Sami country – known as Sápmi – stretches across the northern part of the Arctic region of Scandinavia and Russia’s Kola Peninsula. The Sami have been recognized by the United Nations as an indigenous people, giving them the right to preserve and develop their crafts, language, education, reindeer keeping, traditions and identity. There is no census for the Sami, but the population is estimated at around 70,000 people, spread over four countries: approximately 20,000 in Sweden, 40,000 in Norway, 6,000 in Finland and 2,000 in Russia (the Kola Peninsula).

A nomadic people

The Sami were originally nomads, living in tents during the summer and more sturdy peat huts during the colder seasons. Some Sami still live in tents, but most have modern housing. Many Sami have migrated to the south of Sweden. Today, only ten per cent of Swedish Sami earn a living from the reindeer industry, and many combine their family businesses with tourism or fishing.

Reindeer husbandry

The Sami are often referred to as ‘the people of eight seasons’ – their reindeer industry has specific seasons for calving, marking, counting, castrating and slaughtering.

Changes in grazing rights and logging territories have led to new forms of industry. In 2011, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Sami, giving them common law rights to a specific area of land – possibly the most important modern verdict regarding Sami issues of law.

Much of today’s reindeer industry is simple meat production. During the traditional migration of entire reindeer herds, the herders and their families would also move, by foot or on skis. Nowadays, many use snow scooters, trucks or helicopters, but some still prefer horses.

Business and politics

Some Sami live in the mountains, while others live in forest villages. A Sami village is an economical and administrative union, created with the intention of keeping reindeer and regulated by Swedish reindeer husbandry law. Each village hosts several reindeer businesses, and has a separate area fenced off for pasture. Many businesses also manage reindeer belonging to people who work or live away from the village.

Towards the end of the 19th century, many Sami settled permanently to both farm and keep reindeer (mixed husbandry). The previous nomadic lifestyles of some, however, led the authorities to...
make some contentious decisions, the repercussions of which extended well into the 20th century. The reindeer pasture law of 1928 limited reindeer ownership and membership in any Sami village to herders and their families. The new restrictions meant that mixed husbandry farmers had to slaughter their reindeer or lose their right to brand them.

Today, younger generations are finding other professions, and the Sami are trying to ease the regulations so people can belong to a Sami village without having to own reindeer.

The Sami language

The Sami have their own language, which stretches across Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. The language is divided into three main dialects: Northern Sami in the northernmost area, Lule Sami around Jokkmokk, Gällivare and parts of Tysfjord in Norway, and Southern Sami in the southern area around Västerbotten and Jämtland, as well as near the Sápmi geographical border in Härjedalen and Dalarna.

The Swedish Government has given the Sami parliament (Sametinget) greater influence and financial resources to preserve the Sami language. Eighteen municipalities have been selected to protect, promote, retain and develop Sami culture, and to form consultative groups.

Approximately 6,000 Sami speak their mother tongue, 90 per cent of them Northern Sami.

Sami is a rich language. There are, for instance, more than 100 different ways of saying snow. But despite its abundance of descriptive words, the language is genderless: for example, the personal pronoun son can mean him and her, as well as an animal or an object.

Written Sami was not linked to the Swedish alphabet until 1950. It was then also given an additional seven letters, pronounced with lisping sounds not found in Swedish. Guidelines for the language’s orthography were printed in 1979. This is probably one reason many older Sami can neither read nor write their own language.

Education

A high-school-level education centre was established in 1942, and today operates in Jokkmokk in northern Sweden. It offers training in reindeer husbandry, traditional cooking, handicrafts and the Sami language. It operates as a foundation with board members from the SSR and RSÅ Sami associations, as well as Jokkmokk municipality.

The students board during term time, and have access to modern study and work areas.

There are six Sami schools in Sweden, in Karesuando, Lannavaara, Kiruna, Gällivare, Jokkmokk and Tärnaby in southern Sápmi.

In Sweden, academic courses in the Sami language can be taken at Umeå and Uppsala universities. The centre for Sami research, CeSam, in Umeå coordi-
DID YOU KNOW?

