
The construction of ethnicity in exhibitions in Sámi museums

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Nika Potinkara's doctoral thesis clarifies how the Finnish Sámi Museum and Northern Lapland's Nature Centre, Siida, and the Swedish Mountain and Sámi Museum, *Ájtte*, construct Sámi ethnicity in their permanent exhibitions. While earlier

studies have mainly examined external representations of Sámi ethnicity, Potinkara studies Sámi museums as self-representations presented by an indigenous people.

There have certainly been prior interpretations of the exhibitions as part of the museum institution and the history of Sámi depictions as such, or as criticism of how Sámi exhibits are collected and presented in museums. Potinkara, however, has another fresh viewpoint when analysing the modes of representation in Sámi museums in light of current public discussion.

The writer states that earlier studies on Sámi museum exhibitions have largely seen Sámi ethnicity as a given category, while this work presents Sámi ethnicity as a social construct, one which is continuously being created. A discourse analytic perspective into ethnicity sounds like a rather typical approach these days, but Potinkara has a fresh angle here, too. She is not merely interpreting text or images; she is analysing different elements in an exhibition as a whole, where the different parts are influencing each other.

One of the main observations of the author, one that also supports earlier studies on the subject, is that the presentations in Sámi museums are also based on ideas about the differentiating factors in Sámi ethnicity in relation to others and not so much on unifying factors. Her view is that it is common to understand Sámi culture 'often as those characteristics that set that culture apart from other cultures – less as the whole way of life, customs, attitudes and values of the people called Sámi'.

The author concludes that museums produce a conception of clearly defined, stable and undisputed identities and present Sámi as an unproblematic category. Moreover, in Potinkara's view, Siida's exhibition is 'anchored in time and located in the past'; in other words, the exhibition ignores contemporary Sámi ethnicity as well as the internal heterogeneity of Sámi communities. Instead, the exhibitions tend to emphasise the 'traditional' way of representing Sámi ethnicity, one associated with Reindeer and Northern Sámi.

Of course, it is debatable how much we can expect *museums* (although, in the Sámi context, they are usually also cultural centres) to empha-

size current discussions and phenomena. After all, is not their emphasis on the *past*, recent history included. It is quite true that the past is always interpreted through the present, and therefore interpretations reflect social conceptions and their changes, but the author's criticism that *museum* exhibitions are oriented towards the past is at some points slightly jarring.

Another problematic approach is that the author examines exhibitions produced a few decades ago in terms of current discussions. The Siida exhibition, for example, was composed in 1997–98 based on Sámi conceptions and knowledge of that time. My view is that the permanent exhibition resembles a textbook in that its basic idea corresponds to the established, slowly evolving knowledge of its own time, which is based on the discourse that took shape in the 1980s and 1990s in Siida's case. In its time, it represented a fresh and creative point of view, after all it received an honorary mention in the European Museum of the Year 2000 awards, among other things.

Many new avenues of discourse have opened up after the exhibition was produced and especially in the 2000s. They have gradually, somewhat unsurprisingly, made it the 'official' representative of Sámi discourse, while its relationship to current discussions has become even more contradictory at the same time. For example, the dispute over the definition of 'Sámi' did not actually flare up in Finland until the 2000s, and so the basic exhibition built in the 1990s could not have addressed that particular issue.

In this respect, it would have been pertinent to consider the representativeness of the basic exhibition in more detail. Potinkara's deliberate choice was not to examine the operations of Sámi museums comprehensively, but to focus her attention instead purely on the basic exhibitions of the museums rather than on the changing exhibitions, for instance, which are being arranged all the time. These changing exhibitions have complemented the basic exhibitions by introducing more current themes, which it may not have been possible to cover in the basic exhibition. They have presented modern art, the transformation of crafts and new design, and the histories of smaller Sámi groups.

Traditional image?

