



Controlling the “Wilderness” Through a Rationalised Reindeer Husbandry: The Establishment of the Sámi Nomad School in Sweden, 1906–1917

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Abstract • This article discusses the Swedish nomad school system (nomadskola, 1913–1962), targeting the children of the reindeer herding Sámi, in an environmental history perspective. Earlier research has highlighted demographics (especially social Darwinism), national economy, and reform pedagogy as the ideological foundation of the nomad school system. This article shows that the fixing of a frontier between society and wilderness was at the confluence of all of these ideas. Reindeer as a vehicle for domesticating Arctic “wilderness,” furthering economic goals in peripheries, and modernising indigenous livelihoods has been noted in the North American and Russian/Soviet contexts, as well as in Scandinavia for the second half of the 20th century. This connection has not been explicitly made in the research concerning the early years of the nomad school system. The article concludes that the Swedish government did not have the expertise to control and economically exploit the “wilderness” of the high Scandes, but the reindeer-herding Sámi did. Swedish educational authorities launched the nomad school system in order to harness this expertise and make the reindeer herding livelihood more suitable to the needs of the Swedish economy.

Keywords • Sámi history, nomad school, environmental history

Background, aim, and thesis

In 1913, the Swedish government established a new school system. The new system targeted the children of the indigenous Sámi engaged in large-scale reindeer herding in the mountain areas of central and northern Sweden. The nomad school system (nomadskola) was in many ways a continuation of the earlier, church-run school system. Since the seventeenth century, the Lutheran Church of Sweden had operated schools in the Sámi areas of Sweden in order to educate Sámi youngsters (and, in some cases, young Sámi women) to carry out Lutheran mission among the Sámi population. The early twentieth century witnessed a government takeover of elementary education. Although the Church still had an important role to play in forming educational policy, the government began to take a larger responsibility. Christianity continued to be one of the key subjects in elementary education, but skills and knowledge related to citizenship and the needs of the national economy replaced important parts of the old confessional instruction.¹ In the case of Sámi education, the

1 Björn Norlin and David Sjögren, “Kyrkan, utbildningspolitiken och den samiska skolundervisningen vid seklskiftet 1900,” in *De historiska relationerna mellan Svenska kyrkan och samerna: En vetenskaplig antolog* vol. 1, ed. Daniel Lindmark and Olle Sundström (Skellefteå: Artos, 2016), 403–38; Daniel Lindmark, “Sámi Schools, Female Enrolment, and the Teaching Trade: Sámi Women’s Involvement in Education in Early Modern Sweden,” in *Sámi Educational History in a Comparative International Perspective*, ed. Otso Kortekangas et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 13–26; Mette Buchardt, “Religion, Education and Social Cohesion. Transformed and Traveling Lutheranism in the Emerging Nordic Welfare States During the 1890’s–1930’s,” in *Education, State and Citizenship*, ed. Mette Buchardt, Pirjo Markkola and Heli Valtonen (Helsinki: Nordic Centre of Excellence NordWel, 2013), 83.

metanarrative and core rationale of education shifted in parallel with these changes in the structure and organisation of education. This shift entailed a movement away from the Christian anthropology of the mission period (the human relation to God, and salvation as the desired outcome), toward scientific anthropology (the human relation to nature and resources, and modernisation as the desired outcome).

The nomad school has attracted a substantial amount of scholarly and media interest in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The curiosity toward the school system stems from the topic enjoying a novelty value among scholarly circles after a long period of disinterest. This has directed many scholars, journalists and artists to fill the perceived gap in Swedish history. In media debate and in culture, the nomad school system and Sámi education are often associated with racial biology, and the activities of the Swedish Racial biological Institute, which was active in the university town of Uppsala between 1922 and 1958. Due to this connection, the topic attracts the attention of large audiences.²

Another, and in scholarly terms more relevant, reason for the interest toward the nomad school system is the peculiar structure and ideology of the school: Swedish educational authorities decided to implement a school that was modelled after the Sámi way of life (as perceived by these authorities), whereas the neighbouring countries of Norway and Finland opted for assimilating the Sámi pupils in mainstream elementary schools.³ The nomad schools were to follow a curriculum as close to the Sámi culture as possible, but the principal language of education was Swedish.

