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A Sami History of the World

The Sami people and what constitutes Sami identity have always been seen as functions of their geographical territory at the extreme northern edge of Europe. A History of the Sami World however does not focus on the people living in Sápmi– Samiland – but follows the Sami who travelled and discovered the rest of the world.

They allowed themselves to be put on display in American and European ‘World Exhibitions’. Entrepreneurial Zoo owners such as the German Carl Hagenbeck showed off Sami people in zoological gardens. The new style of commercial publicity reflected industrialisation and international capitalism and, for as long as the public on many continents were showing a tremendous interest, the Sami – as well as several other aboriginal peoples – became energetically exploited in advertising. The exotic was profitable.

The Sami were active participants in the heroic era of polar exploration, when the last white regions on the world map were investigated by expeditions led by famous explorers. Quite rightly, the Sami were regarded as experts on survival in an extremely cold and inhospitable climate. Their role in charting the Arctic clearly belongs in a ‘world history’ of this people.

The Sami History of the World is a unique book – nothing like it has been written before.

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A Sami History of the World
Hugo Lauritz Jenssen

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Hugo Lauritz Jenssen (b. 1962) is a journalist and author. He writes for Dagens Næringsliv and D2, among other publications. Jenssen has written numerous books, among them the Brage Prize-nominated *The High Rise* – a building philosophy.



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Synopsis

A Sami History of the World

An Arctic indigenous people went out to conquer the world.
How they confronted racism and entered into a blood brotherhood with capitalism

Sample Translation

A Sami History of the World

By Hugo Lauritz Jenssen

Translated by Anna Paterson

CHAPTER THREE

“ARTS OF THE DEVIL”

BASQUE AND SAMI?

My book is not intended to deal primarily with the Sami based in their Sápmi territories but to follow the trails of those who left home to discover the rest of the world. They encountered warm receptions as well as unrelenting racism in that outside world. I might – indeed, I should – ask myself the question: is it possible to write a world history about a people – say, about the Sami? Even if the elusive concept ‘world history’ were to be defined as a study of the role of the Sami people, not only over a long period of time but also in terms of the movements of individuals across the map of the world? The Sami have strong bonds with their upland plains and hills, moors, forests and fjords but have inherited a life-time custom of travelling along nomadic routes, regardless of the boundaries of the states that claim national rights to areas of the North Cap. Their

journeying is surely relevant to their history as a people who has chosen to be boundless despite their shared identity being so deeply rooted in a geographically distinct locality, and, like the dramas and challenges of their lives, played out against a backdrop of a distinctive landscape and a very special natural environment? In other words: is it possible to write a world history about a people who lodge in temporary places offered by strangers, in countries forced on them and in politically sketchy regions scattered over the globe – and who, driven by an unquenchable urge to travel, have acted as unofficial and unpaid ambassadors? Can any narrative do justice to these men and women who sought to find a way out, crashed through the fences of topography and racism, tore themselves free from their seemingly indissoluble, symbiotic connections to the spirit of the places where they grew up – and who, by freeing themselves, strengthened their Sami identity as well as bearing witness to the wider world about the adventurous, merciless lands of the far north?

I will risk saying that the answers to these questions are, in all cases, a resounding yes. This book of mine – its very title – is obviously, and enthusiastically, drawing on the inspiring work of the American writer Mark Kurlansky.¹ Kurlansky has written the world history of the Basque people, and also chronicled the world-wide history of, among other things, cod, salt and paper.

He tells us about how, in the nineteenth century, Basque skulls, just as the skulls of Sami people, were measured and their appearance recorded in detail. Depending on which study you chose to believe, the Basque were either Turks, Tartars, Magyars (Hungarians) or Sami. Or, possibly, they could be the descendants of the Cro-Magnon tribe, which originated either in the Basque country or in Berber territory in North Africa. The Basque language turned out to be an even more valuable historic inheritance than the old skulls. This language, [Euskara \[Batua\]](#), has kept its ancient forms more consistently than most other languages. People have made innumerable attempts to place Euskara in a family of languages. In the early twentieth century,

¹ Kurlansky: *The Basque History of the World*, 1999.

