

# The Sámi in Finland



# The Sámi in Finland

The Sámi are the only indigenous people of the European Union. Peoples in independent countries are regarded as indigenous if they are descended from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and if they identify themselves as indigenous and retain, irrespective of their legal status, some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.

The status of the Sámi was written into the constitution in 1995. They have, as an indigenous people, the right to maintain and develop their own language, culture and traditional livelihoods. There is also a law regarding the right to use the Sámi language when dealing with the authorities.

Since 1996, the Sámi have had constitutional self-government in the Sámi Homeland in the spheres of language and culture. This self-government is managed by the Sámi Parliament, which is elected by the Sámi. The Skolt Sámi also maintain their tradition of village administration, under the Skolt Act, within the area reserved for the Skolt Sámi in the Sámi Homeland.

There are about 9 000 Sámi in Finland. More than 60 per cent of them now live outside the Sámi Homeland, which brings new challenges for the provision of education, services and communications in the Sámi language. The total Sámi population is estimated to be over 75,000, with the majority living in Norway.



# Livelihoods

Traditional Sámi livelihoods include reindeer-herding, fishing, hunting, small-scale agriculture, gathering nature's products and making handicrafts. Today, a common way to make a living is to combine these traditional livelihoods with tourism and services.

Nature-based occupations play a small role in terms of turnover and workforce but are of considerable cultural significance. They are not merely about making a living, but rather part of a traditional way of life.

Some of the Sámi are engaged in traditional livelihoods, but many have a modern job.

In Finland, the definition of a Sámi is laid down in the Act on the Sámi Parliament and is mainly based on the Sámi language. According to the definition, a Sámi is a person who considers him- or herself a Sámi, provided that this person has learnt Sámi as his or her first language or has at least one parent or grandparent whose first language is Sámi.

THE SÁMI HOMELAND is legally defined and covers the municipalities of Enontekiö, Inari and Utsjoki as well as the Lappi reindeer-herding district in the municipality of Sodankylä.



# History

The Sámi are descendants of the people who first inhabited the northern regions of Fennoscandia shortly after the end of the last ice age, approximately 10,000 years ago. Ethnically, the Sámi people was formed when the Sámi language and Finnish became two distinct languages around 2000 BC due to differences in livelihoods and culture.

At its height, from the beginning of the Christian era to the 11th century, the Sámi region stretched from Lake Ladoga to the Arctic Ocean and from Central Scandinavia to the White Sea. With the exception of the south and south-west coast, the Sámi inhabited the whole of what is now Finland. Under the pressure of Finnish settlers, the Sámi became assimilated into the Finnish population in Southern Finland.

In the past, a diverse economy of hunting and fishing was the basis of the Sámi way of life. The Sámi used to live on what nature delivered to them through the seasons. Wild reindeer, fur and fish were sold as far away as Central Europe and provided a profitable means of making a living. Other sources of livelihood included bird hunting, berry picking and gathering, following an annual cycle. The Sámi have probably practised small-scale reindeer-herding for thousands of years.

The Sámi society was highly organised: Families and clans formed *siidas*, which together formed a network covering the whole of Northern Fennoscandia.

After World War II, the Skolt Sámi were settled in Finland in the regions of Sevettijärvi and Nellim, partly in their own areas. Their old homes were now on the Russian side of the border.



## DIVIDED BY BORDERS

From the 16th century onwards, the Sámi society was increasingly caught up in drastic changes caused by outsiders. The Nordic countries started to take control of the land of the Sámi by religious converting, supporting settlement and replacing the Sámi way of administration with a Nordic administrative system. Along with the establishment of present state boundaries, the Sámi area was gradually divided up. When settlement increased in the 19th century, the Nordic states launched a conscious assimilation policy which favoured the interests of the dominant population. The Sámi started to lose their own language and culture.

## THE EMERGENCE OF SÁMI CO-OPERATION

The ethnic and national awakening of the Sámi started in the late 19th century, from Norway and Sweden, leading to the establishment of the first local Sámi associations and newspapers. As the grip of the dominant populations tightened, making the living conditions worse and worse for the Sámi, they started to see the necessity for national co-operation. As a result, the first joint meeting of the southern and northern Sámi was held in Trondheim, Norway, in 1917. After World War II, co-operation was extended across borders. In 1953, the first Sámi Conference, which took place in Jokkmokk, Sweden, focused on the rights of the Sámi to natural resources and their own language. The conference brought together Sámi representatives from three countries and it was agreed that a Saami Council would be set up. A real renaissance of the Sámi culture took place in the late 1960s. It boosted the development of Sámi politics, media, literature, theatre, education, research as well as a number of institutions established by the Sámi themselves.