The aim of this article is to study the specificity of Sámi education in early twentieth century Sweden from an environmental history perspective, investigating the relationship between humans and the environment.⁴ In order to understand this specificity, we need to understand the larger societal and ideological context of the country, where national economy, pedagogy, and demographics (including social Darwinism) played a paramount role in forming the relationship between the Swedish society and the Sámi minority.

The thesis of this article is that taken together, these three societal approaches to reindeer herding indicate one thing: the zeal of Swedish educational authorities to utilise Sámi reindeer herders as proxies in controlling nature, or “wilderness.”

Method and sources

Andrew Stuhl and Bathsheba Demuth have made recent contributions toward understanding in what ways governments considered reindeer as a vehicle for the modernisation of the Arctic. Bathsheba Demuth has explored US and Soviet policies toward reindeer-herding indigenous populations in the early twentieth century. In the

2 A recent example is the media coverage of the reconciliation work that the Church of Sweden is doing with the Sámi in Sweden, for information in English see e.g., “Church of Sweden apologizes for abuse of the Sámi People,” The Lutheran World Federation, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/church-sweden-apologizes-abuse-sami-people>.

3 The many Sámi not engaged in large-scale reindeer herding were obliged to send their children to standard Swedish elementary schools. Linguistic and cultural assimilation was often the outcome of this education.

4 This term is, of course, anachronistic in the early 20th century context, and is used as an analytical concept to denote the relations between the human and non-human world. See e.g. Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

US, the ideology behind the governmental policies was the capitalist notion of producing a surplus to be sold. In the USSR, the Marxist urge to modernise a “backward” livelihood informed the government in its formation of policy. In both cases, the solution that government authorities adopted was governmental control and oversight of reindeer husbandry. As Demuth writes, “through scientific innovations and educational intervention, production would expand, human control over nature would increase, and as a result people would live fundamentally better lives.”⁵ Following a similar logic, Andrew Stuhl writes about the introduction of reindeer to the western Arctic of North America in the second and third decade of the twentieth century as a way for bureaucrats to exploit the ecology of the area for economic gains, through reindeer husbandry.⁶ Similarly, in Sweden, in ways we shall see, modernised reindeer herding was hoped to entail a fundamental improvement of the life of the nomadic reindeer herders themselves, but also a Sámi contribution to the national economy of Sweden. This connection, between the reindeer, the economy and ecology, is an area of inquiry that previous research on the establishment phase of the nomad school system has not treated in a clear and concentrated manner.

Taking the research of Demuth and Stuhl as a lens, this article studies the documents through paying attention to the interrelations of humans and the environment. The article investigates how this interrelation was visible on three levels: the individual level concerning the individual Sámi pupil, the regional level concerning the Swedish Sámi areas, and finally, the national level concerning the place of the Sámi reindeer herders in the Swedish economy and society.

The document that laid the ground for the nomad school system was a 1909 proposal, authored by the bishop of Sweden’s northernmost diocese (Luleå), Olof Bergqvist. The future first nomad school inspector Vitalis Karnell, and to a much lesser degree, the elementary school inspector of Sweden’s southern Sámi areas, K. Lorenz Österberg assisted Bergqvist in authoring the document. Legislation passed in 1913, and a subsequent proposal in 1915 reiterated the central aims of the 1909 proposal. In addition to the 1909 proposal, the article analyses a 1917 interview in the Swedish daily Svenska Dagbladet and an earlier interview in the periodical Dagny from 1906, both with Vitalis Karnell. Karnell’s first yearly inspection report (1918) of the nomad schools is also included. Karnell elaborated on his views on the nomad school system and the motives behind it in the interviews and the report, and they give important context to the 1909 proposal.

