University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings Textile Society of America

2010

The Way of Sami Duodji: From Nomadic Necessity to Trademarked Lifestyle

Desiree Koslin
desiree.koslin@verizon.net

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf

Part of the Art and Design Commons

Koslin, Desiree, "The Way of Sami Duodji: From Nomadic Necessity to Trademarked Lifestyle" (2010). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 30.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/30

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE WAY OF SÁMI DUODJI: FROM NOMADIC NECESSITY TO TRADEMARKED LIFESTYLE

DÉSIRÉE KOSLIN
desiree_koslin@fitnyc.edu

The Sámi is a people in the circumpolar regions of four countries today, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. With prehistoric ties to the North Calotte area, it is one of several thousands of groups that count among the Indigenous Peoples of the world, according to the International Labor Organization of the United Nations (ILO). To protect and safeguard the rights of First Peoples around the world, ILO's Convention 169 was adopted in 1991 by fourteen countries. Sweden has yet to sign this convention, while Denmark and Norway have done so. In 1998, however, the Swedish government apologized to the Sámi people for Sweden's oppression of the Sámi. The refusal to let the Sámi use their own language and the forcible displacements of Sámi groups were mentioned as examples of such oppression.

Genetically unique, the Sámi are related to the Siberian peoples. There are ten different Sámi languages whose boundaries follow the natural geographical river valleys and mountain ranges of the Subarctic northwest Eurasia. The Sámi languages belong to the Finno-Ugrian family with roots in the Ural region. The North Sámi of Norway and Finland has most of the speakers. In Norway and Sweden, the ability to speak the language defines a person in legal terms as Sámi. The current national borders between Norway, Sweden and Russia were established piecemeal from the mid-eighteenth-century onward, and curtailed Sámi kinship patterns and the nomadic reindeer herding. From the seventeenth century, the three nations competed for dominion over the Sámi, and collected taxes in the form of furs, fish, reindeer meat, clothing and tools. At times, the Sámi were taxed by all three states. In an early eighteenth-century painting, a Swedish tax collector is seen at his task, and in the foreground a figure is filling a pitcher from a casket. Alcohol was introduced to the Sámi during these exchanges (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. *"Collecting Taxes." Oil painting by unknown artist, probably of the 18th century. Nordiska Museum, Stockholm. In: Sápmi – on being Sámi in Sweden, ed. Eva Silvén. Stockholm: Nordiska Museet, 2007, p. 80.*

The Sámi have lived in the subarctic North Calotte long before these regions were invaded by later migrating groups or colonized by farmers moving north. They have their own culture, language and customs. Sápmi, the land of the Sámi, is called Finnmark in Norway, Norrbotten in Sweden, Lapland in Finland, and Kola Peninsula in Russia. The terms "lapps," "Laplanders" are exonymous, applied to Sámi by others, and are considered pejorative today. The Sámi have traditionally engaged in a semi-nomadic lifestyle of reindeer husbandry, a practice that involves bringing their herds to the treeless mountain regions during the summer months. Many Sámi were also fishermen and lived permanently along the northern shores of the Arctic Sea; others hunted and kept up small-scale farming in forested areas. Most would take part in all of these manners of livelihoods at some point during the year, and all Sámi were able to make their tools and clothing from locally available material, especially from reindeer fur, leather and bone, or from trade goods. The topic of this paper is this Sámi practice of *duodji,* a term that

encompasses the skillful craft practice, the product itself, and the artistic creative aspect. Duodji draftpersons make use of the resources found in the circumpolar landscape, which is forbiddingly harsh in winter, and intensely accommodating during the short, midnight sun summer.