**THE SAAMI COUNCIL** *Sámiráđđi* is a liaison body between the Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Russian Sámi. It was established in 1956 for the purpose of maintaining the interests of the Sámi as one people and promoting cohesion across borders. The highest organ, the Sámi Conference, meets every four years.

**THE SÁMI PARLIAMENT** *Sámediggi* is responsible for the planning and enforcement of Sámi self-government, provided by the Finnish Constitution, in the spheres of language and culture. It leads the political activities, represents the Sámi in national and international contexts and deals with issues relating to the Sámi language and culture as well as the position of the Sámi as an indigenous people. The 21 members, and 4 vice members, are elected from among the Sámi every four years.

In Finland, in 1996, the Sámi Parliament replaced *the Sámi Delegation*, which had been established in 1973. The Norwegian Sámi Parliament was established in 1989, and the Swedish one in 1993.

**THE SÁMI PARLIAMENTARY COUNCIL** *Sámi parlamentáralaš ráđđi*, established in 2000, is a liaison body between the Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish Sámi parliaments. It has 21 members.



# The Sámi Language

The Sámi languages belong to the indigenous languages of Europe and are most closely related, within the Uralic language family, to the Baltic-Finnic languages (such as Finnish and Estonian). Sámi is spoken in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia.

In Finland, there are speakers of three Sámi languages: North Sámi, Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi. With approximately 20,000 speakers in Finland, Norway and Sweden, North Sámi is the most widely spoken of these languages. In Finland, North Sámi is spoken by approximately 2 000 people.

Inari Sámi is spoken exclusively in Finland. Skolt Sámi is spoken in Finland and in Russia. In Finland, both languages have approximately 300 speakers, most of whom live in Inari, the only municipality in Finland with four official languages: Finnish and three Sámi languages. Under the pressure of the dominant languages, many Sámi have lost their ability to speak their original language. Since the ethnic awakening in the 1960s, a variety of measures have been taken to preserve the Sámi languages and bring them back to life. The Sámi Language Act of 1992, revised in 2004, made Sámi an official language.



