

Contemporary Sami demography – a 'black hole' in research and policy making

*Paper presented at
Regional Northern Identity: from Past to Future. International Research Conference.
Petrozavodsk State University, Russian Federation, September 12 – 14, 2006
Session: Sami Studies*

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Introduction

In astronomy the concept *black hole* is used about a star that has collapsed. The star can't be seen anymore, but it still has a very strong gravitation field. I shall not push this metaphor too far, but I do often think that contemporary Sami demography is a bit like a black hole: The theme attracts much attention when one comes close to it, but because it (no longer) is 'illuminated', no one knows exactly what it consists of.

It is said that many questions about black holes in the field of astronomy can only be answered by assumptions. I will argue that it is a similar situation when it comes to questions about contemporary Sami demography; they too can only be answered by assumptions, or one could say: with estimates. Not at least is this so with the constantly recurring question in almost all introductory sections in information material and texts regarding Sami themes: *How many are the Sami* – totally or in a given geographic area? And the figures for the total number of Sami *really* are estimates, as they vary between 50 000 and 100 000.

In general one can say that all kinds of quantitative oriented questions regarding the Sami people's composition and geographical distribution are answered by assumptions and estimates. This includes questions about variations in language use, economic activity and living conditions – both internal among the Sami and between the Sami and the majority population – as well as questions on statistical differences between Sami women and men.

This paper focuses upon some aspects regarding this lack of Sami demographical knowledge, emphasizing a) arguments for why such knowledge is important, b) description of and possible explanations to the present situation, and c) the role of questions on Sami identity in the issue of Sami demography.¹

¹ The paper is a slightly revised version of the presentation prepared for the conference. As the presentation was given in a session on Sami studies, a basic introduction to the Sami people's position in the world – geographically and politically – was not included in the presentation. For such introduction see Pettersen & Høydahl 2005.

Background

The basis for the paper are experiences and text studies related to the Nordic Sami Institute's research and development project *Sami Social Science Database*, including the sub-project *Sami-related statistics in Norway - contents, organisation and operation*. These projects were initiated mainly because of two reasons: 1) A general lack of all kinds of up to date numerical figures and statistics regarding current Sami issues, and 2) When such figures do exist, they are often difficult to find because they are scattered in different kind of documents published by various institutions.

The purpose of the two projects is to facilitate the development and operation of content, technological and organisational solutions that can yield overall access to various kinds of numerical data regarding contemporary Sami conditions. While the sub-project concentrates on data on Sami conditions in Norway, the long term objective in the database project is to contribute to design and organisation of *pan-Sami statistics* – that is, statistics from all the four countries with Sami populations. The work also includes preparation and dissemination of Sami contributions to *international statistics on indigenous peoples*. In practice the sub-project has been organised as collaboration between the Institute and Statistics Norway, while the Sami Parliament in Norway has commissioned the project.²

So far the projects have mainly been dealing with *geographically*-based Sami related statistics, resulting among other things in the publication of *Samisk statistikk 2006/Sámi statistihkka 2006* in the series *Official Statistics in Norway* (NOS) in February 2006. However, the theme in *this* text is limited to some aspects on *individual-based* Sami statistics, namely the fact that in order to develop such statistics, it is required to have access to basic contemporary Sami demographic data.

Needs for Sami demographic knowledge

There are various reasons for why contemporary Sami demographic knowledge not only is important as such, but also has become even more relevant in recent years. Below I have very briefly summed up some general and common points on this (not taking account of the differences that actually exist between the four states with Sami settlements):

- All peoples – also the Sami – seem to have a common need for knowing and be able to describe oneself as a people in past and present, for internally use as well as for externally.
- The demands for and interests of Sami related research and development projects are increasing, and contemporary demographic knowledge is often a necessary starting point and/or mean for such projects. Lack of relevant demographic data will therefore delimit the range of both themes and methods of Sami related projects.
- In recent decades the Sami have achieved increased rights to influence and self-determination. To pursue such rights, different kinds of knowledge are necessary, included demographic. Knowledge is needed both as basis for society planning in general, as well as basis for political decisions in various bodies, not at least in each of the Sami popularly elected bodies – Sámediggi – that are established in Norway, Sweden and Finland.

² More information can be found at the project net site www.sami-statistics.info and Statistics Norway's net site www.ssb.no/samer/.

