

“SWEDEN IS STEPPING OUT OF THE COLONIAL CLOSET”

by Pål Ruin

Sweden’s indigenous people, the Sami, have struggled for years to get more attention. With little result. But now something is happening.

The spectacular success of the Swedish film *Sami Blood* says something about this topic in the Swedish consciousness in 2017. The film portrays an old Sami woman who returns to her Sami village for the funeral of her sister. She is somewhat of an outcast since she left her family some 60 years back when she got sickened by the discrimination against the Sami people. The film lets us travel in time to the painful years when she realizes that being a Sami person means that you are inferior, that you are weighed and measured like an animal, and that your chances of getting an education is almost equal to zero.

The distributor of the film did not really believe in it, saw it as a “problem film” which very few Swedes would pay money to see. Hence it initially opened only at six small cinemas in the country. The distributor believed that the film would be seen by a total of 6,000 people – but after five weeks it had been seen by 120,000 people. How can we explain this success?

It is a cinematic masterpiece and would have won a big audience even without the Sami plot. And it describes – in a skillful way – universal truths about combatting prejudice. But I believe that the success of the film also has to do with the awakening of the Swedish people: How could we have treated this people so badly? And why didn’t we know more about these atrocities?

“It has to do with the Swedish self-image,” says Åsa Össbo, Research Coordinator at the Vaartoe – Centre for Sami Research at Umeå University. “Colonialism is nothing that you connect with Sweden. People have a hard time realizing that there are

similarities in the treatment of Sami people and the treatment of indigenous people around the world. But things are happening now, Sweden is about to step out of the colonial closet.”

The 20th century abuses against the Sami have not been a secret — so why wasn’t a film like *Sami Blood* created decades ago?

“It is difficult to say, but I guess that a generation needed to pass before people really had the wish to dig into this, it has been too painful for so many,” says Åsa Össbo. “Those who are victims want to get away from that epithet; by raising the issue they would again be victims. And of course, someone has to describe it in a way that affects us.”

The film has been awarded several international prizes and the director, Amanda Kernell, has been confronted with many questions. One of them has been repeated several times, she told the audience during a panel discussion at the Swedish Film Institute in early May: “They ask me how such a terrible treatment of a people was possible in Sweden, a leading country when it comes to the protection of human rights. It’s a good question.”

At the showing of the film at the Toronto Film Festival, the minister in charge of issues concerning indigenous people was present. Canada has come rather far in this area: the other year the country presented the results of its Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

“Several times people have asked me how far we in Sweden have come in our work with such a commission,” said Amanda Kernell. “Well, I have to answer that we have barely started.”

Actually, initial discussions on the possibility to create such a commission are taking place. The Vaartoe – Centre for Sami Research at Umeå University is one of the parties involved.

“But it’s more difficult than in countries such as Canada or Australia,” says Åsa Össbo. “First, the colonization in Sweden was a much longer process, going back to the 17th century; it’s



Under det heliga fjället "Atoe" [Under the holy mountain "Atoe"], artwork by Sami artist Tomas Colbengtson.

difficult to know where to start. Second, in Sweden we have not experienced what's been called 'saltwater colonialism', meaning the colonizers travelled over the oceans with the aim of conquering lands. In Sweden it has been a more subtle and slow process of domination."

A colonial past

The Nordic Museum in Stockholm has a permanent exhibition on Sami history and culture on the fourth floor. At the ticket counter I ask about interest in the exhibition.

"During the tourist season we get many foreign visitors," the lady tells me. "I have talked with several Australian tourists who are fascinated by the similarities with the history of their own indigenous people."

In the exhibition I read about mountain tourism, which emerged the 19th century and has done much to shape the rest of the country's – and the world's – perceptions of the Sami. When the Swedish Tourist Society was founded in 1885, Lapland was the prime attraction. The Sami, in their colourful clothes, were something different, something exotic.

To some extent this is still the case: in the latest edition of Lonely Planet's book on Sweden (2015), the whole cover is –

Sami clothing. "Don't miss the chance to learn about this unique group of people: spend a night or two in a Sami reindeer camp or take a dogsledding tour", writes the world famous guide book. But the book also has a section in which it describes the ill treatment of "the only indigenous people in Europe."

At the Nordic Museum, a quotation from Victoria Harnesk, a former head of the Sami Association in Stockholm, summarizes it boldly: "We Sami suffered not a bloody genocide but a kind of cultural genocide, a soft genocide, carried out by veiled yet efficient means, as the Swedish state deprived us of our lands, waters, language, religion, identity, right of self-determination, and ability to fully pursue our traditional livelihood."

