

# The Social Role of Entrepreneurship Strategies among Sámi Family SMEs<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The Sámi are the indigenous people of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia's Kola Peninsula. Here, reindeer herding, conducted by families and referred to as reindeer husbandry entrepreneurship by the Reindeer Herders' Association, has long been a livelihood with a very high social value. What is required to simultaneously produce economic and social value? Content analysis of interviews conducted with Sámi reindeer herders reveals that participants in this study claimed that the causal variable behind their herding was maintenance of tradition and not necessarily limited to the maximisation of financial profits. Since reindeer herding is of limited economic value, a successful strategy has been to seek complementary activities to supplement income from reindeer husbandry and create additional wealth, while preserving the social value of a culturally-desirable form of entrepreneurship. Lower meat prices have prompted greater involvement in economic activities outside the reindeer sector, allowing herders to remain in a low-profit sector of social value.

## Introduction

Reynolds noted, "Entrepreneurship scholars have generally focused on either individual entrepreneurial behavior or the activity of entrepreneurial (new) firms (1991, p. 48)." A problem identified by Davidson and Delmar (1992) is that most studies concentrated on entrepreneurs and ignored the general population from which these entrepreneurs emerged. While the economic environment may explain some factors, it is also important to take account of the social and cultural aspects of entrepreneurial activity (Dana, 1995; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007). This paper will consider entrepreneurship, in the context of Sámi culture that assigns social value to participation in the reindeer sector. As explained by Paine, "capable herding bestows general esteem on a person (1964, p. 85)."

Reindeer herding continues to have social value among Sámi circles. An old Sámi legend recounts the story of Háhcešeatni and Njávešeatni, two sisters, each of whom were said to have had reindeer that came freely to be milked. Háhcešeatni was unkind to her reindeer, and these left her and gave rise to the wild herds. In contrast, Njávešeatni's reindeer remarked, "I will never leave here. My mistress is

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presents partial findings of a larger study, complementing an article co-authored with Ivan H. Light and forthcoming in *ERD*.

<sup>2</sup> The author expresses thanks to the following for their kind assistance in the research phase of this paper: Veli Pekka Olavi AIKIO, Past President, Sámi Parliament, Finland; Liisa REMES, University of Jyväskylä, Finland; Janne SEURUJÄRVI, Managing Director, Inari Municipal Business Company, Ivalo, Finland; and Trond THUEN, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Tromsø, Tromsø, Norway. Thanks are also due to the following for comments on earlier drafts of this paper: Hannu I. HEIKKINEN, Thule Institute, University of Oulu & Arctic Center, the University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland; Teemu KAUTONEN, Academy of Finland Research Fellow, Turku School of Economics, Finland; Lars KOLVEREID, Bodø Graduate School of Business, Norway; Ludger MÜLLER-WILLE, Department of Geography, McGill University, Montreal, Canada; Seija A. NIEMI, University of Turku, Finland; Lars RØNNING, Nordland Research Institute, Norway; Terhi VUOJALA-MAGGA, Arctic Centre, Ivalo; and Birger WINSÅ, Department of Finnish, Stockholm University, Sweden.

much too good to me. She strokes me gently when she milks me. I do not have the heart to leave her to starve alone (Bergsmo, 2001, p. 11).”

For Sámi herders, the profession is of cultural significance. Anderson suggested that “the reindeer still functions as a cultural focus with which all Saami identify (1983, p. 180).” As noted by Turi, “The position of reindeer breeding in the northern areas is unique. No other land-based agricultural branch in northern areas has such long traditions in the Arctic as this economic activity...Domestic reindeer breeding represents not only sustainable exploitation of the marginal nature resources in the North, but is also the cultural basis of the many small tribal societies of the North (2000, p. 131).”

A greater number of animals signifies more wealth and power. Lee, Press, Lee, Ingold and Kurttila elaborated on the subject of status, “The greater the number of reindeer owned the higher the status of the owner within Saami society (2000, p. 103).” Jernsletten and Klovov indicated, “that the self-esteem and self-respect of the people involved in reindeer husbandry is strong, even increasing (2002, p. 21).” More recently, Laakso confirmed that a larger herd still “gives a higher social status inside the local community (2009, p. 63).”

