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Cultural Revitalisation: ‘Feeding on the Tools of the Conquerors’—A Sami-American Perspective

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The Sami are one of the world’s many Indigenous peoples, and one of Europe’s few Indigenous people. Numbering somewhere between 25,000 and 250,000, depending on the counting method used, the Sami people (derogatorily known as ‘Lapps’) live in the northern Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden and Finland, and on the Kola Peninsula of Russia—an area that the Sami call Sapmi. The Sami have a history of coexistence with their Nordic neighbours, but they have also endured forced, coerced and incentivised cultural assimilation into the dominant cultures where they reside. The history of the Sami in their respective Nordic counties is similar to the histories of exploitation of other Indigenous peoples. The borders drawn across the Scandinavian landscape have more meaning to the Nordic countries than they do for the Sami, as families are often on both sides of these government-created barriers.

Approximately 30,000 descendants of Sami immigrants live in North America (‘About the North American Sami’ n.d.)—an immigrant story that their Sami kin in Sapmi often cannot relate to. In this article, it is hoped that the reader will learn how one North American small business has tried to contribute to the revitalisation of Sami culture outside of Sapmi.

What is a *lavvu*?

The *lavvu* is a tent that has been used by the Sami people for centuries. To the untrained North American eye, the *lavvu* looks very similar to the Native American *tipi*, but its structure, pattern and even spiritual use are very different. There are other similar structures in the Arctic polar regions, such as the *chum* used by the Nenets and Khanets of northern Russia, each with their own history, but most outsiders know even less about these structures (Figure 16).



Figure 16. The Inga family c. 1896. The photograph was taken at Kanstadfjord on the Hinnøy part of Andøy. A *lavvu* tent is in the background, while a *gohti* is in the foreground.

Source. A Lapp Family, Norway (c. 1895–1900). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. LC-DIG-pmsc-06257 (digital file from original). No known restrictions on publication. Online: www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001700768/ (accessed 9 July 2018).

Cultural revitalisation and the *lavvu* as a cultural symbol

Although the *lavvu* itself has never been targeted for assimilation by the dominant Nordic cultures, unlike religious and other cultural practices, it has been looked down upon by outsiders as a ‘backward’ or ‘primitive’ shelter over the centuries. The *lavvu* has always been the domain of the Sami and was not appropriated by outsiders until recently.¹ However, in contrast, the *tipi* has been appropriated by many outsiders, such as the Germans throughout the 1900s, in reenactment groups, to the present day. The *lavvu* has always been in the shadow of the *tipi*—for better and for worse. Despite its being overlooked by outsiders, the *lavvu* had always been a powerful symbol of the Sami for centuries, just as the *tipi* has for Native Americans.

The *lavvu* v. the *tipi*

The *lavvu* is markedly different from the *tipi* in several aspects; first, the *lavvu* has no smoke flaps at its top. The walls of the *lavvu* are more slanted towards the ground, at about 45 degrees rather than the *tipi*'s 55–60 degrees (see Figure 17). The door of the *lavvu* door, like that of the *tipi*, is unattached, but is much larger than its North American counter parts. In North America, one of the largest disadvantages of the *lavvu* is that so many people confuse it with the *tipi*. There have been several occasions where individual Native Americans, upon first seeing a *lavvu*, react with hostility, believing that it is simply a ‘badly made *tipi*’, but upon learning more, react more positively to their cultural similarity.

1 The single exception to this was the creation of the *kohte*, designed by the German, Eberhard Koebel in c. 1930. The *lavvu*-inspired *kohte* was a symbolic tent used by the German Youth Movement (*Die deutsche Jugendbewegung*), later banned during the Nazi era, but brought back after the war and now an important symbol of the German environmental movement, no longer connected with its *lavvu* origins.



Figure 17. A present-day 4-metre (12-foot) *lavvu*.
Source. Photographed by author, Hancock, Michigan, 2011.

Northern Lavvu – more than just a small business

Northern Lavvu is a privately owned business founded in 1995 that produces Sami *lavvus*. The owner, as well as many of the part-time employees, are of Sami ancestry. Northern Lavvu is presently the only company in the world (Galloway 2014)² that commercially produces traditional *lavvus* following the liquidation of the Sami-owned *lavvu* company, Venor AS, the only *lavvu* company in Sapmi (‘Tvangsoppløsning’ 2014).

Philosophy

Central to the philosophy of Northern Lavvu are four visions that are closely connected to each other:

2 Laura Galloway mentions that Northern Lavvu is now the only company in the world, following the closure of Venor AS. However, a new venture was started recently under Arctic Lavvo in Norway.