Earlier research on the nomad school system

Previous research on the Sámi nomad school system in Sweden has primarily emphasised cultural and social hierarchies (such as social Darwinism)⁷, national

5 Bathsheba Demuth, “More Things on Heaven and Earth: Modernism and Reindeer in Chukotka and Alaska,” in *Northscapes: History, Technology, and the Making of Northern Environments*, ed. Dolly Jørgensen and Sverker Sörlin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 177.

6 Andrew Stuhl, *Unfreezing the Arctic: Science, Colonialism, and the Transformation of Inuit Lands* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 62–87.

7 Simone Pusch, *Nomadskolinspektörerna och socialdarwinismen 1917–1945* (Umeå: Umeå University, 1998); Sten Henrysson, *Darwin, ras och nomadskola: Motiv till kätaskolreformen 1913* (Umeå: Umeå University, 1993); Lennart Lundmark, “Lappen är ombytlig, ostadig och obekväv”: *Svenska statens samepolitik i rasismens tidevarv* (Umeå: Norrlands universitetsförlag, 2002).

economy⁸, and special pedagogy⁹ as the main ideological rationales behind the establishment of the school system.

Culturally and socially hierarchical arguments

Culturally and socially hierarchical justifications were a part of the discourse legitimating a segregation of the reindeer herding Sámi of the mountain areas: in order to keep this population vital, it had to be preserved and protected from outside influence. Simone Pusch and Sten Henrysson both conclude that social Darwinist arguments were not paramount in the legislation and discussions concerning the nomad school system.¹⁰ Nomad schools formed, however, part of a larger discussion concerning the *de jure* position Sámi reindeer herders had in Sweden, where also social Darwinist ideas of different stages of social evolution among different populations played an important role. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Swedish politicians, civil servants and educational authorities debated the Sámi demographics, and what ought to be done with the nomadic Sámi population with large reindeer herds in the central and northern parts of the country. Two lines are visible in this debate. One line was the assimilationist line, highlighting the role of agriculture and sedentary life as the base for both individual, collective and national well-being. The other line was the segregationist line, emphasising the exotic and specific lifestyle of the reindeer herders in the mountains. This latter line would form the basis for legislation on reindeer herding, and somewhat later, for the education of Sámi children. As a by-product of this legislation completely centred on the nomadic, reindeer-herding part of the Sámi population, all other Sámi individuals were neglected in legal terms, as the only way of being Sámi in juridical terms was to be a reindeer herder.¹¹

National economy

The group of segregationists included two important early twentieth-century educational authorities, Bishop of the Diocese of Luleå Olof Bergqvist, and the first inspector of the nomad school system, Vitalis Karnell. These men, who, in 1909, authored the proposal that formed the ideological and formal basis for the nomad school system, saw in the Sámi a perfect vehicle for turning the mountain “wilderness” fruitful. Early twentieth century Sweden was crisscrossed with farmland, with expanding forestry, mining and energy sectors in the north. The government sought to exploit every possible corner of the country for the needs of the growing national economy.

8 Uppman, *Samhället och samerna 1870–1925*, 90–94; Lars Elenius, *Nationalstat och minoritetspolitik: Samer och finskspråkiga i ett jämförande nordiskt perspektiv* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2006); Sverker Sörlin, “Rituals and Resources of Natural History,” in *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices*, ed. Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin (Canton, Mass.: Science History Publications, 2002), 73–122; Otso Kortekangas, *Language, Citizenship, and Sámi Education in the Nordic North, 1900–1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021).

9 David Sjögren, *Den säkra zonen: Motiv, åtgärdsförslag och verksamhet i den särskiljande utbildningspolitiken för inhemska minoriteter 1913–1962* (Umeå: Umeå University 2010); Julia Nordblad, *Jämlikhetens villkor: Demos, imperium och pedagogik i Bretagne, Tunisien, Tornedalen och Lappmarken 1880–1925* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 2013).

