

# IDENTITY PUZZELMENT: SAAMI IN NORWAY, PAST AND PRESENT

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This article looks at how Saami (Lapps) in Norway are handling their identities as individuals. The ethnography emerges out of an extended historical period of a government policy of cultural assimilation followed today by an agenda reversal: official accord with the promotion of a Saami nation. Yesterday, Saami were to "become" Norwegians; today, Saami are called upon to affirm their Saaminess. There is a wide spectrum of responses: some leave their one-time Saami identity in the past – perhaps denying it; others find personal enhancement in their Saami identity – yet some of them may be tormented with the question of how to "re-become" a Saami. It is then especially when one "Saami" – variously defined – meets another that their identities become a *puzzle* that may defy solution. Unsurprisingly, the pervasive contextualization of "identity" evokes not just ambiguity or contradiction but also ambivalence. Furthermore, introduction of official symbols of Saami identity – e.g. bilingual road signs – instead of relieving "cultural" tension may re-ignite it.

In formal terms, the Saami<sup>1</sup> are a minority population, and a dispersed one, through Northern Fenno-Scandinavia and onto the Kola Peninsula in Russia. However, the dispersal is more than a matter of geography: not only may Saami communities and individuals live alongside non-Saami communities and individuals, but individuals within the same community may have quite different notions of what it means to be – or not to be – a Saami.

The key concept in this article (limited ethnographically to northernmost Norway: see map), then, is *identity* not *culture*. Certainly for the Saami ethnopoliticians, culture is the key word, but for most others of Saami heritage the response is likely to be "Wait! First, *who* am I?" And, of course, individuals are aware – in different ways and to differing extent – of how their identity is really a multiple matter – identities.

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<sup>1</sup> As once there were "Eskimos" but now *Inuit*, so there were "Lapps" who are now known by their own name for themselves – *Saami*.

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But let us take a step back. Puzzlement over Saami identity?

Surely, even the foreign tourist travelling through North Norway is able to identify the Saami? First you see the tent, then the colourful tunics and, sometimes, a reindeer or two. No mistaking! But these reindeer pastoralists are but a small minority – and an exotic one – of the Saami population. The others? Fishermen, farmers, teachers, merchants, technicians, doctors, pharmacists, government employees, students, academics, and so forth – are, for the most part, dressed unremarkably. The tourist passes them by, as likely as not, as Norwegians, and so they are (the pastoralists as well) besides being Saami.

What of the *Norwegian* tourist from the south of the country? What do they see? What they learned from when they grew up – that up here in the farthest north there is a mix of Norwegian, Saami (Lapp) and Finn (Kvaen). No more than the foreign tourist do they recognize a real Saami before they see a reindeer!

But let's forget the tourist: the puzzle begins between Saami themselves.

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I hasten to say the puzzle will not be solved here. Indeed, it is, for the most part, ontologically insoluble on account of its changing nature, involving different parties at different times and in different contexts. This of itself, though, is reason enough that the puzzle be addressed. And there is a particular urgency, given that so much of the current Saami ethnopolitical debate is energized by the idea of "becoming a nation" (Bjørklund 2000) at the centre of which is the notion of common identity – "Saami identity": and hence, *yes!* a "Saami culture."

Yet among the Saami rank and file (allow me to generalize a bit here: specific differences will be recognized farther down the road) there is no place for any easy assumption about there being *a* Saami identity and least of all about *its* national fulfilment: "for some individuals it is immensely important while for others it is totally without interest" (*Arbeidsseminar*, 2001:6; translation mine).

On the other hand, what is increasingly evident is the involvement of individuals regarding their *self-identity*. Of course there are those who proudly proclaim themselves as Saami, but for many others it is a

teasingly perhaps agonizingly complicated matter: "Am I Saami?" "How much of me?" "What part of me?"

Earlier, such questions were more dormant than alive; not only that: the prevalent feeling was that it mattered little what one felt about being or not being a Saami. Today, it does, increasingly. Nevertheless, we will see that not all know the answers about themselves.

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Now, given this background, I think it helpful to consider at the outset the place of Saami in Norway in respect of *being* and *becoming*. And here there are two historically-spaced scenarios:

Behind the contemporary scene lies the Norwegian policy of assimilation of Saami by which they become – were made to become, in one manner of another Norwegian. The policy was particularly effective along the coast – where the majority of Saami reside.

