



A Note on Lapp Culture History

Author(s): Robert H. Lowie

Source: *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Winter, 1945), pp. 447-454

Published by: [University of New Mexico](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3628792>

Accessed: 30/03/2011 16:07

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=unm>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of New Mexico is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY

VOLUME 1 • NUMBER 4

WINTER • 1945



A NOTE ON LAPP CULTURE HISTORY

ROBERT H. LOWIE

ETHNOGRAPHERS are not often enough able to trace cultural developments with the aid of written sources. They are, therefore, rarely able to do more than guess at the factors that have molded social arrangements. It is easier to indicate a significant nexus when demonstrable innovations were introduced at a definite period so that we can then follow the modifications in their wake. Thus, Dr Mandelbaum has shown that, and how, Cree culture was vitally affected at three distinct epochs by elements of white civilization, viz. guns and the fur trade, the horse, and transcontinental railroads.¹ Two Scandinavian publications little known in this country² afford corresponding insight into the consequences of intensified reindeer-breeding among the Lapps and merit a wider audience. Though the authors may not synthesize their findings in so definite a manner as this article implies, I believe it does represent accurately the import of their findings.

It is not my intention to enter into the problem of Lapp origins or the moot-question of how reindeer domestication evolved, but to adhere to facts either established by documentary evidence or by sound linguistic and ethnographic inference. According to Wiklund the Lapps penetrated the Scandinavian peninsula from the north, moving mainly along the mountain ranges, and appeared in the in-

¹ David G. Mandelbaum, *Boom Periods in the History of an Indian Tribe* (Social Forces, vol. 16, pp. 117-119, 1937-38).

² Erik Solem, *Lappiske Rettstudier* (Institutet for Sammenlignende Kulturforskning, vol. 24, Oslo, 1933); P. L. Smith, *Kautokeino og Kautokeino-Lappene* (same series, vol. 34, 1938).

terior about 66° N lat. before 700 AD, at which period they already had Scandinavian contacts. In the seventeenth century they reached their farthest point south, 60°30'.³ By general agreement the primeval Lapps were hunters—largely of wild reindeer—and fishermen. The earliest reference to domesticated reindeer in Scandinavia dates from ca. 890 AD. At that time the Norseman Ohtthere is credited with having owned a herd of six hundred “tame reindeer,” but there is no evidence of any practical utilization of these beasts. It has been both surmised and denied that Ohtthere had Lapps to tend his animals, a point impossible of verification. Indeed, Laufer questions that true domestication was involved at all, conjecturing that the Lapps adopted domesticated reindeer from the Samoyed during the eleventh or twelfth century.⁴ The earliest record he produces for the utilization of reindeer by Lapps is due to Baron Sigismund von Herbertstein, whose Russian interpreter, Gregory Istoma, had seen Norwegian Lapps driving in reindeer-sledges in 1496. In 1555, when Archbishop Olaus Magnus published his account, both driving and milking were fully developed features of Lapp reindeer economy.

Now, whatever criticisms may be made on Laufer's theories from other points of view, his contention that the Lapps became effective reindeer-breeders only in very recent times seems emphatically borne out by Solem's evidence. As he reminds us, a herd of fifty beasts, i. e. one approximating a wild herd, is utterly inadequate for the support of a household; and for comfort the size required is from 200 to 250. Olaus Magnus, indeed, speaks of herds of 500 head, and other sources during his and the following century even mention herds of 2,000 beasts. But the Swedish tax lists tell a different story. The Lapps were obliged to pay the government one tenth of all their reindeer—later one tenth of all the reindeer offspring. The following figures, then, are suggestive. In 1609 the 103 Lapps at Ume owned altogether 946 head, with an average of 9, the wealthiest member of the group having only 28, so that he was unable to subsist on the milk and flesh of his stock. In Lule 181 Lapps owned 3,981

³ K. B. Wiklund, *Finno-Ugrier* (in Ebert's *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte*, vol. 3, pp. 364-382, Berlin, 1924), p. 367.

