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Sámi Genealogy Research as Resistance Practice
Countering Ethnical Cleansing and Reclaiming Our Memory, History and Culture

Agneta Silversparf

I am Agneta Silversparf, born by the Lule River in a small village called Bodträskfors in a reindeer herding family. I went to secondary school in Piteå, where I took courses within the Humanities (Piteå högre allmänna läroverk, latinlinjens helklassiska gren). Some years later I studied at the secondary school in Gislaved and Trollhättan, but this time Economy. The studies I did at universities were short courses, for example, The Biology of the Reindeer, 10 credits.

Through the years I have worked at a number of different places all over Sweden and in all kinds of trades; from wood industries in Småland to Norrbotten and where I worked as a buyer of reindeer for the different slaughterhouses. Since the beginning of the early 1970s I have been engaged in Sami associations in Stockholm, Umeå and Jokkmokk. In 1981-88 I was the accountant in The Swedish Sami Organization (SSR). For a numbers of years I have been engaged in the Organization of Same Åtnam, where I was member of the board for some years. I am the founder and chairwoman of the Sami association Silbonah Sámesijdda, founded in 1997, and editor of its newsletter Medlemsnytt. I work on Sami genealogy retracing Sami heritage. The findings are presented in this newsletter. I am a member of a Sami village, Udtja sameby.

Abstract
This article accounts for the history of Swedish state regulations against the Sami people in terms of numbers, heritage and decision-making. For instance, currently it is not the Sami People as a People, that are considered to be Sami. The current official number of Sami often referred to in official documents are based on those Sami working in the profession of reindeer herding — the number of Sami who owned reindeer at a specific period, around 1965-71. The actual much larger number of Sami is hidden by State-based regulations and categorizations. This is due to a century long racist Lap-should-be-Lap policy, aiming at invisibilising and
reducing the number of Sami persons, and thereby phasing out the Sami culture.

In the article the author describes how performing Sami genealogy research and publishing the results four times per year in the members’ newsletter (Medlemsnytt) of the Sami association Silbonah Sámisijdda is a resistance practice against this colonial invisibilisation of the Sami. It is a reclaiming of Sami history and memory. The author also shares some background for understanding from her own family history, and how this history is interlinked with the genealogy and heritage of the Sami in general. Lastly, some reflections on the future of Sami genealogy are discussed.

Introduction
My name is Agneta Silversparf, and I am the Chairwoman of Silbonah Sámesijdda, a Sami association founded in 1997. The reason why I wrote this article was to tell how the Swedish authorities, through legislation, sought to change Sami identity from being a People into being a profession – a reindeer herder.

Since the 1970s, the official number of Sami persons in Sweden has been closely associated with the conditions for the herders, with little regard for other practices of the Sami People or their descendants.

This is one of the recurring topics in the newsletter of Silbonah Sámesijdda, for which I am the Editor. The Silbonah Sámesijdda newsletter (Medlemsnytt) has been published quarterly since 2005 and has dealt with various events affecting the Sami throughout history. Everything from laws and regulations to court records, newspapers and genealogy can be found in the archives. The purpose of writing on these topics is to create a greater understanding of how colonialism, racism and Swedish laws affected our ancestors and to explain how the contemporary situation has developed for the Sami.

Background of Establishing Silbonah Sámesijdda
In the early 1980s I asked my father the names of his grandfather and grandmother. With an embarrassed smile, he replied that he did not know – my father knew little about our family history and felt at a loss for it. None of my relatives knew about previous generations, nor did they know of the history of the village of Rödingsträsk. This was the beginning of my search for answers.

The idea of documenting Rödingsträsk village had been in my thoughts for some time. I could research genealogy at the library, but more substantial work required
economic resources. The surrounding landscape contained traces of the ancestors – wooden corrals, Sami architecture, huts and repositories. I applied for funding in order to renovate what remnants could still be restored. This was the beginning for the founding of a new Sami association – *Silbonah Sámesijdda* was established in 1997 through the support of the Sami families and the reindeer herders.

The work of the association has since then focused on Forest Sami history and culture – identifying predecessors of the area, as well as important events that occurred in the region. The main objective has been to strengthen Sami identity by giving people access to the Sami electoral register. This is important among the wider community of the Sami, such as for the Forest Sami and their descendants elsewhere, since mountain reindeer husbandry has been regarded as the norm of Sami society. Support for mountain reindeer husbandry Sami culture has often proven stereotypical, and such biased support exemplifies how Swedish colonialism has made other Sami cultures and identities invisible.

