

Preservation of Sami Identity in Sweden: Historical Development and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract. For every ethnic group, protecting customs, language, religion, and cultural identity matters. Protecting these rights remains a major national policy concern. This study examines the historical development and current issues in preserving Sami identity in Sweden, with an emphasis on language policy, education, political representation, and cultural institutions.

This research aims to analyse the mechanisms that protect Sami identity and assess their effectiveness in safeguarding linguistic and cultural continuity. The study uses a qualitative research design, which employs historical-comparative and institutional approaches. The data collected included an examination of legal documents, policy papers, international instruments on indigenous peoples, and academic literature on Sami language use and education. The findings show that Sweden has a relatively comprehensive framework protecting Sami identity, including constitutional recognition, the establishment of the Sami Parliament, minority language legislation, and Sami educational institutions. These measures have helped revitalise the Sami language and media and strengthen Indigenous participation in public life. However, many challenges remain, including a lack of qualified teachers, limited educational resources, and the continued dominance of Swedish in many areas of social and educational life. The study shows that language and education remain the best tools for maintaining Sami identity and transferring culture from one generation to the next. The results may inform future research on Indigenous peoples, minority language protection, and policy formulation to protect cultural diversity and Indigenous heritage.

Keywords: Sami people; indigenous identity; Sweden; Sami languages; indigenous education; cultural preservation; minority rights; Sami Parliament.

INTRODUCTION

The Sami people are one of the Indigenous peoples living in the northern parts of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, broader processes of nation-building, territorial consolidation, modernisation and administrative centralisation affected state policies toward the Sami. The preservation of Sami identity, language, and traditional ways of life thus increasingly depended on the institutional and legal structures the modern state established. Although the Sami gained more political and cultural rights in the latter half of the twentieth century, the legacy of assimilationist policies continues to shape contemporary

discussions of Indigenous governance, education, and language revitalisation.

UNESCO has classified several Sami languages, such as South Sami and Ume Sami, as severely or critically endangered, and one Sami language is extinct. For instance, the last native speaker, Akkala Sami Babin Sami, died in 2003 [1]. The death of the last native speaker of Akkala Sami is not just the death of a language but a reminder of the vulnerability of minority languages in the face of long-term assimilation and demographic decline. These developments have stimulated scholarly interest in the relationship between state policy, institutional support, and the conservation of Indigenous cultural identity.

This article examines the historical development and contemporary challenges of preserving Sami identity in Sweden. It focuses on the role of legal recognition, language policy, education, political representation, and cultural institutions in supporting the continuity of Sami language and culture. While these issues have attracted considerable scholarly attention, their combined contribution to identity preservation has received less attention. The study therefore analyses these mechanisms as interconnected elements of a broader framework for sustaining Sami identity in contemporary Sweden.

The article argues that the gradual expansion of legal recognition and educational opportunities has helped preserve Sami identity in Sweden through political representation and language protection policies. Despite significant progress, challenges related to language revitalisation and cultural sustainability remain.

METHODS

This study draws on qualitative historical and contemporary sources related to the Sami people in Sweden. The research draws upon Swedish legislation, policy documents, international legal instruments concerning indigenous peoples, academic literature, and official reports addressing Sami language rights, education, cultural preservation, and political representation.

The study combines historical and institutional approaches. The historical approach examined how state policies toward the Sami evolved and how mechanisms to preserve Sami identity developed. The institutional approach enabled analysis of the role of legal frameworks, educational institutions, and representative bodies in supporting the Sami community's cultural and linguistic continuity.

The study employs document analysis as its primary research method. The sources examined include Swedish legislation, government reports, constitutional documents, international legal instruments, policy papers, and academic literature related to Sami rights and identity preservation. The researchers analysed the collected data thematically, paying particular attention to four interrelated areas: legal recognition, political representation, language policy, and education. Combining historical and institutional perspectives enabled an examination of Sami policy development over time and the contemporary

frameworks that support the preservation of Sami language, culture, and identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Sami in Sweden: historical development and current status. The Sami predominantly live in northern Sweden, especially in Norrbotten and Västerbotten. Their population is estimated at around 20,000 individuals [2]. National and international legal frameworks protect the Sami as both an indigenous people and a national minority. In 1977, the Swedish government officially recognised the Sami as an Indigenous people. In 1993, the Sami Parliament (1993) was established, providing a formal, structured platform for their political representation. In 2011, the Swedish constitution explicitly recognised the Sami as a distinct people, further strengthening their legal and political position [3].