various linguists argued that they had established links between the Sami and the Basque and that the Sami were the lost tribal ancestors of the Basque – or *vice versa*. These studies have been left largely untouched, seen as curiosities based on a mistaken conclusion; parentheses in the history of linguistic research (*L'Origine des Basques* by abbé J. Espagnol (1900) insists that the Basque were in fact Jews). Neither Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian or Sami – or Basque – has Indo-European roots; they all belong to a mixed minority group on the language map of Europe. Nowadays, Euskara is regarded as the sole member of the Basque language family.²

The Basque and Sami languages are hard to analyse and both peoples lived in far-flung regions of Europe. It is enlightening, I feel, to note that the Sami are almost as devoted to their history of the world as are the Basque to theirs. My observations and speculations will focus on the Sami – a nomadic people – as they travelled far from the grazing heaths of their homelands and also joined expeditions, whether small and unknown, or grand and challenging; I will pay special attention to the inherited *Wanderlust* that took them so far from the seasonal routes of their reindeer herds.

THE SHAMING GAZE

As distinct from the more common take on the Sami as separated from the world at large (a view that has been most commonly held), this book is intended to emphasise the many ways in which the Sami were connected to the world and participated in it. There will be those who respond critically to my discussing these journeys and experiences – especially in the context of exhibitions – in such a positive and optimistic tone. Surely, in many of the places where the Sami allowed themselves to be exhibited, they were systematically disparaged and laughed at? For a long time, this was widely regarded as the accepted truth. It is actually closer to the truth to put it the other

² Kurlansky, pp. 21, 23, 25.

way round: the exhibitions offered many Sami, individuals as well as families, unique opportunities to see the world. I believe that, in the main, their experiences were good. It was, of course, part of the history of the colonial era – a dismal period – to show off the *wild natives*, different and ‘primitive’ people who lived close to nature, whether they were Senegalese or Sami. Those who agreed to have themselves exhibited (force was sometimes used), were presented as being less highly developed than their European and American audiences. Even so, the prominent pro-Sami political activist and newspaper editor Daniel Mortenson from Hotagen chose to go to the 1893 World Exhibition in Chicago as a participant in the exhibition: just one example of how greater nuancing is needed to portray oppressed as well as oppressor. To repudiate the Sami’s own views and decisions would be to discriminate twice over. So, the Sami were *not* simply victims in the tradition of exhibitions.³

For all time, the richness of human traffic has fascinated us more than anything else: it is a case of looking at the Other; most interestingly, at those who look different to us or live in ways different to ourselves. Learning about the alien is part of this fascination, but so are the common aspects of daily life – the essential living conditions – shared by people everywhere. Naturally, I feel it, too; I’m aware that I am an inveterate cultural peeping-Tom.

Over many centuries, conventional ideas about the Sami have become consolidated from a mixture of prejudice, curiosity and actual knowledge but also from elements of their own fight-back. Recognition of the Sami identity has been resisted and this has led to resignation as well as a few victories – even though they came late. They have been subjected to endless anthropological investigations, from learned to quite bizarre. The Sami have naturally not escaped untouched,

³ Gunnar Broberg's article *Lappkaravaner på villovägar. Antropologien och synet på samerna fram mot seckelskiftet* (Lost Lapp Caravans. Anthropology and the views of the Sami until the beginning of the 20th century; Lychnos, 1981–82) was sharply critical of the exhibition practice. One reply was given in the doctoral thesis by Cathrine Baglo *På ville veger? Levende utstillinger av samer i Europa og Amerika* (Lost Lapps? Live Sami exhibits in Europe and America; UiT, 2011). Baglo stresses that the Sami allowed themselves to be exhibited, were usually well paid and travelled widely although tourism was still a project in progress.

especially not from the flashy powers and temptations of advertising. They have been in on the critically important, heroic acts during the historical epoch of ground-breaking expeditions that opened up new territories, and taken part in explorations of the most inhospitable parts on the planet. Presentations of the essential qualities of being a Sami were in the spotlight during the Enlightenment period, which has not ended yet. In addition, the freeing up of world trade and the often brutal growth of capitalism, which eventually eroded the privileges of mercantilism, monopolies and suspicions about the value of imports, have made contributions to knowledge that should not be underestimated. Zealous efforts by missionaries drove the Sami into a kind of shadow belief, between their own nature-based religion and the threatening promise by Christianity of either salvation or damnation. The double face of Christianity was represented by the insistence that christening offered mercy and eternal life. The missions to the Sami were disastrous and laid waste to their culture.