Apart from the state authorities, the main culprit in this



The first official Sami flag was recognized and inaugurated on August 15, 1986, by the 13th Nordic Sami Conference in Åre, Sweden.

Gradually deprived of their dignity and livelihood. The subtle process of domination is hard to revise.



Images from the Swedish film *Sami blood*.

drama was the Swedish church. And the church has come further than the state in addressing its guilt. In the spring of 2017, it published the final results of five years of work, pinpointing in a white paper the actions that led to so much suffering.

“It’s time to make up with Sweden’s colonial past”, wrote the archbishop Antje Jackelén in an op-ed article in the major Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*. “The church played a major part in the atrocities”.

The church highlights abuses that most Swedes are unaware of. It writes that the church christened the Sami by violent means: one horrifying example is of a man who was burned alive after insisting on addressing his own gods as a last means of trying to awaken his drowned daughter. Furthermore, the church took land from Sami by force, starting in the 17th century and continuing into the 20th century. The church also changed the names of Sami people against their will, giving for example the name “Per” to several members of one family. And the church plundered graves to find skulls and bones that they could measure, and even traded remains with other nations.

But arguably the church’s most painful atrocity, with repercussions to this very day, is the crucial help delivered by local priests to the State Institute for Racial Biology. The researchers from the institute in Uppsala measured the heads and the bodies of Sami people – and the local priests, knowing the Sami, provided them with the right individuals. In the film *Sami Blood* the most powerful scene is when the main character, the young girl Elle Marja, is forced to take off her clothes and stand naked in front of the photographer while being measured. The director gave the camera shutter the sound of gun shots.

These academic experiments, which mainly occurred in the 1930s, still affect the view of researchers among older Sami people, reveals Åsa Össbo. “We in the research community have

a bad reputation: we need to work in close cooperation with the Sami institutions to gain their trust”.

If the older Sami generation often chooses to remain silent and forget the past, a different development can be seen among many in the younger generation, people who want to connect to their roots.

Sami identity today

A large number of people with Sami roots live in Stockholm and now there is a growing demand for Sami speakers who are prepared to give evening lessons. You see such advertisements in the social media, and recently one of the biggest adult education institutions was looking for Sami teachers.

Through Facebook I came into contact with Helena Terstad, a university student in Stockholm writing an essay about how Sami people are presented in marketing. Her grandmother is Sami, but she never taught Helena’s mother the language – so Helena does not speak it. “But now I am very tempted to start taking lessons. My grandmother still has her Sami grammar books; I might use them when I start.”

She has become more aware of the fact that the Sami culture is a part of her identity. Her grandmother has not told her much, but she has described how she carried a knife since the metal protected her from the mythological creatures living under the rocks. “I can’t recall that I learned anything about the Sami culture or history at school. It’s a bit strange.”

Manifesting a Sami identity outside of reindeer husbandry was fairly unusual during the latter part of the 20th century. When conducting research for this article, I bumped into the fact that one of my childhood heroes from the 1970s, the ice hockey player Börje Salming, was a Sami. It was news to me. Salming was one of the first Swedish professional players in the NHL, be-

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coming a legend in the Toronto Maple Leaves. Recently during a trip to Canada I met a dedicated Toronto fan my age and asked if she knew about his indigenous background. It came as a total surprise to her – so this was definitely nothing that Salming marketed as a part of his public identity.

These days the situation has changed, at least within show business. In the last couple of years more young Sami artists have appeared on stage, displaying Sami culture with pride and self-confidence. Jon Henrik Fjellgren has performed a traditional joik at the popular Eurovision qualification festival and Maxida Märak has combined her successful music career with a clear political message. But the best example is probably Sofia Jannok, a singer and an activist. Recently Sweden’s public service television ran a 90-minute documentary about her. She expresses views that have rarely been heard before on the national scene: “The survival of Sápmi is everything to me. My home country is not Sweden, it is Sápmi. In Sweden I am still a stranger.”

One of her most popular songs is “We are still here”, alluding to the Sami people in Sweden. During a concert in the northern coastal city of Skellefteå, which is part of Sápmi, she speaks Sami and asks the audience how many understand her. Around ten answer.

The TV team follows her to Minneapolis, where she meets a native American from the Anishinabe people. She is struck by the feeling that she is not alone: “We are so few in Sápmi, but if I count in all these people, there are so many of us!”