10 Pusch (1998), 28–29; Henrysson (1993).

11 Lundmark (2002), 63–75; Ulf Mörkenstam, *Om “Lapparnas privilegier”: Föreställningar om samiskhet i svensk samepolitik 1883–1997* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1999), 99; Sjögren (2010), 8.

The high mountain areas were not in this sense productive, apart from the sites where mining or hydropower were applicable. Karnell explained in a 1917 interview that the Swedish government invested a considerable part of its educational budget in the nomad schools for a very simple reason: the livelihood of the reindeer-herding Sámi was the only option for rendering the mountain areas productive.¹²

Brit Uppman, Corinna Röver and Charlotta Svonni have all noted the close connection between national economy and reindeer herding in Sweden, although the latter two mainly in a somewhat later period than the early years of the nomad school system.¹³ Uppman establishes that three early proposals regarding the nomad school system (1909, 1915 and 1919) all emphasised reindeer herding as a necessity for the economic survival of the Sámi themselves, and a resource for the Swedish national economy.¹⁴

Pedagogy

Reform pedagogy was an educational ideology connected to both segregation and national economy. This influential stream of educational theory was developed in the US and Europe by John Dewey and other champions of freer forms of pedagogy, opposing the classic ideals of encyclopaedic, teacher-led instruction. As David Sjögren shows in his dissertation, reform pedagogy played a substantial role in the formation of the nomad school system as a school form permeated by “true” Sámi values, with a specific connection toward modernised reindeer herding. What is more, reform pedagogy had an intricate connection to *nature* or the environment in that one of its important goals was to base the pedagogy on the “natural” culture and environment of the children. In exploring the links between reform pedagogy and the nomad school, Sjögren shows that this specific form of pedagogy played a substantial role in forming the segregationist nomad school system. Sjögren’s use of the concept *nature* is tied to a psychological or pedagogical understanding of the term, making reference to reform pedagogy’s notion of a “natural” upbringing and education of the children. This education would follow the natural development of each pupil’s character by allowing pupils to explore the most interesting aspects of curriculum independently. Sjögren also shows that, in principle, the nomad schools included elements mainly from the Sámi lived reality, including the livelihood of reindeer herding but also other Sámi livelihoods such as handicraft, and the flora and fauna of the Sámi areas of Sweden. In practice, though, elements from the general Swedish curriculum also seeped in to the teaching of the nomad schools.¹⁵

Julia Nordblad situates the pedagogy of the nomad school system in a context of imperial citizenship ideals. By comparing the education of the Sámi in Sweden to that of the Arab-speakers in Tunisia, Nordblad shows that the Swedish Sámi were educated into a “qualified difference” similarly to the French colonial politics. This

12 Sörlin (2002), 85–87. “Våra lappar måste tillbaka till kåtalifvet,” *Svenska Dagbladet* 4.3.1917, printed in Henrysson and Flodin, *Samernas skolgång till 1956*, 82.

13 Corinna Röver, *Making Reindeer: The Negotiation of an Arctic Animal in Modern Swedish Sápmi, 1920–2020* (Stockholm: KTH Royal Institute of Technology, 2021); Charlotta Svonni, “The Swedish Sámi boarding school reforms in the Era of Educational Democratisation, 1956 to 1969,” *Paedagogica Historica* (e-pub ahead of print, 2021).

