

North of the North, a Sámi Library: inscriptions of colonialism and resistance

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Abstract:

The Sámi literature sections in public libraries of northern Sweden are scarcely visited in an apparent lack of interest from Sámi-speakers themselves. In a country known for its high levels of public library usage, the Sámi face an ambivalent status, welcomed as readers of the main language, dissatisfied by the relegated presence of their culture, if any, as an ethnic minority inside libraries.

The Sámi Library in the Ájtte complex, in Jokkmokk, is a specialised library for the Sámi culture and the Sápmi, a region also known by the exonym Lappland. The Library is mainly directed at serving the researchers of the adjacent Sámi Museum, the Sámi Parliament, external researchers of the Sámi culture, while it also provides access to the general public. By its aims and collection, it plays a role similar to a national library for this nordic European culture.

Sámi culture is resisting and transfiguring itself, after being affronted by centuries of colonialism. The neoliberal arrangements, the privatisation of public services, the new language laws and the Libraries Bill have put additional challenges to The Sámi Library.

In this context, “public reading” - reading within the scope of the public library - is conceptually approached as a component of cultural rights, closely linked to linguistic rights and cultural emancipation.

Keywords: indigenous libraries, Sámi culture, cultural rights, Sweden, public libraries

Sámi libraries: no use no appeal?

A small glazed room in the middle of the wide reading area of Umeå's Municipality (Kommune) public library collects the literature sámi collection: a few worn-out, old books, are exhibited within a space which is almost always vacant, with a half-lit, sombre microatmosphere.

Further north in Jokkmokk, above the polar circle line, there is the only specialised Sámi library in Sweden which may be envisaged as a national library for the Sámi culture. Inaugurated in 1989, it is housed in a building marked by an aesthetics of utilitarian

simplicity, a part of the Ájtte cultural complex. The Sámi community partially funded the starting project by donating the compensation received from the hydroelectric company for the use of their lands and rivers, the Swedish State was the other funder.

The Ájtte includes an exhaustive Bibliography Sámi developed since 1998/9 and maintained with the current production in Sámi and about the Sámi, the historical and the sound archivesⁱ, as well as the Ája cultural centre and an ethnographic museum. Supporting this Museum and the Sámi Parliament as their core purpose, the Sámi Library, so designated in the new 2013 Libraries Act (Regeringens proposition 2012/13: 147 Ny bibliotekslag), receives researchers of various nationalities. This is one of the few places where bibliography about the Sámi in languages other than Swedish is to be found, unanimously represented as a "treasure" by different Sámi cultural agents. In recent years the allocation of librarians decreased and the initial innovative projects, such as the Sámi Subject Headings or the analytic record of articles and parts of books, were discontinued and/or desinvested. The Museum had been recently re-conceived as a museum of the territory and came to be officially designated as "Swedish Mountain and Sámi Museum". It should be noted that the successive designations of the Sámi Library, either an individual body in the institutional organs or an activity area in the Museum's dependence, appear to reflect the conflicts regarding Ájtte's purposes and different interests regarding the relevance of each of its components – Museum, Library/Archive, Cultural Centre – both in local and national societies.

The Sámi, between cultures

The Sámi Library collects some bibliographic parts about ancestral knowledge – regardless of the physical medium –, active or not in daily practices today. Acknowledging that some issues remain secret under the tutelage of Sámi persons, or non Sámi who were granted access to – such as the location of certain pure water springs – their passage from an ethnic community to the public sphere, raises sensitive questions about sharing and transmission that are up to the community to resolve fairly.

Occupations, social classes and ethnic origins, physical and social spaces, religion and spirituality appear today as the product of the crossing of colonial boundaries in a mix that, however, does not ignore the history and persistence of differences. The question of "Saminess" remains awake, even revitalised, namely by the process of the European capital of culture 2014 in Umeå, which had the Sámi culture as one of its themes (Hagerman and Sikku, 2014).

Swedish public libraries, having high levels of attendance - 60% of the population –, renovated collections and good facilities, working closely with local associations, are often listed as examples of good practice internationally (Thomas, 2010). The rarely used Sámi Room in Umeå, nonetheless, is negatively evaluated by several Sámi, the same happening in other northern cities (Gunnare, 2012).

