

Samis share cultures with Alaskan hosts

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times

His eyes are blue and his hair is blond, very blond, and he has the high cheekbones of Northern Europeans. This description does not exactly fit the image most of us have when we think of indigenous, aboriginal peoples who have had to cope with forces of outsiders who have

come in, taken over their lands and subdued their cultures.

But Ove Varsi is indigenous, and his Sami people of Europe's far north have undergone a subjugation remarkably similar to that faced by Alaska Natives and American Indians.

"The Sami have the same practises and lifestyles as we do," said Ralph Eluska last
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Sami's share problems, hopes with hosts

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Friday as he introduced Varsi and four other Samis at a party at his home. Eluska is the newly-elected chairman of Koniag, Inc., Regional Corporation and is also very active in the World Council of Indigenous People, one of the groups behind the Sami tour of Alaska.

"No matter where you go in the world, you'll find indigenous people," Eluska said. If the approximately 20 or so people at the party doubted the similarity of the Sami to Alaska Natives, their suspicions began to vanish when Inger Kuojolk, who holds a doctorate in ethnology, began to show 20 slides of her family and neighbors at work herding reindeer.

Not only did the tundra-covered terrain look like many places in Alaska, but water-planes were the primary source of transportation in and out. Reindeer herding was a community operation, with everyone helping out. Fish for subsistence-type living and commercial purposes were taken from the streams and rivers.

The family house was made of sod, and a teepee-like structure was used for smoking fish and baking bread. Perhaps most moving, however, was the moment when Kuojolk had Eluska play a record of her grandfather, whom Kuojolk

said was a priest, singing traditional songs.

In her Swedish homeland, said Kuojolk, this "was a sin to do." The reason? Early Christian missionaries who accompanied colonists into the area condemned Sami practices as heathenistic and sought to eliminate them.

"We lost our religion long before you did," Kuojolk said. "We have been down for many centuries. It's very amazing anything (from our culture) is alive still."

Varsi, a young journalist, noted another similarity between his lifestyle and that of Alaskans. Generous servings of salmon and halibut had been the main course at the party. "I live near the best salmon-river in all of Norway," Varsi said proudly.

The leader of the group, Jan Henry Keskitelo, also of Norway, explained that the travelers were all with the Sami Institute, an organization which represents Sami people in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. Keskitelo is a post-graduate student in college with a special interest in language.

According to Eluska, Keskitelo is also known as the "Roger Lang" of Sami-land.

Other Samis making the tour include Gudran Eliissa Eriksen, a student at the University of Tromso in Norway,

and Per Guttorm from Oumea University in Sweden.

For some in the crowd, the party was not an introduction but a reunion. Judy Ramos earlier participated in an exchange where a number of American Indians and two Alaska Natives visited Sami-land. Ramos recalled visiting a Sami village in Norway where the people were locked in conflict with the government. They depended on reindeer for their livelihood, and the government sought to build a hydro-electric dam which would flood the spring grazing grounds of the reindeer.

"They have similar beliefs as we do," said Ramos. "I really enjoyed my trip. They laugh

like we do!"

Tonashay, an Apache Indian born in Mexico and raised in California, first heard of the Samis when his father showed him a book picturing cultures worldwide. Tonashay was only nine years old at the time, but the image of the Sami stayed with him so strongly, that he journeyed into their lands when he reached his mid-twenties.

"They lived the old lifestyle, like Indians," Tonashay remembered. "I wanted to go back to the old lifestyle." Tonashay learned the Sami language and became skilled at working with reindeer on horseback. For the past two years, he has been working as

a reindeer herder for the NANA Corporation, but is now looking for a new job.

After the party, the Samis were scheduled to take a tour of Fairbanks and the University of Alaska, go on a four-day subsistence fishing expedition in Southeast Alaska, take part in the Northwest Arctic Trade Fair in Kotzebue, get involved in some projects in the Bering Straits region with Kawerak and visit Bethel.

On July 20, they will return to Anchorage where they will hold a debriefing session on the experiences in Alaska and their comparisons of Sami and Alaska Native life, with anyone interested in attending.