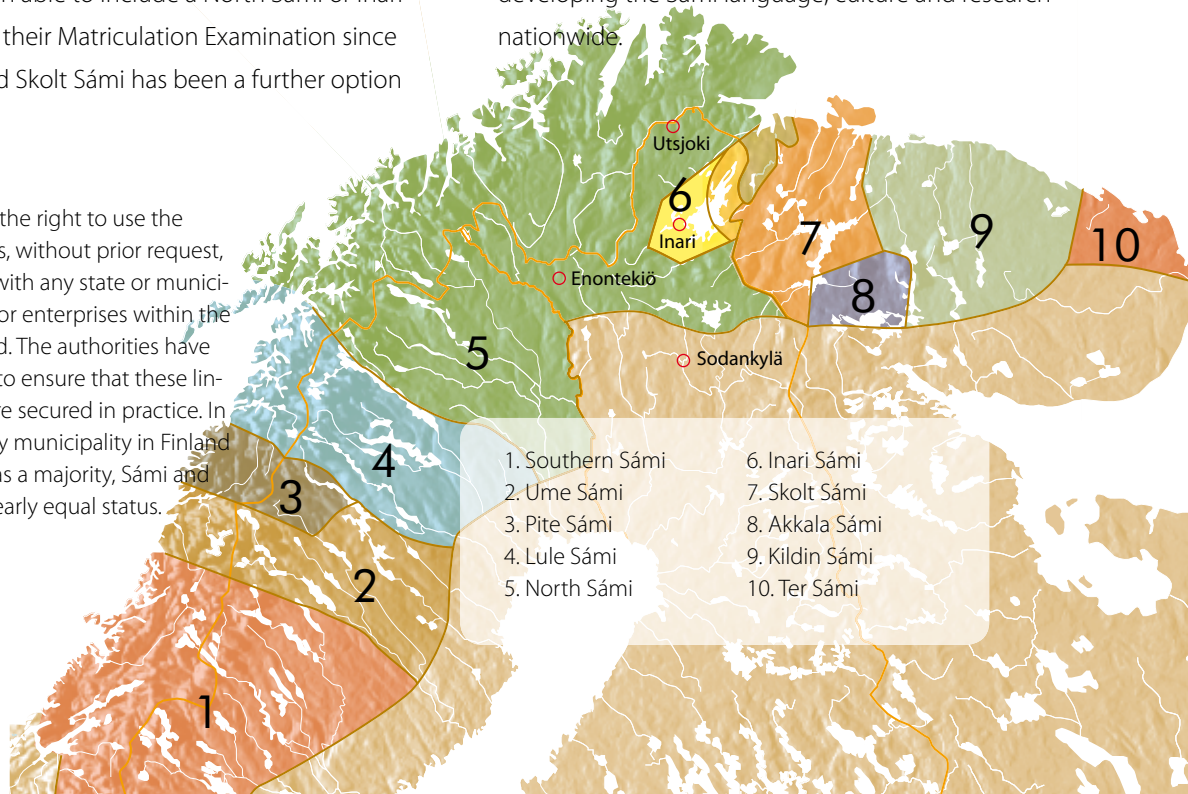
## EDUCATION IN THE SÁMI LANGUAGE

School teaching in the Sámi language dates back to the early years of the comprehensive school system. It was first provided in the mid-1970s for pupils in Utsjoki and Inari. According to the law, Sámi-speaking pupils living in the Sámi Homeland have the right to receive most of their primary education in the Sámi language. The Sámi language can be the teaching language for the school, or pupils must be able to study it as their mother tongue or as an elective subject. All primary and lower secondary schools within the Sámi Homeland provide education in the Sámi language. Students leaving lower secondary education have been able to include a North Sámi or Inari Sámi exam in their Matriculation Examination since the 1990s, and Skolt Sámi has been a further option since 2005.

The Sámi have the right to use the Sámi languages, without prior request, when dealing with any state or municipal authorities or enterprises within the Sámi Homeland. The authorities have the obligation to ensure that these linguistic rights are secured in practice. In Utsjoki, the only municipality in Finland with the Sámi as a majority, Sámi and Finnish have nearly equal status.

Outside the Sámi Homeland, education in and on the Sámi language is scarce, but on the increase. Online teaching is one of the methods used. Teaching materials in the Sámi language are planned and funded by the Education Board of the Sámi Parliament.

The Sámi Educational Centre *Sámi oahpahusguovddáš*, founded to serve the Sámi Homeland and local businesses, is the only institution in Finland providing vocational education in the Sámi language. The Sámi language can be studied at three universities: Oulu, Helsinki and Lapland. The *Giellagas* Institute of the University of Oulu has special responsibility for developing the Sámi language, culture and research nationwide.



# Art



Genuine Sámi handicrafts carry the joint Nordic duodji label, which is owned by the Saami Council and administered by national duodji associations, such as the Finnish Sámi Duodji ry.



Sámi art has its roots in traditional Sámi lifestyle and folklore. There is no art for art's sake, but beauty and practicality always go hand in hand.

**SÁMI HANDICRAFTS – DUODJI** reflect the nomadic lifestyle, making prudent use of natural resources. The aesthetic has traditionally been

subordinate to the practical. Duodji includes clothes, tools, hunting equipment and ornaments made by hand. The shapes, patterns and colours originate from ancient everyday objects, the manufacture of which used to be an essential skill for practically everyone. Traditional materials include horn, bone, wood, tin, leather and fabric.





Handicrafts continue to play an important role in the culture and livelihood of the Sámi. In recent decades, there has been a shift of emphasis towards art products, and these products are unique in the way they are made and shaped.

**THE SÁMI COSTUME** is the most prominent of the national symbols of the Sámi. It carries the history of the Sámi people and is an important part of the national identity. The pieces of clothing included in the costume, as well as the way it is adorned, indicate which part of the Homeland the bearer comes from and even reveal his or her clan and marital status.

In Finland, there are five main versions of the Sámi costume: Teno, Inari, Enontekiö, Vuotso and the Skolt Sámi. The use of the Sámi costume remains unbroken. The costume has previously been used as day-to-day clothing, but it is now worn mainly on special occasions. In Norway and Sweden, only the Sámi use Sámi costumes, while in Finland (imitations of) the costumes have also been used as, for example, tourist paraphernalia, obscuring the link to the Sámi national identity.

**THE VISUAL ARTS OF THE SÁMI** have come a long way from the times of ancient rock paintings thousands of years ago, when the Sámi picture of the world was small enough to be preserved on a piece of reindeer skin stretched over a shamanic drum. Today's artists combine their roots with influences from the dominant populations and from Western institutions. Modern and traditional elements go hand in hand.





**SÁMI MUSIC** is best known for yoiking, or *luohti*, the traditional North Sámi form of song. Typical features include an original use of tones and unrecognisable words, richness of rhythmic, improvisation, a cappella and a strong link to the Sámi culture. There are two main forms of yoik: personal and non-personal. A personal yoik is tied to a person and is meant to reflect the essence of this person by means of melody and gestures; lyrics are less important. Yoiks are also made for animals and places, and today even for objects such as ATVs and snowmobiles. Other traditional forms of Sámi music include the *livđe* of the Inari Sámi and the *leu'dd* of the Skolt Sámi, both of which are at risk of dying out completely.

In the 1960s, the music of the Sámi started to reflect modern trends. Today, you can hear anything from rock, pop, rap, heavy, techno, ethno and dance to hymns and children's songs sung in the Sámi language.

