

# Cappelen Damm Agency *Spring 2019*



## A Sami History of the World

### **A Sami History of the World**

An Arctic indigenous people went out to conquer the world. This is the story of how they confronted racism and entered into a blood brotherhood with capitalism

The Sami people and what constitutes Sami identity have always been seen as functions of their geographical territory at the extreme northern edge of Europe. A History of the Sami World however does not focus on the people living in Sápmi– Samiland – but follows the Sami who travelled and discovered the rest of the world.

They allowed themselves to be put on display in American and European ‘World Exhibitions’. Entrepreneurial Zoo owners such as the German Carl Hagenbeck showed off Sami people in zoological gardens. The new style of commercial publicity reflected industrialisation and international capitalism and, for as long as the public on many continents were showing a tremendous interest, the Sami – as well as several other aboriginal peoples – became energetically exploited in advertising. The exotic was profitable.

The Sami were active participants in the heroic era of polar exploration, when the last white regions on the world map were investigated by expeditions led by famous explorers. Quite rightly, the Sami were regarded as experts on survival in an extremely cold and inhospitable climate. Their role in charting the Arctic clearly belongs in a ‘world history’ of this people.

The Sami History of the World is a unique book – nothing like it has been written before.

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**A Sami History of the World**

Hugo Lauritz Jenssen

## Hugo Lauritz Jenssen

*b. 1962*

Hugo Lauritz Jenssen is a journalist and author. He writes for Dagens Næringsliv and D2, among other publications. Jenssen has written numerous books, among them the Brage Prize-nominated *The High Rise* – a building philosophy.



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## [Overskrift for Synopsis]

### About the book and the author:

The author, Hugo Lauritz Jenssen, grew up in northern Norway (Nord-Norge), a province in the extreme north of Norway. It is a territory where once the Sami people had been the most numerous group and where their reindeer herds had been wandering freely over the high heathlands on the boundary between Norway and Sweden. Nonetheless, Lauritz Jenssen met hardly a single Sami during his youth. The mystery kept intriguing him: *Where had the Sami gone?*

For centuries, the Sami culture was subjected to unceasing, merciless pressures: the people were urged to assimilate, accept colonization and convert to Christianity. Many Sami chose to go underground and try to stay invisible in order to evade the cultural thumbscrews. Family names were changed. Traditional tribal garments were hidden away. That an indigenous population is systematically robbed of their identity and sense of self-worth is a familiar and intensely saddening process. Some of the Sami however found an escape route: *They went out in the world to discover what it had to offer.* The conquered became, in some respects, the conquerors. Lauritz Jenssen didn't take long to locate traces of Sami men and women who had cut loose their moorings, as early as in the 18th and 19th centuries, and left the heaths and hills of their homeland. They would, for instance, go with flocks of reindeer to show the animals off in European palaces and also allow themselves to become exhibits in zoological gardens and at world exhibitions in Europe and the USA. He often came across fragments of history that revealed complex cultural encounters: one Sami went to China as a missionary; another signed on as a seaman on board a whaling ship on its way to the Antarctic Ocean and was later sucked into a vortex of events in the grand drama of the wide-ranging naval operations during the Second World War.

The Sami, in their traditional setting as an indigenous people in Arctic territories, were as extensively studied – and marvelled at – as subjected to cultural and linguistic oppression. Investigations into the Sami identity and culture have been carried out with great zeal for more than five centuries. The net result is an almost overwhelmingly large amount of documentation. Aimless adventurers, classical explorers, ethnologists and every other kind of academic have made their enthusiastic way northwards to Cap of the North.

This book offers a radical change of perspective: it is following the fate of the Sami and the idea of being a Sami, as this group of Arctic nomads find places to survive within elastic geographical boundaries and become observant travellers in their own right.

This book is in fact a first attempt to write a Sami world history. The author asks us to look at the people in a new way, and presents a startling number of different narratives.

Here, we meet Sami as individuals. One of them is Margrete Olsdatter Bull Kreutz. She was an exceptionally strong Sami woman and she truly did see and experience the world. In 1889, she and her children went to France to be exhibited in Jardin d'Acclimatation: the 'Jardin' was then, and still is, an amusement park set in the woodland in Bois de Boulogne. This particular event was a preliminary to the World Exhibition in Paris. In the Bois de Boulogne, the Sami lived in encampments surrounded by tall fences, sharing life shoulder to shoulder with other intriguingly exotic peoples and tribes. These included Nubians from Sudan, Inuit from Greenland, Ashanti from the West African territory that would become Ghana, Senegalese and Hottentots (Khoikhoi) from southern Africa. Margrete and her little daughter were observed and photographed by Prince Roland Bonaparte (a relation to Napoleon) and his assistant. Margrete also participated in the 1893 World Exhibition in Chicago, where *The Lapland Village* had millions of visitors.

