
Winds of Change

The Role and Potential of Sámi Parliamentarians

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Abstract

This text is based on a presentation by Stefan Mikaelsson held at RE-Mindings symposium, October 2012, his opening speech for the Sámi Plenary 62nd session in Vualtjere/Vilhelmina, Sweden, February 19, 2013, and his presentation for the panel “Decolonizing Sápmi: archeology, food security and struggles against mining and militarization” at the annual meeting of NAISA, Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, June 13-15, 2013. In this article Mikaelsson speaks of the threats against lands and waters, culture and food security, and ultimately the survival and continuance of the Sámi People. He speaks of the complex situation and monetary economy that makes it difficult to respond to these threats and challenges, and that the never-ending negotiations with the Swedish government and the Swedish membership within the European Union are ultimately undermining Sámi culture. Mikaelsson argues for a need for responding against threats and challenges through a collaboration within the Sámi Parliament and between Sámi people in general.

Introduction – Winds of Change Are Blowing

Winds of change and destruction are blowing across the lands of the Sámi People¹ – threatening the survival of our culture and our survival as a People. Our lands and waters are located above and below the Arctic Circle and cultivation border; we have lived in an Arctic climate for thousands of years. We have been able to live and prosper in these regions due to our ingenuity, hard work and collaboration with our fellow companions – the reindeer – and in close exchange with the nature and its gifts. We have traded with other peoples, while keeping and developing our own cultures and ways of producing food in harmony, despite

brutal attempts of colonization. Our possibilities to produce safe and healthy food have been diminishing constantly for over more than half a decade. And, as of late, we face severe consequences of an even fiercer State-driven exploitation and colonization.

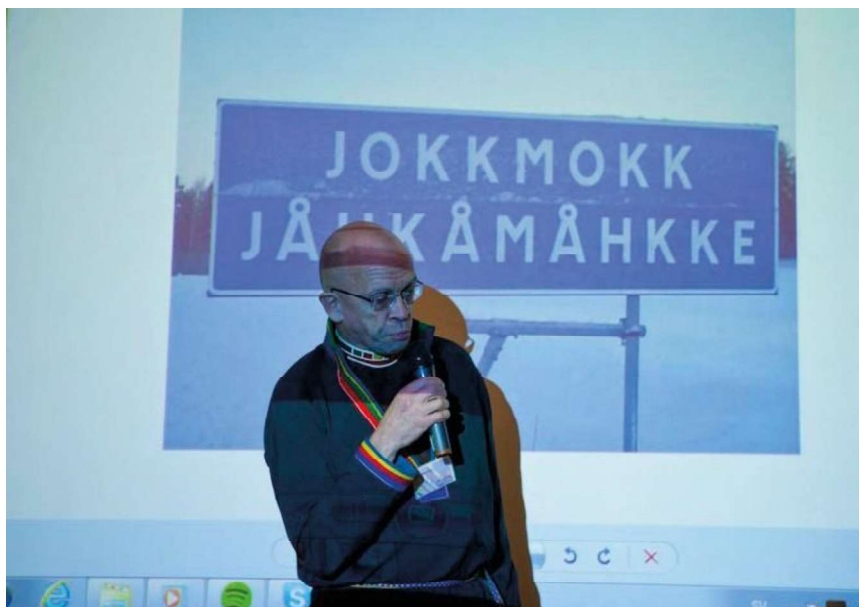
I call for all Sámi Parliamentarians to raise our voices, to stop the negotiations with a colonial power that is slowly, but inexorably, destroying our culture. This destruction is currently conducted by allowing mining exploitations all over our lands and waters, through the destruction of our cultural heritage and rights as an Indigenous People, and through the failing support provided for reindeer herders. We are criminalized for being Sámi. I call for us – within the Sámi Parliament in Sweden, as well as all Sámi Parliaments – to collaborate for the reclaiming of the Sámi lands and waters.

Swedish and European Colonialism

The membership of Sweden and Finland in the European Union (EU) has resulted in the opposite of what was expected. Instead of enhancing the Sámi People's legitimate rights and status and the immediate implementation of the international-community-adopted Human Rights instruments, the European democracies have violated Sámi Rights. Of these, the most important and legitimate rights, as a People, are the exclusive rights to inhabit, cultivate, possess and control our Sámi territory.

European colonialism, founded on racism, considers the Sámi People as an inferior people, unable to realize our own good and even less knowledgeable in the management of our own culture and heritage for future generations. This colonialism is as strong today as it was in 1919, when Sweden began the forced relocation of reindeer herders and their families, the forced slaughter of reindeers, and a commitment to active and brutal Swedification processes towards the Sámi.