However, the era of assimilation politics is past. Hence the increasing self-involvement of individuals with a Saami background regarding their *own* identity/identities. This is particularly evident in decisions about *re-becoming* Saami as opposed to just lamely being one, even as they remain being Norwegians.<sup>2</sup>

Taken together, assimilation and self-realization produce this processual sequence often within the timespan of two generations:

Being a Saami, becoming a Norwegian;

Being a Norwegian, re-becoming a Saami.

Now, with this background in mind, let us approach the decision of the Norwegian parliament, in 1987, that there shall be a Saami Assembly or parliament: *diggji* in Saamisk and in Norwegian *Sametinget*.

Quite how – within what limits – it is a "parliament" I have to gloss over here: suffice it to say that (a) it receives its funding from the Norwegian state, (b) it has both decision-making powers on culturally defined issues and advisory responsibilities on political issues and (c) of course the distinction between cultural and political itself becomes a twister.

Yet one thing is quite clear: the presence of a Saami Assembly requires the provision of an eligible Saami electorate: some 5000 *self-*

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<sup>2</sup> Here my attention is caught by the Maori notion of "going home, growing home" as a re-directing of life following the realization of having missed out on vital aspects of self as a Maori (Ramstad 2001:57).

*declared* Saami took part as registered voters in the first election to the Assembly in 1989. It is impossible to say how many individuals of Saami heritage there are – globally or in Norway (Aubert 1978) and we come to the make-belief of it all in a moment; but at least to put the "5000" in some perspective, it is repeatedly cited that there are 30,000 Saami in Norway.

Note should also be taken of the fact that voting in the Saami Assembly elections does not disqualify a person from voting in the elections for the Norwegian parliament: *Stortinget* (literally, "The Large [inclusive] Assembly"); to the contrary, it remains her/his duty as a citizen to do so.

Yet in relation to the core of this article, what carries the most significance is, surely, the *introspective* character of this electoral enterprise. This is underlined by the key self-declarative question that all potential voters should answer: "do you feel yourself to be a Saami?"

Now, as already suggested, declaring "I am a Saami" can be a particularly delicate issue for the individual who wishes to *re-become* a Saami but has lived her/his life thus far as a Norwegian: "I'm a Saami ... but will others recognize that?" Or "I'm a Saami ... but should I keep that to myself? And *can* I do that? ... What game of deception am I leading others into?"

Of course, there are those whose re-becoming is an act of intensification (and simplification) of identity: "I am a Saami. Period."

But here the self-revelation carries its own load – not of deceiving others but of *self*-deception: namely, that there is no Norwegian in you? Nothing Norwegian about you!

So there emerges a general unease over this officially chosen self-declarative question – "do you feel yourself to be a Saami?" – particularly among younger Saami, not necessarily members of the Assembly but whose voices are heard.

Why, then, is such a question still in use? The Assembly's President answer is that "the Saami voice will fall silent if we take it away" (*Finnmark Dagblad* 1995, 22nd Sept.; translation mine) Nor – I think it is reasonable to add – was there much of an alternative?

But let us note that beyond the introspection, there is (arguably) an unavoidable element of *make-belief*. Namely, the other qualifying hurdle that has to be jumped in order to qualify as a voter for the Saami As-

sembly has to do with the place of the Saami language in a person's history: If neither oneself nor one's parents spoke Saami, then it is enough that a grandparent does or did – and this is later extended to great-grandparentage. Now, an interesting relationship has been suggested between these two requirements: the great-grandparent rule alone (in keeping with the element of make-belief) might well provide a Saami majority in North Norway; however, "the criterion of self-ascription reduces the number" (Thuen 2002: 6).

An element of make-belief? Who really knows, in this polyglot landscape, which language or languages great-grandparents used – and in what contexts? Indeed, the element of make-belief is held up for ridicule: hence this widely gossiped story about the Dane who is married to a Saami, lives in Norway, and wishes to become an eligible voter for the Saami Assembly: How can he? Well, *he speaks Saamisk to his dog*, that's how!

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But we have entered the 21st century and with it come a generation of young persons – among others – whose *parents* (but not the youngsters themselves) moved experientially from "being" a Norwegian to "re-becoming" a Saami. Such families, then, are they "secure" and at peace with themselves in their Saami world?

For some (I can't give numbers) this is undoubtedly true. But for others we find generational differences in the handling of being Saami. Here I cite a Saami ethnographer from the community of Karasjok, itself – along with Kautokeino<sup>3</sup> – a vibrant cultural centre:

[For] today's parent generation, the life project was to create a Saami identity solely based on Saami traditions .... This was a project in opposition to mainstream society.

And the children?

[They] have no lost Saami past to avenge or mourn. ... They are ... claiming their right to determine their own terms and symbols ofness ... (Stordahl 1997: 145-48.)