14 Brit Uppman, *Samhället och samerna 1870–1925* (Umeå: Umeå University, 1978), 90–94.

15 Sjögren (2010), 12, 63, 223.

difference aimed to ensure that the reindeer herding Sámi population in Sweden remained separate from the rest of the society, that was educated according to equal and egalitarian citizenship standards. The citizenship of the Sámi reindeer herders came to be tied to their livelihood: it was only as Sámi reindeer herders that they could fulfil the citizenship ideal bestowed on them by the educational authorities. The goal of the nomad school system was to instruct the Sámi children to know their “rightful” surroundings and place within the economic, political and social structures of Sweden.¹⁶

Education as a device for controlling indigenous populations

Historian Siep Stuurman speaks of the sedentary-nomadic frontier that has demarcated the line between “civilisations” and terra nullius throughout human history. James C. Scott has shown that nomadic populations have constituted an uncontrolled and potentially risky element for governments. In his seminal book *Seeing like a state*, Scott concludes that nomadic populations needed to be made legible, that is, controllable, manageable and predictable. This legibility was a needed to diminish the risks that modern Western governments attached to nomadic and loosely assimilated populations. In the case of the Swedish nomad school, nomadism combined with extensive reindeer herding was hailed and cherished as the highest form of Sámi culture that needed to be preserved. At the same time, the school system aimed at ensuring the “domestication” of nomadic groups, in terms of language assimilation and teaching them how to be Sámi in a manner that was designed, administered, and controlled by Swedish experts.¹⁷

Deploying education as a means of turning ideals into practice, to “making society by making the child” was typical of early twentieth century educational idealists, as Thomas S. Popkewitz has shown in his book *Cosmopolitanism and the age of school reform*. Popkewitz demonstrates how early twentieth century European and North American educational initiatives were deeply rooted in the individualism of the Enlightenment, viewing and portraying school children as future agents of building the society but also capable of making responsible choices regarding their own life.¹⁸ The nomad school system aimed at educating Sámi individuals that could, through a modernising of their traditional livelihood of reindeer herding, make better, informed, and scientifically grounded choices in order to develop their livelihood for the better of the Sámi community and Sweden as a whole. At the same time, the patronising segregationist obligation deviated from this modernist progressivism: the Sámi were, ultimately, not cultivated enough to be able to decide for themselves. The Swedish government was responsible for the Sámi so that they would not leave behind their “rightful” livelihood. For this reason, the Swedish parliament passed a series of laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries specifically codifying that only Sámi who owned reindeer were *de jure* considered Sámi. The cherishing

¹⁶ Nordblad (2013), 279–80.

¹⁷ Siep Stuurman, “Common Humanity and Cultural Difference on the Sedentary-Nomadic Frontier Herodotus, Sima Qian, and Ibn Khaldun,” in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 33; James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 1–4.

¹⁸ Thomas S. Popkewitz, *Cosmopolitanism and the Age of School Reform. Science, Education, and Making Society by Making the Child* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 15–20.

and idealising of this “true Sáminess” was not completely novel. Already seventeenth century clergymen held the view that true Sáminess resided with the reindeer herders.¹⁹ The regulated and systematic way in which the Swedish Riksdag and Swedish educational authorities carried out the legal codification that led to “Sámi” and “reindeer herder” becoming synonyms was, however, specific to the turn of the 20th century.

Controlling the “wilderness” through a rationalised reindeer husbandry

The Swedish government commissioned the 1909 proposal from the Chapter of Luleå in northern Sweden. Olof Bergqvist, the bishop of Luleå, became the chair of the three-person committee writing the proposal. The three experts who produced the proposal were, in different ways, well-acquainted with the Sámi and northern Sweden. Bishop Bergqvist was the bishop of Sweden’s northernmost Diocese, that of Luleå, between 1904–1938. Before his tenure as bishop, Bergqvist worked as vicar in Gällivare parish where he first came into touch with the Sámi population residing in the area. Vitalis Karnell was the vicar of Karesuando in northernmost Sweden, and the inspector of the elementary schools of the area. In 1917, he was appointed the first nomad school inspector. A planner, implementer and controller of educational policies targeting the nomadic Sámi, the nomad school inspector was the principal authority for all of the nomad schools working in the Swedish Sámi areas. K. Lorenz Österberg was Karnell’s colleague, the inspector of the elementary schools of the southern Sámi areas of Sweden. Based on his memoirs, his role in authoring the segregationist main idea of the proposal seems to have been minor.²⁰

