



*An interview with Valentina Sovkina*

## Traditional Saami ways of eating

*"We have four traditional activities in our region that provide us food: hunting, reindeer breeding, fishing, wild fruits collecting like berries, but also mushrooms and herbs. Traditionally agriculture was not our thing. But with the influence of Russian population we started to plant potatoes, carrots, also we plant blackberries, raspberries and even strawberries." - says Valentina Sovkina, the representative of the Coalition on Indigenous Peoples Food Systems and the head of the Russian department of The Saami Women Forum in an interview with Paulina Jeziorek from Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation.*

**Paulina Jeziorek: Valentina, you represent the Saami, the indigenous population of Russia who constitute the smallest national minority in Russia and are concentrated around the settlement of Lovozero.**

Valentina Sovkina: Yes, according to the last census, there are only a little more than 1.5 thousand of us. But the Saami people live in the neighboring northern countries, such as Finland, Norway, Sweden. I think there are many of us around the world. You can find the Saami in countries such as Poland or America, they are in Alaska and in southern countries, even in Asia and India.

**The Saami of Russia live in difficult political, economical and social conditions. You try to support and help the community. Why did you decide to work in the context of food sovereignty of the Saami?**

The reason why I represent the indigenous people of Saami and why I try to protect their rights, culture and food tradition is because I am Saami myself. I grew up in this context, I know the Saami language and got to know their traditions. Our family always ate traditional local products. I often went fishing at the nearby lake or wild fruit picking. The Saami culture and tradition including food was always very close to me.

## **How about the other contexts of food like climate change, people's food sovereignty and preservation of culture traditions?**

The answer implies all the three dimensions you mentioned: climate change, preservation of traditional culture, way of life and food. As for myself I would like my people to stay in the area where they lived for generations. I would like them to restore the traditional way of eating and eat more reindeer meat and fish that is more common than chicken and pork. In recent years a lot of traditional products have been substituted with products from around the world. When I was in a boarding school and they tried to feed us with food they called civilized products like chicken and pork that is very common, but it is not common for us, the Saami people. For us the reindeer meat. I also thought a lot about the traditional products during Covid-19 pandemic and I think that people who ate traditional products had lighter forms of covid. They did not suffer so much. This is my thought. I experienced it myself.

I think a lot about climate change as well. We see the problem looking at our reindeer. They eat bushes and herbs. Recently they cannot find the food they used to eat due to climate change, so they slowly go north. But in the north there is not so much food for them. So in a while they will have nowhere to go. There is less and less territory remaining for reindeer each year.

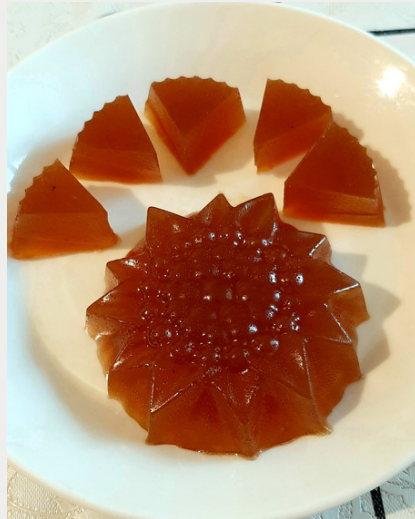
Also, our food tradition and culture preservation is a very important thing. I think that if you eat the food from your area, not only you maintain your tradition, but at the same time it is a healthy way of life.

## **Can you say more about traditional food of the Saami? How do you collect and produce food in your region?**

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and herbs. Traditionally agriculture was not our thing. But with the arrival of the Russian population, we began to plant potatoes, carrots as well as black currants, raspberries and even strawberries. Nowadays people have greenhouses where they plant cucumbers, cabbages, and many other vegetables which they need at the beginning of spring when they lack vitamins. I have a small greenhouse myself. Actually, most products I eat are traditional products: reindeer meat, fish and wild berries. I eat green onion and a bit of carrot and potatoes. Usually I use no spices. Reindeer meat is very tasty and does not require spices.

**You were discouraged from eating traditional food in the past, you mentioned that the kind of food was called “uncivilized”. What activities do you take to promote this food and give people access to this kind of food?**

For me it is a kind of genetic memory. I remember traditional recipes or meals my grandparents prepared. Traditional products are still available to people. If you do not hunt, you can easily get reindeer meat. You can easily get fish as well. You can either buy it or go fishing as we have a lot of lakes. Also, berries are accessible. You can either buy them or go and collect them yourself. Many people I know, including myself, make fruit jams or we freeze collected berries. We dry or smoke meat. When I travel, I always take with me dried meat. I do not eat apples, bananas or pineapples as I am aware that I can deliver much more microelements for my organism eating local berries.

I also started to collect medical herbs in my area. I dry herbs as well as blueberries or cranberries. I am a part of a project called: SUGREV “Treasures of the Far North” It is a unique tea and ethnographic project. It is a set of different kinds of teas called “Treasures of the North” {1}.

{1} more on the project SUGREV “Treasures of the Far North”: <https://sugreff.ru/>





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It is dedicated to and created by the indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of Russia. The indigenous people of Russia make an invaluable contribution to the ethnic and cultural diversity of Russia. Different kinds of teas that you find in this set are made of plants, herbs or even mushrooms that one can find on their ancestral lands. I talked about my traditional Saami tea, which includes lingonberry leaf {2}, angelica root {3} and chaga {4}. I call it Women's Tea because all herbs keep women young and strong.