IN THE TOWER BLOCKS OF THE GOVERNMENT

Moving on to the 1980s might seem a long leap, but the beginning of that decade actually brought more of the same old story of colonialization leading to humiliation and a dreadful loss of cultural traditions and identity. The battle of the Alta-Kautokeino watercourse escalated throughout the years 1979 to 1981, and became the most important and dramatic single event in the history of the Sami in Norway since the Kautokeino rebellion in 1852. The confrontation concerned the building of a dam in the Sami heartlands and received attention from the international press and media; newspapers such as Pravda and New York Times devoted columns to the sensational outcome on 13 January 1981.⁴

⁴ Morris pp. 198–202. Nordlys (Northern Light; Nils Henrik Måsø), 8 June 2002.

As part of the confrontations, two hunger strikes were held, both in Oslo. They were spectacular and intensified the insight into the whole scene: everything was happening in the public space.

The first hunger strike was staged in 1979, in front of the parliament building Stortinget. A banner raised on the square in front of the building carried the simple message: *We are on hunger strike*. Which was exactly what they were doing. The activist Niillas Aslaksen Somby belonged to the Sami action group (*Samisk aksjonsgruppe*) and was one of those who had joined the hunger strike. It was here that Mattis Hætta sang the joik⁵ that was the refrain in the song chosen as the Norwegian entry in the following year's Eurovision Song Contest. The Sami Action Group took their lead from Charter77, an organisation that was founded by the four dissidents Václav Havel, Pavel Kohout, Jiří Hájek and Zdeněk Mlynář and fought for democracy in the then Communist-led Czechoslovakia.

Somby himself had seen action in several confrontations, all adding up to a fight for liberation. For many decades, Somby and his relatives had attempted to get the remains of his ancestor Mons Aslaksen Somby released from the Anatomical Institute at Oslo University. After the Kautokeino rebellion in 1852, Mons Somby and Aslak Jacobsen Hætta had been executed by decapitation in 1854. Their bodies, but not their heads, were buried at Kåfjord Church near Alta. Both names are entered under the heading "Buried, also the stillborn" in the parish records and their identity described as 'Mountain Finn'.

Meanwhile, their heads had been parcelled up and sent to King Frederik's Royal University in Christiania (now: Oslo) as the first specimens in the Schreiner Collections. Somby's skull was delivered to his descendants first in 1996. Hætta's skull was not in Oslo but was eventually located in a collection of craniums kept in Copenhagen University. The case for the return of these

⁵ Traditional form of Sami song (transl. note)

remains was also backed by the Sami parliament (Sametinget), its president Ole Henrik Magga and the Principal of the University in Oslo, Lucy Smith.

The second hunger strike was initiated by the Oslo Christian Student Society in 1981. This time, the Sami activists raised a lavvu⁶ on the square in front to the Stortinget. This time the hunger strike was a life or death struggle. Arguably the most important confrontation took place on 6 February 1981 – two days after the Gro Harlem Brundtland government had taken over. Brundtland and the Minister for Communities received a delegation of fourteen Sami women and one five-year-old child. They were led by Ellen Marit Gaup Dunfjeld.⁷ The meeting began at 0900 hours in conference room II on the fifteenth floor of the Tower Block in the Government Quarter. They stayed there: it soon became clear the women refused to leave the room. Less than a month earlier, a violent police raid had been made on demonstrators in Stilla. Now, the battle had moved south and opened up in the capital city.