Potinkara notices that it is commonplace in both the Siida and Ájtte museums to emphasise, instead of the quantity of artefacts, the stories told by significant artefacts, images and other representations as well as the atmosphere and experiences, sounds and colours. She also finds interesting differences between the two museums. At Siida, the experiences of individuals are hardly distinguishable, but culture is portrayed as a system and collective, one which works seamlessly with nature. Ájtte makes clearer references to 'us'; in other words, the approach is more personal or from an insider perspective, based on the experiences and authority of an inner group.

A major part of the thesis focuses on the deliberation regarding ethnic boundaries, or rather on the blurring of those boundaries, transboundary hybridity or unclear ethnicity. According to the author, the potential multi-ethnic identity is not even presented as a positive resource. An interesting exception is the Lovozero Sámi museum, and perhaps the historical exhibition on settlers in Ájtte. The author demonstrates that the basic exhibitions present very little on internal Sámi ethnic categories or different Sámi languages.

At Siida, the representation of the North Sámi ethnicity is strong, while the Skolt depictions, for example, are completely oriented towards the past, mainly on the Pechenga period. In this respect, the representations at Siida still correspond to the image of Skolt culture that prevails in other publicity – also in research where little else is known about it except the Pechenga period. One of the most central observations in the work is that reindeer herding still constitutes an essential element in both external representations and in Sámi museum representations.

It is good, however, to also bear in mind in this context that the changing exhibition has presented everyday life during the Skolt reconstruction period, which was quite unique among Skolt representations. Also, the *Anaráš* presentation on Inari Sámi published on the Siida homepage complements the presentation of Sámi minorities in the basic exhibition.

We must also remember that deer/reindeer has been a very important quarry and later herding

animal for all Sámi groups, including Inari and Skolt Sámi, even if not in a nomadic or monocultural form. It has also carried a strong symbolic meaning. It is true that reindeer as a symbol and image has been overdone and is overly easy to interpret as exotic, although it can also have a strong significance in the everyday life of Sámi peoples other than just Reindeer Sámi.

In her thesis, Potinkara calls attention to the fact that the maps in Sámi museums in different countries quite clearly repeat the national or governmental manner of presentation. In spite of the 'we are one people' ideology of the Sámi, national perspectives are strong. One background factor is that there has been a tendency to make both the Siida and Karasjok museums into 'national museums', and then they would not be common pan-Sámi institutions, like the Beaivvás Sámi Teáhter, for example. Instead, 'national' specifically refers to national states and to the values inherited from them.

The phenomenon probably illuminates the relationship between the exhibitions and scientific knowledge, which has quite consistently followed national borders in Sámi research. Lack of resources and cooperation can result, for instance, in the fact that the distribution of pre-historical artefact cultures often ends abruptly and in an unhistorical manner at national borders. It may be difficult for underfinanced museums to change this tradition; that would require them financing their own research activities.

Potinkara has an excellent observation that the interests of governmental nature agencies, traditionally considered at odds with the Sámi (National Board of Forestry, the fjell nature information centre), coincide with Sámi interests at Siida as well as Ájtte. **This is motivated by practical reasons**, i.e. resource pooling, but it is also true when the author notes the following: the solution has consequences for the representation of Sámi ethnicity. For example, the exhibitions do not present any environmental impacts harmful to Sámi, such as forest felling scenes or water reservoirs, although they would be quite compelling visually. The image of unchanging nature emerging in the nature exhibitions is also reflected in the presentations of Sámi culture.

In Potinkara's thesis, Ájtte's *Laponia* exhibition seems to emerge as the ideal of a well-produced exhibition, one which combines many different discourses and therefore speaks in multiple voices, a characteristic often missing in official Sámi exhibitions according to Potinkara. Potinkara's own manuscript follows a similar multiple voice meth-

od in that she manages to raise diverse perspectives on the representations of the Sámi. When the approach is fresh and the treatment is very consistent, the thesis produces an interesting view into the problematics of essential Sámi museums.

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