There was curiosity early on about Sámi lifestyle and clothing, *gákti,* starting with late Classical writers. Images of Sámi were published in sixteenth-century reference works showing men and women dressed in furs, on skis, hunting the wild reindeer. The European capitals thirsted for encounters with exotic species of the world. In 1822, a group of Sámi was on display in a Piccadilly location in London, brought there with their reindeer by William Bullock, the British naturalist antiquarian. The colorful, decorated woolen gákti, well known today from tourist brochures, was made of trade cloth and was worn by men and women in summer and for festive display. Sámi clothing made of reindeer furs and woolen clothing are mounted next to painted views of a wintry landscape (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. *1822 lithograph of William Bullock's exhibition of Sámi persons, reindeer and artifacts in a Piccadilly, London, location. In: Aage Solbakk, Barfi – Beaska. Karasjok, Norway: Cálliid Lágádusa, 2009, p. 91.*

Lutheran missionaries who went north to spread the Christian faith imposed Christianity on the Sámi from the seventeenth century onward. Churches and schools were established in the market towns, and in a c. 1830 depiction by a local missionary, three nineteenth-century Sámi students have the northern style four-corner hat that will acquire increase in size in the century to come. The men's gákti retain the broad-shouldered renaissance cuts, emphasized by welts and applied bands at the yokes and seams. The man in blue has a set of duodji sewing tools attached to his belt. The ankle-high pointed-toe boots have been wrapped with woven bands to seal the transition to the leggings or trousers (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. *Johannes Flintoe: "Three Sámi Students," 1831-33, watercolor. In: Aage Solbakk, Barfi – Beaska. Karasjok, Norway: Cálliid Lágádusa, 2009, p. 86.*

Later in the nineteenth century, a Swedish Lutheran pastor of part Sámi ancestry, Lars Levi Laestadius, began a struggle against the use of alcohol among the Sámi. His zeal resulted in a strong revival movement that still has adherents, and is termed Apostolic Lutheranism in North America. Still, the large Laestadian families maintained the duodji traditions for their household needs. The oldest girls in the family frequently were put in charge of gákti-making, and many developed individual styles and patterns that today serve as kinship markers. All extravagance and worldly behavior were forbidden, as in the image of a Laestadian lay preacher and his wife, both dressed in coarse wool gákti and little decoration (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. *Laestadian lay preacher Per Anders Vasara with wife Kristine, c. 1860. Postcard published by the Karesuando, Sweden, Laestadian Archives.*

A process of assimilation of the Sámi into the majority populations of Norway, Sweden and Finland took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was accepted by some, and resented by many Sámi. Some immigrated to North America, others took off for employment in the cities. In early photographs, one can trace the adoption of mainstream dress features; the men in a wealthy, South Sámi family group wear white shirt collars under their traditional chest cloths, and the women have kerchiefs tucked into their tunic necklines (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. *The Fjellström Family, early 20th century photo, Tärna, Sweden, in South Sámi gákti. In: Västerbotten, ed. Katarina Ågren, Issue 3, 1977, p. 166.*

Early in the twentieth century, Sámi groups had formed civic organizations to promote and protect their interests, especially in regard to land use rights and education. From the 1960s, groups of activists among the Sámi demanded broader recognition and joined the UN World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1975. They fought against exploitation of their resources, and for language parity and education opportunities. Today, thanks to extensive advocacy of Sámi activists, a reawakened Sámi identity is fostered through schools, native-language publications, and higher-education programs teaching duodji, traditional and contemporary arts and crafts. In international settings, Sámi culture also has won acclaim, particularly in the music world. Many Sami are performers of *joik*, a vocal tradition of chanted improvisation, and the young generation dress in stage costumes that range from exquisitely made traditional gákti to innovative and edgy new Sámi fashion creations.

