

Beyond Rudolph:  
The Cultural Impacts of Reindeer Herding on the Sami

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In Northern Scandinavia, amidst reindeer and snow fields, there lives a varied group of people indigenous to the land. They are called the Sami. The Sami people have lived in that region, called Sapmi, for thousands of years. Just like indigenous people across the world, they have dealt with loss of culture, land, and rights. Reindeer husbandry, the practice of breeding and caring for reindeer, has been essential to their livelihoods since the beginning of their existence on the Scandinavian peninsula. The practice originates alongside their hunter-gatherer traditions, where the Sami supplemented hunting, trapping, and fishing with hunting of wild reindeer and small-scale reindeer domestication. However, when Sapmi became the territory of four separate nations (Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Russia) around the 17th century, the Sami began to be taxed by these nations. Since they had previously operated in a self-sustaining economy, they struggled to find monetary ways to pay these taxes. Seeing the reindeer as a way to make money, they expanded their herd sizes and began to breed reindeer specifically to turn a profit. Sami people now raised large herds of reindeer and followed them across large areas of land. This practice is known as reindeer nomadism. As other sources of livelihood dwindled, reindeer herding became the Sami's main source of income and economic support. Many parts of Sami life changed as a result of this. They lost traditional hunting and religious practices and adapted their societal organizational unit, the *siida*, to fit their new livelihood. Reindeer have been a fundamental part of Sami culture for centuries, but the pressures of advancing settlers and nations in the 17th century led to distinct changes in the Sami's use of reindeer. The nomadic lifestyle necessitated by reindeer herding allowed the Sami to retain their autonomy and identity as an indigenous people, but also forced them to abandon some of their traditional cultural

practices. Although the Sami people suffered cultural losses, the transition to reindeer nomadism was the key to the survival of Sami cultural traditions during this period of settlement.

To start, it is necessary to discuss the terms used to refer to the Sami people. When Sapmi was first settled by Finland, the region was dubbed “Lapland” and the people dubbed “Lapps.” In recent years, this term has become controversial. Many Sami people see it as derogatory, incorrect, and a form of assimilation.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the term Sami will be used. The term Sapmi will be used to refer to the territory inhabited by the Sami. Although the term Lapp may appear in sources and texts, out of respect for the Sami people themselves, it will be changed to Sami unless quoted directly.

The first mention of the Sami people in a historical text is found in the works of Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus. In his work *Germania*, published in the 1st century A.D., he describes a people he calls “Fenni.”<sup>2</sup> Archeological and genetic evidence supports the theory that the Sami people have lived in Scandinavia for nearly ten thousand years.<sup>3</sup> This makes the Sami the original, indigenous people to inhabit Scandinavia. However, they would not remain isolated for long.

As the rest of Scandinavia transitioned from the age of the Vikings to the age of Christianity and political unity, the relationship between Sami and settler was primarily a trade relationship. The Sami traded furs, fish, and other resources with Norwegian, Finnish, Swedish, and Russian villages.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, the Sami lived a separate and peaceful life from the rest

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<sup>1</sup> Seija Tuulentie, “‘Culture Alone Will Not Put Bread on the Table.’ The Many Facets of the Debate on the Preservation of Sami Culture,” *Acta Borealia* 16: no. 1 (1999): 104.

<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, *The Germania* (Project Gutenberg, 2013), [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7524/7524-h/7524-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7524/7524-h/7524-h/7524-h.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Noel D. Broadbent, *Lapps and Labyrinths: Saami Prehistory, Colonization, and Cultural Resilience* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

of Scandinavia. This began to change when political unity in Scandinavia ended, and individual countries began to gain their independence. The king of Swedish territories (which include parts of current-day Finland) in the 16th century, King Gustav Vasa, issued a letter claiming ownership of the territories in northern Scandinavia, which were traditional Sami lands.<sup>5</sup> Seeing this, leaders in Norway-Denmark began to lay claim to these lands as well. Vague borders were established, thereby splitting Sapmi between the Scandinavian nation-states.

In the centuries before this transition, the Sami were primarily a hunter-gatherer people. They sustained themselves on hunting, fishing, and some subsistence farming. As early as the 9th century, some Sami families had small herds of domesticated animals that they used as pack animals or for milk.<sup>6</sup> However, these families consisted of only the richest Sami – the majority only hunted, fished, or trapped. Many Sami lived as half-nomads, traveling between regions depending on the resources available during each season. The half-nomad lifestyle is defined as a rotation between several different permanently established settlements in different areas.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the fully nomadic lifestyle features constant transitions between temporary living spaces.<sup>8</sup> Although some things remain constant across all Sami, there was also much variation between the Sami who inhabited the mountains, the coastal areas, and the forested regions.