All parts of Sámi culture and all aspects of the Sámi People, as defined by the Sámi, ourselves, must be embraced by the proposed solutions. Some may argue that Nyamko Sabuni, Minister for Integration of the Swedish Government October 6, 2006 – October 5, 2010, and her successor, Erik Ullenhag, have actively supported collaboration between the Sámi and the State. Although this is a renewal process that they have promoted, even on local level, between the Swedish government offices and the Sámi People, far too little has been done in reality. If the Sámi do not lead these initiatives, any changes for the better will



Stefan Mikaelsson presenting at RE-Mindings Symposium. Photo by Tor Lundberg Tuorda.

have been based solely on arbitrariness and random circumstances, rather than a genuine respect for the Sámi People or our status in a society dominated by Swedish standards and legislation.

The mining plague is now spreading around Europe, affecting municipalities, mayors, county governors and other authorities or organizations. These pro-mining entities are now using well-disguised terminology, promising that Swedish authorities will take into account the Sámi interests in any mining exploration and establishment – that “there is space for everyone.” We know that this is not the reality; there is not space for everyone. Little by little, the Sámi traditional way of life is forced to end. This is the result of over 100 years of aggressive colonialism.

It is unacceptable that the dominant societies of Europe still consider an Indigenous People, the Sámi, as part of their entertainment and our culture as objects to put on display in museums and research institutions. The responsible organizations, personnel and scholars, consist of a vast majority of non-Sámi; and being Sámi is not considered important when doing research on Sámi societies or within Sámi territory. At the same time, the moment the interests for the Sámi ebb, Sámi traditional activities will fall out of favor with State support. A result of this is that the Sámi are considered as competitors for land-use territory and, subsequently, expected to give-way to foreign and non-Sámi interests, favoring

the “interest of the Swedish public.” This includes supporting foreign and non-Sámi industrial ventures.

The Sámi People are dependent on a close contact with our nature. Our culture would not survive a totally changed and corrupted nature that has lost its biological diversity, key habitats, diversely-aged forests, non-fragmented lands and clean water.

International Rights of the Sámi and Activism

Indigenous and tribal rights to the lands and waters is also one of the principles behind the development of ILO Convention No. 169.² The ILO convention 169 is an attempt by the international community, on the basis of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948,³ to prevent different dominant communities from altering or destroying aboriginal peoples’ relationship with their traditional lands and waters. We, the Sámi, walk towards the future in the footsteps of our ancestors. Once these footsteps have been erased, our future will be wiped out.

Reindeer herding is a core traditional activity within Sámi culture. The husbandry and slaughtering of reindeer are good measurements for the condition of the traditional Sámi way of life. The Sámi Parliament in Sweden was established in 1993. At this time, the yearly slaughter of reindeer in Sweden amounted to 100,000 per year. At present, the yearly slaughter is about half that number. The Sámi reindeer herders are struggling to prevent a further decline of the reindeer stock and subsequent slaughter. In this work against further decline, the herders need to protect the reindeer calves and adults against predators. However, a growing national and international concern about wildlife has left reindeer herders with large losses of reindeer due to predation by lynx, wolverines, bears, eagles and, in some areas, wolves. Yet, reindeer herders have been prosecuted and sentenced within the Swedish court system for what is termed “illegal hunting” of these predators.

To my mind, protecting our reindeer is not a criminal act. It is a way to assert our cultural survival. But in Sweden, illegal shooting of one or more predators is a severe crime, regardless of quantity. Yet, for the Sámi it is a means to protect the newborn calves, giving the reindeer enough calm during grazing – the tranquility that they are denied under current Swedish legislation. Nor is it to my mind a crime to build a traditional *lávvu*, or *goatje*, a cabin on our own Sámi ancestral lands. Rather, it is an act to continue the Sámi culture, to remember our traditions,

to live the way we have always lived, in the areas where we have always lived since long before the establishment of modern Nation-States.

The Sámi lived in these high mountains, in remote forest valleys, or close to the fishing lake where my grandfather and grandmother had their fishing waters, long before the Swedish king's men burned down their huts and, with threat of legal action, claimed that Sámi fishing was illegal. This colonizing practice still continues in some of the Sámi areas, although nowadays representatives of the Swedish state – the County Administration – perform the burning of cabins.⁴

Resistance Towards the Swedish State

In 1998, the Minister of Agriculture, who also is responsible for overseeing reindeer herding in the State and business concerning the Sámi People in Sweden in general, apologized to the Sámi People for the assaults made on them by the Swedish state.⁵

But for what purpose was this apology, I ask myself? Since then, nothing has changed for the better – the apologies lacked content; except for one thing, which is the annual ceremonial dinner with the Minister, initiated after the apology as a means to discuss “Sámi business” with Sámi representatives. I neither have, nor ever will, attended those dinners – my faith in European democracy has been shaken at its foundation.