What is required to simultaneously produce economic and social value? This article shall report findings obtained from interviews conducted with Sámi reindeer herders.

## Context

It is important to understand the context of entrepreneurship, and the epistemology that surrounds it. Likewise, sense of identity and of land ownership reveals much about internal logic. An American says, “I am American,” and Norwegians say that they “are” Norwegian; a Sámi person often says, “I belong to the Sámi people.” While a Scandinavian may say, “I own this land,” a Sámi is likely to say, “My people belong in Lapland.”

When Descartes (1637) introduced the concept of, “I think, therefore I am,” he articulated a premise central to European and Euro-American epistemology, *i.e.*, that the individual mind is the source of existence and knowledge. Nevertheless, Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth wrote, “the entrepreneur must initiate and coordinate a number of inter-personal relationships in a supervisory capacity to effectuate his enterprise (1963, p. 5).” In the case of Sámi reindeer herding, the individual’s existence is contingent upon relationships with others. Each reindeer has one owner, but herding must be done in co-operation with others. Unlike Schumpeterian entrepreneurs, who compete against one another in search of individual success, the success of each Sámi reindeer herder depends on the mutual cooperation of reindeer herders. The traditional unit of co-operation is the *siida*, a co-operative by nature. Despite co-operation among members, there is competition between co-operatives, for resources and for markets.

The *siida* – the plural of which is *siidât* – does not claim to be democratic; rather, solutions are reached by consensus and for this reason cooperation is essential. Manker explained “*Siida* is a normalized form of the Lappish term for ‘the group’, a group of families who migrate together, have their reindeer in a common herd and their dwellings in the same place (1953, p. 13).”

Whitaker confirmed, “The natural basic unit of Lappish society is the elementary family (1955, p. 37).” Haetta wrote, “The Sámi people have always had common ownership, land belonging to the group...This is advantageous and necessary because stocks of fish, game, valuable fur animals and other resources are unevenly distributed within a district. Dividing the land into private sectors would

be difficult and pointless. If land were individually owned and could be passed on to children, the size of each piece would soon become smaller and smaller from one generation to the next. Finally, individual families would not have enough land to maintain their semi-nomadic way of life (1996, p. 21).”

Helander (1999) described the *siida* as a kinship group. Jääskö elaborated on the importance of kin, “it should be noted that the most effective and most durable economic unit in reindeer herding is not the reindeer woman or reindeer man, but the family (1999, p. 36).” Tuisku wrote, “The most important characteristic of pastoralism is that it is a predominant economic activity in which the whole family participates (2002, p. 101).” Turi (2002) confirmed that a crucial element in the organisation of reindeer herding is the *siida*, which he defined as a working community consisting of one or more families. Nyysönen clarified, “*Siida* is Northern Sámi, and means a Lapp or reindeer village. It refers both to the area and the people living in the autonomous area of *siida* (2003, p. 252).”

Riseth (2003) listed the regulatory principles of Sámi herding society: (i) the autonomy of the husbander, in “that all husbanders are their own masters (p. 232)”; (ii) the social bonds of the extensive kinship system, resulting in “a network of mutual obligations through genetic and social kinship (p. 232)”; (iii) partnership and *siida* solidarity; (iv) dialogue and consensus; and (v) responsibility toward the land and the spirits. Man, society and nature are viewed as interconnected; for a discussion of the land and the spirits of the Lule Sámi, see Rydving (1993).

Bjørklund explained *siida* as referring “to a group of reindeer owners who live and migrate together, and to the herd of reindeer owned and herded by them (2004, p. 125).” He added, “the *siida* represents a flexible cooperative unit between people and animals (Bjørklund, 2004, p. 126).” Flexibility is crucial; in the winter, when a pasture might not sustain a specific herd, a Sámi strategy is frequently to divide the herd into smaller ones and to move each to a different area. “The strategy of the pastoralists is never to be in a position where the size and composition of the herd is not in proportion to the available labour and pasture (Bjørklund, 2004, p. 126).”