The forest Sami, as one could expect, lived primarily in the forest. Their livelihood included hunting, trapping, and agriculture. They often owned small, non-migratory herds of reindeer that were not slaughtered for meat or pelts. The forest Sami were stationary, living in established, permanent villages. On the other hand, the coastal Sami were semi-nomadic. They

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<sup>5</sup> Israel Ruong, *The Lapps in Sweden*, trans. Alan Blair (Sweden: The Swedish Institute, 1967), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Broadbent, 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

routinely traveled from inland homes during the winter to homes at the mouths of great fjords during the summer.<sup>9</sup> Along with this, they hunted and trapped to sustain themselves during the winter, while fishing during the summer. Coastal Sami may have hunted reindeer on a small-scale, but it was not their main source of sustenance.

On the other hand, reindeer herding had been essential to the mountain-dwelling Sami for many years before it spread to the rest of the population.<sup>10</sup> It first originated with them as they hunted reindeer for their primary source of food, clothing, income, and general livelihood. While there is speculation on when reindeer hunting and small-scale reindeer herding originated, the observations of the 9th century Norwegian traveler Ohthere of Hålogaland confirm that some Sami kept small herds of domesticated reindeer by at least the 800s.<sup>11</sup> Over time, as wild reindeer faced constant hunting and trapping, their numbers dwindled. Because of the decline in wild reindeer, the mountain Sami could not survive on hunting alone. They began to leave their homes and follow the reindeer on their yearly migrations. As shown by the writings of Swedish historian Samuele Rheen, the mountain Sami had adopted a fully nomadic lifestyle by the 17th century.<sup>12</sup> Their yearly cycle and migratory patterns were dictated by that of the reindeer.

Although reindeer herding began with the mountain Sami, it quickly spread beyond the mountainous regions. Their newfound nomadic lifestyle required them to venture into new territory, infringing on the lands of the forest and coastal Sami. As the other Sami were exposed to this new practice of large-scale reindeer domestication, they adopted the lifestyle of reindeer

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<sup>9</sup> Gutorm Gjessing, *Changing Lapps* (London: Dept. of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1954), 25.

<sup>10</sup> Ornulv Vorren and Ernst Manker, *Lapp Life and Customs*, trans. Kathleen McFarlane (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 68.

<sup>11</sup> Robert T. Anderson, "Dating Reindeer Pastoralism in Lapland," *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 4 (1958): 368. [www.jstor.org/stable/480452](http://www.jstor.org/stable/480452).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

nomadism as well. Across all Sami people, this form of reindeer husbandry was intensive.<sup>13</sup> Although herd size increased from what it had been previously, it had yet to reach that vast proportions of reindeer herds today.<sup>14</sup> Herding communities traveled with their herds and remained close to them throughout the entire year. From this point on, the Sami people would become synonymous with reindeer herding.

On the surface, the transition to reindeer nomadism was spurred by a lack of natural resources and easy access to reindeer. However, further investigation determines that the development of the Scandinavian nation-states played a large role in hastening this transformation. A treaty between Sweden and Russia from the late 1500s reads, “Not a slightest obstacle shall be set by [Russia’s] royal highness’s orderlies [...] to orderlies of [Sweden’s] mightiest King when collecting taxes from people of Lapland [...] Likewise, the Swedish orderlies will set no obstacles to royal orderlies of [...] Russia in collecting taxes from those Lapps,” thus confirming that the Sami were taxed by Scandinavian kingdoms as early as 1595.<sup>15</sup> To control taxes in the north, the Swedish imperial crown created an unofficial group called the Birkarls. They levied taxes on the Sami people and demanded a certain percentage of their income.<sup>16</sup> For a people who had previously existed in a purely self-sustaining and self-contained economy, this sudden economic pressure was nearly devastating for the Sami. They found themselves pressed for resources and ways to pay the taxes imposed upon them by settler governments.

As they began to increase their hunting and trapping in an attempt to meet this new economic burden, the ecosystem around them suffered and reindeer numbers began to

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<sup>13</sup> Vorren, 85.

<sup>14</sup> International Centre for Reindeer Husbandry.

<sup>15</sup> “Treaty of Teusina.”

<sup>16</sup> Ruong, 40.

decrease.<sup>17</sup> Whether the overhunting of reindeer stemmed from a need to pay taxes with reindeer skins/meat or the need to replace other resources used to pay these taxes is unknown, but it undeniably stemmed from a general shortage of resources for paying taxes. As has already been established, this decline in wild reindeer populations led to the transition to reindeer nomadism and the spread of reindeer nomadism across the Sami people. Thus, the connection between the advancing Scandinavian nation-states and the transition to reindeer nomadism is made clear.