The rune drum, or *goavddis*, was originally used by shamans in ritual contexts. Other instruments include the *fádnonjurgganas*, a flute with 3-5 finger holes made of stems of Garden Angelica (*Angelica archangelica*), and shakers.

Only the Skolt Sámi are known for **DANCE** traditions. If dance was involved in the ritual burial of bears, for example, the tradition was broken on the introduction of Christianity. The dance of the Skolt Sámi is the quadrille, which is of Russian origin. The tradition is kept alive by dance groups in the regions of Sevet-tijärvi and Nellim.

**IJAHS IDJA**, the Indigenous Peoples Music Festival, is held in Inari in the last week of May every year.

**SKÁBMAGOVAT** (*Reflections of the endless night*), the Indigenous Peoples Film Festival held in Inari each January, is the most important forum for Sámi films.

## LITERATURE

The first books in the Sámi language, two religious works, were printed in Sweden in 1619. The first works of fiction by Sámi writers were published in the 1910s.

The beginning of the 1970s saw a major breakthrough and increase in the amount of Sámi literature. Sámi writers, who had been deprived of their native language, identity and culture during their years at school, started to describe their collective experience, at the same time developing forms of expression in the Sámi language.

Kirsti Palto's first book, *Let Our Reindeer Graze Free* (*Guhtoset dearvan min bohccot*) was shortlisted for the Finlandia Prize in 1986. *The Sun, My Father* (*Beaivi, áhčážan*, 1988), a collection of epic poems by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, was awarded the Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 1991.

**SÁMI FILM** came to prominence in 1987 with *the Pathfinder* (*Ofelaš*), a film directed by Nils Gaup which was nominated for an Oscar. A "new wave" of Sámi films and directors was experienced at the beginning of the 2000s, partly due to increased provision of education in film-making in the north.

## Media

The most important communication channel for the Sámi is *Sámi Radio*. Finland's national broadcaster started supplying Sámi-language news on a regular basis in October 1947. The radio station is an important source of information and also culture. It supports, for example, the spread and adoption of new words and expressions relating to modern life and society.

*Oddasat*, TV news in the Sámi language, was introduced at the beginning of 2002, and Sámi-language programmes for children have been shown since autumn 2007. The TV programmes, co-produced with the Finnish *Sámi Radio*, the Norwegian *NRK Sámi Radio* and the Swedish *SVT Sápmi*, are also available to view on the Internet.

*Sápmelaš* was the first Sámi-language magazine to be published in Finland. From 1935 to 2002, it was written in North Sámi. The Inari Sámi Language Association has published a journal called *Anarâš* since 1987. In addition, the Sámi in Finland have access to North Sámi publications from Norway.



SIIDA in Inari is the home of the Sámi Museum and the Northern Lapland Nature Centre. With its cultural and nature exhibitions, it is both a meeting place and an exhibition centre. Siida provides the visitor with new experiences and information about the Sámi culture and the nature of Northern Lapland. [www.siida.fi](http://www.siida.fi)

*Guhkin davvin Dávvgaid vuolde  
sabmá suolggai Sámieatnan:  
Duottar leabbá duoddar duohkin,  
jávri seabbá jávrrri lahka,  
čohkat čilggiin, čorut čearuin  
allánaddet almmi vuostá;*

Harri Nurminen

**THE SONG OF THE SÁMI FAMILY** *Sámi soga lávlla* is the official national anthem of the Sámi. The words were written by Isak Saba, the first Sámi Member of Parliament, and the music is by the Norwegian composer Arne Sørliie.

**THE SÁMI FLAG** *Sámi leavga* was designed by the Sámi artist Astrid Båhl. The motif was derived from the shaman's drum and the poem *Sons of the Sun* (*Páiven párneh*) by the south Sámi Anders Fjellner, describing the Sámi as sons and daughters of the sun. The circles represent the sun (red) and the moon (blue).



Both the flag and the national anthem were approved at the 13th Sámi Conference in Åre in 1986. The melody of the anthem was approved at the 15th Sámi Conference in Helsinki in 1992.

The Sámi have eleven flag days, the most important of which is the Sámi National Day *Sámi álbmotbeaivi* on 6 February. This is the date when the northern and southern Sámi came together across their national borders for their first meeting in Trondheim, Norway. The flag may also be flown unofficially on special occasions.



SÁMEDIGGI  
SÄMITIGGE  
SÄÄ'MTE'ĞĞ  
SAAMELAISKÄRÄJÄT



FINNISH TOURIST  
BOARD

Saamelaiskäräjät – Sametinget – The Sámi Parliament  
FI-99870 Inari | [www.samediggi.fi](http://www.samediggi.fi)

Sámi Parliament Publications 2008. Translation Multidoc Oy. Kalevaprint 2008.  
Graphic design Studio Borga. Front cover images Harri Nurminen, Martti Rikkonen.