

The Saami and Their Penchant for... Java?

by Moki Kokoris

Despite its perception by most outsiders as a barren and inhospitable wilderness, the Arctic is home to approximately 4 million inhabitants - roughly one tenth of which consists of a diverse number of indigenous peoples spread across the Arctic territories of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, northern Scandinavia and Siberia. In general, the region is sparsely populated, with densities averaging fewer than one person per square mile. Yet in spite of tremendous social, demographic, and technological changes in modern times, Arctic cultures remain vital and resilient, with many small nomadic communities that are closely linked to native wildlife and local natural resources still continuing to follow a traditional way of life.

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Lapland, more currently referred to as Finnmark or Sápmi, is not a country but a region stretching across the borders of Sweden, Norway, Finland and northern Russia that has been inhabited by the Saami people for at least 2,500 years.

Although their territory is intersected by four national boundaries, most Saamis speak the same basic Finno-Ugrian language, with some dialectal differences. Their costumes are also similar throughout the region, with distinct variations only in ornamentation, embroidery and hats, which by their patterns and shapes identify their specific home territory and even an individual's marital status.



By and large, the Saamis are divided into three groups according to their occupation and location: the coast-Saamis, the forest-Saamis and the mountain-Saamis. The coastal group is the most numerous and has never been known for reindeer breeding, choosing instead to settle in turf-huts along the shores of the Arctic Ocean. They are trappers and fishermen, boat builders and skilled weavers. The forest-Saamis are regarded as half-nomads, basing their existence on the forest reindeer, which remain in the forests throughout the year, moving to higher ground only in the summer. These Saamis migrate between permanent timber huts and their winter camps where they live in tents. The mountain-Saamis, who are regarded as being wholly nomadic follow their reindeer herds between the forests of the Gulf of Bothnia in the winter, the eastern foothills of the mountain range in spring and autumn, and the higher mountains of the northern sea coasts in the summer – all in a regular, annual rhythm. They live in relatively easily transportable lavvu tents through the entire year.

Though the balance varies based on the locality group to which they belong, the Saami diet consists predominantly of reindeer meat, reindeer milk, butter and cheese, fish, and various native berries. Grains and other items, which cannot be cultivated with any reliability in this region are purchased at regional markets two or three times a year. Perhaps most interestingly of all, the one staple that few Saamis can live without is.... coffee!

Coffee has had a long-established place in the lives of the Saami for well over 100 years in most parts of Sápmi, and many customs flourished around its use. The Saami people probably had their first experiences with coffee from sources in Sweden, where it was first imported around 1680. By the early 1700s coffee houses were established in Stockholm, and it is believed that coffee finally reached Sápmi's coastal communities by 1750.

Customarily, coffee was prepared by the man of the household, perhaps because he was also responsible for the cooking of the meat. In the earliest years of its use, preparing coffee was, like the meat, a difficult task. By 1900, however, women had taken on the task and it became a companion duty to bread-making.



Early on, coffee beans were purchased in unroasted form. A large frying pan was the utensil of choice for the roasting process, which required constant stirring of the beans over the heat. It was a laborious task to maintain a sufficient supply at the rate that coffee was consumed – often three or four cups per person per sitting. Migratory folk roasted a larger quantity during the winter before leaving for winter pastures, and in summers roasted it as needed in smaller amounts. Apparently from the very beginning, Saamis preferred their coffee very strong, roasting it until the beans were nearly coal black.

Roasted beans were freshly ground for each pot, although herdsman usually brought along preground coffee. The earlier grinding was done with a stone on another flat or concave stone. Sometimes grinding was done in a hollowed-out log using a stick as the pestle. Still a third method was to place the roasted beans in a skin bag and strike the bag with a stick until the grounds were suitably fine.

Early techniques for brewing coffee appears to have been common across most of Sápmi, the process beginning by soaking the ground beans in cold water, then brought to a boil after which the pot was placed beside the fire to steep. Because of these crude roasting and grinding methods, the brewed coffee was very murky and needed to be cleared prior to drinking. Clarifying coffee the Saami way required placing a dried pike skin into the pot. The slime from the fish skin picked up the floating grounds and carried them to the bottom of the pot as it sank.

Although sweetening coffee is gaining popularity these days, Saamis still enjoy a sprinkling of salt in their brew, and in northern Sweden, it has been known for Saamis to float reindeer feta cheese in their cups - á la marshmallows in a mug of hot chocolate. (Let's see your local coffee franchise try that!)



It is no surprise that superstitions around the use of this most-favored beverage would evolve over time, and many of these commonly held beliefs remain to this very day - some of the more peculiar and amusing ones listed here:

- * When the coffee is ready, one must pour for oneself first or it will spoil the family's best driving reindeer.
- * When cooking coffee, see to it that the coffee pot does not rock, or surely you will rock away your belongings and end up in poverty.
- * When one throws the coffee grounds away, take care not to throw them outward but towards oneself. Coffee grounds, bones and other waste must be thrown towards oneself or there is a risk of throwing away happiness.
- * If there is foam on the coffee, the direction in which it floats will show who the recipient of money or a gift will be. If the drinker is alone and the foam floats away, it is an indication that the drinker will have many debts.
- * If one spills coffee, guests will arrive who are thirsty for coffee. If coffee is spilled twice, count on receiving intoxicated guests.
- * When the coffee pot hanging over the fire turns by itself and there is an unmarried boy or girl present, he or she will marry the first guest of the opposite gender.
- * If an unmarried person receives a refill before the first cup is entirely finished, one risks getting a nasty mother-in-law.

Who knew?

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