An important discrepancy must now be brought to light. Currently, only 10% of Sami are actively involved in reindeer herding.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, other events would take place between the 17th and 21st centuries that would help form this discrepancy, but, nonetheless, it originated in the 1600s. Not all Sami had the means to gather large herds of reindeer and take on a life of nomadism. Many, in fact, were forced to permanently settle in fishing villages along the coast, or in farming villages in the woods.<sup>19</sup> These Sami suffered greatly – losing traditions, religion, and livelihood. As reindeer became increasingly synonymous with Sami, they even faced skepticism of their own Sami heritage.<sup>20</sup> However, their plight is the topic of another paper at another time.

The reindeer herding Sami found themselves in a unique situation. After changing their entire livelihoods and source of income to afford the economic pressures foisted upon them by Scandinavian governments in the 16th century, they faced the loss of certain elements of their culture. Increased interaction with Christian nations led to persecution of the Sami religion, which closely followed Animism.<sup>21</sup> The Sami were polytheistic. They believed that all natural

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<sup>17</sup> International Centre for Reindeer Husbandry.

<sup>18</sup> International Centre for Reindeer Husbandry.

<sup>19</sup> Gjessing, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Tim Ingold, *Hunters, Pastoralists, and Ranchers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 115.

<sup>21</sup> Vorren, 152.

objects possessed a soul and that spirits were present in the world around them.<sup>22</sup> These beliefs were targeted as heretical and blasphemous by Christian settlers. Oftentimes sacred objects like drums were taken and destroyed, and Sami were forbidden from practicing traditional chants, known as *yoiking*.<sup>23</sup> Gradually, Sami communities were converted to Lutheranism and many religious practices have been lost to history. While loss of religion is not tied directly to the shift to reindeer nomadism, it occurred in tandem with this change. Both changes were a result of increased contact with Scandinavian nations, and thus loss of religion should be mentioned.

Additionally, the Sami's traditional methods of hunting and trapping were left behind in the transition. Hunting reindeer, specifically, involved a process in which pits were dug along reindeer migration pathways. This technique, called the pit-fall technique, allowed the Sami to easily and safely fell a several-hundred pound animal.<sup>24</sup> The Sami were also very skilled with the bow and arrow. They often used such weapons to hunt smaller animals from long distances, a practice that fell out of use as the hunting of creatures like beavers and foxes became less lucrative than reindeer herding.<sup>25</sup> As the Sami became primarily reindeer herders, they lost their traditional hunting and trapping practices, as well as the freedom to practice their religion.

Although the Sami lost many of their cultural traditions, the transition to reindeer nomadism allowed them to retain some traditions and autonomy. Chiefly, the reindeer-herding Sami remained economically and socially independent from the rest of Scandinavia. This included the continuation of the *siida*, a community unit of Sami families, as well as traditional

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Broadbent, 123.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>25</sup> Gjessing, 25.



methods of clothing and shelter.<sup>26</sup> Through adaptation and flexibility, the Sami managed to keep their identity as an indigenous people separate from the rest of Scandinavia.

The *siida* originated in Sami communities that hunted reindeer. While it did undergo modifications to survive the transition to reindeer nomadism, the key ideas of the *siida* persisted. *Siidat* are community units formed of several Sami families.<sup>27</sup> Grouped by district or geographical area, *siidat* are formed between Sami in a local area. Members of the same *siida* often feel a deep sense of kinship to their fellow Sami. A *siida* works, plays, and goes through daily life as a unit, so members of a *siida* are economically, as well as socially and emotionally, connected.<sup>28</sup> Both prior to and after the shift to reindeer nomadism, the *siida* was an essential aspect of Sami life and culture.

Before the transition to reindeer nomadism, the *siida* took the form of an organized community centered around hunting, trapping. Members had their own distinct roles to help the *siida* operate the smoothest, and given the semi-nomadic nature of some Sami, a *siida* was not necessarily together for the entire year. *Siidat* were the size of a small village, usually consisting of between ten and forty families.<sup>29</sup> All members of a *siida* collectively shared resources. Pre-nomadism *siidat* were defined as small, cohesive units that worked as one.

As the Sami shifted their livelihoods, the *siida* shifted with them. Although it would maintain its core purpose, to unite, protect, and support fellow Sami, it changed slightly to become smaller, more individualistic, and more flexible to the patterns of reindeer nomadism.

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<sup>26</sup> Vorren, 45.