In the Tower Block lobby, 110 demonstrators linked arms. The occupation of the conference room on the fifteenth floor lasted well into the night when the police arrived and arrested the activists. The police waited until about 04.30 am before moving in. This episode is described, in rather soothing terms, in Dag Berggrav's book *Maktens høyborg (The Fortress of Power)*; he says, among other things: "Most of them left willingly, walking on their own. Some of them were kicking and had to be carried [...] The whole thing was a quite calm affair and there is every reason to praise the police for the restraint with which they managed everything. The conclusion must be that the 'occupation' was concluded without bloodshed or any lasting damage."⁸

Several of the women however felt they had been part of a much more dramatic event. Five year old Ellen Kristina Saba (later to become a politician) recalls how the Sami were forced out of

⁶ Lavvu or lavvo is a Sami tent, usually made of skins (transl. note)

⁷ «Ville lamme samfunnsmaskineriet» («Wanted to paralyse the social machinery» - Editorial). Klassekampen, 6 September 2006.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 42–45 and in Jensen pp. 197–198.

the conference room and taken to the Tower Block basement where they were “pushed into police cars and driven to the Oslo police headquarters”.⁹ One of the hunger strikers in front of the Stortinget was Mikkel Eira from Masi. He went to the castle whether he was granted an audience with the King. He later declared that King Olav was king of the Sami.¹⁰ As part of his hunger strike, Eira starved himself a for so long – thirty days – that he lost consciousness in Stockholm, where he and two other hunger striker had been driven to let them escape being forcibly fed.¹¹

Ellen Marit Gaup Dunfjeld met Pope John Paul II – the Pole Karol Józef Wojtyła was the first pope for 455 years who had not been an Italian – in the Vatican. Gaup Dunfjeld also presented the cause of the Sami people in the United Nations headquarter in New York. “She drew her strength and enthusiasm from her profound recognition of her Sami origins”, wrote Ketil Lund in his obituary of her. ¹² On the same date, 6 February, as Gaup Dunfjeld and the other Sami women occupied the offices of the Prime Minister, the Sami activist Elsa Laula Renberg had in 1917 opened the first Sami national gathering in Trondheim. The Sami national day has been agreed to fall on the 6 February.

Explosive moments in history had somehow merged. Driven by desperation, the Sami had taken the now unavoidable step onto the stage of international politics.

SAMI NEIGHBOURS.

At some point in time, I must have realised that the Rana of my childhood had once been where many Sami lived and that my home village had been the central place in the Sami geography. They were a large part of the local population – indeed, the majority.

⁹ *Ellen Kristina Saba. Endelig hedret [Honoured at last].* nsr.no (Norske Samers Riksforbund), 28 February 2005.

¹⁰ *Alta-konflikten for 10 år siden endret miljø-Norge og samesaken.* (Ten years ago the Alta conflict changed the Norwegian environment and the Sami cause. NTB, 15 January 1991.

¹¹ Hjorthol p. 122–128.

¹² *Aftenposten*, 31 May 1991.

The father of Petter Dass was a migrant from Dundee in Scotland. Young Petter Dass was to be ordained, once he had made a humiliating trip to Copenhagen where he had to ask the King's forgiveness for having made his betrothed Margrethe pregnant before the marriage had taken place. He served his Lord, first in Nesna (it is on the coast of the long fjord that ends in Mo, in Rana), where he also in fish, before becoming the wealthy, powerful minister in Alstahaug parish, which is in the more southern district of Helgeland. It was a huge parish that included Rana, but Dass was not in favour of having a church built there. The clergy's tithe – a church tax on the farmers – was paid by around 1300 tenant farmers and more than 100 freeholder farmers.

Petter Dass was a respected, well liked and colourful poet-priest. The ink with which he had penned his description of the north, or Nordland dried in 1696. His great work is best known under the title *Nordlands Trompet* ('Nordland's Trumpet'). Dass almost certainly knew that he had created a masterpiece but it was not printed until 1739 and, by then, Herr Petter had been dead for more than thirty years.