This can leave parents at a loss: why, for example, would one's children who speak Saami with their friends and whose parents speak Saami to

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<sup>3</sup> The Saami Assembly is in Karasjok, the Saami research institute and university college in Kautokeino.

them, resort to Norwegian at home in front of their parents? The answer (Stordhal suggests) is a protest against parental attempts to direct them as to what is "correct" and "incorrect" Saami behaviour: the children insist on managing their own Saami identity; and in this "management" there are likely to be elements of invention. In other words, another phase of "re-becoming" is being entered into. And here I would call attention to how Saami radio and television and song and theatre producers and artists are launching Saami-ness in new imaginative directions.<sup>4</sup>

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That characterizes the situation in Karasjok and Kautokeino in the interior of Finnmark. But what's happening out along the coast? In one bay there are the sounds of cultural warfare, in another – silence. It's warfare in Kafjord, it's silence in Kokelv.

In *Kafford*, among those who now see themselves as being Norwegian, there is anger over what they see as attempts by fellow villagers to undo that Norwegian identity: "it's like experiencing assimilation [in reverse] once again" (Hovland 1996:60; translation mine). And among those who wish to re-become Saami, life is marked by painful contradictions between family members:

I know if I say I'm a Saami, so dad says, 'No, that you are not!'  
(Hovland p. 92; translation mine)

And just as hurtful is the scorn of Kautokeino Saami – I see them as the emblematic Saami – visiting the coast, telling those of Kafjord who have declared themselves Saami – perhaps using Norwegian to do so but have dressed themselves as Saami – that you don't become a Saami simply by wearing Saami clothing (Hovland p.125).

What I think is particularly worth stressing is that many of the young people of Kafjord are truly "migrants of identity" (Rapport & Dawson 1998) but it is migration in time not space; they do not move geographically, they are still *in* Kafjord but they self-consciously face the question *which* Kafjord are we *of*? Or, can the different Kafjords be combined? Their parents, on the other hand, having done one such migration (towards Norwegian-ness) likely want no more of it.

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<sup>4</sup> Several of the essays in Gaski 1997 serve well as an introduction, in English.

*Kokelv* was also subjected to assimilation but in contrast to *Kafjord* it is not a cultural battlefield today; or rather, perhaps the battle is to avoid such a battle:

We want peace in Saami politics ...(Paine 2000: fieldnotes).

In *Kokelv* today, but not *Kafjord*, instances of re-becoming Saami are the exception. *Kokelvers* have also been migrants of identity but their journey is now concluded: there's no turning back from having been Saami to now "being" Norwegian.

(Of more than mere incidental relevance here: On my arrival in *Kokelv*, back in 1951, they refused to teach me Saamisk – and at least among the elderly, Saamisk along with Norwegian were their alternating languages. Why their refusal? Because: after all, I am an *Englishman*! It wasn't until I returned to *Kokelv* two years later with a functional ability in Saamisk, having spent time with a pastoralist group, that Saamisk was recognized, perforce, as appropriate for this "Englishman"! But was I still one to them?)

How to explain the *Kafjord-Kokelv* contrast? I think that in the main it has to do with a contrast – and its implications for personal awareness of "who I am" and "whom I am not" – between the ethnic homogeneity of *Kokelv* and the heterogeneity of *Kafjord* with not just Norwegian immigrants but Finnish as well. Assimilation politics through church and school were more effective in the homogenous *Kokelv* than ever it has been or is to this day in *Kafjord*.

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I remarked earlier that Saami – along with the rest of us – are entering the 21st century. What this means for the self-declared Saami – be they in *Kafjord* *Karasjok* or *Kautokeino* – is that at the same time as they are making for themselves "new" Saami worlds, they are also being brought face to face with the world at large through *Norwegian* and *English* radio and television programming, as well as Saamisk.

And so, one may well suppose that as this young generation reaches adulthood, their cultural *habitus* of being Saami will have relatively open borders with the *habitus* of being Norwegian. And we hear it proudly claimed, ethno-politically:

I don't just have one foot in each camp [Saami and Norwegian], I have both feet in both! (Paine 2001:fieldnotes)

Even as we hear, despairingly:



I'm no proper Saami! I have so many kinds of background (Hovland 1996:85; translation mine).

And yet, having both feet in both camps, is part of what modernity has brought. Furthermore, there is the essential need of Saami ethnopoliticians for competence and confidence in the non-Saami world "in order to be heard and taken seriously" in decision-making circles there (Gaski 1997:12).