I attended my first meeting about Swedish State public inquiries into Sámi issues in 1977. The purpose for the Swedish Government was to propose actual solutions to our problems.⁶ Oh how happy I was to see that my part of the Sámi territory would finally enjoy the benefits of policies that would mean the achievement of progressive solutions. However today, 36 years later, nothing has improved. The opposite has occurred, and my excitement over being a Swedish citizen has long since gone.

I do not expect the Swedish Government to, within my lifespan, have the will to do anything other than consolidate what is already happening everywhere in Sápmi/Sábme, to maintain the status quo in the state of Swedish-Sámi affairs. I do not expect any ratification of international conventions by the Swedish State that could improve the conditions for the Sámi; there will be no ratification of the Nordic Sámi Convention, and there will be no ratification of ILO Convention No. 169. We cannot hope for the implementation of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)⁷ nor the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁸ We can forget the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).⁹ These will never be implemented by Sweden. Realizing what the actual situation is like, I pose this question: is there any

other option for the Sámi Parliament in the Swedish side of Sápmi, but to cancel all negotiations with the Swedish government? If we continue our negotiations, as we have done since the establishment of the Sámi Parliament 20 years ago, but continually fail – what will this lead to? I believe that, within a decade, we will have reached a level where only 25,000 reindeer are slaughtered per year – along with a final collapse of reindeer herding. This means the collapse of our livelihood, our possibility to sustain ourselves with food from within our own territory. Furthermore, the traditional Sámi *lavvus* might also be considered to be “illegal” and consequently burnt down by representatives of the Swedish state. We will be negotiating away our own culture and right to exist as Sámi, as human beings.

Today, 20 years after the establishment of the Sámi Parliament in Sweden, we, the Sámi Parliamentarians, have better opportunities to act than ever before. We have the potential to make the European colonial powers, and European democracies, accountable – both on a national level and within court procedures pursued through the international community’s Human Rights instruments.

What we need to do is *resist*, instead of accepting never-ending negotiations where *business as usual* leads to further loss of Sámi territory, lands and waters. The way I see it, *resistance* is the only remaining possibility in a desperate situation. The Sámi Parliament on the Swedish side of Sápmi has already spoken all the words that may be spoken, in documents and statements. So far, none of our actions have had any significant effect on the dominant Swedish society. The colonization and destruction keeps continuing, without any stop.

Modern Nation-State Economy and the Sámi Parliament

However, one question remains – the question is whether the Sámi Parliamentarians are ready and prepared to promote Sámi Rights, and in a uncompromised way? It is difficult to not be compromised by a monetarily-based economy that has been imposed upon us throughout a century of colonization. Many Sámi are already used to a lifestyle where working within the mines provides a high monthly salary and, consequently, high retirement funds. This might be more interesting for those Sámi persons than having the rights to traditional Sámi lands and waters. Realizing that struggling for Sámi rights might mean the loss of such incomes, or even unemployment, may make some Sámi unwilling to take up the fight. Even Sámi Parliamentarians who are working for mining companies might refrain from speaking of Sámi Rights, for fear of losing voters or income along

with prospects of retirement funds.

Furthermore, Sámi persons who do not have memberships within the *Sameby*¹⁰ may accept working for the mining exploiters, and thereby contribute to the destruction of the Sámi traditional lands and waters. Indeed, even members of the Samebys, during certain periods, work for mining companies to earn extra income. Many Sámi have become dependent on this unsustainable monetary economy – it is an addiction from which it is difficult to be cured.¹¹

Other Parliamentarians may consider the struggle for Sámi rights as a way to create a polarization between “Sámi” and “Swedes”¹² – the Sámi society and the dominant Swedish society – within the small communities in our Sámi territory. I argue that it is possible to reclaim Sámi traditional rights without causing polarization and conflicts. To achieve this, we need support from Swedish local and national politicians; it will take careful and wise politics from both Sámi and Swedish politicians, along with good policy-making.

We desperately need to reinforce ourselves as *Culture Carriers* – carriers of Sámi culture – and to reclaim our space and rights. The Culture Carriers are the individuals that, through their/our everyday life and practices – and sometimes clashing with Swedish legislation – reclaim and continue our Indigenous culture. The fisherpersons, yoikers, hunters, herdswo/men, artisans, constructors of Sámi traditional *goatje*, and wanderers are all Culture Carriers. This essential work of transferring Sámi culture to children, nieces, nephews, and other adult Sámi, cannot continue if our lands and waters are turned into holes and tailing dams. The day the transfer ceased would forebode the end of Sámi culture; it would be the death to our way of life.