## Related Literature

There has long been interest in the Sámi people (Clarke, 1824a; 1824b; Brooke, 1827) and their reindeer herding (Collinder, 1949; Elbo, 1952; Itkonen, 1951; Manker, 1953; Shor and Shor, 1954; Weber, 1939; Whitaker, 1955). Clarke wrote, “The *Lapps* are said to be more cunning than the *Swedes*, who consider them as a crafty set of knaves; just as the *Gipsies* are regarded everywhere. Perhaps their cunning may be principally due to the necessity they are under constantly upon their guard, lest they be maltreated; the people considering them as an inferior order of beings in the creation, and thinking it lawful to make them the objects of contempt and ridicule, using their very name, *Lapp*, as a term of degradation (1824b, p. 169).” Nowadays, the term “Sámi” has replaced the formerly used word “Lapp.” Their traditional land is referred to as Lapland or Sápmi.

Fisher suggested, “Here we find the usual order of things reversed, man’s life being ruled by an animal’s needs (1939, p. 641).” Collinder confirmed, “The life of the reindeer nomads is regulated by the migrations of their reindeer (1949, p. 105).”

According to Vorren (1960; 1973) domestic reindeer herding replaced Sámi reindeer hunting during 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Sámi thus evolved from being a food-extracting society to a food-producing society.

As explained by Lähteenmäki, “Finnish Lapland emerged in 1809 when Sweden lost its eastern part of Lapland to Russia after the Finnish War. The area ceded was integrated into the Grand Duchy of Finland, an autonomous area in the Russian Empire (2006, p. 696).” During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Clarke wrote, “The *Laplanders*, or *Laps*... constitute the only remaining branch of the ancient inhabitants of *Finland* ... (1824a, p. 328-329).” Yet, they were quite misunderstood. Clarke wrote, “they pretend that of the Ten Tribes of *Israel* led captive into *Assyria*, a portion migrated to the *North*, and bestowed their own appellations upon the mountains, lakes, and rivers; adding that the *Lapland* language approaches near enough to the *Hebrew* for the two people to understand each other’s speech (1824a, p. 329).”

Traditional principles of Sámi entrepreneurship included the absence of land ownership and the absence of labour markets. The right of ownership was substituted by traditional usage rights to certain areas, often sequential. Land was neither bought nor sold. Likewise, manpower was not a good that could be bought and sold. The economic system was based on mutual exchange of services within the clan. Clarke wrote of the Sámi, “in their dealings demand specie, refusing the paper-currency of the country whenever it is offered Clarke (1824b, p. 169).”

In parallel, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Youatt wrote about the sheep business: “The milk and the wool were the only products for which this animal was domesticated, and for which, in some parts of the world, he is even at the present day bred. In proportion, however, as agriculture has improved, the milk of the sheep has ceased to be an article of human sustenance, and has been appropriated to its natural purpose, the food of the lamb (Youatt, 1866, p. 43).” In contrast, the Sámi made use of the entire reindeer, including its milk. Clarke (1824b) described the milking of “hundreds (1824b, p. 171)” of reindeer nightly. Ruong confirmed that reindeer milk used to be “an important item of food (1967, p. 31)” for the Sámi people.

Fisher observed, “When a reindeer is killed, every part of the carcass is utilized (1939, p. 648).” Reindeer hides were used for clothing and for shelter. The skin from a reindeer’s legs, referred to as *bellingar*, was used to make winter boots, sewn with thread of sinew. Antlers and bones that could not be eaten were turned into utensils. As Beach explained, “Reindeer antler, when mature and hardened, affords a strong material for innumerable uses (1990, p. 255).”

With regards to the size of a flock of sheep, Wrightson noted, “A flock of a thousand ewes is unquestionably a valuable property. Such a large flock...is maintained upon about 1,000 acres of land...Where 1,000 stock ewes are kept 1,100 lambs may be reasonably looked for (1905, p. 195).” In contrast, Whitaker wrote, “a family of 3 would require 20 reindeer for their own personal needs (*i.e.*, food), apart from those sold to bring in income (1955, p. 35).” Usually, between 10 percent and 20 percent of the herd consisted of draught reindeer. Olson described reindeer transport during the 1930s, “In descending a very steep grade, the reindeer is hitched behind the sleigh. The animal resents being pulled by the head and digs his forefeet into the snow, thus providing effective breaks (1938, p. 512).”