Yet there are warnings as well as to what the implication may be for cultural self-identity. Here are two, the first from a Saami from the coast speaking as an "ordinary" person (but with telling irony) about "Saami in top positions,"

[t]hrough the educational system they have become so Norwegian, but they don't see that themselves (Andersen 1999:125; transl. & emphasis added; cf. Paine 1955: 319).

And the second one is from a Saami who certainly experiences "top positions":

When we have learned the language of power, [we may well turn into] a kind of political actor without a cultural base (Gaski 1997:20).

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I've repeatedly highlighted *difference* among the Saami and the *dis-sension* that likely follows from it; but there are many whose plea can be rendered as: "Let my being be!" – whether it be a Saami being or a Norwegian one or a combination thereof.

However, there *is* a cultural *cum* political home for such people, along with many "ordinary" Saami for whom the distance between their local world and that which is promulgated by the Saami elite is too great: it is the SLF party: *Samenes Landsforbund*. (I have not intruded the word "ordinary" into the discourse, one finds it both in Saamisk and Norwegian texts.)

An approximation of SLF sentiment – at least in terms of this article – might be "Let my being be: I am a Saami *and* a Norwegian. So be it." In short, it makes being into a respectable cultural and political alternative to re-becoming. The SLF has its own intellectuals, its own political leadership, and can justly claim a bicultural philosophy and practice (if a somewhat muted one). I cite a leading SLF figure:

We wish to pursue a moderate Saami political line. We will live peacefully together with our neighbours in the whole of Finnmark ...

And from this it follows

One cannot demand special rights for ourselves as Saami (Nielsen 1986:66; translation mine).

Thus the SLF declines participation in the Saami Assembly; in effect, it asks "why should we favour the Assembly as the guardian of our common interests rather than the state?"

And here it is worth noting how the reindeer pastoralists ask themselves much the same question – but for a different reason: the interests of sedentary Saami dominate the Assembly at the cost of pastoral interests. The Saami pastoralist feels 'safer' in dealing with the state where – especially in recent years – reindeer pastoralism is recognized and supported as one primary resource in the national economy among several.

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I have perhaps given too little attention to the place of the Norwegian state in this Saami puzzle. There have been interventions by the state in the name of cultural enlightenment. Thus some North Norwegian municipalities have been declared Saami municipalities: Kafjord is one of them (also Kautokeino and Karasjok, of course). This meant, among other things, the introduction of the language law whereby Samisk is afforded equal rights with Norwegian: i.e. Saami-speakers must be heard and responses given in Saamisk when they so wish.

The question is, then, what effect will such *imposed* procedures have in a community, such as Kafjord, that is already embroiled in its own ethnopolitical battle? Clearly, moral autonomy has been both enhanced and prejudiced: enhanced for the Saami activists, prejudiced for those who now see Kafjord as their Norwegian home.

There is also an irony about the situation that should not pass us by. As seen by the "Norwegians" of Kafjord, it is *their state* – the Norwegian state – that has sided against them, in support of their "Saami" adversaries! In short, the state has sided with one faction of Saami against other Saami with different ideas of what the future – and the present day – should hold. Here is a typical voice of dissent:

Declaring Kafjord a Saami place meant the loss of [our] domicile. Others have taken it. (Hovland 1999:184; translation mine)

However, in the view of one who is engaged in Saami cultural life but is not himself a native of Kafjord, his concern is not with the loss of "domicile" but of *choice*:

Kafjord is now defined legally as a Saami place – well and good; but the danger is that people will lose their sense of choice. (Paine 2001: field-notes)

Yet choice is not what everybody wants; indeed, some wish to deny it of others. For example, the response among the Saami "Norwegians" of Kafjord to the introduction of road signs in Norwegian, Saami and Finnish (instead of simply Norwegian) has led to the physical blotting out of the Saami and Finnish words on the signs!

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In closing: a question that we are left with is how does today's cultural diversity with its marked subjectivities fit in with everyday life? For the moment, the immediate answer is that there is much that is ill-fitting. On the other hand, Saami are making their own constructions of self-identity, replacing prescribed identities imposed upon them. Thus, alongside sameness and sharedness, those old hallmark notions of culture, there emerges, with new force, an emphasis on individual uniqueness, not simply collective uniqueness (which is too easily seen as amounting to "sameness".)

But still, there is unease over possible incompatibility between the necessity – as held by some Saami – of ethno-political programming (a successor to Norwegian hegemony) and the value of individuality. In short, collective uniqueness and individual uniqueness are sometimes pulling against each other.

Is it, then, in this pulling against each other that we find Saami *culture*?

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### Appendix

#### A map of Northernmost Norway