Sofia Jannok and other young activists have also inspired older Sami who suddenly feel that their messages are being spread more than before. The artist and Sami activist Tomas Colbengtson can sense a growing interest among galleries in displaying his work: “Art, theater, film, and music – we use it more and more to increase the knowledge of our Sami culture, of our history, of our pain. It has become somewhat of a weapon for us. The young generation is brave in the way that they mix old Sami traditions with modern cultural phenomena, like Sofia Jannok who mixes the joik with techno and jazz.”

Later this year, Tomas Colbengtson is going to Japan for a conference on the rights of the Japanese Ainu people, the Inuits of Greenland and the Sami population. “We have had such cooper-

Sápmi – one people, four countries

- The number of Sami people in Sweden today, counting those with at least one parent of Sami heritage, is somewhere between 45,000 and 60,000. The number 20,000 is often cited, but it is not based on current research. The total number of Sami, including those in Norway, Finland, and Russia, is over 100,000.
- It has been stated by researchers that a people with a clear identity, the future Sami people, was living in northern Scandinavia as early as 1000 B. C. The first written documents mentioning the Sami date from the year 98 A.D.
- The Sami lived by reindeer herding, hunting, gathering, and fishing. New sources of income are handicrafts, tourism, media, art, and music. Today there are Sami working in most vocational fields.
- There are 51 Sami villages in Sweden. And there are Sami pre-schools and schools in five places: Karesuando, Kiruna, Gällivare, Jokkmokk, and Tärnaby.
- The Sami language is a Finno-Ugrian language. There are about ten different varieties of Sami, and whether some of them are separate languages or just dialects is subject to debate. But the difference between Northern Sami and Southern Sami is as great as that between Swedish and Icelandic. About 23,000 people speak Sami today, including about 7,000 in Sweden. The majority speak northern Sami, which has been least exposed to assimilation.

Sources: Samer.se, Vaartoe – Centre for Sami Research, The Nordic Museum.



370 million people identify themselves – among them the Sami – as indigenous people.



PHOTO: SVT

Dave Archambault II, chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, in conversation with the Sami artists Sofia Jannok, Inger Biret Kvernmo Gaup, and Sara Marielle Gaup Beaska during their visit to the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota.



PHOTO: SAMETINGET/SE

The Swedish Sami parliament (Sametinget) has an electorate of about 9000 individuals and has currently eight parties represented in the body. The 31 members of the Sami Parliament Plenary Assembly are chosen through general elections every fourth year.

ation between our indigenous peoples for many years, but lately it's been growing. And even more importantly, the knowledge of this cooperation is spreading outside of the Sami community.”

Among Swedes who criticize the Sami people for pushing their rights, you can hear the argument that the Sami actually aren't an indigenous people, since they haven't lived in Sweden for thousands of years. But according to the official UN definition of indigenous peoples, the critics have it wrong, claims the researcher Åsa Össbo: “You don't need to have roots going back to the very first people that inhabited the area, but going back to the people who lived there when the state boundaries were formed. And you need to have protected your cultural bonds with this people to be called an indigenous people.”

A Nordic issue

The Swedish Sami have of course cooperated extensively over the years with the Sami organizations in Norway and Finland (and to a lesser degree with the smallest Sami population, that in Northeastern Russia).

The Norwegian Sami have come a bit further than the Swed-

Growing interest in indigenous issues

The international interest in the Sami history has long been extensive, especially in other countries with indigenous peoples. It is illuminating that the English Wikipedia text about the Sami people is double the length of the corresponding page in Swedish. The “UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples” (UNDRIP) of 2007 was a boost for the Sami population. The UN also has a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, which is yet another sign that these issues have gained greater international importance since the turn of the century.

ish Sami when it comes to fighting for their rights. The Norwegian Sami got their parliament (1989) before the Swedish Sami (1993), and the Sami parliament in Norway has more money and somewhat more power than the one in Sweden. As early as 1990 the Norwegian government ratified the ILO 169 convention on the rights of indigenous peoples, whereas the Swedish government still hasn't done so – with the argument that a ratification is not compatible with current Swedish law. Furthermore, the Norwegian government recognized the Sami population in its constitution many years ago. This did not happen in Sweden until 2010.

As for the Finnish Sami, their rights are guaranteed in the constitution – but in real life, their rights are somewhat less clear than in the Swedish case. Unlike Sami in Sweden, the Finnish Sami have no exclusive rights to reindeer husbandry. A majority of the reindeer herders in Finland are actually non-Sami. And the Finnish Sami parliament is as weak as the Swedish.