The reindeer, on which the Sámi depend for food, clothing and material for tools, is central in Sámi culture. Although only about ten percent of Sámi are semi-nomadic reindeer herders, many kept tame reindeer, and all used the skins for winter clothing, *muodda* fur coats. The reindeer fur is uniquely thermal, keeping the body warm in subzero temperatures. There are dozens of terms that specify reindeer and reindeer skins in the categories of their age, sex, color, the time of year they were slaughtered, which part of the animal the skin comes from, the type of tanning and fat used for preserving the skin. Each type has specific uses in the making of clothing and footwear. The making of a pair of winter boots, *gállot,* require two head skins and four leg skins The diagram displays the nine pieces used, and the arrows show that the direction of the fur is placed in alternate ways so that one does not slide going uphill or downhill. There is no lining. The boots are stuffed loosely with dried grass, and bare feet stay toasty warm in freezing temperature. This practice is shared among peoples across northern Asia (Fig. 6).

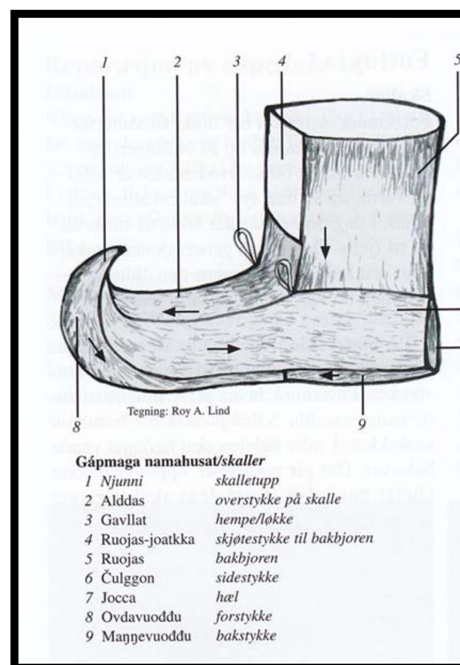

Figure 6. *Diagram of gallót reindeer skin winter boot, showing direction of fur layout. In: Maret Haetta and others, Håndbok I Duodji, Nesbru, Norway: Vett & Viten, 2007, p. 130.*

Sámi shoemakers were women, and they prepared their materials with expertise and discernment. They would have been present at the slaughter to select the best skins for good color and strength. Above all, they harvested the sinew for their sewing needs, from along the spine and the back of the legs. After cleaning, drying and softening, they were twisted and doubled. The sinew swells when wet, and maintains

a leak-proof seam. Stab stitch, over casting, felled seam, and placing welts of cloth in the seams are techniques used for different parts of the garments or shoes.
The *muoddá* fur coat consisted of two layers, the inner with the hair to the inside, the outer turned the fur to the outside. This double fur had unsurpassed thermal qualities. Many small pieces made up the pattern to allow greatest strength and flexibility for the different stress points of the body. Muodda furs and gallót shoes would be patched and mended with care, an important duodji skill. Men's and women's fabric gákti cuts show a silhouette similar to the muodda, but are made in woolen cloth, fine imported qualities for holidays and ceremonies, coarse, stiff weights for the everyday. Today gákti makers use fabrics of all kinds, including synthetics and prints for summer and easy cleaning, and affordability. Many Såmi dress in gákti for special occasions, only the elderly use them everyday. A complete outfit is a considerable expense, in materials and time, and especially if the wearer is not a *duojár*, craftsperson. There are great regional and family differences in styles of gákti cut, color, type of headdress and decoration.

New technologies arrived during the twentieth century, and the sewing machine revolutionized gákti making. The elaborate borders on the gákti of the North Sámi from the second half of the twentieth century would not have been possible for a duodji maker to stitch by hand in the old way. The North Sámi man's gákti has a border, *holbi,* which starts out as a forty-meter long band onto which dozens of quarter-inch-wide commercial polychrome ribbons are machine-stitched, while the holbi is shaped into a large flared funnel, to then be stitched to the tunic's edge. The same ribbon pattern was applied to the gákti sleeve bands, the back, and the four-corner hat (Fig. 7).

