Before the Fall of the Reindeer People

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Photo. A Sami (Lapp) family in Norway around 1900.

In the freezing far northern reaches of Europe live an indigenous, semi-nomadic people of fishermen, fur trappers and reindeer herders. Like a thin but stubborn sheet of ice, these people have inhabited Sápmi, a large but sparsely populated area covering parts of northern Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia’s Kola Peninsula for thousands of years. They remain closely tied to nature throughout the 18th and 20th centuries, as their clothes, dwellings and other trappings of culture bear witness – here beautifully frozen in film. These people are the Sámi.
Photo: Sami family in front of their home, 1970s. Photo: Unknown photographer
(http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sami_family_1970s.jpg)

"This singular race is divided into three different groups: mountain, forest, and fisher Lapps. The first two are nomadic and almost entirely dependent upon reindeer. Nearly all the needs of the Lapps are supplied by this useful creature, which closely resembles a stag. The flesh provides his food, from its milk he obtains cheese; from the hide, clothes, leather, foot and tent covering, while the antlers yield material for knife blades, vessels, etc." Catholic Encyclopedia, 1913. Lapland and Lapps

Photo: Two persons in Sami dresses outside Jokkmokk Old Church, Sweden, c. 1860. Photo: Swedish National Heritage Board (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jokkmokk_church_1860.jpg)


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Two hundred years ago, the Sámi people lived in more or less peaceable co-existence with the societies surrounding them. However, as modern industrialism cranked its wheel throughout the rest of Europe, the Sámi began to feel the strain in the relationship with their neighbours, and the accelerating changes in their culture that would hit high gear during the second half of the 20th century became apparent. Yet the Sámi way of life refused to be buried.

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A people without a sovereign state, the Sámis have made the Arctic Area of the Nordic countries the land of a nomadic culture unique to Europe: a culture so much more in tune with its natural environment as to be almost unrecognizable to eyes dulled by consumerism and the computer. As motley as the many colours of their costumes, this diverse group of people – a people with up to ten languages and more dialects spoken among them – yet share some common characteristics and customs.

After breakfasting, those Sámi men who practiced reindeer husbandry would have gone about their daily routines – feeding, milking and helping to tend their animals; driving them to fresh grazing lands; breeding and birthing when the season dictated. Their animals would provide them with many of the materials they needed: pelle to keep warm and for use as the walls in their dwellings; sitters to be employed alongside other bones and wood for crafting; and of course meat and milk for meals.
"The Sámi are believed to be the first known culture to have herded animals," writes one scholar. "To capture and train draft reindeer for pulling snow sleds, they lasso the wild reindeer, tie it to a tree, and slowly train it until it is domesticated. The reindeer sleds, as well as skins, are vital to Sámi life in the winter." The reindeer were cardinal, morning, noon and night.

A frugal lunch might have followed for a Sámi family – especially during the long, dark winter – while the mothers fed and cared for their young in cradles of wood and horn. Youths might have gathered berries or helped with repairs. Immaculately crafted tools would have hung from their waists, ready for everyday use or when needed in fishing and hunting. Sámi handicrafts, known as doodej, were born of a time when the Sámi people were isolated from the outside world and needed to be self-sufficient to survive.
Made from wood, bone, horn, leather and roots, crafts ranged from knives and cases to women's bags and wooden cups, with the underlying belief that they should serve a purpose. That didn't mean objects couldn't be decorative; and while the Sámi women spent their afternoon making wares, embroidery with beads, linen thread, weaving and textiles would have been the treasures of their toil. By the 19th century, items could have been exchanged as well as used, and certainly there was an art to it all.

The traditional clothing worn by the Sámi is called gákti, a patchwork type of attire typified by a main colour adorned with contrasting bands, plaits and metal embroidery, often with a high collar to keep out the cold. The various different patterns and jewellery spoke of the person's marital status, where they hailed from, and other cultural variations of the different regions. Traditionally, gákti was made from reindeer leather, sinews and perhaps wool, with cotton and silk introduced later.
When the dogs had returned home and the reindeer shuffled together for warmth, when the day — if it had even dawned — began to darken, the Sámi families would return to their shelters — the focal points around which their lives turned, even if their location was only temporary. Similar in design to the Native American tipi, but less vertical and more stable in high winds, the lavvu could be set up and taken down quickly, allowing the Sámi to follow their reindeer herds or otherwise move from place to place.

Supported by evenly spaced, forked or notched poles arranged into a tripod, with other straight poles to give structure to the form, the lavvu was then covered in reindeer hides — until inexpensive textiles were made available. Inside, a fireplace in the middle would have been used for heating and to keep mosquito at bay, the smoke escaping through a hole in the top. The goahti was a slightly larger construction, similar to a Sámi lavvu or a post-covered version using the same base structure.
The handwork of the Sámi people was supremely functional, but when the evenings and winters had closed in, their music and song was less practical in principle. The traditional Yoik is one of several modes of Sámi song listeners would have heard — slow, chant-like, emotive singing expressive of personal attempts to touch on the spiritual essence of a subject, say an animal or bird in nature. Other styles may not have contained words, or might have told a story about a special person or event.

In truth, there were as many differences as similarities among the Sámi of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Different cultures that have been identified include the Forest Sámi, Fjell or Mountain Sámi, Sna Sámi, and Eastern Sámi. Yet such classifications were further complicated by other differences of language, livelihood and history that filled the system of small, sometimes migratory groups of families — or slides — like beautiful cracks in the ice.
The Sámi have lived in northern Europe since the last glacial ice sheets melted away, following herds of reindeer, living off the land, and adapting to the harsh winter winds and climate. However, they only became recognizable as their own distinct culture in the last few millennia. When the Black Death sank its teeth into Europe in 1348, it did not impact so heavily on the Sámi, who were less connected to the European trade routes and so were not infected and killed at nearly as high a rate as their neighbours.