<sup>27</sup> *siida* plural

<sup>28</sup> Mikkel Nils Sara, “*Siida* and Traditional Sami Reindeer Herding Knowledge,” *Northern Review*, no. 30 (2009).

<sup>29</sup> Marius Warg Næss, Guro Lovise Hole Fisktjønmo, and Bård-Jørgen Bårdsen, “The Sami Cooperative Herding Group: The *Siida* System from Past to Present,” *Acta Borealia* 32, no. 2 (2021): 95, DOI: 10.1080/08003831.2021.1972265.

First and foremost, the concept of the *baiki* emerged. The *baiki* is the individual household within the *siida*.<sup>30</sup> Each *baiki* owned their own reindeer herds, keeping profits and incomes separate from other households. Additionally, *siida* became much smaller in their human population, shrinking to only include two to six families and their large herds of up to two thousand reindeer.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the territorial boundaries between *siida* grew more relaxed. Since reindeer nomadism requires a larger spread of land than the *siida* had previously inhabited, boundaries became more flexible to allow migration across Sapmi.<sup>32</sup> By changing some elements of the *siida*, the Sami were able to hold onto a vital part of their culture while adapting to new ways of life.

Some cultural aspects were even enhanced by the transition to reindeer nomadism. The increase in access to reindeer products was largely beneficial to cultural elements like clothing and shelters. The *gakthi*, which is a piece of traditional clothing worn by Sami, is made primarily out of reindeer sinew and leather.<sup>33</sup> Also, Sami often wore reindeer furs to stay warm during brutal Arctic winters.<sup>34</sup> Rather than be forced to adapt their processes of clothing-making, the Sami were able to keep their practices. On top of that, the temporary shelter of Sami half-nomads (and later, full nomads), was the *lavvu*. Similar to the tipis of the Great Plains Native Americans, *lavvu* were made of reindeer hides stretched across wooden sticks that resembled tent poles.<sup>35</sup> The *lavvu* became more prominent after the shift to reindeer nomadism as well, due to its

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ingold, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Gjessing, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Vorren, 170.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 173.

inherent convenience as a temporary dwelling.<sup>36</sup> Unique Sami cultural elements such as clothing and shelter survived the transition to reindeer nomadism.

Reindeer are a quintessential part of Sami culture and history. Beginning as a source of food, materials, and other resources, along with other animals, the reindeer grew to become a staple of Sami life. Originally, not all Sami hunted or owned reindeer. Most, in fact, relied on hunting, trapping, and fishing as a way to sustain themselves. However, as Scandinavian nation-states grew in size and power, they began to expand their reach into Sapmi. Around the 17th century, the Sami suddenly faced new economic pressures in the form of taxes. Unable to produce the amount of money necessary to pay these taxes with their regular hunting and fishing activities, the Sami increased their efforts. This led to a decrease in wild reindeer populations, making it even more difficult for the Sami to pay their taxes. The Sami who already owned small herds of reindeer expanded these to reach vast proportions of reindeer and began to adopt a nomadic lifestyle. The reindeer herders, previously half-nomads, became a fully nomadic people, following their herds of reindeer on their yearly migrations around Sapmi. Although the Sami's shift in reindeer herding practices resulted in loss of culture, it also allowed the Sami to preserve certain parts of their culture like their clothing and shelter. Additionally, they kept their autonomy through the preservation of the *siida* community unit. While some cultural traditions were lost, the transition to reindeer nomadism provided the Sami with the means to survive the expansion of Scandinavian governments with their cultural identity intact.

In present day Scandinavia, preservation of Sami culture is widely discussed. More research and exploration must be done into how to effectively restore Sami culture, and what sources of oppression and erasure still remain amongst Scandinavian society. It is necessary to

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<sup>36</sup> Gjessing, 41.

center the experiences and input of the Sami themselves in determining how to move forward with these issues.

Reindeer often take priority in these discussions about cultural preservation, due to the idea that the reindeer is the most central part of Sami cultural identity. In some areas, a person cannot register as Sami unless their parents or grandparents participated in reindeer herding. Yet, understanding the place of reindeer in Sami culture is essential to understanding Sami culture itself. The reindeer have not always been at the forefront of Sami identity. Indeed, the period of time and circumstances that brought reindeer to the forefront also resulted in widespread lifestyle change and loss of culture for the Sami. The repercussions of these changes still reverberate through Sami communities today. Attempts to restore and revive Sami culture must take into account the historical oppressions and struggles of the Sami people. Modern-day issues of Sami cultural preservation cannot be fixed unless the root of the issue is studied and understood. Any movement to restore Sami culture must be informed by the past as well as the present.

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