Figure 7, left. *Gákti maker Sanna Aslaksdotter, Kautokeino, Norway, showing a man's wedding gákti. Author's photo, 2008.*

Figure 8, right. *Sámi couple from Tysfjord, Hellemo, Norway, photo by O. Solberg, 1914. The woman wears a chamois reindeer gakti, and is braiding a band. In: Ornulv Vorren and Ernst Manker, Samekulturen, Tromsø, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 1976, p. 58.*

There are three principal duodji fabric-making techniques. The first is braiding, where a set of elements is worked in oblique plain or 2/2 twill interlacing (Fig.8). One particularly elaborate version is the South Sámi boot band made of three shorter warps in different colors for a combined length of about 400 cm. Two of the sections are linked, or "laid," the third is added in standard fashion. The second fabric technique is woven, using the rigid-heddle device, suitable for a mobile lifestyle. Young duojár weavers practice simple plain weave ribbons with stripe designs, and when accomplished, make patterns using

supplementary warps that float over a plain weave foundation, in the *dávlen* style, to create geometric designs. These bands are used for trims on the gákti edges, as belts, and particularly as a matched pair for

Figure 9. *A pair of men's woolen boot bands in supplementary warp patterning, 400 x 4.5 cm, woven by Ensi Aikio, Inari, Finland. In: Duodji, an exhibition catalogue of Varanger Sámi Museum, Norway, 2000, p. 17.*

boot bands, and as the carrying and lacing bands for baby carriers. The patterning and colors are specific to regions and families and gender. Zigzag and v-shapes are often seen in women's bands, and diagonal crosses in men's patterns (Fig. 9). The third fabric making method, requiring the use of the warp-weighted loom of ancient heritage, continues to have a presence in duodji skill sets. It is practiced by relatively few, and to be gifted a *rátnu* panel made on this loom is a great honor for a Sámi person. Traditionally in all handspun wool from sheep in the household, these weft-faced plain weaves are used as blankets and door covers, and they are today seen as wall hangings. Traditional rátnu compositions are colored stripes on white ground (Figs. 10a and 10b).

Figure 10a, left. *Skolt Sámi Tyyne Fofanoff weaving a woolen rátnu on the warp-weighted loom, photograph by Satu Mosnikoff. In: Anni Linkola and Martti Linkola, Kolttasaamelaiset/The Skolt Sámi, Inari, Finland: Siida Museum, 2005, p. 16.*

Figure 10b, right. *Weaving on the warp-weighted loom, Manndalen, Norway. Photo: Norsk Folkemuseum. In: Maret Haetta and others, Håndbok I Duodji, Nesbru, Norway: Vett & Viten, 2007, p. 96.*

What once were objects of basic needs for the Sámi community have today become exquisite expressions of duodji craft items and works of art, made by experts trained in the special duodji craft schools. These wares are trademark-protected, and the duodji organization maintains registers of duojárs past and present. Sold in galleries, museums and at exhibitions to collectors, duodji is a well-established brand, but many duodjárs complain about being undersold by imitators who mass-produce look-alike goods. Beyond the duodji brand, some Sámi artists choose to market their cultural expressions in other art market venues. The fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s was a great boon for duodji makers in Russia who today are able to participate in Pan-Sápmi cultural contexts.

Figure 11, left. *Handbag in reindeer skin, 25 x 19 cm by Birit-Rauna Länsman, Kautokeino, Norway. In: Duodji, an exhibition catalogue of Varanger Sámi Museum, Norway, 2000, p. 30.*

Apparel duodji objects in the traditional style often include hand-tanned reindeer skin made into useful dress accessories. The collector pays attention to the hand sewing skills, the closing, the interior detailing, the evenness of the twisted and plied leather cords, and the compositional aspects of the applied wool trims. Couched pewter thread stitching forming a silver outline around the cloth appliquees is frequently included (Fig. 11). While traditionally trained, many duodjars experiment with new materials. Anna-Stina Svakko applied a Lucite handle to her handbag of white wool with elegant, sparing decoration of fish skin and witty print labels (Fig. 12). Edgier still, the Denim Demon company is run by two Sámi brothers, marketing jeans with wear marks from the work in reindeer corrals for their Ware-Out line, fabricated in Japan (see www.denimdemon.se).