The Swedish Sami parliament (Sametinget) has an electorate of about 8000 individuals, and has currently eight parties represented in the body. But it has very little say against the government: it is formally an authority subordinate to the government in both Sweden and Finland, dependent on the rules and the regulations handed down by the central government. The Norwegian Sami parliament has somewhat more independence when it comes to the use of resources. And it has developed a closer cooperation with local and regional authorities than in the case of Sweden. “There are even municipalities in Norway where the Sami are the majority, which gives their voices power on the local level. In Sweden there is no such municipality,” says Ragnhild Nilsson, a researcher in political science at Stockholm University and an expert on cooperation between the Nordic Sami populations.

The Swedish Sami often highlight the role of the Sami in Norway when discussing the matter with the Swedish state. Yet another difference between the countries is that the ordinary

parties in the Norwegian parliament also are represented in the Sami parliament, which contributes to putting the issues on the national agenda. In Sweden, on the other hand, all parties in the Sami parliament are Sami parties. However, the Norwegian Sami influence should not be overestimated, argues Ragnhild Nilsson: “The government has no wish to give the Sami full authority over crucial decisions that affect the Sami interests, such as extracting new ore deposits or developing new power plants.”

The stronger role of the Sami parliament in Norway has also led to a stronger trust in it. The difference between the two countries is dramatic, according to new research from Stockholm University: among the Norwegian Sami, 49 percent have “high or very high confidence” in their own parliament, compared with 16 percent in the Swedish case. “The Swedish Sami voters want more self-determination and are disappointed with the Sami parliament which can’t give them that”, says Ragnhild Nilsson.

A clear illustration of this occurred during the discussion at the Swedish Film Institute in May, where the panel also talked about the elections to the Sami parliament which took place later that month. When discussing the role of the parliament, the representative Ulf Bergdahl of the party “The Sami” stood up and declared, “The Sami parliament is an illusion, it’s just a tool for the government, a way to control us and spread the image that the Sami people have some kind of influence. We only get to deal with some school, language and culture issues. I would rather close it down and establish an institution that gives us real influence”.

Conflicts in Sápmi

There are not only conflicts between the Sami population and the state, there are also conflicts of interest between the Sami population and the non-Sami, especially when it comes to the growing number of vehicles used by those living in the area and those visiting Sápmi. There are more snowmobiles than ever and it has become more common for skiers to reach the mountains by helicopter, which in turn leads to more noise and growing problems for the reindeer herders.

The public Sami radio station recently initiated a project trying to get a picture of the attitudes towards Sami people. The radio station got many answers, some of them scary. Sami people have heard such comments as “Save a wolf, shoot a Sami”. And one listener described how a bus driver told passengers over the loudspeaker that “if I find a reindeer blocking the road I will run it over, and if a Lapp (condescending word for a Sami) is there I will run him over too, so that we can keep the time schedule.”

Other comments were less violent, such as “you damned Lapps are just living on welfare and you are against all development”.

A court case that has led to a lot of anger and hatred is the Gir-

jas Sami village case. Last year, the District Court in Gällivare decided in favor of the Sami village and declared that Girjas has the sole hunting and fishing rights to its land, based on the principle of “urminnes hävd” [prescription of time immemorial]. The court found that the Sami have been living, hunting and fishing on the land in question for at least 1,000 years.

The verdict was praised by the Sami and by indigenous peoples in other countries, but led to very strong reactions by non-Sami in the region. The head of the Sami village, Matti Berg, was threatened with death by angry hunters. The Chancellor of Justice has decided to appeal the verdict, since it can become a precedent. The chancellor argues that the state owns the land and must therefore also have the hunting and fishing rights in the area. The proceedings in the higher court starts in November this year – which risks new tensions.

It is problematic when the question of Sami influence and Sami historic rights end up in courts instead of being discussed on a political level, argue several experts. One high state official tells *Baltic Worlds*, in confidence that she has brought up the issue among senior politicians and with different ministries – but gotten very little response. The issue is so complex, and politically sensitive that the politicians and the ministries pass the hot potato among themselves. “The state has not taken responsibility in trying to solve this conflict of interest,” she says. “Sometimes the state supports the side of the Sami, sometimes they are on the side of other interests – but there is no overall strategy.”

Ulf Mörkenstam, professor of political science at Stockholm University, has done extensive research on Sami issues. He agrees that this is a problem: “The Swedish parliament and the government must eventually decide and define what they mean by self-determination for the Sami people. Today it is very vague. And the interest in discussing the issue is low”.

It is a bit paradoxical, he says, since he can see a growing interest in Sami issues among his students, and a growing interest among the general population. One wish that has been repeated by Sami representatives, is that the government at least should consult the Sami community before making decisions which effect the Sami. Today such consultations appear on a rather ad hoc basis. A discussion about formalizing such a consultation is underway.