1. Materials: The use of natural and environmentally friendly materials, as much as possible, with a minimum of carbon footprint, and avoiding petroleum-based products.
2. Education: Educating the general public about the Sami, our world view, who we are, and how the *lavvu* is part of our world view.
3. Philanthropy: A portion of the proceeds is used to provide material and financial support for North American Sami events.
4. Standard and protection: ‘Defending the *lavvu*’—to protect the *lavvu* from commercial and cultural exploitation by non-Sami, so that it is kept within the community, and on Sami terms.

Many manufacturers use petroleum-based fabric materials in their tents, and although it may be cost-effective to use them, these fabrics cannot withstand exposure of heat from an open fire or other heat source. Cotton duck, which is naturally fire resistant (with limitations), has been used extensively for Northern Lavvu tents. These fabrics can be treated using natural elements, such as saline to inhibit mildew staining, but they provide warmth and are partially resistant to fire—the whole purpose of a *lavvu*.

‘Defending the *lavvu* ...’

When Northern Lavvu first started during the mid-1990s, a ‘social licence’ was ‘granted’ from several Sami Elders with the understanding that the knowledge of *lavvu*-making would be kept within the community, and not suffer the same fate as the *tipi*—namely, being made by outsiders. ‘Defending the *lavvu*’ has been a mantra within Northern Lavvu ever since.

There have been a few instances over the years where some non-Sami wanted to use the *lavvu* in derogatory ways—whether intentional or not. One example was when, during the late 1990s, a commercial film company contacted Northern Lavvu and wanted to create a comical sketch, using a ‘cheap *tipi*’ to be part of a commercial. Northern Lavvu refused this exchange as it would have been demeaning to the Native American culture. It also would have been seen as demeaning by the larger Sami community who would protest such antics. After some discussion, the film company dropped the *lavvutipi* idea and later used a generic nomadic tent, which looked neither like a *lavvu* nor a *tipi*. Another example is when participants in a local Minneapolis art show wanted to

‘make our own *lavvu*’, and portray Sami people in a skit, yet without any Sami community input, or direction in this matter. They also mistakenly believed that the *lavvu* is of the same design as a *tipi*. They were discouraged from doing this and moved on to another concept.

In both instances, not only were *lavvus* not provided to these groups, but also they were persuaded to avoid any connection—even remotely—with the Sami culture, as they would have represented it, even if unintended, in a negative way. In both these instances they were persuaded to use other methods of expression rather than the *lavvu*. This is an example of not only educating the public of certain cultural expectations, but also of ‘defending the *lavvu*’.

Northern Lavvu’s contribution to the Sami community

Apart from the private business perspective, Northern Lavvu’s long-term goal has been to provide philanthropic funds for Sami cultural projects, such as supporting film societies, providing Sami Elders with their own personal *lavvu*, and sponsoring Sami- and Nordic-related events. Although not a major source of philanthropic funds for the North American Sami community, it has financially ‘smoothed things over’, in regards to providing help for cultural demonstrations, film societies, social events and even for personal emergencies for individuals within the Sami community for a variety of reasons.

However, to raise such philanthropic funds, a commercial perspective is needed, which requires business savvy; something that seems counter to an Indigenous perspective. Indeed, ‘business’ and ‘Indigenous’ are often in conflict with each other—and rightfully so. There are many Indigenous peoples all over the world fighting timber, mining, or fishing industries that encroach on Indigenous land and fishing rights.

A recent public example has been the Dakota Access Pipeline protests of the Dakota People of the Standing Rock Tribe in North Dakota in 2015–17. The tribe protested the building of an oil pipeline upriver and under their reservation’s water supply, thus threatening the tribe directly. The protests became a global focus for Indigenous rights and were supported by thousands of people for many months, from hundreds of North American Native Tribes, and including non-Natives—but also

by several Sami visitors during the two-year conflict. During that time, Northern Lavvu provided both financial and material support in the form of *lavvus*, food, water and fuel to the protesters, who were all in conflict with both federal and state law during that time. There were nearly a dozen *lavvus* set up alongside hundreds of tipis in their camp.

Business interests vs Indigenous interests

At first glance, ‘business interests’ and ‘Indigenous interests’ may seem in conflict; however, they are not polar opposites and can be in alliance with each other. There have already been precedents for this in the past.

A simple mistake in a \$147 Minnesota county tax bill resulted in the US Supreme Court’s landmark 1976 decision in *Bryan v. Itasca County*, which became the ‘bedrock’ of the Native American gaming industry (Washburn 2008). Although casinos/gambling were not necessarily part of the history of North American Native Communities, billions of dollars have been raised that directly benefited the majority of tribes that participated in gaming. This success requires knowledge and understanding of their business plan, their customer base, and even the exploitation of the dominant culture.