**I know that you were a part of agriculture cooperatives in your region. Can you say what kind of cooperatives they were?**

Cooperative farms were not created by the Saami. During the years of Soviet power, collective farms were organized, they were called Kolkhozes. It was a difficult period for those who kept private deer. Many reindeer breeders were dispossessed, their reindeer were taken away, and their families were sent into exile, for example, to Siberia. It's a long sad story that happened 90 years ago. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in order not to lose the reindeer herds and all the work experience, agricultural cooperatives, SKhPK, were created.

In the Murmansk region, two SHPKs, "Tundra" and "Olenevod", are the only ones in our region that produce reindeer products. They breed reindeer, produce meat and various products that are sold directly.

{2} lingonberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), is a small evergreen shrub that bears edible fruit. It is native to boreal forest and Arctic tundra throughout the Northern Hemisphere, from Europe and Asia to North America

{3} angelica is a genus of about 90 species of tall biennial and perennial herbs in the family Apiaceae, native to temperate and subarctic regions of the Northern Hemisphere, reaching as far north as Iceland, Lapland, and Greenland.

{4} chaga (*Inonotus obliquus*, Russian word чара) is a fungus. It is parasitic on birch and other trees. The inhabitants of Russia and Siberia use the infusion of the mushroom in folk medicine as a remedy for many common ailments.



The SHPK "Tundra" has an EU certificate, which they received even before Covid, but they cannot sell dietary products. Now they sell their products in the region and send them to different regions of Russia.

**Women play a strong role in Saami culture, there is a matriarchal element there. You are a head of The Saami Womens Forum supporting Saami women. Can you say more about this organization? What is its main goal?**

Yes, traditionally the role of women was important in Saami culture, but I would call it soft. When men went hunting everything could happen to them, they could die. Women were responsible for their families. They had to be strong. They discussed everything and the final decision was taken by women. My grandmother was a real manager, my grandfather was soft and kind. In Saami culture the role of decision taker belongs to an older woman like a grandmother. When she dies, then the role is passed to a mother or a sisters and so on.

The Saami Women Forum {5} is an international organization that brings together the Saami women from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. Usually we organize live meetings. Unfortunately, since the emidemy of Covid-19 and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, we only meet virtually. In Russia we created a department of the Saami Woman Forum where I am an activist. We try to work more with our local women.

**What do you do to strengthen the Saami women in your region?**

Initially, the goal was to strengthen their political presence, but we understood that women face many other problems. We started to help women in many aspects like psychology or business. Every two years we draft and discuss a strategy. Recently the most important topic is alcohol addiction among women. For Saaami people, men and women, it is an important problem. Many women who use alcohol do it quietly, in their houses. Society may not notice it, but still, they continue to ruin themselves. Not only we talk about this in various forums, but also conduct training on sustainability and a healthy lifestyle.

The other topic is supporting women entrepreneurship, teaching them how to create small businesses, and providing training for them. We have a small business ourselves that includes a group of people. We produce local products. The name of our company is Take With You. We produce and deliver products you can take with you when you travel like dry meat, smoked fish and products made of wild berries, all produced by women. We sell locally, to people we know.

**Do you think that the agroecology movement or UNDROP (the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas) can be understood or implemented among the Saami and helpful for them somehow?**

{5} more on the organization: <https://indigenouswomen.ru/>



Yes, for sure. For example UNDROP is linked to local territories. There is an article 23.2 which talks about herbs and medicinal herbs. The herbs belong to local population and the local population has the right to collect it and use it. Article 26 of UNDROP talks about traditional knowledge. Traditional knowledge is generated by local people and belongs to the local people. These things should be considered and used. Also I often use the terms of agroecology. Thanks to agroecology I understood the importance of local products. It is not only healthy but also a very economic way to live. You save money and you save resources. I try to spread the knowledge around to our women. We hold seminars and webinars, meetings using only traditional food.

Also I am a representative of Russian Indigenous People in the Coalition on Indigenous Peoples Food Systems created by FAO. Recently we gathered in Genova and we talked a lot about our traditional food. One session was devoted to traditional literature describing traditional products and ways of eating. I brought with me interesting books. One of my family members, my aunt, Svetlana Egorovna Zaborshchikova, wrote a book about the traditional medicinal herbs of the Sami people, written in the Sami language. The book is called "Plants in the Life of the Saami of the Kola Peninsula". I try to mention it in articles, other books, and I produce videos for it to stay.

“ **What is your biggest concern in a few words? What do you worry the most about in terms of your region?**

Preservation of land. There are a lot of industrial companies and manufacturers trying to grab our land.



**Valentina Sovkina** - currently director of LLC "Kola Saami Radio". Educational teacher. She worked as an educator at the Lovozero secondary boarding school, deputy director of the Vocational School No. 26 in the village. Lovozero, Indigenous Peoples Specialist at Tundra Agricultural Cooperative and Indigenous Peoples Specialist at the Barents Office. Member of the Sami Women's Forum. Since 2008 - Chairman of the elected body of the Saami people - Kuelnegk Nyoark Saam Sobbar. In 2023, she assumed the duties of a Member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples.