The discussion on whether the Sámi should stay nomads or be assimilated was reflective of the general ideological context of early twentieth century Sweden. This being said, the 1909 proposal itself, and texts written by its three authors on the Sámi and education elucidate in a specifically accurate and concentrated manner the main ideas, ideals and arguments for establishing a completely new school system to cater to the needs of the nomadic Sámi and the Swedish state at the same time. The following analysis demonstrates how the three threads of pedagogy, national economy, and social Darwinism (and demographics more generally) were intertwined in the reasoning of the authors of the proposal. These core elements flow together into the notion of fixing the frontier between the human and the non-human worlds.

The 1909 proposal included the main ideas of the new school form, and a short chronicle of earlier school forms based on Lutheran missionary ideology. The chronicle leads up to the motives for the nomad school reform at hand. The main motive for establishing a new school form for the children of the reindeer herding Sámi was that the existing, stationary schools for the children of the reindeer herding Sámi contributed to a distancing of the children from nomadic life and reindeer herding. The proposal elaborated on the disadvantages of this distancing and alienation from reindeer herding from an economic perspective on three levels: The first one of these

19 Daniel Lindmark, “Diaspora, Integration, and Cantonization: Swedish Colonial Education from a Theoretical, Comparative, and Concluding Perspective,” in *Education and Colonialism: Swedish Schooling Projects in Colonial Areas 1638–1878*, ed. Daniel Lindmark (Umeå: Umeå University, 2000), 20.

20 K. Lor. Österberg, *Anteckningar och minnen från elvaårig verksamhet som folkskolinspektör i södra Lappmarken* (Härnösand: Härnösands boktryckeri, 1922), 48. See also Uppman (1978), 92.

levels is the individual level, the ways the livelihood of reindeer herding fits the individual Sámi. The second level views the connection between reindeer and humans from a collective or regional perspective, highlighting the significance of reindeer herding for the Sámi collectively, but also for the regional economy and life of northern Sweden. Finally, the proposal makes arguments about the advantages of reindeer herding from the national perspective, pointing out the national economic contribution of reindeer herding to the whole of Sweden.

The individual level

The 1909 proposal authors stated that for the individual Sámi child, abandoning reindeer herding as their main source of sustenance constituted a risk in several ways. It was, first of all, a threat to the social and physical well-being of the child itself: leaving behind the natural surroundings of the Sámi implied entering into a terra incognita where the physical and social certainties of Sámi way of life were absent. The authors' experience clearly indicated that many Sámi youngsters attending stationary schools became too comfortable with a sedentary way of life. This adaptation to the comforts of a sedentary lifestyle entailed that the children would find it difficult to return to the harsh life realities, cold climate and long peregrinations that were typical of the life of the reindeer herders. Yet the Sámi children could not simply and fully adapt to the sedentary life form either, as they were lacking of the physiological qualities needed for the heavy bodily labour of the sedentary farmers. The authors' conclusion of this double reasoning was that only by accepting to remain in their "ancestral livelihood" of reindeer herding could the Sámi children survive and thrive. Karnell reiterated this idea in his 1918 yearly inspection report, concluding that only the nomad school system was compatible with the "way of life [...] disposition and character" of the Sámi children. Already before the 1909 proposal, Karnell had established, in 1906, that it was important that the "sipping of civilisation" provided through education always remained a sip. A more profound exposure to civilisation would have strayed the Sámi children away from "wilderness" and the reindeer-herding life. Karnell and other educational authorities considered the Sámi as "predestined" to live.²¹

