

# A Summary of the Saami (Lapp) Situation in Finland

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## 1 Introduction

The Saami peoples occupied a significant part of modern Scandinavia from some point in the Bronze Age until the second century A.D., when the arrival of new settlers—Finns and Swedes—pressured the nomadic Saami tribes to move north into areas poorer in resources.<sup>1</sup> The Saami were apparently undisturbed in their nomadic lifestyle there until the Middle Ages when other tribes and crowns took an interest in the Saami economy. Several states laid claim to the Saami territory (including Russia, Sweden, and Denmark-Norway), colonized it, and eventually divided it amongst themselves. What has become modern Finnish Lapland (*Sámiid ruovttuguovlu*) was ruled first by Sweden, then Russia, and finally by an independent Finland. The Finnish government claimed the Saami lands as state property in 1925, creating a situation in which many Saami people felt compelled to abandon their culture and join that of the Finnish majority.<sup>2</sup>

Today, fewer than 5,000 people are registered as Saami in Finland, and approximately 2500 of those speak a member of the Saami language group,<sup>3</sup> a group which consists of at least 10 varieties with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility. Despite these small numbers, some Saami in Finland are uniting with the larger Saami community and are

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<sup>1</sup>Modeen p. 133.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Grimes.

using Saami as a language of both high and low culture. The world literature community—Dana (1997) for example—has taken notice of the strong showing of Saami authors, and similar validations can be found for Saami music<sup>4</sup> and Saami film.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Recent and Current Language Policies

In the late 1940s, the Saami people petitioned the Finnish government for help in ensuring the continuance of Saami language and culture. In response, the Finnish government created a series of committees, boards, and councils: the Committee on Saami Affairs in 1949, the Advisory Council on Saami Affairs in 1960, and several other committees directly dealing with issues of Saami-language schooling and the economic, social, and legal situation of the Saami peoples in the early 1970s.<sup>6</sup> This last committee determined in 1973 that the Saami community enjoyed “almost no particular rights in Finland,” although teachers were strongly encouraged to teach the Saami language in elementary schools where feasible.<sup>7</sup>

Finland’s government was embarrassed by the report of their failure, and began generating a lot of proposals. Several proposals centered around the idea of a “Lapp Act” which would officially recognize anyone as Saami who wished to be recognized as such, and which would declare the northern region of Finland to be officially bilingual (Saami / Finnish). Other proposals—eventually ratified in 1995—suggested amending the Finnish constitution to include provisions for maintaining the status of the Saami ethnic group.<sup>8</sup>

Slowly, these proposals began to be formed into bills and enacted. In 1973, the Finnish parliament issued a decree creating a Saami parliament, although this body was only given consultative powers<sup>9</sup> (which were greatly expanded in 1996<sup>10</sup>). The first legal provisions

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<sup>4</sup>Lofthus.

<sup>5</sup>Kauffmann.

<sup>6</sup>Modeen pp. 137–138.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 139.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 141.

<sup>9</sup>UN Chronicle 1993.

<sup>10</sup>Virtual Finland.

for native-language instruction of Saami children in primary schools were made in 1983 and extended in 1991, in 1995, and again in 1999, giving Saami speaking students the right to receive native-language instruction in their core curriculum from grades one through nine (both in “*gymnasia*” and comprehensive schools as well as in vocational schools)<sup>11</sup>. The Saami Language Act was passed in 1992, giving Saami of any citizenship the right to communicate with the authorities in their native tongue and to speak Saami in the meetings of any public boards or committees on which they serve.<sup>12</sup>

### **3 Language Policy Implementation**

Modeen (1999) reports that the implementation of Saami Language Act has progressed to the point where government paperwork such as tax returns is available in “Lappish” (by which he perhaps means the Northern Saami language). Interpreters are provided for interaction with the authorities. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland states that the Finnish Broadcasting Company is required to provide news in Saami, and that national radio broadcasts 40 hours in Saami every week.<sup>13</sup> The Ministry also reports that during the 1997/1998 academic year more than 400 students were being taught Saami and that more than 100 Saami students were receiving native-language instruction in their core classes. The national government pays all costs of the generation of teaching materials in Saami as well as the training of Saami teachers.

### **4 Community Reaction**

Despite the availability of interpreters, Modeen (1999, p. 147) writes that nearly all communication between the Saami and the Finnish authorities takes place in Finnish. He observes that “the Lapps all master Finnish,” and concludes that speaking in Finnish with the au-

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Modeen.

<sup>13</sup>Virtual Finland.

thorities is therefore not only more customary, but also more convenient as it can be done without the intervention of an interpreter. He also records that the Saami are annoyed that the language used in the Finnish legislation implies the existence of a single Saami language, even though there are at least three distinct varieties of Saami spoken in Finland. He describes the Saami leadership as “afraid” that the continued implementation of this policy might be too slow to save the Saami culture.

Others are much more optimistic and portray the Saami as a people vigorously attached to their traditional ways. Hutchings (1995) writes, “. . . their strong sense of independence guarantees that the [Saami] are never likely to fade into obscurity,” a sentiment echoed by Oliver/Powell (1996). While the survival of a culture and the survival of the associated language do not necessarily go hand in hand, the continuation of the culture is certainly an incentive to maintain the language.

## **5 Conclusions**

In many ways, the (recent) Finnish treatment of their indigenous population is quite exemplary. The high cost of creating educational materials and training teachers is borne entirely by the government, and it seems likely that the government will continue such funding until either interest in Saami instruction wanes or a sufficient amount of books, teachers, etc. are available for Saami schools. Provisions have been made for the use of Saami in most public situations. In other ways, the Finnish government has failed; they have failed to acknowledge the linguistic diversity of the Saami peoples and they were also extremely slow in moving from the requests made in the 1940s until the first (language specific) legislation was passed in 1983.

Modeen’s choice of the word “custom” to describe the use of Finnish in the Saami dealings with the authorities suggests the possibility of a diglossic situation. He may be a poor judge of linguistic matters, though, as he details in his introduction the history of

the intricate system of the Saami courts and councils and then states in his conclusion that “[t]he Lapp language still lacks the vocabulary needed for government and administration of justice.” If there is a diglossic relationship between Saami and Finnish, then the situation may truly be very stable, but it seems more likely that the Saami are “accustomed” to communicating with the authorities in Finnish because that was their only option.

Overall, the situation of (Northern) Saami in Finland is better than would be expected for the language of such a small minority. If good materials and teachers can be introduced into the Saami school system in a reasonable amount of time, it is very possible that Saami will make it into the 22<sup>nd</sup> century.

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