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Gákti ja goahti

Heritage work and identity at Várdobáiki Museum

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Abstract: *The legacy of the harsh assimilation policy in Norway* – fornorskingen *– has resulted in a loss of language, cultural heritage and corresponding identities for many within the Sámi population. Helped along in particular by the practice of late nineteenth and twentieth-century ethnographic and cultural-history museums, the culture of Norway has often been presented as a singular culture with few, if any, references to the Sámi. Only in the last few decades have any attempts been made to rectify this image. In this article, I show how the Sámi communities have appropriated the tools of assimilation – i.e. museums – and used them to counteract its effects. I focus on the work of indigenous museums in one geographical area – the counties of Nordland and Troms – and the Marke-Sámi population and culture within this area. Using the Marke-Sámi community as my starting point I show how the use of local and traditional knowledge alongside heritage work in museums helps form a sense of local ownership of the Marke-Sámi culture and an entitlement to participate in the creation of modern Marke-Sámi identities amongst the local Marke-Sámi population.*

Keywords: Sámi, indigenous cultural heritage, indigenous identity, appropriate museology, heritage object, oral historical research, community-based archaeology.

When His Majesty King Harald V of Norway in 1997 addressed the members of the Sámi Parliament he expressed regret for the wrongs that had been done to the Sámi people as a result of the Norwegian government's former official assimilation policies. He spoke, of course, of *fornorskingen* – the official policy adapted in 1851 to deal with the Sámi people's culture that was (and still is) vastly different from that of the Norwegian culture.

The existence of a different culture within the borders of Norway was regarded as problematic in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The reason was contemporary politics: in 1814, after centuries under Danish rule, Norway had established its constitution, and in its wake political groups believed that sovereignty would follow. With this belief came the need for a common Norwegian identity that would gather and unite the Norwegian people as one

(Eriksen 2009:126). Anyone and anything that differed from the idea of such an identity – which the Sámi arguably did – proved disruptive and so, up until its repeal in the years after World War II, the aim of *fornorskingen* was to change the Sámi people's culture and language to Norwegian (Minde 2005:11).

The consequences of this policy were many and varied (Minde 2005). The suppressing of Sámi cultural and ritual practices, as well as the prohibition on the use of Sámi languages, ultimately resulted in a loss of identity for a large part of the Sámi population (Eidheim 1961:38, Eidheim 1971:50–56, Eyþórsson 2008:11–20, Finbog 2013:42–43). The census of 1930 and 1950 may serve as an example. In the former, Sámi-speaking groups accounted for as much as 44 per cent of the general population in the municipality of Kvænangen in Troms county. Twenty years later, in 1950, none remained (Internet source 1, Bjørklund 1985:12).

Even though the Norwegian government gradually abandoned the assimilation policy towards the Sámi from the mid twentieth-century, some claim that the effects of this policy were felt up until the 1980s (Minde 2005). Others argue that the effects of the assimilation policy are still at work today (Josefson 2006). Factual or not, any serious attempts to remedy the effects of *fornorsking* happened largely during and after the 1980s, initiated by the Sámi communities themselves, and in particular through the establishment of indigenous and local museums. In the following I will examine some of these attempts by looking at museological practices at the Várdobáiki Museum, a local and indigenous museum located in the north of Norway in the Marke-Sámi territory.

There are of course many ways of examining how museums seek to counter the effects of assimilation. I have found it helpful to explore how Várdobáiki make use of *heritage work* in its daily practice. The concept of heritage work, as I understand it, can be broadly defined as any work pertaining to the expression and fortification of indigenous cultural identity and heritage. This includes, but is not limited to, indigenous language revival, exhibitions, festivals and films (in accordance with Clifford 2004:8). Heritage work, as I define it here, has had a substantial impact on indigenous people's efforts to reclaim their language and culture (see for example Erikson 1999:568f., Saetersdal 2000:170). In my study of heritage work at Várdobáiki, I have chosen to focus on three different activities: oral historical research, community-based archaeology and art and/or object production. Focusing on specific examples within all three activities, I will look at how Várdobáiki engages with the local indigenous population in order to construct Sámi identities appropriate to the area. But first a small detour as I try to answer the question: Why are museums important for indigenous peoples who strive to reconstruct and strengthen an indigenous identity?