Beyond a likely cultural estrangement or unfamiliarity with Sámi culture, deeper reasons for this relegated status, deriving from cultural policies, are worth considering.

The first public library in Jokkmokk

The history of this library speaks of yet other times and contexts. According to written (Jokkmokks SK, 1993) and oral sources, I concluded that the first public library was created in the Old Church, following its deconsecration, at an uncertain date by the action of Eigil Högström, a Sámi who came to Jokkmokk in the early 1900'sⁱⁱ.

After the first Libraries Act, dated from 1905, a debate took place in society about the need to develop public libraries, under State control, focusing on the proclaimed objectives of popular education and awareness – especially of the young – qualifying for jobs, for voting and for political intervention. The pioneering study circles came to be financed and controlled by the State in 1912, while it agreed to keep libraries open to the general public. These libraries were formally dissolved in 1949 upon the creation of a national education system.

To Exist

The Sápmi displays traces of human occupation dating back about 10,000 years. The oldest Sámi artefacts indicate the existence of this culture for about 8000 years (Kuoljok, 1998), an occupation that extended far below the Arctic Circle until the settlements of colonists from regions farther South forced the originary population to move.

The story of the Sámi is one that is woven in and between some powerful and influential countries, empires, events in the history of Europe.

The Swedish crown begins the exploration of the territory in the far north of Europe from the 15th to the 16th centuries, constantly redrawing the borders, competing with other states for natural resources (Lindmark, 2013). Tax exploitation had already begun in the 14th century. From the Middle Ages the Sámis "paid tax to three crowns" - Sweden, Norway and Finland -, in different places and moments during their journeys, according to the report by the Portuguese scholar Damião de Góis, the first to introduce the Sámi to Central and Southern Europe (Hirsch, 1987). In the second half of the 16th century, the Sámi are displaced by waves of Norwegian settlers, and by incursions of the crowns of Holland, England and Denmark. Russian Orthodox missionaries and monks occupy and subjugate parts farther East (Storfjell, 2013). In the mid-17th century, Sámi land neither cultivated nor built upon is appropriated by the Swedish crown in a process of *discovery* and effective occupation fostered by the settlements (Lindmark, 2013). The Sámi are further hindered from pursuing their various and often cumulative economic activities – hunting, fishing, gathering, agriculture – leading a large number of families to concentrate on reindeer grazing alone.

They will later be described in scholarly circles, in analogy with other colonial conditions, as pagans, primitives, impulsive and childish. Linnæus, an 18th century Swedish scientist, travelling through an area contiguous to Jokkmokk, in this very region, writes his taxonomies for Botany, Zoology and also for humans (Koerner, 1999). Ironically referring to the well-known allegory, Storfjell comments that "[i]f Sápmi is an Edenic paradise, then Linnæus is its Adam, invested with the power to name its plants and animals" (2013: 568).

The Swedish modern monarchy, which simultaneously headed the Lutheran Church, will pursue the shamanic practices of the Sámi shortly after the occupation. A forced conversion to Christianity begins, the churches in the new Lapp Marks are used as a compulsory convergence point, profiting from the seasonal travelling of the Sámi to the market cities, such as Jokkmokk.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, there is intense missionary activity, blending literacy with conversion, and creating future missionaries of Sámi ethnicity (Lindmark, 2013). Claiming that shamanism threatened the national unity, the Monarch established Lapp Schools in 1735, with a reduced and evangelising curriculum, removing children from family contact and keeping them under the vigilance of a Lutheran pietism moral. Speaking in Sámi would be discouraged and even persecuted. From 1925, the State imposes the Swedish language in all schools (Cocq, 2008).

The processes of assimilation of the Sámi programmed by Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, and of cultural suppression end just after World War II.

At present there are Sámi Schools in five Northern localities, serving students from kindergarten to the end of their compulsory education. Elsewhere, optional subjects in Sámi culture and optional curricula with Sámi programs after the seventh grade, regardless of the ethnicity of origin, are designed by the state (Green, 2009). In Jokkmokk, a city symbolic for the Sámi, where a 400-year old annual market takes place - an international convergence spot for scattered relatives and friendsⁱⁱⁱ - lies the only secondary school with a Sámi Arts and Crafts integrated curriculum.