In positioning the Sámi children in the risk zone of incomplete assimilation, the authors reproduced an old stereotype of Sámi individuals opting out nomadic life running a high risk of ending up in poverty and wretchedness. The policy of the Swedish government had since the seventeenth century highlighted nomadism as the only true way of being Sámi, and the trope on the degeneration of the Sámi who had left behind nomadism and reindeer herding was developed in for instance the journal of the missionary Petrus Læstadius, himself of Sámi origin, in the early nineteenth century.²² The reindeer herding laws of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries followed the segregationist ideal that extensive reindeer herding constituted the only viable future for the Sámi. This legislative context, that the nomad school proposal was an integral part of, reproduced, reinforced, and coded in law the segregation between nomadic and sedentary Sámi.

21 "Lapparna och civilisationen," *Dagny* 2 (1906), 48; Inspection report (inspektörsberättelse) 1918 (Vitalis Karnell) D:IV:1, Rikets nomadskolors arkiv (RNS), The Regional State Archives in Härnösand, Sweden (RSAH); Olof Bergqvist, *Förslag till omorganisation af lappscoleväsendet* (Luleå: Ruuth, 1909), 17–18.

22 Petrus Læstadius, *Journal af Petrus Læstadius, för första året af hans tjenstgöring såsom missionaire i Lappmarken* (Stockholm: Hæggström, 1836), 139–40, 200–1.

The regional level

The collective or regional-level reasoning of the 1909 proposal established that for the Sámi and the Swedish populations of Sweden’s mountainous areas, the supply of products derived from reindeer herding were critical. The products that reindeer herding yielded had been a part of the regional economy, ecology and lifestyle for a long time and they were crucial as adapters that made human life possible in the harsh environment of the mountain areas. In the words of the proposal, the substantial surplus that reindeer herding produced contributed to covering the need of food and other necessities in “large parts of northern Sweden and far beyond.” This argument related to the regional economy and the high status and use value of Sámi products locally.²³ From other sources we know that the importance of reindeer meat and other products such as hides were an important part of the regional economy of the northern areas of Scandinavia and Finland. They also played a key role in the commercial contacts the Sámi had with Stockholm, often through proxies in the towns of northern Sweden. As shown by Roger Kvist and Lars-Ivar Hansen, in the nineteenth century, Sámi products from reindeer herding formed a crucial link that tied together the trade spheres of the Baltic Sea area and the Arctic Ocean region. During their yearly cycle following the reindeer herds, Sámi individuals were in contact both with the merchants of the Norwegian Arctic Ocean coast, and with the tradesmen of the towns on the Gulf of Bothnia. These Bothnian tradesmen had, in their turn, frequent contacts with Stockholm and other large trade centra in the Baltic Sea region.²⁴ Following this line of thought, the nomad school system can be interpreted as a way of the Swedish government to try to control this important economic activity.

The national level

The discussion of the crucial trade links that the Sámi reindeer herders formed for the whole Nordic region brings us the third level of economy that the 1909 proposal introduces. This level represents the wider national economic importance that the proposal authors considered reindeer herding to possess. The proposal paints a general picture of Sweden’s barren mountain regions as unsuitable for agriculture, the livelihood that turned other parts of the country productive. In the mountain regions, and especially in the areas that could not directly be exploited for mining, reindeer herding was the only sustainable and productive livelihood. The reasoning of the proposal was that the only way to yield a profit from the mountains was the extensive reindeer herding practiced there.²⁵ This wider national economic argument should be placed in the context of the early twentieth century economic takeover of northern Sweden. Whereas new iron ore mines and hydropower plants were established around Sweden’s northern regions, infrastructure to support a stronger northern economy included radically better, modern communications such as the turn-of-the-century Malmbanan (Iron Ore Line) that connected the northern parts

23 Bergqvist (1909), 18.

24 Roger Kvist, “Den samiska handeln och dess roll som social differentieringsfaktor: Lule lappmark 1760–1860,” *Acta Borealia* 3, no. 2 (1986), 19–40; Lars-Ivar Hansen, “Handel på Nordkalotten,” in *Nordkalotten i en skiftande värld: kulturer utan gränser och stater över gränser*, ed. Kyösti Julku (Rovaniemi: Pohjois-Suomen historiallinen yhdistys, 1987), 216–43.