During WWII, the Sámi lost land to Russia as the boundary between Finland and the Soviet Union was redrawn; Skolt Sámi were resettled accordingly. For studies of the Skolt Sámi see Ingold (1976) and Pelto (1962).

Post-war accounts include Bradley (1947), Collinder (1949), and Itkonen (1951). According to Itkonen (1951), an average-sized Sámi family required 300 reindeer to support its members. Shor and Shor stated, “Twenty females are the minimum for a practical herd (1954, p. 269).”

Shor and Shor noted the speed of reindeer, “In winter the splay-footed beasts pull Lapp *polkas* 10 miles an hour on long trips, easily reach twice that speed on shorter stretches (1954, p. 280).” Until the 1960s, draught reindeer were given names; when too old to travel, they were slaughtered and eaten. During the 1960s, snowmobiles gradually replaced draught reindeer; as noted by Pelto and Müller-Wille, “The use of reindeer sleds for any sort of transportation was almost completely obsolete by 1967, and even economically marginal households throughout northern Lapland found means to purchase machines during the late 60s (1972/3, p. 119).” Although one still sees draught reindeer in Russia, draught reindeer in Scandinavia were completely replaced by snowmobiles (Hukkinen, Heikkinen, Raitio, and Müller-Wille, 2006; Müller-Wille, 1978; Müller-Wille and Pelto, 1971; Pelto, 1973).

Siuruainen and Aikio (1977) discussed the livelihood of Sámi people in Finland at the time. Lenstra observed, “reindeer herding has undergone over the past 10-15 years a change from a subsistence economy to an increasingly pronounced financial economy (1978, p. 43).” Pelto (1978) described such change as the de-localisation of resources. Herding activities became increasingly mechanical as the reindeer economy became a meat production business. Direct dependence on nature and on the traditional family business was reduced. Thus, traditional subsistence self-employment discussed by Barth (1952) yielded to a cash sector. Beach wrote, “Money economy is no longer simply an attractive alternative affording luxuries and new comforts, it is a vital need (1993, p. 25).” Haetta explained, “Mechanization and the market economy have replaced self-sufficiency (1996, p. 3),” and elaborated, “Self-sufficiency has been replaced by occupational specialization and dependence on consumer goods (Haetta, 1996, p. 48).”

Burgess (1999) found that although nobody lives exclusively from fishing, this provides a supplementary source of income and food. A problem, however, is that substantial commercial fishing has overfished some waters. Some Sámi people must now buy fish and meat.

Lee, Press, Lee, Ingold and Kurttila (2000) reported on reindeer herding in Finland at the turn of the millennium, noting that of about 7,000 reindeer owners in Finland, two-thirds owned fewer than 25, and 7 percent owned 100 or more, and that “Although many Saami herders have additional employment, reindeer herding is still regarded as being of high cultural importance (Lee, Press, Lee, Ingold and Kurttila, 2000, p. 103).”

Heikkinen (2006) observed cultural adaptation models among reindeer herders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As European Union regulations impacted reindeer herding in Finland, participants in a study of Sámi reindeer herders in Finland (Dana and Dana, 2007) expressed concern about the impact of external pressures on reindeer herding.

Heikkinen, Lakomäki, and Baldrige (2007) interviewed Sámi and non-Sámi reindeer herders, with a focus on sustainability and neo-entrepreneurial development. Dana (2008), focused on cooperation within the Sámi *siida* in Norway. Among the most recent studies of reindeer herding is Heikkinen, Sarkki, Jokinen, and Fornander (2010); they identified problems created when applying international standards in a reindeer herding region.