The Sami's contemporary legal status in Sweden emerged from a much longer historical process, in which common law was replaced by special legislation with the Reindeer Grazing Act in 1886. By this Act, Swedish authorities pursued policies that distinguished between reindeer-herding Sami and other Sami groups. This approach, commonly associated with the principle "Lapp shall remain Lapp" (Lapp ska vara lapp), sought to preserve the traditional livelihood of reindeer-herding Sami while limiting the recognition of Sami identity outside this framework [4]. As a result, Sami identity became closely connected to reindeer husbandry, whereas government assimilation policies increasingly integrated many Sami who did not engage in this activity into the majority society.

The Swedish government established special nomad schools (nomadskolor) for the children of reindeer-herding Sami. Although intended to accommodate Sami cultural traditions, these schools generally offered a more restricted curriculum than ordinary Swedish schools and contributed to Sami children's separation from the mainstream educational system [5]. Since the mid-twentieth century, the Swedish government has changed its policy towards the Sami, recognising the cultural, linguistic and political rights of the Sami people. The government has gradually abandoned its previously assimilationist approach and has granted certain rights that support the protection of minorities, cultural diversity, and the political participation of Indigenous peoples. These developments laid the foundation

for subsequent reforms in education, language policy, and political representation that continue to shape Sami identity in contemporary Sweden. These developments laid the foundation for later reforms in education, language and political representation that continue to shape Sami identity in contemporary Sweden.

In Sweden, the international legal and normative framework for Sami rights has taken shape. Sweden supported the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. However, because this declaration is not legally binding, Sweden has not fully implemented its provisions. Restrictions persist in the full realisation of Sami rights, particularly in areas such as land and natural resource use, self-government, and education.

Political representation and self-governance for the Sami people. The legal status of the Sami in Sweden: The "Act on the Sami Parliament" adopted in 1993 determined the legal status of the Sami in Sweden [6].

Despite this, the Sami have historically demonstrated limited political representation at the national level. As Josefsen noted, the Sami have generally avoided close cooperation with national political parties and have preferred to defend their interests independently, outside of parties. While this approach has helped maintain political neutrality on Sami issues, it has also limited their representation within Sweden's broader political system. As a result, the government has not sufficiently included Sami issues in the national political agenda, and parliamentary debates demonstrate limited knowledge and awareness of these issues. Nevertheless, the establishment of the Sami Parliament (Sametinget) and the development of Sami political organisations have expanded opportunities for Sami political participation. In practice, Sami political activity has been concentrated primarily within the Sami Parliament and at the municipal level. Some Sami political groups have successfully participated in local elections and gained representation in local government bodies. In contrast, several Swedish political parties have gradually incorporated Sami rights and interests into their political programmes [7].

This local political engagement has been particularly visible in the municipalities of Jokkmokk and Kiruna, where Sami representatives have achieved electoral success through the Samernas Vål party and other independent candidate lists.

The relatively small size of the Sami electorate also highlights structural constraints on political representation. In 2017, the electoral registers for the Sami Parliament of Sweden included 8,766 people [8].

While the Sami Parliament safeguards Sami political and cultural rights, questions about land and natural resource rights require additional legal recognition. For many years, the Swedish state regulated these traditional rights, and local communities had limited authority. A notable example is the Girjas Sami village, which claimed the right to regulate hunting and other traditional activities within its territory. In 2016, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the community, formally recognising these rights and thereby complementing the Sami Parliament's role in protecting Sami interests [9].

This ruling marked an important step in recognising Sami rights in Sweden. The Girjas case is widely regarded as a landmark decision in the development of Sami rights in Sweden. By recognising the Girjas Sami community's historical land use, the ruling strengthened Sami communities' legal position on hunting, fishing, and managing traditional territories. At the same time, the case highlighted the continuing debate concerning the relationship between Indigenous rights, state authority, and natural resource management.

Language policy and education play a key role in preserving Sami identity. Modern Sami speak nine Sami languages, although not all representatives of the indigenous people are native speakers. Speakers in Sweden use South Sami and Lule Sami more actively. Most Sami either do not speak Sami or use it as a second language. Since the adoption of the Act on the Sami Parliament, language has become the main marker of identity [3].