Museums and identity

Constructing cultural identities through visual representations has long been the prerogative of museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). This is in part due to the history of the public museums. Though museums first appeared in the late seventeenth century it was not until the late eighteenth century that public museums became a well-known concept (Abt 2006:124, Eriksen 2009:20). Many museums created in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were strongly influenced by the sentiments of nationalism. Nationalism was, at this time, a belief or a political ideology that stressed that

a nation originates from one singular ethnic group (Blanning 2002:259f.). This belief was a strong influence on many of the museums at the time (Abt 2006:123f., Hesjedal 2001). These museums promoted the image of a nation state as home to a singular, shared culture (Eriksen 2009). This had serious consequences for indigenous and minority groups (Hilden 2000).

In nineteenth- and twentieth-century Norway, as previously stated, a need was felt for a unifying Norwegian identity. The museums promoted and exhibited the Norwegian population as consisting of one unified group (Eriksen 2009:26). The existence of the very different Sámi cultures native to Norway was, in this regard, problematic. The Sámi were excluded from, or at best marginalized in, the national narratives in the museums (Hesjedal 2001). In the case of the latter, the presence of Sámi cultures and identities in Norway was explained as the result of late settlers from an eastern reindeer-herding culture (see Hallström 1929:56). Consequently the Sámi were generally portrayed as the remnant of a foreign and exotic culture centred on reindeer herding. Over time this image has been perpetuated to such an extent that many modern museums still exhibit Sámi culture strictly as a reindeer-herding culture that is resistant to and unmarked by change (Baglo 2001:55f.). However, it must be said that – depending on context – this kind of imagery has symbolized very different things at different times (Mathisen 2014; see for example Finbog 2013:49, 59).

It is only recently, as we have seen, that attempts have been made to rectify the outdated view of the Sámi people, their cultures and their identities. Several indigenous museums, established in the 1980s, are now attempting to engage with, and change, how the Sámi and their cultures are perceived. In the beginning, these museums displayed the same visual imagery that the cultural-historical museums in Norway had exhibited for centuries: the Sámi reindeer-herding culture (Olsen 2000:18, Webb 2001, Levy 2006). But even though the imagery was the same, the meaning behind it was an entirely different matter.

The archaeologist Sharon Webb argues that the new indigenous museums continued to display Sámi culture as primarily a reindeer-herding one in order to make use of a well-known and recognizable imagery. When an indigenous group intentionally manipulates, projects and homogenizes its culture in accordance with a known public image and identity based on Western stereotypes, it is an act of *strategic essentialism* (Hodgson 2002:1040, 1046). When employing this strategy the aim is generally to seek recognition and gain rights as one people. In this case, Webb claims, the aim was to create one common, and therefore unifying, Sámi identity (Webb 2001:163, 2006:174). But this strategy is never without cost.

Today only a small number of the Sámi people are involved in reindeer herding (Internet source 2). Most work within other industries and as such may feel alienated by how the indigenous museums display Sámi culture. The Sámi communities within the sphere of influence of Várdobáiki Museum are no strangers to such sentiments. Várdobaiki is, as previously stated, located in the north of the county of Nordland, but the museum's scope also includes the south of Troms, the county neighbouring on Nordland (Skåden 2009:3). This area has for centuries been the home of the Marke-Sámi people, and although they have a history of reindeer herding,[1] if asked today most would claim no relation to that livelihood. Some therefore admit to feeling

Fig. 1. Multalusmeannu, a variant of Skrømtkveld arranged in 2006 during the local musical festival Markumeannu. Photo: Ellen Berit Nymo Dalbakk.

alienated by museums that display the Sámi culture as a reindeer-herding culture (Finbog 2013:64).

This implies that there was a need for local indigenous museums that would focus on the Marke-Sámi cultural heritage. As a result, in the 1980s and 1990s several local indigenous museums were established, the first of which was the Gállogiedde open-air museum in Evenes, Nordland, soon followed by Vilgesvarre in Skånland, Troms, Gamtofta in Sørreisa, Troms and Kvandahl-museet in Ballangen, Nordland (Finbog 2013). Though only Gállogiedde is managed by Várdobáiki, the latter three are affiliated. In the following, I will look at all four museums when I examine how Várdobáiki constructs Sámi identities that are appropriate to the Marke-Sámi area. To begin with the focus will be on oral historical research.

