

## Historical Synopsis of the Sami/United Nations Relationship

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CHAPTERS:

- [A brief Saami history](#)
- [Saami Today](#)
- [World Council of Indigenous Peoples](#)
- [Saami and the ILO](#)
- [Saami and the United Nations](#)
- [Nordic Saami and International Fora](#)
- [Future Implications](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [References](#)

### A brief Saami history

It is believed that the Saami arrived on the Fenno-Scandinavian peninsula just over 10,000 bpe. They are considered the first residents of this area.<sup>1</sup> The Saami followed their food sources that moved northward behind the retreating glaciers. They eventually inhabited all of present-day Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula southward almost to present-day Tallinn, Estonia. (Important Years in Saami History, 1996)

As the Saami inhabited the different ecosystems they adapted to the conditions. On the coastal fjords and bays of Norway, they utilized the resources of the sea. In the mountains and forests farther inland, hunting and gathering became the norm. The inland lakes of Finland and Northwestern Russia were used for their abundant pike, trout and other freshwater fish. For some of the Saami away from major fishing areas, reindeer became the major food source. (Baer, 1994, 51)

With time, the people who make up the dominant ethnic groups of present-day Norway, Sweden, and Finland moved into the homeland of the Saami due to pressure from competing tribes in the south. The first documented contact between these two groups came in the ninth century, when Ottar of the Norwegian Vikings traveled far to the north and east (Kola Peninsula).

Eventually, the rulers of Fenno-Scandia realized the wealth of resources available in the North. They tried to cement their land claims in Sapmi through settlement and taxation.<sup>2</sup> By taxing the locals, each country proved their sovereignty. At one point, three different monarchs held claim to Northern Fenno-Scandia and simultaneously levied taxes on the same Saami to prove it.

Eventually the three nations worked out their land-claim issues in the mid-eighteenth century. (Dellenbrant, 1997, 163) Norway's Finnmark borders became very similar to what they are today. Sweden and Russia split up the land that would later become Finland.

In the nineteenth century Saami were viewed to be at a lower social evolutionary level than other Scandinavians. As Social Darwinism advanced it became

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<sup>1</sup> The recent discovery of non-Saami skeletons and artifacts in Norway that date prior to the end of this ice age counters this argument. (Mayell, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> Sapmi is the Saami name for their homeland or Northern Fenno-Scandia previously called Lapland.

the national desire to lift the Saami from their wretched circumstances and help them progress to modernity through education. It was also seen as a form of equality to educate the Saami as other Scandinavians. The government policy was to educate the Saami children. In Norway it was called *Norwegianization*.<sup>3</sup> This policy allowed the Saami to 'catch up' with the Nordic ethnic majority in formal education. Saami language and culture was 'harmful' and Norwegian or Swedish language and culture was 'progressive'.

## Saami Today

The Saami educational assimilation policy continued until the mid-twentieth century. As social theory changed and the Saami presence became more acceptable within the Norway, Sweden and Finland, the anti-Saami language rules were softened. Starting in the 1960's, the Saami began to assert themselves strongly. Their presence was seen in political and social venues throughout Fenno-Scandia. With the changes in the Saami political assertions, came a change in Saami well-being. Today the political and societal standing for Saami individuals is at its greatest in all of history. There are Saami schools, social organizations, businesses, and political parties. The Saami language is on track to be recognized as an official language on all government documents that pertain to Saami issues. (Nystad, 2002) The standard of living for Saamis is nearly equal to that of their fellow Scandinavian citizens. Though the situation has changed for the better, many things have yet to be resolved. Land claims and hunting rights issues are continuously worked and reworked for the Saami. Though the three Nordic countries have made great strides for Saami rights, they are technically all in violation of certain United Nations (UN) mandates. (UN, 1995) Many of these rights the Saami feel should have been granted already.

## Saami Today

The Saami have increased their international presence greatly since the 1960's. In the last ten years this presence has become a major force in indigenous politics and human rights. They have interacted with other indigenous groups, and on all levels of national and international organizations. They have done so perhaps more effectively than almost any other indigenous nation.<sup>4</sup> They have done so in a unique way in comparison to other ethnic minorities.

The Saami have never been a cohesive ethnic group. (The Kola Lapps, 2001) The contemporary pan-Saami movement was created out of an ethnic artificiality. There were only minor indications of such things as pan-Saami culture prior to the 1960s. The one exception to this may be the Saami movements earlier in the twentieth century. Karl Nickul points out, "There was Lappish collective action prior to mid 1920's but stopped then because of the negative attitude of the authorities." (1977, 75) The Saami elite found it necessary to create such a paradigm (with the help of non-Saami) to legitimate and authenticate their land, resource, intellectual, and cultural claims. (Conrad, 1999, 1) By creating such an artifice the Saami movement has been able to increase their presence. It is an effective tool for presenting a cohesive front in the struggle for self-determination and political

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<sup>3</sup> Norwegianization is the term given to the Norwegian policy of controlling the cultural stimuli that Saami school children are exposed to. Norwegian school system removed all aspects of Saami culture and language from these children's lives. They were immersed in majority Norwegian society. Though now highly controversial and no longer practiced, at the time it was seen as the best way to create equality for Norwegians and Saami alike. The goal was to make all citizens of Norway *Norwegian*.