## **Methodology**

Entrepreneurship research was traditionally been quantitative in nature, and dominated by the logical empiricist paradigm, assuming absolute knowledge, independent of cultural, social and political factors; findings which were not directly linked to the predetermined hypotheses were often ignored. How-

ever, hypotheses may have a cultural bias, and cultural variables are open to interpretation (Geertz, 1973; 1983). Crozier and Friedberg (1977) suggested that to understand the role of culture and the general population from which entrepreneurs emerge, a more effective research strategy should involve an inductive approach with qualitative interpretation. This paper is based on interviews, with no pre-determined hypotheses. Participants in this study were reindeer herders who qualified as entrepreneurs, according to the definition provided by Ely and Hess who defined them as “the ultimate owners of business enterprises, those who make the final decision and assume risks in such decisions (1893, p. 95).”

Whitaker wrote, “there are several cases of daughters being given a handsome number of reindeer as a sort of dowry by wealthy parents; the actual amounts involved are however seldom divulged (1955, p. 40).” A big herd provided people with security, but actual numbers were not discussed with strangers. In fact, asking a Sámi person how many reindeer he has may be perceived as culturally insensitive. To avoid uncomfortable situations, potential participants were consulted during the creation of the survey instrument used in this study. The specialised questionnaire, as recommended by Bherer, Gagnon, and Roberge (1989) was then sent for approval by local leaders with expertise on cultural sensitivity.

With the objective to learn about entrepreneurship conducted by individuals for mutual gain (Bull and Winter, 1991; Johannisson and Nilsson, 1989; Light and Karageorgis, 1994; Lyons, 2002; Selsky and Smith, 1994; Spear, 2006), reindeer owners were asked questions related to their activities. Viewing entrepreneurship as a societal phenomenon rather than as a purely economic activity (Steyaert, 2007), questions inquired about non-economic causal variables as well as economic goals. Actual participants were selected by means of snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961; Müller-Wille and Hukkinen, 1999). For the purposes of this study, Sámi identity was based on self-identification.

Heikkinen, Lakomäki, and Baldrige (2007) conducted semi-structured interviews in 17 enterprises run by reindeer herders. Accepting that entrepreneurship is embedded in a social context (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986), the present paper is likewise based on 13 semi-structured interviews with Sámi entrepreneurs in the same sector. All participants were reindeer herders, but some were also involved in other professional activities or occupations.

Participants in this study signed a release form and were assured anonymity in this paper. For this reason, no names are provided below. The oldest participant was born in 1939. The youngest was 12 years old. All interviewees were self-employed reindeer herders, but some also had some unrelated expertise; formal education levels ranged from “almost nothing because I learn from parents” to “I am a qualified engineer.” Some had experience as employees, *e.g.*, “I worked two months when I was 16.” One respondent claimed he had always been a subsistence hunter and fisherman, with minimal activity in the formal economy.

## **Findings**

Participants were asked what/who motivated them to become self-employed herders. Most spoke of Sámi ethnicity and/or cultural traditions. Answers provided by interviewees included: “I come from a prominent tradition of reindeer herders,” and “It makes me proud to be like my ancestors, especially if I have a large herd.” Respondents often referred to social capital, *e.g.*, “The family is set up for this.” Reference was also made to human capital, *e.g.*, “This is what I learned when I was infant

doing this.” Cultural capital was also evident, *e.g.*, “This is my interest since ever.” All of the Sámi interviewees declared that they had relatives who owned reindeer.

When asked about employees, most respondents said that other than family members they had “only occasional” or “seasonal” employees if any, and intended to have the same after five years. When asked about technology, elder participants expressed concern about “a double-edged sword” that “creates needs and expenses.”

All participants expressed that they enjoyed reindeer herding. Several said they would have liked for their herds to be bigger, *regardless of whether this would enhance their material well-being*. With regards to their views on government, views were mixed. These ranged from “The government does not do enough to help us,” to “There are too many regulations.”

When asked about propensity for risk, one Sámi respondent explained, “Being an employee has more risk because you can get fired.” Another stated, “Risk is not desirable but it is inevitable, so we do another business too and that reduces risk.”

Respondents explained that supplementary income was required, “especially when the price of meat is low.” This was obtained from diversification into other activities, in addition to reindeer herding. These included: carving, exporting reindeer hides, felt-making, fishing to supplement the sale of reindeer meat, handicrafts, jewellery, real estate investment, retailing, teaching, and tourism-related activities. In some cases, the secondary enterprise involved a high degree of internationalisation. One Sámi had a strategy of vertical integration, selling reindeer-related handicrafts and exporting reindeer antlers to Asian markets.

