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# What is a document institution? A case study from the South Sámi community

What is a  
document  
institution?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The Sámis are the indigenous population of Northern Scandinavia. When the oppressive policy against the Sámi population in Norway was lightened during the 1960s, many Sámi communities established language and cultural centers for documentation and development of their language and cultural heritage as the oral tradition lost its ground in the modernization process. This paper aims to discuss how Sámi cultural centers use documentation both as a way of remembering the past and as a political strategy in order to produce evidence for land and water claims.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The Sámi centers are many-faceted institutions and document theory is suggested as a theoretical perspective in order to analyze why these institutions were established and how they are functioning today.

**Findings** – Two cases are presented. The first shows how the centers use documentation as a technique for restoring the past. The second is a ruling in the Norwegian High Court that shows a new turn in what can be accepted as documents proving indigenous land and water claims.

**Originality/value** – This article is an attempt to introduce document theory as an analytical tool for analyzing the documentation processes in indigenous cultural centers.

**Keywords** Indigenous, Cultural centers, Sámi, Documentation, Document, Document theory, Document management, Culture (Sociology)

**Paper type** Case study

## Background

The Sámi are the indigenous population of the middle and Northern part of Scandinavia. Their territories are part of four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Traditionally they have lived by nomadic reindeer herding, farming, fishing and hunting. They were organized in small, decentralized units (called “*Siidas*” in Sámi) regulated by unwritten agreements very different from the centralized and hierarchical political structure in the Scandinavian countries (Hansen and Olsen, 2004; Manker and Vorren, 1962). During the last 50-100 years only a small percentage have kept up the traditional livelihood; the rest have largely been absorbed in the same occupational pattern as the majority population (Stordahl, 1996). The Sámi are accepted as an indigenous group in all four countries, but with unequal rights following this acceptance. Because there is no overall registration of the Sámi population based on ethnic criteria, no one knows exactly how many Sámi there are today, but there is estimated to be at least 50,000 Sámi in Norway and about 80,000-100,000 in Scandinavia, including Russia. About 12,000 of the Sámi in Norway speak Sámi as their first language, and around 3,000 still have reindeer herding as their main occupation (Aubert, 1978, pp. 117-20; Statistics Norway, 2010).



From the mid-1960s many institutions named as Sámi cultural-and/or language centers have been established in Sámi communities in the middle and Northern parts of Norway (The Sámi Parliament, 2010). These centers combine many functions, which in Norwegian society are divided into different kinds of institutions like libraries, archives, museums, preschools, primary schools, and adult education. The Sámi cultural centers also hold events like theatre, music, dance and cultural festivals (Láng, 2005). The Sámi, who have seen their way of life gradually threatened by the majority society, have built most of the centers from “below”, on their own initiative, but with support from middlemen in the Norwegian political system and with economic support from the Norwegian state (Gælok, 1992). During the last 20-30 years the centers have played an important role in the revitalization process among the Sámi population. They have contributed to the present situation where the Sámi are constitutionally recognized as one of two (Norwegians/Sámi) people living on the territory of the Norwegian state. They now have an elected Sámi assembly (established in 1989), with a certain degree of political autonomy towards the Norwegian Parliament (Broderstad, 2001; The Sámi Parliament, 2011).

### **The Norwegianization policy**

When the first centre was established in 1964, the Norwegian Parliament had formally abandoned the oppressive “Norwegianization” policy against the Sámi. But the consequences of this policy continued with great strength into the 1970s and 1980s and can even be felt today (Minde, 2003b). The goal of the Norwegianization policy was to make the Sámi into “good” Norwegians. In order to carry through this policy, the use of Sámi language in schools was prohibited by law between 1898 and 1962. Although this law was not fully enforced, the consequence was that thousands of children with Sámi as their mother tongue never got the chance to use their language in school (Minde, 2003a). In 1902 a bill was passed that prohibited the Sámi ownership of farmland. This law forced thousands of Sámi to change their names to Norwegian names, which was mostly accepted by the authorities as a change to Norwegian identity. This enforced change gave the Sámi formal ownership of farms that many of them had already cultivated for decades. Modern Norwegian institutions like schools, pre-schools, health institutions, national media, the political institutions, museums and libraries had no understanding of the Sámi language and culture other than as a culture on the verge of extinction. The general technological development and modernization process also contributed to the heavy pressure against the traditional Sámi culture during most of the twentieth century (Minde, 2003a).