⁴ B. Laufer, *The Reindeer and its Domestication* (Memoirs, American Anthropological Association, vol. 4, no. 2, 1917), pp. 95-101.

reindeer, averaging 22 head; and the wealthiest man owned 75 head. Solem reasonably conjectures that the high early estimates relate to the property of a whole community. In peltry payment, too, reindeer are far from predominating during this period. In 1549 the Lapps of Västerbotten paid 103½ marten skins, 1760 squirrel skins, and 75 reindeer skins; in 1554 those of Kemi and Torne are credited with 50 reindeer, 92 marten, 9 beaver, 40 ermine skins. Somewhat later dried fish were added to the tax payments. The facts suggest a population supporting itself essentially by hunting and fishing (*Betalingsmidlene viser en befolkning som for den vesentligste del har hatt sin naering i jakt og fangst*).

Only in the eighteenth century is any marked change demonstrable. In Kola Peninsula, Russia, large herds began to develop about 1700. In Kautokeino the Lapps of 1740 were still moving "hither and thither in order to seek food in some fashion, for hardly any one was wealthy enough to sustain himself and his household solely by his reindeer." In Scandinavia larger herds first developed in the southern Lapp districts. The census of 1753 shows 64 men of one locality owning jointly 4,860 head, with the richest having 300; 16 men, between 100 and 250; the rest, between 20 and 100. At that period it was still only the wealthiest Lapps who could afford to dispense with hunting.⁵

In short, until well into the eighteenth century, the ancestors of the modern Reindeer Lapps were for the most part hunters and fishermen with merely ancillary dependence on reindeer-breeding. Tornaeus' graphic account of a wild reindeer herd driven into a corral dates back to 1672.⁶

What, then, were the social arrangements that accompanied the pre-pastoral condition; and how were they influenced by the introduction of stock-breeding as a primary economic occupation?

At no time is there evidence for a clan system with exogamy nor even for a distinct stressing of unilateral kinship ties. The relationship terminology emphatically departs from the customary "classificatory" (bifurcate merging) pattern, conforming rather to the "bifurcate collateral" type. There are, then, distinct words for

⁵ Solem, *op. cit.*, pp. 14, 17-21, 184 f.

⁶ Alexander Castren, *Reiseerinnerungen aus den Jahren 1838-1844* (St Petersburg, 1853), p. 44 f.

father (acce), father's elder brother (oekke), and mother's brother (oeno); and for mother (oedne), mother's elder sister (goaske), and father's sister (siessa). This is in consonance with the observed prominence of the individual family. No trace has been noted of either the avunculate or preferential cross-cousin marriage. Residence varies, in part at least, regionally: the Skolte Lapps are thoroughgoing patrilocalists; in other groups the first year of marriage at least is spent with the wife's kin, an arrangement that sometimes becomes permanent. Matrilocal residence seems to be more common if the bride's family are wealthy, a condition met only in the stock-breeding era, for originally there was no distinction of rich and poor, the very word for "rich" being borrowed from the Scandinavian.⁷

Both hunting and pastoral Lapps have had a type of unit larger than the family and designated by a truly Lapp stem with such dialectic variants as sit, sida, sii'dâ. For the sake of simplicity the first of these will henceforth be used exclusively; its current Norwegian rendering is "by" (town). Pre-pastoral conditions must be considered first.

The sit is not a joint family, lineage, or clan, for the blood-kinship of the constituent families is immaterial. The Petsamo Lapp fishermen, for example, embraced three sit, each attached to a river of its own, and each made up of several families that might or might not be related. The institution throughout historic times is "not tied to a definite lineage" (*ikke knyttet til en bestemt slekt*). A sit derives its designation not from a putative ancestor, but from its fishing-sites or winter-quarters. In other words, the group names are local.

Probably the sit owned a sacred sacrificial site where the oldest member, or in matters of special importance the shaman, made offerings. However, the unit was primarily an economic one. A sit owned a tract of land, which was usually set off by natural lines of demarcation. In Petsamo each territory was concentrated along a watercourse, the watersheds marking the boundaries. Since the seventeenth century litigation over trespass has been brought before Scandinavian courts.