• Reindeer milk tastes sweet and looks like melted ice cream.
• Reindeers eat mushrooms, lichen, grass and herbs.
• There are 51 Sami villages, the largest one being Sirkas in Jokkmokk.
• Sami shoes and gloves are made from reindeer hide.
• The Sami national song was written by Isak Saba.
• Typical Sami first names are Ante, Risstin, Sunna and Aslak. Double names such as Per-Anders, Lars-Nila and Elle-Maret are also common.

As of 1993, the Sami have had their own parliamentary body elected by popular vote, Sametinget. Its task is to safeguard, develop and coordinate all matters concerning Sami areas of interest.

Elections to the Sami parliament are held every four years. The parliament has 31 members who gather three times a year in different locations around Sweden. Over the years, the political parties have changed, both in policy and number. Sametinget is financed by grants from the Swedish Government and has one full-time politician, the assembly chair.

Those on the Sami electoral register – open to those who speak Sami at home and feel part of Sami society – are eligible to vote. The numbers registering to vote have increased in recent years, not least because of a growing interest in political issues among young Sami and a growing willingness among older Sami to accept their ethnicity.

The Sami parliament
The Sami political struggle for increased influence and autonomy began in the 1950s with the establishment of Sami associations. Today, the Sami are largely represented through four stakeholder organizations: a political party (LSS), two national federations (RSÄ and SSR) and a youth organization, Saminuorra. These focus on different areas of interest and might best be described as lobby organizations.

MUSIC, THEATRE AND DANCE

Yoik is traditional Sami singing, and was originally closely linked to Sami religion. Seen as a pagan and uncultured activity, it was long banned by the Government. Yoiks describe something or someone. A yoik is passed down through generations, its style determined by its origin. Southern Sami yoiks include animal sounds, while those from the north tend to be about places.

Sami music today is a blend of yoik, rock and contemporary music. Sofia Jannok, for example, performed the ABBA hit Waterloo in Sami at the Swedish Song for Europe contest in 2011. Other singers who mix traditional yoiks with pop music are Mari Boine and Wimme Saari. Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, better known as Áillohaš, saw the yoik as an art form early on and created many works of poetry.

Theatre is a newer art form, often based on old legends or stories. The Sami have a rich storytelling culture, which has gained new perspectives through the theatre. The Sami Theatre in Giron, the Sami name for Kiruna, puts on several productions each year.
Aims for greater autonomy
The parliament has expressed its wish to build a Sami-influenced parliament building in Kiruna.

Among the various issues, one goal unites all the political parties: greater autonomy. At present, Sametinget is empowered only to deal with matters concerning hunting and fishing, reindeer herding, compensation for damage caused by predators, and Sami language and culture.

The Sami parliaments in Finland, Norway and Sweden have drawn up a joint Nordic convention to strengthen their position as a minority people and influence decisions on Sami-related matters.

New ways and old traditions
The Sametinget has created opportunities for the Sami people to care for their culture, traditions and language by designating certain municipalities as administrative centres. This has meant new opportunities to further Sami interests and include Sami-speaking staff at nursing homes, Sami history in primary schools and Sami information signs in schools and other municipality premises.

Another focus area is traditional Sami food. Previous generations grew up using everything from the reindeer, the meat being a permanent feature in Sami cooking. Many young Sami want to rediscover dishes that were disappearing, and traditional, local recipes have found new followers among both Sami and non-Sami. Classic dishes are also being given new twists, one example being reindeer carpaccio.

Sami handicrafts – Duodji
Reindeer are a big part of Sami culture, providing food and raw materials for everyday use. Sami pass on knowledge about reindeer through formal education and from generation to generation. Traditionally, every part of the reindeer was kept and used – skin and horns for making shoes and knives, meat to cook or for further processing.

Sami handicrafts, duodji, use natural materials and often have soft rounded shapes, pleasing to the touch but functional. Elaborate ornamentation was, and is, important, for showing off the maker’s skills and to preserve family and cultural designs.

Many Sami make handicrafts to boost their income, but few earn a living from it. A certificate of Sami handicraft quality guarantees authenticity for the buyer, and indicates that the maker is recognized within the industry.

New styles and materials have made their way into Sami crafts, and today, a variety of techniques such as metal casting, visual arts and photography are used. The more modern the art form, the more accessible it is for younger Sami.

Reindeer meat is rich in minerals and very lean.