

The History of the Smörkniv: One Woman's Relationship with a Butterknife

The smörkniv is a wooden butter or spread knife traditionally made by hand. It is a humble tool with humble origins and is widely used throughout Sweden and Scandinavia today. This work outlines my introductory experience to the smörkniv; learning about a cultural connection to craft, how place and craft can become intertwined in culture and my continued reflective research by practicing craft. I want to explore what the smörkniv can tell us about the history of a culture and how craft can build community.



Figure 1. Swedish smörkniv. Image: Gini Dickinson, 2023.

My first introduction to the smörkniv was in a Umeå hostel, lying next to the floral spread, an intriguing object. The shape draws your hand to it. It is ergonomic and smooth; you want to feel the handle with your hand and touch the butter with the knife. Then, in a department store, I saw the object again, with the long smooth, wooden handle. A different wood, a different shape, still the same attraction to a similar form, the same 'need to know' the object. Intrigued by its positioning throughout daily life, I am drawn to discover why in the UK we do not have this kind of object in common use. We may have butter knives but they lack presence in everyday life, making me question the difference in our cultures that made this so.

The smörkniv holds many connections to culture in Scandinavian countries. They have been made for generations, using a few simple tools: an axe, a carving knife and perhaps some oil. The tradition of making smörkniv continues in schools today, with children as young as three being taught to whittle, aligning with the slöjd education system. Slöjd encompasses working with wood and natural materials surrounding the farm in a self-sufficient way, akin to life pre industrialisation (Sundqvist, 2018). Teaching things to children at an early age encourages the values of slöjd – a connection to

tools, nature and handicrafts – to develop young, embed intrinsic knowledge and retain an awareness of their culture.

In recent years, there have been questions about the importance of these crafts in the contemporary school curriculum (Jeansson, 2017; Framtid, 2015). Some question the use of holding onto this aspect of culture, but craft connects us to something innately human and offers ways to connect with our surroundings: “When I carve, I feel calm. It’s my relaxation, and at the same time a reminder of the forest” (Brännström Ott, 2023). The importance of this should continue to be realised. Sometimes now children may be given a near-com-

plete project to finish themselves, just a small amount of craft helps; “Slöjd affects us by satisfying the body and in turn, the soul” (Sundqvist, 2018, p.9). Sustaining handicrafts that offer reflective processes is important for calming minds and thus influencing a community, making people collectively happier through engagement in the craft.

I was honoured to have been taught the process of making a smörkniv, which I approached with a curious mind. An important part of the process is finding the correct wood. You search for your tree, chop it with an axe into the appropriate length and divide it again and again until you have a decent size to make a smörkniv.

*Figure 2. Beginning to whittle with driftwood in Sweden.
Image: Karin Stoll, 2023.*



*Figures 3 and 4. Chopping the wood found on the roadside.
Images: Mette Gårdvik, 2023*



You engage with the forest by getting to know the tree and feeling the wood before you begin with your knife, which enhances your connection with the material. The selective process and handmade aspect mean that many people have their own personal smörkniv, it is a simple tool that can have strong personal connections, “you have completed the circle of being both producer and consumer.” (Sundqvist, 2018, p.9), which instils pride and self-assurance.

In the Västerbottens Museum, we learnt about Swedish forest culture and Sámi people, who have moved by choice and been moved by governments for hundreds of years: “We have some knowledge about how to live in a

changing environment. The term “stability” is a foreign word in our language.” (Turi, 2009, p.11) Smörkniv and craft knowledge spread and “it is important to remember that knowledge grows roots where it is developed and used.” People lived among forests and became an extension of their environment; culture was informed by material and in this case, that was woodcrafts. Whilst moving around, crafts can become an essential tool for growing roots and community identity. The Sámi were traditionally hunter-gatherers whose customs were altered thanks to colonisers (Kuokkanen, 2017), but they continue to use craft and creativity to spread their knowledge and culture (Woodard, n. d.).

*Figure 5. The Feminist Lark engaging with the forest.
Image: Gini Dickinson, 2023.*





*Figure 6. The Feminist Lark contemplating smörkniv.
Image: Gini Dickinson, 2023.*

Learning how to make the smörkniv, for me, demonstrated the importance of making and learning together and the role that cultural practice has in sharing knowledge, developing social roots and producing new creative ideas. As I learnt to carve and whittle, many others were drawn to the crafting space. Craft and knowledge spread through the group as we gathered around our tutor.

Since being in Sweden, I have continued whittling; it has become an essential reflective practice. Working with the wood I find on my journey; I connect to the material in an intuitive way of working without a tutor. Demonstrating that “the only way one can really

know things... is through a process of self-discovery. To know things, you have to grow into them, and let them grow into you so that they become a part of who you are” (Ingold, 2013, p.1). From the moment I saw a smörkniv, I knew I wanted to know it. Perhaps alongside yearning to learn a culture, it was akin to an innate human fascination with one of our most primitive tools, the knife.

A knife, normally sharp and made of metal, changes meaning in a new material. Plastic can represent industrialisation and wood speaks to craft. Different shapes



*Figure 7. Plastic smörkniv meeting the forest,
Image: Gini Dickinson, 2023.*

are informed by different hands, inspirations and desires. The cultural desire to whittle is still strong, “we can use the knowledge of slöjd to find that brilliant combination of a small-scale approach to a sustainable society that does not exclude the necessities of modern technology” (Sundqvist, 2018, p.9).

Recently, I relocated to Canada, feeling a sense of kinship to Sámi identity, and like the Sámi, movement and instability are becoming part of my norm. I continue to whittle to feel a sense of grounding and learn about indigenous cultures, connecting to my new environment. I have stumbled upon an abundance of spreaders in a fellow northern territory, hand- and machine-made. There are cultural similarities in the relationship to forests that perhaps highlight a historical cultural connection or a need that has stemmed from a similar ecological environment. My ongoing research will engage with marginalised and indigenous communities through a feminist framework. I also plan to build on my whittling practice as a reflective and collaborative tool, considering how cultural identities are formed alongside crafts and how crafts can be used as a process to understand one another.

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Figure 8. Canadian spreaders. Image: Gini Dickinson, 2023.

