director of the Vaartoe Centre for Sami Research and a professor at Umeå University says, "I've met so many Swedish people who say *'I don't know anything about the Sami'*."

Professor Sköld currently leads a network of researchers and PhD students who are conducting various Sami-related researches. "I often tell them not to blame themselves. Try to find a Swedish history or social studies textbook. Look for a page on the Sami. It simply isn't there. It has to do with knowledge for sure," he adds, noting that lack of comprehensive education remains a key problem.

But who has the responsibility to teach? Who has the responsibility to learn?

History flash

There are roughly 70,000 indigenous Sami living in specific areas of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Russian Kola peninsula collectively known as the Sápmi region. The oldest

archaeological discoveries which tie Sami to the regions above date back 10,000 years. Traditionally, Sami society was made up of numerous family groups called *Siida*, who depended on reindeer, fishing, and hunting for their daily sustenance.

At the turn of the 20th century when Sweden moved to an industrialized society, many conflicts with the Sami occurred. The country's development required forestry and mining resources found within Sápmi. This exploration of natural resources threatened reindeer herding which was crucial to the Sami way of life.

Lennart Pittja, project manager of VisitSápmi, an initiative which organizes and promotes sustainable ethical Sami tourism, explains: "For the longest time, Sami people like my grandfather were not educated enough to communicate and describe things in Swedish. His first language was Sami. We were not listened to because we couldn't describe what we wanted and needed in Swedish."

Over time and to some extent, the Sami became marginalized due to miscommunication and a lack of understanding on both sides. In 1977, the Swedish government recognized the Sami as an indigenous people, and in 1993, an agency called the Sami Parliament (*Sametinget*) was set up to help address indigenous affairs at the national level.

Political Positioning and Sore Points

The Sami Parliament falls under the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs due to Sami's tight integration with reindeer husbandry and land issues. Even though this classification helps protect reindeer rights, the flipside is that the stereotype and lack of knowledge is continually fed. The average Swede is more interested in technology and other cultural issues, than they are in agricultural issues. So this classification makes it difficult for others to fully understand the breadth of involvement of the Sami within all facets of society.

*In 1993 the Sami Parliament (*Sametinget*) was set up to help address indigenous affairs at the national level, but it is not a body for self-government. Photo: Henrik Montgomery/Scanpix*

Internationally, Sweden is seen as a global champion of human rights, opening its doors to an unprecedented number of refugees seeking better lives through asylum.

“It’s strange to be an indigenous person in Sweden,” notes Pittja, who is also Sami. “Sweden has no difficulty understanding what happened to other tribal peoples around the world, but is still having a hard time fully understanding the complexities of its own indigenous population.”

In 1989, The United Nations (UN) adopted Convention ILO 169, which protects the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples all over the world, and many countries have ratified this act.

“Sweden has still not ratified ILO 169,” Sköld says. Ratification means reviewing existing laws with regards to Sami land and their hunting and fishing rights as well as a review of the Sami Parliament and its political influence.

“We’ve investigated the consequences for 20 years but are still uncertain of what will happen if we sign it so we don’t. One of the reasons Sweden doesn’t want to sign is because we need more knowledge to come up with a good solution for handling things,” Sköld went on to say.

Because current Swedish legislation is still trying to wrap its arms around the intricacies and complexities of Sami society, it is at the municipality levels one can find examples of genuine cooperation. The subarctic municipality of Jokkmokk – population 5,000 — is one example.

Working models in Subarctic Sweden

Anna Hövenmark, Swedish council member and former mayor of Jokkmokk, says, “Jokkmokk municipality is one of the first places where the Sami have been in the parliament for so many years — since the fifties, and that’s very unusual in Sweden.”

The Sami flag. The circle represents the sun and the moon, and the red, blue, green and yellow colors are taken from gáktis — the traditional Sámi garb. Photo: Pab_lo49 (CC BY)

Hövenmark’s former deputy mayor, Karin Vannar is Sami and agrees with Hövenmark. “Back in the fifties, there were a faction of Sami who were really interested in the political process, and so the Sami in the Jokkmokk area have been involved politically for quite some time.”

By involving the local Sami in broader aspects of local government beyond reindeer herding, Hövenmark and Vannar were able to address many intrinsic issues.