To remember

Extended family-based communities, or *siida*, that used Common goods while internally negotiating the demarcations and divisions of territory, were threatened by the borders – indicative of private property and nation-states, concepts foreign to the Sámi – drawn by the dominant powers (Kuoljok, 1998). Even today a large part of Sápmi is owned by the crown: with no private property nor land records, the Sámi have rarely seen their ancestral ownership of land legally recognised.

From the late 19th century until 1935, racist theories permeated the anthropometric surveys and the photography of the Swedish Institute for Racial Biology^{iv}. Used in widely printed books in the 20s and in the Stockholm Exhibition in the 30s, these documents have will leave painful marks on the Sámi social memory (Kvarfordt, Sikku and Teilus, 2009), a memory impregnated with history, marks which today's art often stumbles upon and raises. As Katarina Pirak Sikku claims grief may be inherited (Sikku and Andersson 2014).

From the 20th century on, the main clashes arose from hydropower (Össbo and Lantto, 2011) and mining interests. The persistent consequences of Chernobyl and climate change have had a strong local impact, making the soil retreat, endangering natural goods, and threatening subsistence and small-scale economic activities (Mustonen and Syrjämäki, 2013).

The Sámediggi, a Swedish State administrative agency and advisory body created in 1993 and elected by the Sámi, often see their advice ignored. In February 2014 it decided that a Nordic-Sámi Convention, with representatives of the three Sámi parliaments and of the Nordic governments should be held (Sametinget, 2014)^v, 2016 being the expected time for the completion of their work. The Sámi spokesperson expressed the expectation that the States would ratify the definition of minimum standards within civil and international law, including the right to self-determination, to land and water, in addition to the already, although informally, accepted right to knowledge and cultural expressions.

To Speak, To Write, To Edit

The Sámi population is estimated currently at 60,000, 17,000 of which have Swedish citizenship. (Axelsson and Sköld, 2006; Green, 2009). Of the total, only about 20,000 speak an originary language.

The Sámi languages belong to the Fino-Ugric linguistic branch, nine being alive, six of which have a standardised orthography and literary printed works (Hirvonen, 2008). Each language has its own latin alphabet with additional special characters for unique phonemes. North Sámi had three orthographies (Skutnabb-Kangas & Magga, 2001) until a standardisation was agreed between Sweden and Finland in the 70s (Samiskt Informationscentrum, 2014).

The issues of language and writing, as well as editing, deserve some detail in this brief consideration of what was and is the context for the existence of libraries in Sápmi within Swedish borders.

After a heated public controversy, the legal status of minority language was acquired by the Sámi language in 2005, along with other languages spoken in Sweden (Meänkieli, Finnish-Swedish, Romani-Chib and Yiddish). Five national minorities - Sámi, Tornedalian, Finnish-Swedish, Roma and Jew — are also recognised.

If, until then, Swedish was a *de facto* predominant language (Milani; Johnson, 2008), in 2009, under the centre-right Alliance, the claim that a main language is necessary to consolidate democracy (Leissner, 2012) and prevent globalisation was signed into law (Milani; Johnson, 2014). The term *mother tongue* is used instead of *native tongue*, thus reinforcing the ideology of an ethnic and cultural homogeneity in Sweden (Milani; Johnson, 2008). It should be noted that the government steered the discourse on colonialism toward that of multiculturalism, in line with the *tolerance* that the Swedish State has claimed in recent decades.

Sweden has not yet signed the Convention 169 – ILO, 1989 – only underwriting the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a non-binding instrument^{vi}. After long years of contestation, the Constitution received an amendment, in 2011, recognising the Sámi as a people of Sweden. However, an Act on Sámi matters remained unapproved, given the opposition to regulate core issues like rights over land and natural resources both by the Swedish Parliament and by the not previously consulted Sámi Parliament (U.N., Human Rights Council, 2011).

It should also be noted that the privatisation of services, and public sector cuts had an especially negative impact, in the last decade, on secondary education, railway transportation, health and elderly care, as well as cultural programs..

At present, much of the population speaks English fluently, while teaching Sámi is seldom implemented in spite of the law. The fact is that Sámi is not spoken in public and rarely in private. Intergenerational communication remains hampered by the very recency of promotion measures.