⁷ Solem, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 72 f., 284, 290, 292, 294 f.; Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 572.

Control was vested in an assembly of house fathers, succeeded by their eldest sons, and presided over by an elected chairman. This body assumed jurisdiction in civil cases, assigned land for exploitation, altered the allotments of fishing-sites, disposed of beavers and other land animals killed by residents, and by lot distributed the salmon catch. The council of the Skolte Lapps retained these privileges until recent times.

Obviously there was a considerable measure of communism, but it was not unqualified. Chattels were owned individually, and a distinction was drawn between the more and the less valuable game animals. Generally speaking, the latter might be hunted by individuals for the sole benefit of their households. On the other hand, the sit anciently claimed reindeer, beavers, bears, and wolves, and periodically reaffirmed the old law or specifically sanctioned its modification. Thus, in 1770 an assembly declared that no beaver must be sold or given away until the whole "by" had given its consent, and allotted the places for making a catch among the membership. In 1733 the same principle had been asserted for wild reindeer, too (*villren og bever efter gammel sedvane skulde tilfalle byen*). Since the corrals for a battue required coöperative effort, the rule appears rational enough. It was also decreed at one time that between Christmas Day and mid-Lent no one should hunt reindeer alone. Again, bear flesh was consumed in a big common feast.

In consonance with the spirit of these regulations the sit provided for the wants of every member, not as a matter of charity, but as an obligation owed him. This attitude, of course, militated against marked differences of wealth.

Nevertheless, the historic period witnessed definite steps towards restricting the communistic principle. Whereas anciently the catch of fish was shared, later the sit came to recognize the individual's privilege to fish at particular spots; and in 1733 a decree explicitly eliminated the wolf hunt from the roster of compulsorily communal enterprises and sanctioned the individual appropriation of glutton, otter, fox, and marten skins.⁸ Such defection from traditional usage was probably due to the seeping in of individualistic notions from either Scandinavians or stock-breeding Lapps.

8 Solem, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-93, 101-104, 285 f., 288 f.

To turn to the reindeer nomads, they preserved the sit, but inevitably modified it. It comprised from two to six families—most frequently three—who profitably united their beasts in a single herd of between, say, 1,500 and 2,000 head. Occasionally local conditions precluded such unions: in Polmak, for instance, pasturage was so sparse that each herder had to shift for himself. However, the sit is clearly the normal institution for the reindeer-breeders. Yet, notwithstanding the coöperative principle on which the unit rests, individual ownership predominates. Though pasture lands are shared, each family has its own tent, driving equipment, domestic utensils, and reindeer (*Det er i det hele tatt ikke noe økonomisk felleskap mellom de forskjellige familier i siidaen*).

The pastoral sit, too, is emphatically a "loose" unit: there is no question of exogamy; the membership may hold for only part of the year and changes from one year to the next. However, before admission to another sit a seceder is likely to be cross-questioned concerning the reason for his shift. Every sit has a leader, who is not formally chosen, but emerges naturally as the most experienced and affluent reindeer-breeder, retaining his position as long as his competence insures his prestige. The office, which is without compensation, may descend to the incumbent's eldest son provided he displays the requisite efficiency. The leader decides on the time for migrating and allots tasks among the members. He is influenced by their advice, but often his word is decisive, which also holds for cases of quarreling. Damages claimed by Norwegian peasants or sedentary Lapps who have suffered from the herds are paid by the headman, who recoups himself by assessments.