What complicates the matter even further, is that the Sami interests clash with one another too. There is no such thing as “a Sami position” on an issue. There have been court cases where Sami representatives have been on the side of the landowners in disputes with Sami villages. Inter-Sami tensions are of different kinds, but a common dispute is between reindeer-herders and non-reindeer herders. In some cases, the animosity includes tragic family stories in which fathers or grandfathers once were forced to leave the relatively rich life as reindeer herders and

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“I LEARNED SOMETHING FROM THE CANADIANS, WHO HAVE COME FURTHER THAN WE. THEY HAVE SAID THAT ‘BEFORE THE HEALING CAN HAPPEN, THE WOUNDS HAVE TO BE EXPOSED.’”

ended up in the cities on low incomes, longing for a life that was long gone. There are also tensions and diverging interests between reindeer-herding Sami and fishing and hunting Sami, and between North Sami and South Sami.

The state has a very big responsibility for the frictions, during the last century the state decided who was a true Sami, who should keep up reindeer husbandry and who shouldn't. The state created the divisions by giving rights to the reindeer herders but denying rights to the fishing and hunting Sami. The Sami without reindeer were supposed to become as Swedish as possible, forgetting their roots and their language.

Waiting for an official apology

An illustration that the Sami issue has gained a growing interest is the fact that the Sami organization in Stockholm, with support from the authorities, organized a week of Sami issues in May in connection with the elections to the Sami parliament. Such weeks with Sami themes have occurred several times in other cities, especially in the north, but never before in Stockholm. “We want to show the people in the capital that we have an indigenous people in this country, something that many are unaware of”, said Inge Frisk, the head of the Sami association in Stockholm.

One of the events during the week was a discussion on Sami rights in connection with a guest performance by the Giron Sámi Teáhter playing *CO2lonialnation*. The discussion started with a showing of the famous speech by the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd 2008 addressed to the aborigines. His words touched a nation: “This is a blemished chapter in our history... we inflicted wounds, we took children from their communities. To the fathers and the mothers, to the sisters and the brothers, we say: sorry...”.

No such apology has been heard in Sweden. The director of the Sami Theater, Åsa Simma, told the audience that she thinks it will happen: “We are not there yet, but we have started the journey in that direction. I learned something from the Canadians, who have come further than we. They have said that ‘before the healing can happen, the wounds have to be exposed’”.

The play that they are performing is based on voices not heard before. In preparation, they travelled around Sápmi listening to the stories of people who in many cases had kept their secrets to themselves. The playwright and therapist Ana Yrsa Fallenius conducted some of the interviews: “Many of these people have a lack of identity, they feel ashamed of who they are, their identity has been defined by others, they feel inferior.

It leads to silence, a silence travelling down the generations. The postcolonial trauma is being inherited. Many of those we have spoken to have felt a relief that someone finally wanted to listen to their stories”.

The team also conducted interviews with health officials, getting confirmation of a fact that many are aware of: that mental illness is more widespread in the Sami community and that the number of suicides are higher in this group – especially among men.

In the Northern city of Kiruna, where many inhabitants make their living working in the mine, they heard tragic stories of Sami working underground – but in disguise. “The mine took their livelihood away since this was an area where their reindeer used to graze,” says Åsa Simma. “Now they need to work at least part-time, often at night, in the mine to make a living. But they don't want to talk about it.”

The head of the Girjas Sami village, Matti Berg, also participated in the discussion before the play: “My defense attorney told me at the beginning of the trial that I should not see this as a political issue, but as a purely judicial issue. But some weeks into the hearings, he turned to me and said: Matti, you were right, this is very political.”

The psychologist Anne Siviken at a Norwegian national center dealing with health issues collaborated with the ensemble. The center is helping Sami people not only in Norway, but also in Sweden and Finland. “We witness how people have become depressed by the loss of their language, the loss of their identity. Some of them have hesitated to seek care in the ordinary health service, they are afraid of not being understood”.

A dark side effect of their despair is a high rate of alcohol abuse and several cases of sexual assault within the Sami community, an issue that is extremely sensitive.

In the audience of about 80 people, a woman raises her hand during the question-and-answer session, and it is a sensitive moment: “My

name is Carmen Blanco, I am also a representative of a harassed indigenous people, the Quechua in Peru. I have lived many years in Sweden and I have known that you Sami are here, but I have not heard you. I have been alone in my grief. But not anymore. I cried when I saw the film *Sami Blood*: it could have been a story about my mother and my grandmother”. ✕

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Muohta (Snow), silver brooch by Erika Huuva. A contemporary take on a traditional samí brooch.