Participants were asked where they saw themselves five years into the future. One Sámi herder stated, “I will herd even if reindeer bring no money.” Another replied, “Not all the eggs in same basket. I will follow opportunities, in addition to reindeer.”

One Sámi participant who was a part-time reindeer herder stated that he relied on his hotel to provide him most of his income. Although he had been “pushed” into the hotel business because traditional reindeer herding did not provide the cash necessary to maintain the standard of living that he chose for himself, his goal for the future was to become a full-time reindeer herder.

Sámi participants in this study commented how recruitment and training for reindeer herding in their communities was unlike meat production among non-Sámi who might employ non-family members. “Our children learn on the job since they are tiny small,” explained one respondent. This supports Helander (1999) who discussed how Sámi reindeer herders were trained on the job; and also Ruotsala who explained, “Often an important factor is that this is a profession passed down from generation to the next, primarily from father to son, which is carried on in the same place as the previous generation (1999, p. 43).” This also supports Bjørklund who wrote, “Traditionally, Saami cultural arrangements had taken care of recruitment into pastoral society. Animals were allocated to children during certain ritual occasions... Along with the gift also came the responsibility of being a reindeer owner. Children learned how to take care of their animals and were thus socialised into the world of reindeer pastoralism. When the time came to marry, both spouses were in possession of knowledge and enough animals – together with the animals given to them as wedding gifts – to make it possible to establish themselves as their own husbandry and perhaps herding unit (2004, p. 133).” Indeed, reindeer herding is associated with social capital (Bourdieu, 1980; 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993; Rønning, 2009; Winsa, 2007); human capital (Becker, 1964); and cultural capital (Weber, 1904-5; Light, 2004) specific to the social role of reindeer herding.

## In Closing

Penrose wrote, “The fact that businessmen, though interested in profits, have a variety of other ambitions as well, some of which seem to influence (or distort) their judgment about the ‘best’ way of making money, has often been discussed primarily in connection with the controversial subject of ‘profit maximization’ (1959, p. 39).” Along similar lines, some participants in the present study are reindeer husbandry entrepreneurs more for the reindeer aspect than for economic profit maximisation. This is consistent with the findings of Jernsletten and Klokov who stated that for some people, “reindeer husbandry forms a ‘way-of-life’ more than a ‘way of production’ ... (2002, p. 21).”

Sámi reindeer herding is unlike the cattle or sheep sectors (Barth, 1973). As explained by Ingold (1978), entrepreneurship strategy in the stock-rearing sector requires the farmer to leave alive only the minimum needed to maintain his herd; in contrast, pastoral strategy recommends a man to slaughter only the minimum of deer needed to maintain his family. Paine (1988) noted that reindeer have their own social organisation, and Beach added that “Herders sensitive to ... aspects of reindeer social life are able to use them to control the deer... Traditional herders do not force the reindeer if need be, but they often know how to achieve the desired result by utilizing the herd’s own propensities and instilling in it the desired behaviour pattern... (1990, p. 258).”

How do Sámi reindeer herders cope with low profitability of their primary activity? *Recognising the social role of their entrepreneurship, they remain in the sector, but in view of its limited income, many seek secondary opportunities in other sectors, in order to supplement profits from reindeer herding.* This simultaneously results in economic and social value. Findings thus support Lee, Press, Lee, Ingold and Kurttila who observed, “Reindeer herding is an important source of income for the Sámi, bringing in between half and three-quarters of their gross earnings. However, this income has to be supplemented by agricultural and forestry work, as well as cash-earning jobs (2000, p. 101).” Findings are also in line with Labba and Jernsletten, who wrote, “When the price of reindeer meat decreases, this does not automatically mean that the reindeer owner will sell a larger amount to compensate for the economic losses caused by the price decrease. Rather the opposite: the reindeer owner sells a smaller amount and compensates with money earned from other income sources (2004, p. 136).”

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