I feel a little wistful nowadays when I read Petter Dass. Earlier, I read his work with uncritical delight at the poetic power of his language that is so vital (and fruity) and so much of the region that is northern Norway. Also, I regarded him as *mine*, just as many others in my part of the world had taken him to heart as their literary house-god – in a way, we shared roots in the same rocky beaches. His biography was a story of the trials of a heroic poet living the extreme north. By now, however, my respect for Dass is flawed, even though I realise I should not read historical works with the gaze of someone alive today. That attitude usually leads you up a blind alley. Still, I cannot completely ignore my own mind and time. His book includes a chapter devoted to 'The Lapps and the Finns'.¹³ The description of the Sami is heavily burdened with racist prejudice and stereotypical representations: the 'Lapp' is sharp-eyed but his mind is embittered, and his face

¹³ Dass, pp. 64–73: *Om Lapperne og Findene*.

brown and weather-beaten; “In Build, he is short of Leg and in his Stature, stunted, not unlike a Dwarf”. As a people, he feels they have “an inscrutable Nature”. He writes about how rare it is to come across a tall, well-built Sami man – unless, of course, “his Mother is suspected of Whoring”. At the same time, Petter Dass cannot deny his respect for the Sami capacity for leading a life that depends only on the most basic elements: the houses were like “six or eight birch-bark baskets (put together)” but the Sami were satisfied by these turf-covered shelters. If a Sami had owned “Persian Finery”, he could not have been more content. Dass is intrigued by their footwear and their trousers, which are cut from a single piece of cloth. His comments on sure-footed speed of the Sami could have been lifted out of a description of Native Americans. He also admired the women’s skill in spinning with tendons from the legs of reindeer: abroad, the results would be valued as much as “the finest Linen [thread]”.

Petter Dass also writes: “Lamentable that the Lappish Breed / Is full of Belief in a Pagan Creed.” As their minister, he despairs at not being able to reach these God’s children in his parish with the message of Sin, Faith and Salvation; he expressed the wish that he could speak “the Lappish Tongue”. Then, they would hopefully be converted to the True Faith. He muses that he has been told “they commune with the Devil” in many settlements and that the Sami practice their own form of sorcery.

As he discusses the Sami, Dass does not hold back on his general pessimism about the future, anticipating the loss of species diversity and untouched nature. He sighs that the forests are emptying, and that, year by year, fewer animals are seen in the high hills. He worries that trade seems to be all that matters, to the Sami just as to everyone else. This, he feels, ruinously stresses the mind. Most of the Sami are impoverished. On his journey up along the Ran Fjord, he has of course observed the bleak misery among the Sami people: “As the World grows older in Years, we find/ The worse, the more gruesome the Lot of Mankind / We have surely lived through the best.”

When the winter snow cover could support their reindeer transports – larger or smaller sledges, with goods to trade in pack-saddles – the Sami came down to Mo, across the border mountains and the Umskaret pass, bringing ptarmigans, fine furs from animals such as pine marten and wolverine, reindeer hides as well as gloves and soft footwear made from skins. Petter Dass remarks that the “Lapps brought Bags of Feathers”.¹⁴ Just as the Swedish Sami would travel to Norway during the summer, their Norwegian cousins crossed the Kjølén mountain range during the winter. And in high summer, at Olsok or St. Olaf’s Day, they came down to Mo for the popular ‘Lapp Market’. Of old, there had been two kinds of Sami: Mountain and Lowland people. The latter group lived as neighbours to the farming communities and traded with them. The wealthier farmers kept reindeer and entered into agreements with the Sami about managing the herds for payments in coins and aquavit. Once a year, the Sami herdsman would come to see *his* farmer, who had to entertain him for several days “in the most agreeable manner and provide him with Aquavit and Tobacco”. In the autumn, they would travel together up into the high hills to find animals with correct cut-out brand in their ears and bring one or several of them downhill. Often, many farmers got together for an autumn journey into the mountains: “The Journey is called to Travel to Reindeer Forest or Go Reindeer-foresting”.¹⁵

Gradually, the Sami in Rana as well as those who lived on the other side of the Norwegian border – populations that were steadily declining – would also trade with L. A. Meyer, whose fiefdom included the fjord valley. The warehouse on Moholmen was a central facility that offered for sale everything from snared ptarmigans from the Sami hillsides to completely equipped fishing boats, good enough for fishing expeditions to Lofoten. In terms of trade, the local merchant prince just about monopolised the regional economy and the Sami, despite their ability to run households on natural resources alone, were to some extent meshed into this economic system.

¹⁴ Coldevin, p. 319. Dass, pp. 64–73.

¹⁵ Heltzen, p. 149.

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