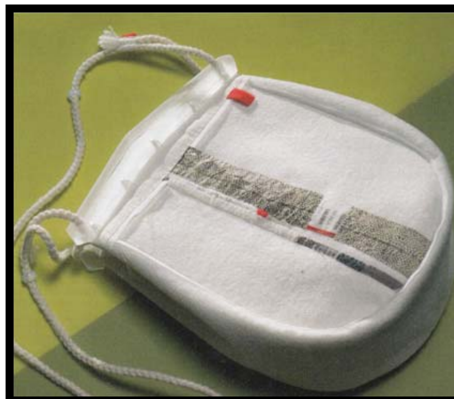

Figure 12, right. *Handbag in white wool, silk, fish skin, reindeer skin, and Lucite, by Anna-Stina Svakko, Porjus, Sweden. In: Sápmi – on being Sámi in Sweden, ed. Eva Silvén. Stockholm: Nordiska Museet, 2007, p. 37.*

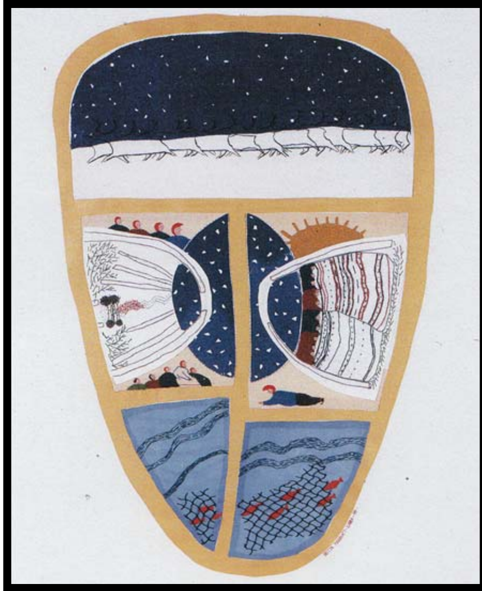

Figure 13, left. *Britta Marakatt Labba, "Niegadeapmi " (The Dreaming), embroidery and appliqué, silk and wool on linen, 1999, 130 x 70 cm. By permission of the artist.*

Figure 14, right. *Agneta Andersson, "Tidsflöde" (Flow of Time), mixed media, in Sápmi Sculpture Park, Lake Talvatis, Jokkmokk, Sweden. By permission of the artist.*

While steeped in Sámi culture and duodji traditions, some Sámi work as artists. Britta Marakatt Labba's imagery and technique is based on her Sámi upbringing which she developed while attending art school in Gothenburg; she is considered one of the foremost Sámi artists today. "The Dreaming" is a large embroidery whose image recalls the framework a Sámi shaman's drum. The center field depicts the interior of a *goahti,* the traditional Sámi domed dwelling, showing the star-filled sky through the smoke-hole. Four female figures may represent Sámi goddesses, protecting the sleeping Sámi, flanked by fish in the water below and reindeer above, close to the sky (Fig. 13).

Belonging to an artists' collective in the northern city of Kiruna, Sweden, Agneta Andersson works in fabrics and textiles as well as other media, including metal, glass and graphics, and her inspiration comes from the mining activities and the nature around Kiruna. In the Sámi Sculpture Park in Jokkmokk, Sweden, her out-sized rigid-heddle loom, "Flow of Time," beckons viewers and weavers with its metaphor of temporality and memory (Fig. 14).