Through the work of *Silbonah Sámesijdda* many people have found support in the process of identifying as Sami. Additionally, all who are interested to do so have the possibility of participating by contributing what relevant materials they may have of their own.

*Me, Agneta, in my office where I spend most of my time among shelves of archive material, printers and copying machines. I read parish registers on one computer and write in the genealogical database on the other. Here is also where the *Silbonah Sámesijdda* Newsletter (Medlemsnytt) is produced quarterly. Photo by Eric Stenberg.*
Apart from the periods of time when I lived in the countryside without access to computers, libraries or archives, I have worked relentlessly with developing the genealogy for the Sami People. Genealogical roots are easy to follow due to Sami usage of patronymic systems: the father’s first name became the surname of the child with the suffix -son/daughter. This provided a means of tracing whom was related to whom, especially when the Sami name was also included.

Still, doing Sami genealogy research has been complicated—much in part due to the efforts of the Swedish authorities. For example, 20th century Swedish priests of Edefors Parish systematically omitted Sami surnames from the church records. In addition to exclusively using the Swedish modern patronymic system of -son-names, there are several examples when authorities omitted the Sami ancestry. Young Sami, working as farm serfs called [male serf] and piga [female serf], were commonly described as “Swedish” piga or “Swedish” dräng, despite their parents being Sami.1

Previously church records had recorded whether or not people were Sami,2 however this practice changed with the Name Act of 1901.3 The patronymic system was banned, and all Swedish citizens were obliged to acquire a family name that could be inherited by their heirs. Until then, the priests had made changes to names in the parish registers, even if these were nobiliary surnames.4 With the establishment of the Name Act of 1901, many Sami families replaced their surname with Swedish ones, for example Lundmark, Lundman, and Nyman.

Defining the Sami Identity

The name directive is but one of several means by which the Swedish authorities, through the centuries, have legislated and regulated Sami communities. The Reindeer Grazing Acts were established in 1886, 1898 and 1928. In 1971 the Reindeer Husbandry Act of 1971 was established and is still currently valid. Until the Reindeer Grazing Act of 1886, there had previously been no difference between herding Sami and other Sami subsistence practices or trades. All of this changed with the Swedish Legislative Committee of 1882, whose work resulted in the act of 1886, influencing the direction taken by subsequent authorities. The relationship between Swedish Sami and Swedish population was supposed to be regulated through legislation. Lennart Lundmark has written about this “Lap should be Lap policy” promoted by different means.5 It was soon narrowed down in such a way so as to define the Sami as only those practicing reindeer herding. For example, the first paragraph of the act regulates the Sami right to reside “with his reindeer” on certain areas.6
Beginning in the late 19th century the Swedish government pursued the even older intention of reducing both the Sami and reindeer populations within Sweden. When the border of 1888 between Norway-Sweden, Finland and Russia became increasingly regulated, the transhumance Sami reindeer gatherings posed a problem to the Swedish Parliament.

Prior to 1920, State authorities commonly exercised ethnic cleansing of the Sami and their reindeer from ancestral lands. This proved a great distress Sami families, who were forced to leave their homelands and relocate; it also meant suffering for the people (including local Sami) living in the regions and settlements to which these Sami had to migrate. This created a meeting of differing peoples, languages and practices of life. Following this, many Sami were left without any option but to sell their herds, to provide settlement areas for the displaced northern Sami.

In 1912, there was a secret meeting between the Foreign Minister of Sweden and governors, local authorities and other officials of the State. On the agenda was the question as to how the areas of Sápmi of the Forest Sami in Sweden could be used to accommodate the northern Sami migrants. A proposal to exterminate the forest reindeer was put forward but not adopted. Although this proposal was not accepted, the ideological content of it survived. Not one of the solutions finally opted for addressed the opinions of the Sami themselves. Forest reindeer husbandry has been neglected, ignored, invisibilised and the number has been dramatically reduced ever since.

The question of finding a legal definition of the term “Sami” was first proposed in Bill No. 169 to the Swedish Parliament of 1917. Its content aimed towards excluding the Sami from occupations other than reindeer herding. To some degree there were also attempts to prevent the combining of reindeer husbandry and agriculture. The bill was not successful in its entirety, but there were more to follow.