- Both the Sami and the nation states need relevant data in order to document the Sami situation with respect to the respective states' obligations towards the Sami (as an indigenous people, eventually as a language or national minority). This is the case on *national* level according to each of the states' internal laws and guidelines. It is also the case at the *international* level according to various conventions.³
- Needs for Sami demographic knowledge must also be seen in the light of the international work regarding documentation of the worlds' indigenous peoples' conditions, not at least the work done by the UN body *Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII)*.⁴

Status for contemporary Sami demography

I have already stated that the lack of Sami demographic knowledge is rather remarkable. I consider this being due to mainly two circumstances, namely lack of *criteria* and lack of *procedures*:

- On criteria: It is not clear who constitutes the Sami people today. It is no simple way to delimit the amount of persons that make up the Sami demos – or ethnos if one prefers, neither geographically, nor at an individual level.
- On procedures: After the Second world war, the basic principle has been to *not* include ethnical categories in official population statistics in the Nordic countries. Thereby, there are today no updated demographical sources where Sami affiliation has been registered at a regular basis.

Thus, analytically the status for contemporary Sami demography can be described in terms of 1) a *criteria aspect* which covers considerations of each individual's affiliation to the Sami people, and 2) a *procedure aspect* which covers public authorities' practices for registration of Sami affiliation. I shall comment briefly on both of these aspects.

First on procedures: Official division of populations in ethnic categories is a huge and complex field of both scientific and political nature. The central element in this field is the different opinions on both *whether* and eventually *how* data on ethnicity should be officially registered. These differences of opinion are found both among individuals and institutions; among representatives for minority groups as well as among majority representatives. The field can not be explored in this paper, but the theme is classic and its relevance is now a days increasing in many states and regions of the world.⁵

One aspect of the field's complexity is that *practices vary*; they vary between states as well as over time internally in each state. And the Sami situation is one true example on such variations.

³ Such as United Nations: *International Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)*, Council of Europe: *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM)*, Council of Europe: *European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)*.

⁴ See for example United Nations, Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: *Report of the Workshop on Data Collection and Disaggregation for Indigenous peoples*.

⁵ A basic overall introduction to the issues mention in this paragraph is given in Pettersen 2006. Some relevant background readings are Blum 2003, Cook 2005, Haug 1998, Haug 2003, Kertzer & Arel 2002, Mirga 2000, Morning & Sabbagh 2005, Niemi 2002, Simon 2005

Previously, and especially before the Second World War, Sami affiliation was – to differing degrees and on different criteria – registered by censuses in selected areas in the northern reaches of the respective national states.⁶ The history of the states' census policies can't be presented here, but the last time censuses asked about Sami affiliation was 1970 in Norway, 1972 in Sweden and 1962 in Finland. This was then done at the urgent request of Sami organisations that *themselves* wanted such information as a basis for documenting Sami presence in the states in general and their living conditions in particular.⁷ It was not, therefore, the state authorities that initiated such registration, even if the responsibility for completing the censuses was vested in the national statistics agencies.

Current estimates quoted for the size of the Sami population are based on figures from the previous censuses.⁸ Even if these figures are naturally of interest, however, we know that they suffer from grave deficiencies. In the first place, the censuses had a limited geographical catchment area inside Sápmi; for example, the big towns in the north were excluded. In the second place, it has never been conducted a registration of how many Sami who live outside the traditional Sápmi region. In the third place, we know that many of those actually asked about their ethnic affiliation and/or language use did not want to answer and/or for various reasons chose to answer the ethnicity question in the negative, when they could have answered in the affirmative.⁹

What might be the reason why many Sami have been unwilling to give information about their Sami affiliation? There can be several answers to this question, but many of them are probably related to the fact that, from the end of the 19th century and as late as around 1970-1980, the Sami language and other Sami cultural expressions were under heavy pressure from the respective state authorities. For example it was forbidden to speak Sami at school, and many parents therefore chose not to speak Sami actively with their children. The idea was that not teaching them Sami would make it easier for them to integrate into the wider society. In addition, there were other reasons why many people wanted to lay aside their Sami identity and their Sami cultural practices and had strategies for doing so. One such reason – at any rate in some local communities – was the social stigmatisation of anyone displaying any form of Sami affiliation.¹⁰ On the other hand, another part of this picture is that there could be other and more principled reasons for not wanting one's Sami affiliation publicly registered. And for others again, knowledge of or experience from the Second World War may have caused uncertainties of how, in a worst-case scenario, 'ethnic registers' could be abused.¹¹

To summarise: Due to previous epochs' assimilationist policy vis-à-vis the Sami, and because of various reasons in more recent time the states have chosen not to register ethnic affiliation. Thereby, one simply *does not have* the data basis that is needed for demographic descriptions of the Sami population, neither in the near past nor the present.

