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POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF SÁMI ARCHAEOLOGY

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I thank Carl-Gösta Ojala and Jonas M. Nordin, and Marte Spangen, Tiina Äikäs, and Anna-Kaisa Salmi for taking time to respond to my criticism of their papers on Sámi archaeology and postcolonialism (Ojala & Nordin 2015; Spangen et al. 2015; Olsen 2016). We seem all to agree that more discussion is needed in order to maintain and develop the position Sámi archaeology has had and should have as a vital part of Nordic archaeology and heritage studies. Apart from that there still seem to be some different opinions, which, if nothing else, should make a good starting point for further debates and inquiries.

Ojala and Nordin state that I read their article as a criticism of Sámi archaeology and therefore have misunderstood their intention and aim, which ‘was never to criticize Sámi archaeology’. First of all, I did not read their article as such criticism, neither did I criticize its content. It should be clear from my arguments that what interested me was the impression their writing left of Sámi archaeology, which in my opinion rendered its discourses on theory, politics and ethics less significant compared to indigenous and postcolonial archaeology conducted elsewhere, especially in the USA and Australia. I was also very careful to state that this was *not* caused by Ojala and Nordin having any ‘intention of downplaying or marginalizing contributions in Sámi archaeology’ (Olsen 2016: 219). In other words, the subject of my criticism was not the interesting content of their paper, what they write about, but the way Sámi archaeology unintentionally was situated and depicted.

Upon second thought, Ojala and Nordin also seem to conclude that it is ‘absolutely right that

a text can convey messages which were completely unintended by the authors’ though immediately devalue the significance of this possibility by adding that ‘Olsen is free to read our text as he wishes’. I disagree; critical reading is not – or, the least, should not be – about reading texts as one wishes. For example, trying out the frictions between the intentional content of an argument, however positive and well-meaning, and how it actually is framed and articulated, is a well-established ‘deconstructive’ approach in discourse analysis. It is a critical scrutinizing, that also situates statements in relation to webs of hegemonic representations, as exemplified by Edward Saïd’s contrapuntal readings of the ‘Oriental’ archive (Saïd 1978).

In my paper, I draw attention to the discrepancy between how Sámi archaeology and indigenous archaeology in the Anglophone world is situated and narrated in Ojala and Nordin’s account. While the former is made relevant mostly in relation to empirical cases, the latter, on the other hand, is embraced for its guiding importance on theoretical, ethical and political matters (Ojala & Nordin 2015: 12–5). While this choice may seem obvious, it is also – intentionally or not – a choice to leave out the many principal and theoretical contributions very relevant to their discussion. I provided several examples of this bias, and we may revisit one paragraph describing the situation regarding heritage and rights, where they write that,

In recent decades, demands for greater self-determination in the field of cultural heritage management have been put forth

by Sámi groups... These demands are part of the international movement of indigenous peoples, seeking the right to self-determination, self-definition, and what is often called the right to 'one's own past'. *Here*, the question of control over and the repatriation of cultural objects of special importance, and not least the repatriation and reburial of human remains, has been an especially important, symbolic, and emotional issue. Although these questions have been discussed for a long time, during several decades, in many parts of the world, such as for instance in the USA and in Australia, they have not, until recently, attracted much attention among archaeologists in Sweden (Ojala & Nordin 2015: 13, my emphasis).

Just notice where the source of vitality and inspiration is situated, and also acquire additional strength from the initial bleak depiction of Sámi initiatives, which boil down to stating that in 'recent decades, demands for greater self-determination in the field of cultural heritage management has been put forth by Sámi groups' (Ojala & Nordin 2015: 13). A depiction which I found remarkable, not the least given the situation in Norway where the Sámi succeeded in their long struggle for the right to self-management of cultural heritage, which was fully transferred to the Sámi Parliament in 1994. Considering that this also in global terms is an immense indigenous success history, it is strange to see it, and also the associated debates, left out of an account which otherwise seems to search for inspiration and model cases for the Swedish situation. More generally, it is enigmatic to me why debates on theoretical, ethical and political issues taking place within Sámi archaeology outside Sweden is not considered equally relevant as the emphasized US and Australian ones.

Spangen et al. are also concerned with their good intention and are thus surprised that I should have framed their introduction 'as an attempt to disregard the importance, quality or relevance of Sámi archaeology'. Again, I did of course not see their introduction as a deliberate 'attempt' to discredit Sámi archaeology. However, due to what is actually said the outcome is a somewhat biased representation, which I neither

can see is adequately addressed in their reply. The latter may very well be my own fault, having not expressed my self clearly enough. Let me therefore start with a statement from their original introduction, which I think captures well their view on how Sámi archaeology has been involved with postcolonial theory

archaeologists working with Sámi pasts have used terms coined within this tradition, such as 'hybridity' and 'creolization' (Bhabha 1994), but often without referring to the explicit postcolonial theoretical framework. This can be problematic because the terms have a somewhat different use and meaning within the postcolonial theoretical context than in everyday use, which can easily result in misunderstandings (Spangen et al. 2015: 3).