A decade later, the state report SOU 1927:25 wished to define the relationship between membership in the Sami and settler villages of Sweden. This relationship was revised in the Reindeer Grazing Act of 1928, which defines Sami as “a nomadic reindeer herder”, stated in §1 and explained in the following passage:

“…the Sami were divided into two groups: the Sami with legal right to reindeer herding and the Sami without that right. Only the former group is called Sami in the law. The others are judicially equal to the non-Sami population.”
The Act closely defined the linkages between the herding vocation and Sami genealogy:

“The right to reindeer herding will be due to those of Sami origin if his father or mother, or one of their parents, permanently had reindeer herding as a profession. ‘Sami’ is in this Act every person who has the right to reindeer husbandry.”

Furthermore, the status of Sami women was weakened by paragraph §1, a phrasing that was not to disappear until 1971:

“The right of reindeer husbandry belongs to a woman who is, or has been, married to a man with such a right. If a woman who has the right of reindeer husbandry marries a man who has no such rights, then she loses her rights.”

To conclude, according to the Swedish law of 1928, to be a Sami meant having the right to reindeer husbandry. However having the right was not enough, if a person did not actually work within reindeer husbandry, one was not considered to be officially “Sami.” In the Act of 1971, still in effect at present, a Sami is defined in the very same way. Moreover, Sami women have faced additional discrimination under Swedish Sami-defining law.

Looking back, we find this Swedish national policy being applied in the parish censuses of Northern Sweden, for example in Jokkmokk and Edefors in 1912, 1915, 1920, 1939-45 and 1945. In these cases, primarily Forest Sami and reindeer herding families were registered – all other Sami families that had, for the past two generations, refrained from reindeer herding were disqualified as Sami henceforth. Additionally, authorities estimated the proportions of Sami lineage of each individual. In one family, relatives of mine, the father was listed as a whole Sami, the mother as half and the children 3/4 Sami.

The current official number of Sami in Sweden has been estimated to approximately 20,000 persons. This number is based entirely on registers of reindeer owners (so called renlängder within which owners of reindeer are registered) from 1965-71. That means that the current number of Sami in Sweden today is based on the reindeer owning Sami from a very limited time period. Those families that lost their reindeer earlier, or did not own any reindeer at this point in time, are not accounted for. Neither are those families that have not been reindeer herders since many generations back, which is a large number of Sami in Sweden. Thus only the reindeer owning population of the Sami People
was counted and consequently categorized as Sami. From this an estimation of the figure 20 000 was made and presented in the report published in 1975. Fourty years late this is still the number officially used, even by the Swedish Sami Parliament.

In my research regarding my birth parish and along the Lule River, vast amounts of persons have proved to be Sami descendants. Indeed, the first settlers of this region were Sami. However, they were not considered as such due to their being settlers and thus not corresponding to the Swedish authorities’ idea of the Sami being nomadic. Ann Charlotte Sjaggo, in her Bachelor’s thesis in Sámi studies at Umeå University from 2003, with the title “When the Sami became settlers”, argues that most of the settlers within a specific region the Jokkmokk area are Sami who left a nomadic life. Eventually they also changed ethnic identity. The dissertation by Filip Hultblad of 1968, from the Geographical institution at Uppsala University, also focusing on Jokkmokk, provides a similar understanding.
From my own Sami genealogy investigations I can see the very same things as Sjaggo and Hultblad states. A vast majority of people originating settlers within the Lule River Valley seem to have Sami heritage. My recent studies of the genealogy of families within the Pite river valley, the river south of Lule River, shows the same patterns. I find it likely that the same goes for the other river valleys in the north of Sweden. It is hard to give an exact number of the amount of person who could be counted as Sami descendants – and if they so wish themselves – to be Sami and I dont want to do this until I have a enough material to confirm such a number. But I do find that the number must be investigated and updated. The loss of memory is our biggest problem, the shame of being Sami has been very detrimental to our sense of pride and self esteem, to dare to identify as Sami. I – and others find – this to be a consequence of how throughout history, and still today, the dominant Swedish society has sought to make the Sami People invisible. Getting the numbers right is a very important start for reclaiming our history, our pride, our present and our future.

Anna Lydia Svalastog in her article in this publication accounts for the situation in regard to literature in bookstores, and how teachers’ education is void of knowledge of Sami history and culture. Another indication of this, relevant to us Sami genealogy researchers, is the lack of forums for genealogical research concerning the Sami. Until 2005 there was a site named Anbytarforum, which was the website of the Swedish Genealogy Association. Along with closing down the website, so, too, disappeared the possibilities for the information stored on Sami heritage – which is a great loss. There is still a webpage operating that provides general information about the Sami, but the means for dialogue remain insufficient.