And to put it short: Based on the experiences from our Sami Statistics project so far, I consider an overall change of practice on regular official registration of ethnic/Sami affiliation in the Nordic countries to be – *at best* – something that might take place in a not too close

⁶ Torp 1986

⁷ Aubert 1978, NOU 1984: 18

⁸ Estimates are often distributed as follows: 40-50,000 in Norway, 17-20,000 in Sweden, about 7,000 in Finland, and around 2,000 in Russia.

⁹ Aubert 1978

¹⁰ See for example Eidheim 1971

¹¹ NOU 1984: 18, Ot.prp. nr 33 (1986-87), Søybe 1998

future! However, in the projects we are also working towards 'temporary' solutions that for the time being can make up some sort of acceptable and productive basis as source(s) for contemporary Sami demography. Details on such solutions are not yet elaborated, but some possibilities are outlined in Pettersen and Høydahl 2005.

Sami identity discourses

But even if procedures for registration of Sami affiliation *should* be established and accepted of relevant stakeholders, the challenges regarding the criteria aspect remain. For what *is* actually Sami affiliation and/or identity – and who decides whether someone has it or not? These are questions that have to be answered both on a category level as well as on the individual level ahead of each and every registration of ethnicity data. And every person who has the slightest knowledge about Sami history knows that none of these questions are uncomplicated.

A main reason for the complications is the above mentioned former times outspoken assimilation policy and the aim of "wiping out" Sami language and culture. This policy has for quite a time been left back as a principle, but the policy of the *past* still causes many unsolved questions regarding Sami affiliation in the *present*.

The connection between the two concepts *affiliation* and *identity* is in itself an interesting and challenging discussion. This discussion is in its turn one part of the phenomenon that can be denoted *Sami identity discourses*. By this I mean the ongoing academic, public and personal reflections – and controversies – on what it means to be Sami today, and on where the power of definitions lie – or *should* lie. The prominent indicator on the intensity in such discourses is in itself the (relatively) striking huge amount of public contributions on the subject Sami identity from different thematic and geographic perspectives. These are not only scholarly texts, but also articles, comments and discussions in newspapers and other mass media.¹²

However, a part of this picture is that the closest one today comes to "official" definition and registration of a Sami person, are the respective states' laws that regulate who are entitled to participate in the Sami Parliaments elections. These laws have in common that they combine a demand for a *subjective* criteria on personal Sami *identity* with a demand for one or more *objective* criteria on the persons own or one of his/hers ancestors' use of Sami as home language.

Both historical research and local knowledge indicate that quite many persons who meet the objective criteria on language use do not have enrolled themselves in the respective Sami electoral registers. The reasons for this have not yet been systematically studied, but they are probably both varied and complex. The situation demonstrates anyway that there is no automatic linkage between having Sami *ancestry* and having a Sami *identity* for oneself.

Simultaneously, it is interesting that the Sami electoral registers show a varied, but in some geographical areas quite steep growth. Neither this aspect is systematically studied, but the growth indicates that neither Sami identity itself nor opinions about and willingness to official registration of Sami affiliation are constants.

¹² Some various examples are Hegg 2000, Andersen 2003, Paine 2003, Thuen 2003a, Thuen 2003b, Kramvig 2005, Berg 2004, Dankertsen 2006.

Sami demography as indigenous demography

And this is actually worth noting. Similar phenomena are namely observed in states that *do* have registration practices that allow specific demographic studies about and for indigenous peoples. Such studies show among other things that quite a bit of measured changes in indigenous populations can be due to other reasons than 'classic' demographic events as birth, death and migration. One example of this is just the fact that the answers individuals give to official questions on ethnic affiliation vary. And the variations seem to be closely connected with conditions in the persons own lifetime and with the degree of recognition and status that at any given moment are ascribed to different sub-groups of a population in general and to an indigenous people in special.¹³

I will argue that even that the contextual challenges vary quite a bit between the indigenous peoples of the world, the work on criteria and procedures for contemporary *Sami* demography can draw much on the relationship with demography of other indigenous peoples. Thus, thinking of the huge need for basic Sami demographic data both in research and policy making, one must be allowed to hope for – not a complete and optimal demographic profile of the Sami – but at least a gradual improvement of this field, both regionally, at national levels and in a pan-Sami perspective.

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¹³ See for example Mihesuah 1998, Taylor 2000, Gardiner & Bourke 2000, Weaver 2001, Siggner & Costa 2005

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