In the wake of the pandemic, those Sámi driven to fish off the north Norwegian coast became the Sea Sámi who, as they migrated and multiplied, settled Norway's firths and island waterways, combining cattle ranching with trapping and fishing. Meanwhile, a smaller minority of Mountain Sámi continued to hunt reindeer, and around the 1560s began taming the overhunted animals into herds, becoming the famed reindeer nomads – a lifestyle portrayed as archetypically Sámi but in fact only pursued by about 10% of the people.
The Sámi felt the pressure of interest shown in their areas by the surrounding states of Denmark-Norway, Sweden-Finland and Russia – not to mention instances of forced labour and the fact that all claimed the right to tax them. Yet for a long time, the Sámi way of life thrived in the north because of it was so supremely adapted to the harsh Arctic environment – and was fit to survive independent of crises like the low fish prices and resulting depopulation Norwegians living up north suffered during the 18th century.

However, the fortunes of the Sámi people began to wane in the 18th century when the Norwegian authorities began taking away Sámi rights in a bid to make the Norwegian language and culture universal. Although on the Swedish and Finnish side the authorities were less militant in their efforts to assimilate the Sámi culture, in all three Scandinavian countries a strong drive towards settlement in the north led to a weakening of the Sámi people's economic and cultural status.
Worse was still to come. The tightest grip exerted on the Sámi occurred in the years between 1900 and 1940, when Norwegian nationalism intensified to the point where the government invested considerable money and effort into wiping out their culture. Anyone who wanted to claim new land for agriculture had to prove they could speak good Norwegian. The earlier myths of the Sámi as somehow 'innocent' primitive people had reached a new and frightening level under the banner of a dominant, 'civilising' culture.

Photo:
A Nortic Sámi family in traditional costumes and a dog from Finland, pre-1936. Photo: Kortesmäki Helsinki. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sami_family_Finland_1936.jpg

In Sweden, Sámi areas were increasingly exploited by the burgeoning mining industry and the building of the Luleå-Narvik railway, and later some Sámi were subjected to a compulsory sterilisation project. Meanwhile, in Russia the nomadic Sámi way of life was brutally interrupted by the collectivisation of reindeer herding and farming in general, with most of the people rounded up in a kolkhoz in the middle of the Kola Peninsula and forced to accept this radical new ideology or face the concentration camp.

Photo:

Matters didn't improve any with the onset of WWII, when the eastern Sámi in north-eastern Finland and Russia found themselves fighting on opposing sides. When the Germans withdrew from the north of Finland and Russia, homes and other visible traces of history were laid to waste in a scorched earth policy. Many families were forced to evacuate, though some Sámi ended up in German prison camps. Areas like Finnmark county in Norway and all northern areas of Finland were left in smoking ruins.
After the War grew a renewed interest in the Sámi culture, the roots of which had been sown in the late 1800s when the first Sámi newspapers were founded; the news spoken in Sámi on Norwegian national radio started in 1946. The construction of a hydro-electric dam on important grazing and calving areas in the Finnmark town of Alta in 1979 brought Sámi rights onto the political agenda. And since 1992, the Sámi have their own national day, which takes place on February 6.

Today, the Sámi people remain among the largest indigenous ethnic groups in Europe. Only around 2,800 Sámi are actively involved with full-time reindeer herding, but its continued existence is the legacy of a beautiful culture founded on seasonal migrations and the cycles of life.

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kristain77 says
Sep 2nd, 2010 at 12am
Rapon is a main Russian public organization working for indigenous peoples rights and has arranged recently a meeting of representatives of indigenous peoples from all over Russia to discuss the common challenges facing indigenous peoples, Indigenous Peoples of Europe : https://www.europe-visit.net

merlynn6 says
May 12th, 2010 at 12am
Superb Article where the detailed narrative imparts an important history. And the gallery of historic photographs carries great impact. Excellent!!

Le Loup says
Jan 1st, 2013 at 12am
Great info and pics, thanks for sharing this. Would love to see some similar info from the mid 18th century. One wonders how far back this clothing and dwellings date. Regards, Le Loup. https://woodlandsurveysdiary.blogspot.com

Hotspur555 says
Dec 17th, 2009 at 12am
Here's an interesting story of a Sami's misadventures trying to implement some sense into the government welfare added natives of Canada: http://www.finlybooks.com/bookeval & s=9781552978719 "An epic experiment of cultural evolution. In the 1920s the traditional migration routes of wild caribou changed, making it difficult for native Inuit hunters. Faced with a crisis of Inuit survival and having cleansed the success of reindeer herding in Alaska, the Canadian government established the practice in the Mackenzie Delta area. To help the Inuit make the shift to the new economy, Scandinavian reindeer herders, the Sami, were brought to Canada. To bureaucrats, changing the Inuit from a hunting-gathering culture to a herding-nomadic culture appeared straightforward and simple. Reality proved otherwise. The Reindeer Herders of the Mackenzie Delta is the fascinating true story of the Canadian Reindeer Experiment as experienced by Otto Binder, an Inuit herder, his Sami wife, Ellen Pulk Binder, and their son, Lloyd Binder, who continues to herd reindeer. The book explores their struggles and ultimate survival. Their story is also an account of the survival of two circumpolar cultures -- Inuit and Sami -- in a global society. With contemporary and archival photographs, The Reindeer Herders of the Mackenzie Delta recounts a true-life adventure with valuable insights for contemporary readers.

Richard says
A lot of native people from all over the world has lost their livelihoods and in the process their identity because of excessive industrialism.