We are, together, quite a few genealogists that research within Sami families. Some of us have close contact via email, exchanging information. We spend a lot of time and effort in researching and may well be called serious. There are also a large number of so-called amateur researchers. We have personal email contact almost every week, exchanging information. Some old conversations remain at Anbytarforum, and every month I am contacted by people who have read my earlier posts about different Sami families.
Regarding research on Sami identity, and the avarice shown by the Swedish State towards its Indigenous population the Sami, may be summed up using the words of Johan Kitok (2011):

“I would not say that researchers don’t know what they are doing. But the fact that they claim that an industry can rise to a race, those who originated that idea must have realized that it was beyond all rhyme and reason. But they didn’t.”

Reluctance and Appreciation in Regards to Sami Heritage

I have found that not all persons who request genealogy investigations and are made aware of their Sami roots appreciate it. Racism towards the Sami sometimes runs deep within the dominant society, as has been experienced by Sami genealogist Agnes Palmgren from Gammelstad, Luleå, Sweden:

A woman thinking that she was a descendant of a noble family, the Silfversparre family, approached Palmgren with a request to research her family lineage. The researcher gathered all the information she could, finally tracing the linkage to the family Silfversparre in Rödingsträsk. Silfversparre, in fact, was a Forest Sami family who originated from the village inside the forests near the Lule River. The supposedly nobility-born woman came to get the genealogical research she had ordered. However, when she learned of her Sami lineage she threw the research on the floor and left the house, refusing to compensate the researcher for any of the work done. Silfversparre was indeed the name of Swedish nobility – but it was also the name of my ancestors’ families. They were Sami from Sjocksjock. They may have been noble, but they were not members of the Swedish Nobility.

During the years that I have researched Sami identity, I have met with several people who previously were unaware of their Sami heritage. For example, two of my second cousins, twin sisters in Uppsala, Anna Greta, and Vännäs, Ann-Louise, are amongst those whom I have had the most contact with. Their grandfather was a reindeer herder together with my grandfather in Rödingsträsk until the end of the 1920s. My cousins’ father was a state forester in Storuman. He had never spoken to his children about Rödingsträsk, and he had never said anything about their Sami roots. Only by the age of 50 did the sisters learn about their family’s past. The thirst for understanding one’s own heritage may, for some, be as great and enjoyable as seeing what treasures can be found in the archives of memories, including the unique ways by which one remembers. For example, Anna Greta nowadays celebrates the Sami National Day with reindeer meat, table settings in the Sami colors, and champagne.
Work In Progress
My genealogy computer program, named Holger,26 is one of a handful of database applications used by researchers. It is easy to add people, link families and tribes, and connect to other databases. The most important information I retrieve through church-, birth-, marriage- and death records, parish registers and migration records. There are many CDs produced by the Swedish Heritage Association, local research organizations and private individuals; they can be very helpful when you have problems finding certain data.

Another archive that is important is the Court archive. These are registers that provide knowledge about human family relationships through inventories. In Norrbotten and Västerbotten, Northern Sweden, we have a particularly difficult situation in this regard. Most church records are scanned and are available on the Internet, including the National Archives. However, Court rolls of Jokkmokk and Överluleå parishes are not yet scanned, so we have to travel far distances south to Landsarkivet, the National Archives in Härnösand, where all documents relating to our two northernmost counties are archived. Jämtland has its own Landsarkiv in Östersund. The scanning of archived materials is ongoing, and eventually they will be available to all of us.

However, access to data can never replace the analysis of content, nor can it replace the process of critically assessing the sources. Genealogical research performed online is of varying quality. Misinterpretations may have devastating consequences for persons with hopes of learning more about their past. Recently, a man from Gällivare contacted me regarding his dissatisfaction upon hiring someone to research his family’s genealogy. He had been informed that he belonged to the Silfversparre family in Rödingsträsk. His grandmother’s father’s name was John Erik Nilsson, born in 1884. My inspection of birth records showed that two Johan Erik’s with a father called Nils were born in that year. One Johan Erik belonged, indeed, to the Silfversparre family; while the other Johan Erik, who was his actual ancestor, had parents in Gällivare parish and belonged to the Finnish family Lehto. The man’s disappointment was intense, partly because the research for which he had paid for was of no use, but also because he had lost a family to which he wished to belong.

Concluding Remarks
I have good hopes for the future. Sami, who earlier were unaware of their heritage, today have good possibilities to learn about it. This is due to several factors:
The legislation has, in this respect, improved the situation for Sami — with the constitutional changes of SFS 2010:1408, the Sami have status as a People. As an ethnic group and Indigenous People, the Sami now enjoy rights under International Law.