<sup>4</sup> The one exception would be the Canadian Inuit and First Nations who have outstanding rights themselves.

interplay., "It [successful Saami political organization] must have a complete political action program-one that is almost ideological in scope-that can unite the Saami community in support....To a great extent, the Nordic Saami have been able to accomplish this with the establish of national and pan-Nordic organization to represent their collective interests..." (Sillanpää, 1994, 228)

The Saami participate in and/or sponsor many transnational conferences and alliances.<sup>5</sup> "The Sami (Lapps) of Sweden, Norway and Finland have also been active on the international scene, both at United Nations meetings and as founder members of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples." (Burger, 1987, 60) Saami work closely with the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAPON), and other indigenous groups. Before the current 'International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples' was even conceived, Saami were leading at international conferences and forums.

## World Council of Indigenous Peoples

In 1975, the Nordic Saami Council and other indigenous groups held a conference in Copenhagen for the final preparations of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP).<sup>6</sup> A strategy, budget, and delegation of experts were adopted at this time. Aslak Nils Sara, an experienced Saami political activist was elected to the delegation as a representative of Europe and Greenland. The WCIP's goal was established a formal relationship to the United Nations and is seeking to have concepts of aboriginal rights accepted internationally as basic economic and political rights of indigenous peoples." (Sanders, 1977, 6) It was one of the first non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to receive consultative status at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN. The WCIP proved to be a powerful force in indigenous politics until it dissolved in 1996 for internal conflict. (Henriksen, 2002) Before its dissolution, the WCIP accomplished two major functions. It gave its members concrete experience in international politics and it presented indigenous politics to the United Nations.

Saami have proven their merit at forming international partnerships and motivating politics for indigenous rights. "The Saami have formed alliances with other aboriginal peoples through such organizations as the WCIP. Such initiatives have enabled the Nordic Saami to have their rights as an aboriginal people discussed in international fora." (Sillanpää, 1994, 229)

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<sup>5</sup> In this text *transnational* refers to across-border cooperation by sub-governmental groups beyond national borders (i.e. Inuit Council and Saami Nordic Council). It can also be cooperation between sub-governmental groups and governments of other states (i.e. between Saami Nordic Council and Russian Federation). It should be noted that the Saami do not think of themselves as one group but a people of made up of groups. This is changing with the organization and cooperation of the different Saami groups throughout the circumpolar world.

<sup>6</sup> The Nordic Saami Council changed its name and focus from a purely Nordic organization to the Saami Council when Russian Saami were allowed to participate in 1996.

## Saami and the ILO

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is an international organization that promotes and protects the rights of the employee. It has a tripartite system made up of governments, employers, and employees. It has been a long-time ally to indigenous peoples. The ILO Convention Number 107 was the first international legislation that dealt with indigenous people explicitly. Though it came at a time when assimilationist policies were the norm, it was a major leap forward for indigenous rights. No indigenous group was involved in the drafting of this convention. The nation-states were still the only participants allowed at such a high international level. The Saami were not involved for this reason and because they had just formed one year earlier.

The review of 107 saw indigenous participation. The most significant participation came from the Nordic Saami Council. Leif Dunfjeld, currently a Senior Advisor for the Norwegian Ministry of Municipal Affairs, was working in Geneva in November 1986. At the time he was working as a representative for the Nordic Saami Council on the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples. In 1986, the ILO Convention 107 was up for review. None of the other indigenous groups saw the significance of participating in this process. Mr. Dunfjeld was a major player in the revision process. When the agenda had to be decided for the 1988 ILO conference. Eight different proposals were submitted and the Saami Council's was heard and adopted. (Dunfjeld, 2002) ILO Convention Number 169 is the revision and replacement of Number 107. The assimilationist policies have been removed and are much more current. The first country to ratify this document was Norway.

## Saami and the United Nations

Arguably the most important international influence by the Saami has been felt at the United Nations. The Saami were instrumental in the formation of nearly all aspects of the United Nations that dealt with indigenous issues. (Nystad, 2002)

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is a long awaited advisory committee placed directly under ECOSOC. Its mandate is to, "review developments pertaining to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples. [The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is] to give attention to the evolution of international standards concerning indigenous rights." (UN, 1982) The PFII can be seen as the most significant achievement for indigenous peoples at the international level. Now indigenous leaders can voice their concerns and issues in a venue where they have to be heard. The only way that they can be silenced is if the Permanent Forum were dissolved.