### **The Sámi centers**

As a consequence of the Norwegianization policy there was a strong motivation in the Sámi people to build up institutions that could document those parts of the Sámi culture that were in danger of extinction (language, customs, building techniques, the nomadic way of living, etc.) and to establish new meeting places and develop new knowledge about their own culture and history, so that the small and often geographically remote Sámi villages could be prepared for the future. Each centre, built from 1964 up to today, has its own unique and particular history, but the central idea behind them is to make visible the existence of the Sámi nation and prove its right to exist. For this purpose the Sámi centers developed into institutions storing, producing and using documents of different types for

various purposes. The traditional Sámi culture was a nomadic culture. They used organic materials for their dwellings and tools. Proof of their use of the landscape or terrain would soon disappear if it was not documented in one way or another. The first centre, Saemien Sijte in the South Sámi area, was primarily occupied with different forms of documentation as techniques for the registration and preservation of cultural artifacts. The artifacts were not only perceived as documents of archaeological interest, but as documents providing a special meaning for the ethnic group. In this area the processing of the milk from reindeer had a special cultural significance. The process of milking the reindeers and making dry milk and different types of cheese was a main factor in the self-supported nomadic way of living. The milk and cheese production was a specialized process based entirely on organic materials and equipment; the processed milk and cheese were stored for months in wooden troughs dug down in special pits in the ground (Fjellheim, 1991, pp. 25-35). To register these sites the leaders at Saemien Sijte hired Sámi from the area who had grown up in the traditional Sámi culture instead of professional archaeologists as normally demanded by Norwegian museum authorities. The idea was that people who had grown up in the traditional reindeer herding culture would more easily spot places in the terrain where their foremothers and forefathers had lived and worked. It takes a trained eye to “read” the terrain and spot potential marks that indicate a milk pit. Places in the terrain were marked, their position mapped, descriptions written down, pictures taken and if tools were found they were taken to the centre for storage. The documentation process strengthened the feeling of identity and belonging among members of the local “*siidas*” (tribes). Sverre Fjellheim, a prominent Sámi leader, and one of the first leaders of Saemien Sijte, put it this way (my translation):

In my opinion the protection of Sámi cultural values can, and ought to be, a process where registration, documentation, research, administration and protection and self-defined activities connected with culture and identity are closely linked, and this must function in a interaction between the professional institution and the local community (Fjellheim, 2004, p. 14).

Fjellheim uses the term “*områdetilhørighet*”, which can be translated as “the way a people belong to a landscape”, to describe the process. Saemien Sijte’s choice of local registrars led to a conflict with Tromsø University Museum, which by law could claim that professional archaeologists should do the work. The dispute had to be settled by the University Board in 1990. The board accepted that documentation for indigenous peoples has a special significance in relation to identity, belonging and future, and supported Saemien Sijte and gave them formal acceptance in hiring Sámi who had grown up in this area (Fjellheim, 1991, pp. 7-17). This way of documenting a culture is a way of preserving a bond between the past, the present and the future and strengthens the way native peoples belong to a landscape (Jernsletten, 2009). If the milk pits had been registered by professional archaeologists (non-Sámi, by and large) the context of meaning provided by the documentation would have been different. The artifacts, maps, pictures and sites would have been made into documents of scientific status and most of them would probably have ended up in a university museum, interpreted and providing information and meanings of another kind.

### **Documenting traditional knowledge**

What is the role of documents and documentation in the perspectives and ideology of the Sámi centers? Why study the Sámi centers as document institutions? I will try to

answer this by discussing the synthesizing functions of the Sámi centers in the light of a concept of documentation that was defined by leading thinkers and practitioners in the documentation movement in the first part of the twentieth century and later adapted by Buckland (1997, 2007) and others (Lund, 2009; Day, 2006). Suzanne Briet was a leading figure in the movement. In her seminal book *What is Documentation?* (Briet, 2006) she extends the definition of documents from written texts to representation of objects and even objects themselves. She connects information content explicitly with its material base and underlines its use as evidence or proof (Briet, 2006, pp. 9-10; Buckland, 1997, p. 805; Lund, 2009, pp. 401-5). Furthermore she defines a document as “a proof in search of a fact“, and elaborates by saying that a document is “any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [*indice*], preserved or recorded towards the end of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon” (Briet, 2006, pp. 9-10). In a discussion of “Briet’s rules for determining when an object has become a document” Michael Buckland argues that:

There is materiality: Physical objects and physical signs only; (2) There is intentionality: It is intended that the object be treated as evidence; (3) The objects have to be processed: They have to be made into documents; and, we think, (4) There is a phenomenological position: The object is perceived to be a document (Buckland, 1997, p. 806).