Lauritz Jensen challenges the attitude that casts the Sami solely as victims. Instead they more often are portrayed as winners rather than losers, as brave rather than the usual view of them as submissive, weak and pitiable souls. It is of course also true that the book includes many tragic stories, with a dark undercurrent of racism running through many of them. Carl von Linné was one of the central and most notable figures behind the ideas that form part of «scientific racism» (though he hardly ever wrote down his outrageously racist categorisations of, among others, the Sami, as if he had an inkling of what it might lead to). But Linné had himself portrayed wearing a Sami outfit, and so did many of his contemporary scientists, for instance the French mathematician Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, the Viennese court astronomer and Jesuit priest Maximilian Hell and Prince Roland Bonaparte of France, a man with a pretty comprehensive portfolio of academic enthusiasms. To dress like a Sami – a move designed to indicate well-meaning sympathy and even admiration for the Sami people – was a popular gesture for Europe's intellectual and well-travelled elite. Nowadays, this kind of cultural appropriation is normally viewed with feelings ranging from suspicion to anger.

When, in 1786, Sigrid and Anna, two young Sami women from Njutånger in Sweden, followed a member of the English nobility back to Newcastle, they were regarded as living souvenirs – as human trophies. This episode was the outcome of a wager between two men. The famous 1822 exhibition in London of a Sami family from Røros followed: Jens Thomassen Holm, his wife Karen Christiansdatter

and their son were shown off, just before the staging of grand exhibitions grew into an established part of the entertainment industry and then, some fifty years later, a major international enterprise. Zoological Garden entrepreneurs such as the German Carl Hagenbeck would exhibit Sami people in his zoos.

A key aim of Lauritz Jenssen's approach to the Sami is to shake up assumptions and 'conventional truths', whether clearly stated or unspoken. One such 'truth' is that the Sami were shown in public by greedy, unscrupulous profiteers. In fact, the Sami made the choice to become exhibits of their own, free will, had proper contracts and were paid accordingly (unlike some Africans, who at the time were more or less enslaved). Travelling to distant countries was part of the deal and these groups of Sami saw something of the wider world at a time when this was impossible for most people, unless they emigrated (usually driven by poverty, and mainly to North America) or were very well off.

Some Sami men became heroes of Polar expeditions and were active participants during the heroic period during which the polar areas, by then the last white spots on maps of the world, were explored by teams that became world-famous. The Sami were rightly regarded as experts on survival in extremely cold and inhospitable climates. Such roles are of course an essential part of the world history of this indigenous people. Samuel J. Balto and Ole Nielsen Ravna served as guides on Fridtjof Nansen's very first crossing of Greenland, and Per Savio and Ole Must joined the expedition of Carsten E. Borchgrevink, the first to spend a winter on the Antarctic continent.

At the same time as an international public was showing a tremendous interest in native peoples, the Sami – as well as population groups from elsewhere – were frequently featured in advertisements. Advertising, including publicity stunts, had emerged as a major industry, driven by newly prosperous merchants, part of the world-wide growth of industrial capitalism. What was seen as exotic turned out to be profitable. While the Sami were invariably shown in a very positive light (even though the advertised images were stereotypical), this distinguished them from how other 'exotic people' were treated and in particular the indigenous Americans, then known as the *Indians*. In American advertising, the portrayal of the Indians was unmistakably racist – as if belonging to an inferior kind of human being. However, to be precise, the Sami were never asked if they wished to be featured in advertisements. Capitalist market economics recognised no reasonable objections to anything or anyone – including ethnic groups – being managed as an investment. The book shows plenty of examples of how advertising has been exploiting the Sami concept for much more than a century to sell everything from Belgian chocolates, French bouillon, American rubber boots, Dentyne dental chewing gum (*Lucky Lapp!*), coffee (from Arbuckle Bros. New

York),cigarettes from many countries and Canadian whisky – not to forget washing powders in Nazi Germany.

The strange thing about this phenomenon is that it took place at the same time as the pressure on the Sami in the far north of Europe was increasing relentlessly.