The state has created a legal framework to protect Sami languages. The Swedish government ratified the Council of Europe's Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2000, granting Sami languages protected status [10]. Sweden's recognition of Sami languages as national minority languages marked an important step toward revitalisation.

The revival of Sami languages was a main objective of Swedish minority policy during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Earlier assimilation-focused approaches contributed to a decline in

the number of fluent speakers, and language preservation has become a key element of efforts to strengthen Sami identity. Contemporary language policies therefore seek not only to protect linguistic rights but also to encourage intergenerational language transmission within Sami communities.

The Swedish National Minorities and Minority Languages Act (2010) ensures the use of Sami languages in public services, law enforcement, and education [11]. Likewise, in 2011, an amendment to the Swedish constitution established the Sami as a recognised people with cultural and linguistic rights [12].

After the 2011 constitutional change, the government introduced a full school curriculum. Compulsory education also includes *sameskolor* (the Sami schools) for Sami children. The Sami School Board (*Sameskolstyrelsen*) is an administrative agency for public Sami schools and their affiliated activities, governed by the Sami School Ordinance [13].

In Sami schools, bilingual education is offered in grades 1-6, and in municipal schools, instruction in the native language or integrated Sami education is offered, often with support for distance learning. A lack of qualified teachers, insufficient teaching resources and materials for the Sami language, and the predominance of Swedish in classrooms hinder teaching the Sami language at the desired level. Umeå University, Uppsala University and Sami Universities of Applied Sciences offer Sami language education and pedagogical courses [8].

Native language learning plays a vital role in maintaining the Sami identity. Beyond transmitting formal knowledge, it also promotes the preservation of the Sami language, cultural traditions, and collective memory. This broader role of education strengthens cultural continuity and supports the transmission of local heritage to future generations. The effectiveness of educational policies remains an important factor in the long-term sustainability of Sami identity.

Sami media in Sweden. The media is also a critical tool for preserving Sami languages and plays a pivotal role in sustaining and strengthening Sami identity in Sweden. Several newspapers, Sami Television, and radio stations cover news, cultural stories, and issues relevant to Sami communities. Sveriges Radio Sápmi broadcasts daily news and cultural content in North, Lule, and South

Sami, thereby supporting multilingual media landscapes.

The oldest Sami periodical, *Samefolket*, was established in 1918. Josefsen and Skogerb emphasised in their research that "in Sweden, concerning print media, no Sami daily or weekly news media exists; however, the magazine *Samefolket* in 2020 had seven issues per year and reports extensively on Sami culture and politics, mainly in Swedish" [14].

The most influential platform for the Sami media in Sweden is SVT Sápmi, the Sami division of Sweden's national public service broadcaster. SVT Sápmi produces television news, cultural programming, and documentaries in Sami languages, ensuring that Sami perspectives reach both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences. Additionally, in 2018-2019, a series of articles on Sami land rights was published in the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* [15]. *Sameradion* is a radio department of Sveriges Radio, which broadcasts in both Sami languages and Swedish across Sweden.

The Sami media play an important role in protecting and promoting Sami identity in Sweden. Media use of the Sami language helps strengthen national identity, prevent language loss, and increase cultural continuity among Indigenous people.

CONCLUSIONS

The research results indicate that.

First, Sweden legally recognises the Sami as an Indigenous People, as set out in its constitution. The state has passed diverse laws to protect their rights. The constitution guarantees the Sami people's status and rights.

Second, Sweden has a state-recognised, elected, and dual-function institution, the Sami Parliament (*Sametinget*). Establishing the Sami Parliament was an important step in promoting Sami political participation.

Third, Sweden seeks to provide a full curriculum and native language education through the *sameskolor*. Language and education are important tools for preserving Sami identity and the national language.

Fourth, in Sweden, decisions such as the *Girjas* case strengthen the legal recognition of traditional land rights, even though gaps remain in territorial autonomy.

Fifth, challenges remain, including limited educational resources, a shortage of qualified teachers, the dominance of Swedish, and unresolved land rights issues.

Thus, Sweden's institutional and legal mechanisms aim to protect Sami rights and identity and support the development of language and cul-

ture. As a result, the evidence strongly suggests that Sweden protects Sami national identity and rights much better because of stronger legal status, dedicated parliamentary institutions, and a greater commitment to mother-tongue education.

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