“I asked chairman Bertil Kielatis of the Sirges Sami settlement many years ago why we

[Jokkmokk] don't have a lot of the problems other areas have," Hövenmark says. "Yes, we do have problems, but it's not as bad."

Bertil Kielatis noted that by involving the Sami in local parliament especially within the realms of education, Jokkmokk was able to avoid many deep-seated conflicts other areas within Sápmi are currently experiencing.

"That's the way politicians learn," Hövenmark adds. "We learn when people like Karin [Vannar] speak during political meetings and council hearings about various related issues from the Sami point-of-view."

Back to school

But what is the Sami point-of-view?

Only by engaging fully can Swedish society begin to understand their point of view, whatever it may be. In terms of involvement, Sami issues are complex. They don't necessarily want the same things Swedish society at large wants. But by involving them at various levels of government, the government can figure out what they want, and more importantly, what they need for their own sustainability.

"Centers like the Sami Education Center where students can combine special courses in Sami culture with regular school curriculums are important," according to Hövenmark. Founded in 1942, the center in Jokkmokk teaches reindeer husbandry, traditional handicrafts (*Duodji*), and cooking, along with a standard Swedish high school curriculum. "There is no ill-will or conscious effort not to teach Sami culture in schools. The issue lies on a national legislative level."

The municipality of Jokkmokk proposed to make Sami language a requirement but since all mandatory course curriculums are administered at a national level, small adjustments can't be made at the municipality level; hence, learning the Sami language remains voluntary for each individual.

"Another reason why people don't know so much is that their own teachers were never taught," adds Peter Sköld. "But this year [2011], for the first time ever in Swedish university history, teaching education programs will require a 1-week course on indigenous and Sami society studies, and that is a major change. Each of these teachers will meet thousands of students over their lifetimes so I think the effect will be enormous in 10-20 years."

Where the future lies

Bridging this generational disconnect lies in the hands of today's Swedish and Sami youth, and Sweden may want to start looking towards this group to start fostering stronger dialogue and rebuilding the connection.

According to Vannar, the younger Sami generation are now going to school and studying at universities. "Our parents didn't do that. They [students] are coming back home and contributing to the community, bringing knowledge on how to work with and preserve the local forests using better sustainable techniques as well," Vannar explains.

26-year old Ylva Maria Pavval runs Creative Sápmi, a consulting company which works on various youth-related projects such as Niejda — Chicks in Sápmi — a mentoring program for

girls.

Ylva-Maria Pavval runs Creative Sápmi, which arranges events, workshops and projects for the youth. Photo: Lola Akinmade Åkerström

“Things that we can learn aren’t the same things that our parents were able to learn,” Pavval says. “I think my generation is so much more confident than my father’s and Karin’s generation.”

Historically, the Sami are not a naturally outspoken people, and the confidence Pavval alludes to is really about seeing the Sami culture as one that needs to be treasured. Sami youth in their 20s and 30s have a renewed vigor and spirit. They know the problems, they’ve seen and talked about them, are frustrated, extremely vocal, ask tougher questions, and are now focusing their energies and actively taking initiative.

“I think there’s something really exciting happening right now,” Pavval says. “Since the Sami parliament (*Sametinget*) itself doesn’t have any real power, many young Sami who want to influence Sweden and deal with Sami-related issues may not go into the Sami Parliament, but rather into traditional Swedish political parties — locally, regionally, and eventually, nationally.”

Side-by-side political collaborations similar to Anna Hövenmark and Karin Vannar’s example in Jokkmokk may very well be the way Sami and Swedish will bridge the gap in the future; pushing local level breakthroughs upwards to a more national level. Knowledge may not be the total solution, but proactively acquiring it is a very good way to start changing the collective Swedish consciousness of the Sami.

Related links

- **Vaartoe Centre for Sami Research**
- **VisitSápmi**
- **Samer.se**
- **Jokkmokk tourism**
- **Sami Education Center**
- **Creative Sápmi**

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Lola Akinmade Åkerström

Lola Akinmade is a Stockholm-based freelance writer and photographer whose work has appeared in National Geographic Traveler, BBC, Vogue, Guardian UK, and more — www.lolaakinmade.com/articles. She's an editor with Matador Network and also contributes as a photojournalist to the Swedish Red Cross and other non-profit organizations.

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