Time passes, too, in the making of duodji and there is a continuing debate among Sámi duojars about its future and viability. Its role to sustain the harsh Sámi existence of the past is no longer relevant, but it constitutes a powerful marker of Sámi identity. Since its leading practitioners have established careers in mainstream society, and discerning collectors support emerging talents, duodji seems well-positioned to bypass a threatened demise as a redundant artifact, and instead set a new course of significant exceptionality.

Bibliography, titles in English

Brantenberg, Terje. *Sápmi – The making of a nation. Building a new ethno-political exhibit at the University of Tromsø, Norway*. Arctic Studies Center Newsletter, No. 7, August 1999. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.
Kivelä, Petri, Sigga-Marja Magga, and Samuel Valkeapää. *Davvehieibma Pohjatuuli North Wind. Duodji: From Sámi Handicraft to Design.* Rovaniemi, Finland: University of Lapland, 2007. ISBN 978-952-484-176-4.
Kulonen, Ulla-Maija, Irja Seurojärvi-Kari and Risto Pulkkinen, eds. *The Saami: A Cultural Encyclopedia.* Vammala: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2005. ISBN 951-746-506-8.
Kvist, Roger, ed. *Readings in Saami History, Culture and Language III*. Umeå, Sweden: Center for Arctic Cultural Research, Umeå University, 1992.
Lähteenmäki, Maria and Päivi Maria Pihjala, eds. *The North Calotte: Perspectives on the Histories and Cultures of Northernmost Europe*. Helsinki, FInland: University of Helsinki, 2005. ISBN 952-5243-21-9.
Pennanen, Jukka and Klemetti Näkkäläjärvi, eds. Siiddastallan – From Lapp Communities to Modern Sámi Life. Inari, Finland: Siida Sámi Museum, 2000. ISBN 951-97845-4-3.
Silvén, Eva and Christina Westergren, eds. *Sápmi – on being Sámi in Sweden.* (An exhibition catalogue in English, Sámi and Swedish) Stockholm: Nordiska Muséet, 2007.
Slezkine, Yuri. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Bibliography on duodji and Sámi dress, in Finnish, Norwegian, Sámi and Swedish

Duoddaris 15 Dräkt. Proceedings from Ajtte Sámi dress seminar. Jokkmokk, Sweden: Ajtte Museum, 1996.
Guttorm, Gunvor and Solveig Labba. *Avdanasis duodjin: Dipmaduodjesánit* (Handbook and Dictionary of Såmi duodji and dress). Kautokeino, Norway: Sámediggi, 2008. ISBN 978-82-90625-60-8.
Haetta, Máret, Bjørn Aarseth, eds. *Håndbok I duodji Sámisk håndverk.* (Handbook in duodji Sámi handicraft). Nesbru, Norway: Vett & Viten, 2007. ISBN 978-82-412-0197-4.
Porsbo, Jannok S. *Samedräkter I Sverige* (Sámi Dress in Sweden). Jokkmokk: Ajjte Museum, 1999.
Rinno, Soile. *Länsi-Enontekiön Saamelaisväestön puvuissa ja niiden käytössä tapahtuneita muutoksia vuosina 1939-1969* (Sámi Dress of Enontäkiö Region of Finland 1939-1969). Summary in English. Jyväskylässä: Gummerus Oy, 1987. ISBN 951-99804-8-2.
Sildness, Sissel. *Samer I Sør-Varanger: Koftebruk* (Sámi Dress in South Varanger). Karasjok, Norway: Davvi Girji OS, 1997. ISBN 82-7374-385-3.
Solbakk, Aage. *Barfi-Beaska: Sárgosat sámi gárvvuid historjjás 1500-1900* (History of Sámi dress 1500-1900). Vaasa, Finland: Lapin Maakuntamuseo, 2009. ISBN 978-82-92044-73-5.
Ågren, Katarina and Marianne Nilsson. “Sámiskt Dräktskick I Västerbotten”. In: Västerbottens Museum. *Västerbotten*, No 3, 1970.

Websites
www.samernas.nu
www.sapmi.se
www.sametinget.se