The story of the first book authored by a Sámi and written in Sámi, *Muitalus sámiiid birra*, (A narrative on the Sámi), is singularly significant. Published in 1910, in Danish and in North sámí, it departs from the oral tales, manuscripts and illustrations of Johan Turi (1854-1936)^{vii} a self-taught wolf hunter and guide. The seduction and wisdom of the teller attracted persons from other cultures to produce the book: the literary edition and translation were undertaken by Emilie Demant Hatt, a Danish painter, traveller, and ethnologist; the financing by Hjalmar Lundbohm, formerly an artist, who came to Giron as the administrator of an iron mine where he was confronted with the unequal work conditions the Sámi faced. The life of Turi, measured by anthropometry, a guide to anthropologists and a subject for artistic photographers, reflects the tensions between discrimination, and curiosity about the “Other” in Sweden.

During the 50s, Sámi publishing became more notorious through the emergence of newspapers in Sámi. Initially assumed by the Sámi Council, formed in 1956 and aggregating the Sámi organisations of the four States – Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia – the promotion of literature had as specific purposes the protection and recognition of Sámi interests, both individual and collective, and the respect for economic, social and cultural

rights^{viii} (Paltto, 2010). This impulse ended in 2000 with the cuts in funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers^{ix}. Publishing is now a dispersed sector, with newly-formed small publishers in Norway, which depend on activist support, and occasional grants from the Norwegian and Finnish Parliaments.

Resuming Turi, addressing those *unknown* beings demands acknowledgement of their condition, past and present, and the recognition of their culture.

Questioning and concluding

My sojourn in Jokkmokk, from April to May 2013, was aimed at understanding what an *indigenous library* is, how it works, its significance as a contemporary institution, in this case within the space of Europe.

The constraints and inequalities in education and publishing and the specifically targeted cuts have not yet garnered public scrutiny nor investigation of their deeper causes. the Sámi condition is barely known and addressed.

The Sámi, though disconnected from their own languages by colonial oppression, maintain and recreate forms of knowledge construction and transmission, and forms of artistic expression parallel and diverse from the normative literate knowledge or canonical art and literature.

Literacy policies can, counter-intuitively, produce the stigmatisation of illiterate groups and people (Lahire, 2005), thus the awareness of being a culture without a writing system of their own.

On the other hand, in the global North new technologies are strongly oriented towards commodification of cultural goods and implemented in the transmission of ideas such as a-historicity, immediacy and competitive individualism. In addition to this, the development of technologies that appropriately address the complexities of oral language and imagistic and aural expressions (McKenzie, 1999) set demands that go beyond the already developed applications for the dominant print-based paradigm.

Other considerations shall be advanced, concerning:

- the responsibility of the custodian powers within the neoliberal managerialism frame;
- the different concepts of culture for Sámi leaders and cultural agents and for State officials, Swedes or not.
- access to knowledge should be considered from the perspective of the originary people who produced it, which lives by and casts the future with it. The debate on the concepts of intellectual self-determination and of intellectual sovereignty may give substantial contributions on this matter (Sleeper-Smith, 2009; Edwards and Edwards, 2010).

The decolonisation of the library institution and its redesign by and for the cultures of the counter-hegemonic South, even if the South may, surprisingly, be situated North of the North is a fundamental requirement.

The history of the production of *Muitalus* may be an inspiring metaphor (Haraway, 1991) in the transmutation of *unknown beings* into a recognised people who shall have many tales to read and tell as a subject with a History.

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the richest *jojk* archive in Sweden, followed by the one in the National Library in Stockholm; *jojk* is a practice of remembrance in the form of a vocal solo, with or without text, describing and evoking living beings, natural elements; used as an identity symbol

ii he confirmedly resided there since 1918, at the latest

iii approved by a Royal Charter since 1605

iv photos archived by University Library of Uppsala which recently gave way to a wide polemic upon being exhibited online; see <http://www.samer.se/4308>

v <http://www.sametinget.se/1110>

vi <http://www.sametinget.se/10171>

vii born in Kautokeino, Norway, worked from childhood in a *siida* near Giron/Kiruna and died in Čohkkirasjávri/Jukkasjärvi, Sweden.

viii <http://www.samer.se/1089>; <http://www.saamicouncil.net/?deptid=1116>

ix <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Nordic+Council>