First of all, I would like to state that I find it perfectly possible to conduct advanced and detailed archaeological analysis of hybridity, without explicitly referring to Bhabha and his likes, and without ending up in the 'misunderstandings' of 'everyday use' (see e.g. Olsen et al. 2011). Anyway, try to read the quoted paragraph carefully and think of the impression it leaves of Sámi archaeology with respect to postcolonial theory. Not very positive, I would say; perhaps expressing something like this: 'there are archaeologists using postcolonial terminology, but most of them do so without really knowing the use and meaning these concepts have in postcolonial theory' (thus, the cautionary tale).

I argued against this alleged superficiality and lack of knowledge, and referred to a number of studies that prove otherwise. Indeed, Spangen et al. counter this by claiming that I have included publications that either are not discussing Sámi archaeology or not making explicit use of postcolonial theory. To take the latter first, those works were, of course, not included in my discussion of postcolonial theory (apart from Gjessing, which is an interesting but largely ignored case). And with respect to the former, I actually find them very relevant to show that postcolonial theory was well integrated and discussed in the environments where Sámi archaeology also was conducted (even by the same scholars). Some of these works, whether concerned with Sámi ar-

chaeology or not, and especially Falck (2003), provide excellent examples of critical archaeological discussions of postcolonial theory. The authors however, found the very short and general paper by Peter van Dommelen, concerned mostly with Mediterranean archaeology, a more obvious choice (van Dommelen 2011).

After acknowledging, in their reply, the quality and importance of the works I mentioned, Spangen et al. continue by making the following, and perhaps slightly sarcastic (?), remark:

Still, the lack of published work made accessible to an international audience is a plausible reason why general introductions to the topic of postcolonial theory and archaeology do not mention Sámi archaeology as a *frontrunner* (e.g. Lydon & Rizvi 2010; van Dommelen 2011; Gosden 2012) (my emphasis).

There may be several issues at stake here but note the seemingly unconditional faith in the receptiveness and, thus, international representativeness of these discourses (cf. Wolters 2013). May it be that the vantage point and location of those who write affects – just a little bit, of course – what and who become frontrunners or even become mentioned at all? Just think of it, and especially as framed within a critical postcolonial perspective: have the theoretical archaeological discourses emerging from US and British academic institutions necessarily been characterized by knowledge about – and openness to – debates taking place in the non-Anglophone world? (cf. Olsen 1991; 1998).

Let's briefly look at van Dommelen's paper, which introduces an issue on postcolonial archaeology in *World Archaeology*. Here he states with confidence that '(i)n archaeology, the first explicit discussion of postcolonial theory, if not also its first mention in archaeological literature, is straight away an entire volume on *Roman Imperialism*.... (Webster and Cooper 1996)'. What is interesting here, given its totalizing pretensions, is the lack of any qualifying remarks (e.g. 'to my knowledge', 'in English'). It is tempting to see it as an example of what Ian Hacking (2001: 24) termed the Richard Nixon doctrine ('only what is talked about exists; nothing has reality until it is spoken of, or written about'), to

which 'in English' is added as yet another ontological requirement. It is even more remarkable that Spangen et al., who themselves in this case should not suffer from any linguistic barriers or lack of local knowledge, take this as face value and conclude that,

postcolonial theory was first integrated in the archaeology of colonial encounters of the Roman Empire, concerning the 'Romanization' of the colonized peoples and the frontier situation of colonial encounters between Native Americans and Europeans in North America. Postcolonial theory has also been used in critical studies of the close relationship between the development of archaeological practice and theory and the colonial process between 1850 and 1950 (cf. van Dommelen 2011) (Spangen et al 2015: 3).

Wouldn't their introduction in a US journal be a perfect place for addressing the mentioned bias and to refer to and discuss postcolonial works in Sámi archaeology? And thereby also contribute to making them known and 'accessible'? Spangen et al., however, seem convinced that their representation is fair and conclude that 'we stand by our claim that the examples of archaeological studies of Sámi pasts where postcolonial theory is explicitly discussed and made use of are rather few and far between'. Well, perhaps; it is admittedly a small field – but compared to what are these studies 'rather few and far between'? To the relative number and importance of studies of postcolonial theory in classical archaeology? In North American and Australian indigenous archaeology? Or in European archaeology at large? Perhaps their relative score in Sámi archaeology actually is quite decent?

As underlined in my paper, my criticism was not to plea for retreat and confinement, or even more absurd, to say that everything has been done. It was rather a call to engage with the diverse indigenous, postcolonial and archaeological contributions on more equal footing. In other words, rather than omitting or marginalizing the contributions in Sámi archaeology, as well as the numerous postcolonial works in Sámi studies more generally, it would be far more productive to integrate and debate them alongside other

relevant contributions in postcolonial studies and indigenous archaeology. Especially since upholding Sámi archaeology as a ‘critical force’ in contemporary debates seems to be a common goal. If not, as argued, we easily end up reaffirming an oppositional hierarchy which for long has been all too common, whereby the local, the Sámi, the northern, continues to be subordinated to the Anglophone and supposedly more theoretical and ‘international’.

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