As between distinct sit units, there have been no noteworthy disputes over land. The Lapps are peaceable and reasonable folk who recognize that circumstances alter cases. Their claims, accordingly, are not advanced as indefeasible prerogatives in a modern legal sense. Customary rights are respected, and along the paths of migration one sit will try not to exhaust the pasturage, so as to save as much as possible for later wanderers. If ice covers the lichens so that the reindeer, unable to get at their fodder, trespass on grounds traditionally associated with another sit, no grievance is felt. Inevitably, too, a mixture of herds will occur, since weak animals lagging behind their fellows are picked up by subsequent arrivals. Or,

wolves may cause an alarm and drive reindeer into alien herds. Hence a regular technique has developed for separating one's animals from those of other herders. In lieu of a brand, each reindeer bears a property mark cut or bitten out of its ears, and when the animals to be sorted out have been driven into a corral, or nowadays assembled at some suitable site, a Lapp will go back and forth to lasso his property. He will very likely offer a fee to the man into whose herd his beasts have strayed, but since at some future time the tables are likely to be reversed, the offer is usually declined. An interesting relation has sprung up between pastoral and sedentary Lapps. The latter, too, require some reindeer for transport since horses can be used only on regular roads; in the winter the owners tend their beasts themselves, but in the summer they entrust them to the care of some friendly Reindeer Lapps.

The pre-pastoral Lapps were definitely egalitarians. Never a warlike people, they did not acquire captives that might evolve into a caste of slaves. But with the rise of large reindeer-herds the pastoral Lapps found it desirable to employ helpers, usually hired for one year, who receive their clothes and as many as five reindeer cows as wages. These servants are well-treated and because of their skill may become full-fledged members of a sit. Characteristically, there are no stems in the language for such workers: the words designating them are the Scandinavian *dreng* (boy) and *pike* (girl) or Finnish equivalents.⁹

To sum up, the transformation of fishing and hunting Lapps into large-scale stock-breeders brought with it definite social changes. There developed marked differences in wealth: Turi's maternal grandfather at one time owned 5,000 head of reindeer, whereas another old man who once had a herd of 1,000 saw his stock dwindle away to a paltry 20.¹⁰ Incidentally, the pastoralists pay little attention to the decrepit, for their nomadism renders such care very difficult. The rise of rich people, of course, involved a recession of the communistic principle. Finally, the new conditions introduced nascent, though not over-emphasized, distinctions of status—a group of hired workers.

⁹ Solem, *op. cit.*, pp. 273, 306 ff., 185-203; Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 570 f.

¹⁰ Solem, *op. cit.*, p. 63 f; Johan Turi, *Das Buch des Lappen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1912), p. 249 f.

The degradation of women, which some authors connect with pastoral life, did not develop. Lapp women enjoy a relatively good position, advise in economic matters, dispose of their own property, and may forbid a daughter's marriage. In this connection we may recall that the women are economically active, milk reindeer, help in tending them and in putting up the stock, usually procure firewood, and take care of everything connected with skins. Their disabilities in pagan days seem to have been mainly connected with menstrual and natal taboos. A woman retired to a special hut during her confinement and was considered impure for six weeks after delivery. When menstruating, she had to avoid stepping over her husband's feet or gun. She was not supposed to enter by the rear door through which a hunter brought his kill nor to approach a fisherman's catch. Shamanistic drums and sacred rites were also taboo to her. In the daily routine, however, women held an accepted place.¹¹

Ultimogeniture is noted for some groups, but not exclusively for the reindeer nomads. It is, of course, consistent with matrilineal residence, but the regional differences are considerable. The Finnish Lapps in Enare regard the eldest son as the principal heir, whereas among the Skolte the youngest son remains at home, taking care of his parents and unmarried sisters, and is called "the foundation of the house." In one case, in Tana, the youngest daughter took over the house and property though there was an elder brother. It would be worth while to determine the correlates of these varying usages.¹²

Altogether it would be a great boon to science if some Scandinavian scholar were to synthesize what is known about the Lapps from both earlier sources and recent field work. Both the old-style ethnographer and the student of acculturation have a great deal to learn about this fascinating people.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

11 E. Reuterskiöld, *De nordiske Lapparnas Religion* (Stockholm, 1912), pp. 59, 68;
J. Scheffer, *Lappland* (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig, 1675), pp. 101, 115 f., 122, 341.
12 Solem, *op. cit.*, pp. 169 et seq., 297 f.