25 Bergqvist (1909), 18.

of the Scandes to Stockholm (and the deep-sea harbor of Narvik in Norway) for the first time. In this spirit, the Swedish educational authorities planning to reform Sámi schooling considered that reindeer herding also needed to be modernised. The only way to practice a productive reindeer economy was the arduous work of following the reindeer herds in their seasonal migration to the mountains and coastlands in the summer, and to the forested lowlands in the winter. The new Sámi nomad school system needed to cater to the needs of both the Sámi reindeer herders as individuals, and the whole of Sweden as an economy. It was also pivotal, according to the proposal, that the Sámi that were already sedentary, be kept apart from the nomadic Sámi children. The motive for this was that the sedentary children would in many cases constitute an unfavourable influence and example for the nomadic Sámi. Those sedentary Sámi children whose parents had only very recently forsaken the nomadic way of life could, however, be placed in the nomad schools in order to be re-educated to the nomadic way of life.²⁶

As Vitalis Karnell later elaborated in an interview in the Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet* in 1917, the movement leading the Sámi “back to nature” would have to start with the children. In this 1917 interview, Karnell pointed out that the leading principle of the nomad school was to reshape the psychology of the Sámi. This reshaping would help the Sámi realise that the only road to survival for them as a people was the resistance of assimilation to sedentary life and the continuation of their traditional livelihood, although in a “rationalised” format. The attribute “rationalised” again points to the notion the Swedish educational authorities and Karnell specifically highlighted: the function of the nomad school system as the preserver *and* moderniser of the Sámi livelihood of nomadic reindeer herding. In the 1917 interview, Karnell also expressed his disdain towards the development in many parts of the Swedish Sámi region, where the Sámi lived in cottages, and had maids, telephones and sewing machines. Karnell used a Swedish term for wilderness, *ödemark*, to describe the area where the nomad schools were active. The prefix of the word, *öde* (=uninhabited) highlights the emptiness of the area of human activities. Karnell stated that the Sámi had inhabited the mountain expanses “since times immemorial,” but, in the following sentence he nevertheless considered these regions as uninhabited wilderness. The Sámi people, Karnell reminded, belonged in the “wilderness and the mountains” and not in wooden cottages with maids and technology. Karnell explicated that the main function of nomad schools was to instil a love for a life in the wilderness, combined with profound and detailed knowledge of reindeer husbandry.²⁷

Conclusion

Whereas the core notion of Sámi reindeer herding was sound, according to nomad school inspector Karnell and bishop Bergqvist, their main livelihood nevertheless needed to be modernised, in order to match the needs and requirements of a modern economy, and the state of Sweden. Centuries of Sámi activity was not considered part of the economy and society until modernised by the Swedish school system. The

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁷ “Våra lappar måste tillbaka till kåtalifvet,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, March 4, 1917.

nomad school, and the rationalised modernised reindeer herding in general, transferred the Sámi from the domain of complete wilderness to that of controlled modernism. Within this domain of controlled modernism, they contributed to Sweden’s national economy without being full-scale members of the Swedish society.

The Swedish authorities sought to utilise large-scale nomadic reindeer herding as a proxy in setting the relationship between society and “wilderness,” or the environment. This argument moves the conclusion beyond a “mere” national economic interpretation. The article then brings new insights into Swedish-Sámi relations, and to the relationship, but also to the relationship of the human and the non-human spheres in northernmost Sweden. In the eyes of Bergqvist, and Karnell, Sámi reindeer herders were the perfect vehicles for turning mountain wilderness a profitable and controllable part of society: the reindeer herders possessed the expertise needed for this process.

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