Briet’s and Buckland’s definitions of what a document is fit the view of traditional knowledge as dynamic and alive, and underscores what Sámi language and cultural centers need to do as the oral transmission of traditional knowledge loses its ground: institutionalize and make visible (we could say prove) a connection between a way of living in a specific landscape and cultural revival. Their definitions open the floor for a broader understanding of what a document institution should be. It must cross the borders between texts (the library), artifacts (the museum), files (the archive) and performance (the theatre/classroom) and include a phenomenological and cultural sensitive understanding of the documentation process. The Sámi centers handle documents and document complexes of all kinds: Books, pictures, maps, movies, clothes, traditional buildings and building techniques, food, sacred places, stories, story-telling, music, theatre, language revival, different cultural events. But these documents are not treated as containing static and “frozen” or preserved knowledge, as in so many museums, archives and libraries, but rather with the aim of transmitting knowledge for future generations of Sámi, thereby making the centres into “proactive centres of documentation” (Lund, 2009, p. 405). Today documents and documentation are vital in the political processes concerning land- and water rights in Norway. Two cases from 2001 (“Svartskogdommen” and “Selbudommen”) are worth mentioning in this respect. In the “*Svartskog*” (Black Forest) case, a Sámi village won a trial in The Supreme Court against the Norwegian state and was granted collective ownership to grazing and logging land due to “time honoured rights”, although the Norwegian government possessed a legal title deed to the area (Bjerkli and Thuen, 1998; Matningsdal, 2002). Oral testimonies and the way the landscape and pasturelands could be seen as documenting a certain traditional use was accepted as evidence in court and treated as “a proof in support of a fact” (Briet, 2006, p. 9). The Supreme Court Judge in charge of this case said that written historical documents, oral traditions, anthropological reports and marks or signs in the landscape were treated as documents in court proving that the inhabitants of the village during many

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generations had used the area “in good faith”. The concept “in good faith” is an important juridical principle in Norwegian law covering the right to use natural resources by established custom (Matningsdal, 2002, pp. 63-71). The Supreme Court Judge also said (although this was not mentioned in his written paper following the lecture) that his upbringing on a farm helped him to see or “read” the different uses of pastures when the jury made their inspection of the ground. For him the differences between how herded reindeer versus domesticated animals (cows and sheep, mainly) grazed the area documented how the land had been used and by whom[1]. The judge perceived the landscape as a document that evoked mental images or earlier experiences that validated it as “supporting a fact”. We can assume that the cultural background of the Supreme Court Judge (growing up on a farm) facilitated his observation and enabled him to interpret signs in nature as messages to be informed by.

### Conclusion

An important task for Sámi cultural centers today is to document Sámi traditions and lifestyles in such a way that they can serve as evidence in court proving the right of ownership to land and water in Sámi regions (Eriksen, 2008; Hernes and Oskal, 2008). Laila Susanne Vars, the Sámi lawyer and Research Fellow at the University of Tromsø, recently elected as the Vice President of the Sámi Parliament, put it this way: “Documentation of Sámi knowledge is the most urgent issue facing us today. [...] Sámi traditional knowledge encompasses the beliefs, practices, innovations, arts, music, livelihoods, spirituality, and other forms of cultural experience and expression that belong to the Sámi” (Vars, 2008, p. 5). It is the most urgent issue, according to Vars, because without the documents there will be no evidence left of a traditional knowledge system where people, animals and landscape were interconnected in an intimate way and where knowledge were transferred through participating in the daily activities in the *Siida* (the traditional Sámi village).

Documentation among indigenous groups, and other grassroots movements, needs an institutional basis. Documentation of traditional knowledge more and more becomes a task for the Sámi centers. Documentation is important because of the forced cultural invisibility, but also in a future-oriented perspective of keeping the language alive, about self-esteem and the claims for intellectual property rights, self-government and land rights. In this perspective the language is a document, the food is a document, and the music is a document, because they demonstrate who you are. The centers’ documenting activity is closely connected to identity management, self-esteem and juridical claims (Eriksen, 2002). For a better understanding of these processes, established models for understanding and analyzing libraries, museums and archives are inadequate. Document theory seems like a promising alternative, because it offers a model that incorporates the active, interconnected way these centers collect, remediate and use a wide array of documents.

### Note

1. Lecture by Supreme Court Judge, Professor Dr Juris Magnus Matningsdal, at the conference “The Sámis’ Right to Self-Determination as an Indigenous Population”, University of Tromsø, Norway, February 28-March 1, 2002. Notes taken by the author (see references for published version).

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