On a regional level, the municipalities have obligations towards the Sami concerning language and education. Furthermore, Sami must be given influence over decision-making in the municipalities regarding issues that concern their heritage.

The Sami, who had or have been taught to be ashamed of their roots, today stand a far greater chance of reframing these experiences towards something valued — something of their own.

Notes
2 The term prevalently used was "Lapp", a derogatory sobriquet for Sami.
5 There was a specific state promoted "Lap should be Lap policy", separating reindeer herding nomadic mountain Sami from the rest. According to Lennart Lundmark (2002), p. 63, the "Laplander should be Laplander policy" was an attempt by the Swedish state to categorize the "Laplanders." Although racism was an important part, the economic policy was also of interest. This led to a position where state policy regarding the Sámi had to pay respect to three different criteria: First of all the race, i.e. the origin, where the person came from. Secondly the way of living, i.e. whether the person was nomadic or not. Thirdly, the economic activity, i.e. if the person was a reindeer herder or not. This led to three distinct categories, the real "Laplanders" were the ones who were nomadic, living in special huts and herding reindeer. The second category was the "Forest Laplander", living in normal houses but still reindeer herding, who were considered something in between Laplanders and the other population. Finally, the persons of Laplander origin, but living in houses and not involved in reindeer-herding, who were considered to have lost their Laplander origin and thus defined as part of the general non-Sámi population, and thus supposed to be or become Swedish ; Lundmark, Lennart. Lappen är ombytlig, ostadig och obekväm: Svenska statens samepolitik i rasismens tidvarv [The Lapp is changeful, unstable and uneasy: Swedish state Sami policy in the era of racism]. Umeå, 2002.
8 Swedish Government. Sammanträde på Saltsjöbaden den 30 mars 1912 [Session at Saltsjobaden, 30th of March]. SSR Archive, 1912.
10 Cramér/Prawitz, 1970.
11 Swedish Government. Lag om de svenska lapparnas rätt till renbete i Sverige; given Stockholms slott den 18 juli 1928 [Law on the right of Swedish Lapps to reindeer pasture. Stockholm Castle 18th of July, 1928].
12 Swedish government, Law, 1928.
13 See also Amft, Andrea, Särmi i förändringens tid: en studie i svenska samers levnadsvillkor under 1900-talet ur ett genus- och etnicitetsperspektiv, Umeå, 2002.
16 Henrik Barruk (2008) Interviewed 2008; Mr. Henning Johansson who was the main responsible for the demographic part of estimating the number of Sami. According to Barruk Henning Johansson, spent the years 1971-1974 to identify reindeer owners from the register of reindeer owning persons (renlängder) starting from late 19th century going both back in time as well as forward. To validate the investigation, Henning Johansson also made telephone calls to persons to verify their Sami ancestry. Those that never had owned reindeer were not counted at all. Johansson stated that it is likely that not even all those that actually owned reindeer was not counted. However, this information is not provided in description of the methodology in the state inquiry. It might be a misunderstanding by Barruk, and we need to trust the method accounted for in the state inquiry SOU 1975:100. For further investigation of the actual methodology used to estimate the number of Sami an investigation of the archival material is needed. In any case, Henning Johansson acknowledged in the interview (Barruk 2008) that the number of Sami far from fully accounted for and only based on reindeer owning Sami. Barruk, Henrik, Samiskan i Sverige: rapport från språkkampanjåret 2008 : en sammanställning av befintliga resultat och fakta om samiskans användning och utbredning i Sverige. Kiruna: Sámediggi, 2008, p.20.
17 Current number of Sami in Sweden, according to the website of the Swedish Sami Parliament, which is a Swedish government authority and at the same time an elected parliament, is 20 000, In Sametinget [Accessed September 7, 2013].
19 Hultblad, Filip, Övergång från nomadism till agrar bosättning i Jokkmokks socken [Transition from nomadism to farming in the parish of Jokkmokk]. Diss. Uppsala University, 1968.
21 http://aforum/genealogi.se/discuss.
22 Datainspektionen. Beslut Dnr 708-2005 [Swedish Data Inspection Board’s decision] [Accessed 2005-10-26].
23 Kitok, Johan, Maktens olika ansikten [The many faces of power], Porjus, 2011.
24 Interview with Agnes Palmgren.
26 Website Holger [Accessed Sept. 7, 2013].