However, the reverse has also been true. If one is looking for a Native-made, commercially sold *tipi* made by a US federally recognised tribe, one will be hard pressed to find any on the market, as nearly all *tipis* advertised today are made by non-Natives, even in the United States and Canada. The *tipi*—a strong and powerful symbol of Native Americans—is not available commercially in a way that benefits Native Americans. To prevent the *lavvu* from suffering the same fate as the *tipi*, this is where Northern Lavvu’s philosophy of ‘defending the *lavvu*’ comes into effect. Northern Lavvu are always aware of the possible exploitation of the *lavvu* by outside interests.

In Sapmi, many cultural organisations, individuals and (in some instances) corporations, often do get some type of government financial backing in the form of grants or loans of varying degrees, though their funding has always been a source of on-going political debate. In Canada or the United States, any government grants to cultural organisations and individuals, if available, are often very limited, and rarely available for long—to the

point of being just lip service. In North America, business-savvy is the only way for Indigenous peoples to step in to fill that financial void, such as the gaming industry.

The *lavvu*—a ‘snapshot’ in time

Northern Lavvu’s goal has been to reproduce the *lavvu* design as it was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There are several reasons for this time frame: English textiles, with their inexpensive cotton duck from colonial India, were reaching the far corners of the globe, including Sapmi. Before the transition period of 1850–1900, *lavvus* were made primarily of reindeer hides; however, during this transition, cotton, and to a lesser extent woollen felt, came into use. This transition period started roughly during the 1850s and into the early 1900s as more accessible and inexpensive British fabric goods became available to the Sami. The ‘olive drab’ *lavvus* were popular following World War II as this was the material that was readily available following the destruction of residential housing during the war.

Research

Even though the *lavvu* remains a powerful symbol of the Sami people (see Figure 18), there is still very little in the way of academic research on the subject, and to date none known in the English language (except for the author’s manual for the *lavvu* from Northern Lavvu). When Northern Lavvu started research on the *lavvu* in the preinternet era, there were only two main sources of research: the oral traditions of immigrant Sami to North America³ (who made only one traditional *lavvu* here in North America), and historical photos of the tent structure. The only way to simulate a pre-1900 *lavvu* structure was to build it, experiment, make it into a living structure, and then compare the work with period photos of the *lavvus*. See Figure 16 as an example of this research, among others. There are also movie reels from the era. One such is *Le Vie chez les Lapons* (Life in Lapland) (1908), which is another example of the historical work that we attempt to incorporate into our research into *lavvu*.

3 The vast majority of the oral traditions were from Anja Kitti of Toronto, Canada and Ellen Binder of Tuktoyaktuk, Canada during the early 1990s. Nathan Muus, coeditor of *Baiki: The North American Sami Journal*, also had considerable background knowledge of the *lavvu*.

The *lavvu* produced by Northern Lavvu are a hybrid made up of ideas from these oral traditions, photographic evidence, and an application of practical design. With this basic design, plus minor variations in size, colour, and so on, the pattern is a commercially viable product that has been used in a variety of the world-wide environments, that provides for people with differing camping skills, and is cost effective for production. It is with some interest that *lavvu* poles, normally spruce or birch of the northern climates of Sapmi, have been substituted with bamboo in such places as Indonesia, South Africa, Brazil and even Florida. The vast majority of *lavvus* are now going to areas never seen by the Indigenous Sami. Northern Lavvu's consumers have mostly been non-Sami wanting a unique camping tent and, along the way, learning about a Sami world view perspective.

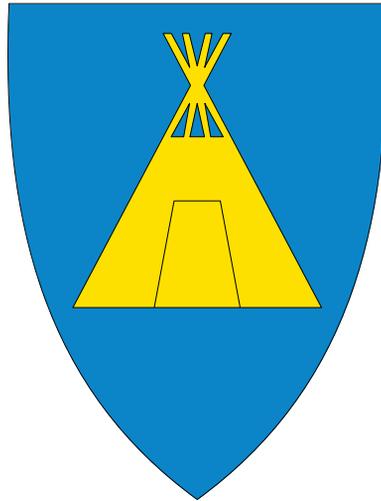


Figure 18. The coat of arms of the Sami town of Kautokeino (Guovdageaidnu), Norway.

Source: Wikipedia Commons. Online: upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/Kautokeino_komm.svg (accessed 2 September 2018).

Cultural revitalisation and *lavvu* today

When Northern Lavvu started in 1995, there was only one known traditional *lavvu* in North America made by an elder, and one of the very few outside of Sapmi. Today, the *lavvu*—and the Sami world perspective—has spread to every continent on the globe. To date, Northern Lavvu has published the only work in the English language that deals exclusively with the *lavvu*, while some of the proceeds go to supporting Sami cultural events in North America.

Revitalisation of Indigenous cultures will come from many sources and directions, and although commercialisation and business have often been used as weapons to exploit Indigenous peoples, this need not be so in the future. The very seeds of Indigenous cultural revitalisation may actually feed upon the roots of past exploitation—‘feeding on the tools of the conquerors’.

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