However, I am hopeful. The Sámi Parliamentarians can come together to restore and reclaim our rights. On us rests the responsibility and possibilities for ensuring that Sámi culture may survive and prosper for posterity. This can only occur once we collaborate. We can choose to do it during our Parliament sessions, by working in a constructive way. If we do not assume this responsibility, we will have left the burden to do so to coming generations.

Concluding Remarks

Below are a few questions that remain open-ended and should be addressed by us, the Sámi Parliamentarians. They concern urgent issues for political decision-makers in the Swedish Parliament and in the EU to resolve:

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- The relationship between Sweden and the EU. Will the demands of the EU on unlimited access to natural resources in the Arctic, due to the regulation of the international market, contribute to the creation an Arctic desert? Would this be done despite the risk of severely altering, or destroying, the means to produce food in these regions?
 - The European lifestyle of consumption and waste production. If every citizen on this planet lived like an average European, we would need four planets equivalent to the size of and resources contained within this one, and only, Earth. How can destructive lifestyles be changed to become sustainable or reduce the impacts on climate? What is the role of the Arctic in this matter, and how can we assert that the Arctic is not further destroyed by destructive lifestyles or quests for oil and minerals in our lands and territories?

To conclude, I will quote from a poem by the Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää:

They come and ask where is your home they come with papers and say	Dat bohtet ja jerret gos du ruoktu lea Dat buktet báhpiriid ja dadjet
this belongs to nobody this is government land everything belongs to the State	dát ii leat geange dát lea Riikka eanan Riikka visot
They bring out dingy fat books and say	Dat ohcet assás duolva girjjiid ja dadjet
this is the law it applies to you too	dá lea láhka ja dát guoská dunai
What shall I say sister what shall I say brother	Maid mun dajan oabbá maid mun dajan viellja
You know brother you understand sister – <i>Aillohas</i> ¹³	Don diedát dan viellja don ipmirdat oabbá ¹⁴

Notes

¹ There is not one single Sámi language – and thus not one single word for the land of the Sámi, but nine different words. Sápmi is the word in North Sámi, Sábmme in Lule Sámi, Saemie in South Sámi, Säämi in Inari Sámi, and Sääëmjánnam in Skolt Sámi.

² International Labour Organization, ILO, Convention no. 169, 1989 [Accessed July 10, 2013].

³ United Nations, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 [Accessed July 10, 2013].

⁴ This concerns mainly the Västerbotten County, within the Swedish State. Cf. Fjällström, Carola. *Jakt och Fiskesamerna* [Hunting and Fishing Sami], Motion nr. 299 till Sametinget [Motion to the Swedish Sámi Parliament], dated May 19, 2004, 299 04-05- 27 Carola Fjällström, *Skydd mot Samiska byggnader* [Protection regarding Sami buildings] 04-10- 21. Sametinget, Kiruna.

⁵ <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/1473/a/58188> ; <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/9808/08/telegram/inrikes35.html>

⁶ Swedish Government. *Om insatser för samerna* [On the interventions for the Sami]. Government proposition, 1976/77:80, Stockholm, 1977 ; SOU 99. "Sameutredningen", In *Samerna i Sverige: stöd åt språk och kultur : betänkande* [The Sami in Sweden: Support for language and culture: reflection], Liber/ Allmänna förlag, Stockholm, 1975.

⁷ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>

⁸ <http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/iccpr/iccpr.html>

⁹ <http://social.un.org/index/IndigenousPeoples/DeclarationontheRightsofIndigenousPeoples.aspx>

¹⁰ A *sameby* is a Sámi economic association where reindeer herding is organized, a membership that provides rights for fishing and hunting within specific areas.

¹¹ Within the mining sector, salaries are considerably higher than elsewhere in the Sámi territories. Also many Sámi may take short-term jobs in the mining sector, earning a larger amount of money for a few weeks of work per year. For salary statistics of the mining sector in the county of Norrbotten – where the majority of the current mines are located today – see the following website on salary statistics, Lönestatistik.se [Accessed July 16, 2013].

¹² As "Swedes" in this case I consider those people living in the inland and mountain communities within the Sámi territory that are not (yet) on the Sámi Parliament voting register. Most people that live in these communities are, however, related in some way or another, whether "Sámi" or "Swede." Many people who identify themselves as Sámi are also not on the voting register.

¹³ This is a quote from a longer poem in North Sámi by the famous Sámi poet, author and artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: Ruoktu Váimmus, DAT 1985, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. The English translation is from *Trekways of the Wind*, DAT 1994, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. Translated to English from North Sámi by Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström and Harald Gaski

Permission to publish the quote from the poem in North Sámi and in English has been provided by the Lassagammi foundation, www.lassagammi.no.

The Swedish version of the book is named *Vidderna inom mig*, DAT, 1987.

¹⁴ This is the quote from the poem by Valkeapää, in original text, North Sámi language.