The first person to come up with the idea of the Permanent Forum was Lars Anders Baer. A Swedish Saami, Lars Anders Baer is a long time activist in national and international Saami politics. At ECOSOC's forty-ninth session of the Commission on Human Rights, Mr. Baer proposed that, "The institutional framework of the UN must also be strengthened in view of the increasing importance of issues affecting indigenous peoples; that could be done by creating a permanent advisory body within the UN consisting of representatives of indigenous peoples themselves." (UN, 1993, 14) In addition, John Bernard Henriksen proposed the current structure of the Permanent Forum. (Nystad, 2002) John Henriksen is a Saami and advisor in the

Norwegian Foreign Ministry. In 1994, Mr. Henriksen was a representative and legal advisor for the Nordic Saami Council to the United Nations. (Henriksen, 2002)

## Nordic Saami and International Fora

Saami political leaders have become affective at promoting indigenous and Saami rights throughout the UN. They are affective because of years of participation on all levels of the United Nations. They know how to work the systems within the UN when other indigenous groups stumble. As Rigoberta Menchu Tuz, the Peace Prize Nobelister noted at this year's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Forum started in the corridors of the UN. (Tuz, 2002) The first president of the Norwegian Saami Parliament (Norske Sametinget) was Ole Henrik Magga. He was a representative of the Saami at many UN meetings. Based on his diplomatic style and understanding of the UN system he was chosen to be the inaugural Chairperson for the PFII. He displayed his experience throughout the proceedings in New York. His appointment can only mean increased exposure and benefit for the Saami as a people.

## Future Implications

Saami political leaders continue to view the United Nations as an important step towards greater self-determination. In 1998, the Norwegian Saami Parliament published their three year plan for future actions. This document outlined the importance of continued work with ILO 169 and the United Nation's WGIP. (Norske Sametinget, 1998, 48-50) In addition, Anne Nourgam, President of the Saami Council pointed out in 2001, "We Saami also work side by side with other indigenous peoples. We are deeply committed to fighting for the human rights of indigenous peoples collectively. This is demonstrated through our on-going and continuous work at the United Nations and other international fora." (Sami Council, 2001)

"International law has become an increasingly significant means by which the Saami and other aboriginal minorities are able to expand their legal position within their own countries. One can expect this trend in the development of minorities rights will increase." (Sillanpää, 1994, 233)

As the Saami political leaders have cemented their position in international politics, they have turned their attention toward helping other indigenous groups. Indigenous peoples in Africa, Central and South America, and Asia have all benefited from the experience and resources of the Saami Council. John Bernard Henriksen initiated a workshop series for indigenous groups to be held before and after WGIP meetings. These workshops are to familiarize less experienced indigenous leaders with the nuances of international politics. (Henriksen, 2002)

As a dominant indigenous group, the Saami feel it is their obligation to help less fortunate groups. The Maasai of Africa, Tibetans of Asia, and Chittagong Hill Tribes of Bangladesh have all received support from the Saami of Scandinavia.<sup>7</sup> The different UN agencies that deal with indigenous issues have also benefited greatly from the Saami influence. In 1997 through the Saami, Sweden gave \$61,633 and Norway gave \$68,552 to the Voluntary Fund for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous

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<sup>7</sup> Not to mention the poorly experienced and funded Russian Saami of the Kola Peninsula.

People. (UN, 1998, 10) In 1997-1998, Finland and Norway each almost contributed nearly \$100,000 in addition to the money given to the Voluntary Fund.<sup>8</sup> (UN, 1998, 4)

Finland, Norway, and Sweden are involved in regional collaborations as well as their UN affiliation. Since 1996, the Nordic States and the Saami have been members of the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council is revolutionary because it is a vast regional organization which has (nearly) equal participation by national governments as well as indigenous groups of the Arctic. It is a policy driven organization to promote sustainability and equality in the Arctic. The Saami are just now starting to become involved in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. The Barents Council is focused on certain fields of cooperation: economy, trade, science and technology, tourism, environment, infrastructure, educational and cultural exchange health issues, youth, and finally indigenous peoples. (Granholm, 2001) The Norwegian Saami Parliament sees this organization as another priority for future exploitation. (Nystad, 2002)

What does this all mean for the Saami? Have their leaders in the international arena changed their own situation? Have they improved self-determination for their fellow Saami? This author would contend that is the case.

Scandinavia enjoys benefits in the global environment from being human rights leaders. They are viewed as the most progressive countries in the world in this respect. The more global links created between regions and communities, the more accountability. When Canada increases self-determination for its indigenous people, Scandinavia feels it must match and surpass them in their own policies. (Henriksen, 2002) When the Saami make a proposal at the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Norway usually feels it must comply. Norway has much at stake when it comes to these policies. It is both good politics and good business to have their exemplary human rights records. By ratifying ILO 169, Norway entered into an agreement of compliance.

Despite the fact that not all politicians in Norway agree with the terms of ILO 169, they are bound to comply. (Dunfjeld, 2002) "For NGOs generally, and indigenous peoples in particular, the human rights system has become an increasingly important arena for reminding governments of their internationally mandated obligations." (Pritchard, 1998, 7) The minimum standards set by ILO 169 have improved land rights and self-determination for the Saami. Even with the resistance in municipal and national governments, Saami involvement in the international arena should continue if the recent historical situation can be an indication of the future. The financial and moral resources may be weakening slightly for Nordic Saami; there is no warning that they shall be removed altogether.

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<sup>8</sup> All figures given in US dollars.



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