The telling of tales

Oral history is a collection of information gathered through oral transmission. It can be centred on everyday life or important historical events as they are or have been experienced by individuals, families or local communities (Allen & Motell 1981). This way of gathering information is of course of scientific value (Internet source 3), but there is also significant value for the storyteller. This can be illustrated

by the research of the museologist Anne Eriksen. In her work with veterans of World War II, she found that storytelling was used to convey a collective memory of the war effort rather than individual endeavours. As a result, the veterans collectively determined how an historical event should be perceived. This also coloured their perception of self and likewise how others would perceive their identity (Eriksen 1995:161). By telling stories an individual or a community may, in other words, choose how to present their history, culture, ethnicity and cultural identity. As examples worldwide have shown, museums in particular have proven to be an excellent setting for such endeavours (Clifford 1997:188, Bujis 2010:18). It is thus understandable that when the Marke-Sámi museums were established, they chose to begin with oral history research, in collaboration with the local community.

Of the projects categorized as oral historical research, the events known as *Skrømtkveld,* or *Scare Night,* have had the greatest longevity and are still periodically arranged (fig. 1). Backlit by the historical buildings and natural landmarks of Gállogiedde, storytelling is made a guest of honour on various occasions. On *Skrømtkveld* the children and young people from the Marke-Sámi community gather at Gállogiedde to share stories and listen to the tales of the older generations. Often the stories revolve around traditional myths and narratives from and about the Marke-Sámi region and culture. Many of the stories tell of different supernatural beings of Sámi origin – one of these being the *Ulda.*[2]

In old Sámi tradition the Ulda is a mysterious and fearsome creature. Often it is an agent of goodwill, but they have also been known to be harbingers of doom, depending on the situation. It is on the one hand said that the Sámi learned the art of joik and the powers of the *noaide* (Sámi shaman) from the Ulda. At the same time many of the stories tell of how Ulda kidnap and replace Sámi children with their own. To protect against these changelings the stories would have you believe that silver is a protective agent not tolerated by the Ulda, and so within Sámi communities newly born are always gifted with silver (Turi 1910/2010:158f.).

As described above, when telling stories of the Ulda, the older generations give the young children and teens *árbediehtu* or traditional knowledge – in this case the social practice of giving silver to the newly born. In other words *Skrømtkveld* ensures the survival of an *intangible* cultural heritage. But that's not all. A recent report on the cultural heritage in the north of Norway has concluded that storytelling can, and is in fact often used, to make connections between specific ethnic groups and their traditional areas of settlements (Myrvoll *et al.* 2013). Such a process is not unknown within indigenous communities elsewhere (see Lefale 2010, Heikkila 2014), for instance in Australia where storytelling is used to transmit geographical knowledge and recognition of traditional settlement areas amongst aboriginal communities (Meggit 1962:285). I would argue that the stories told at *Skrømtkveld* serve a similar purpose.

At Gállogiedde there is a particular stone that locals refer to as *Storsteinen,* or the big stone (fig. 2). It is generally believed that the stone has a connection with the Ulda and should therefore, to prevent any harm from coming to the people of the community, be treated with the utmost care. This is a long-held tradition in the community, and the stories told at *Skrømtkveld* have passed the tradition on to the younger generations. Telling stories of the Ulda thus forges a continuing link between the intangible cultural heritage and the community. This, in

Fig. 2. The big stone at Gállogiedde. Photo: Ellen Berit Nymo Dalbakk.

turn, moors the young to the areas of Marke-Sámi traditional settlements.

Those participating in Skrømtkveld support this claim. Some feel that there is a sense of empowerment, citing that the storytelling gives them a sense of ownership of the Marke-Sámi cultural heritage as well as the corresponding geographical area (Finbog 2013:73). I would argue, then, that *Skrømtkveld* legitimizes the use and creates local ownership of the Marke-Sámi area as well as the related cultural heritage. In turn, this boosts cultural identities that are specific to the Marke-Sámi community. I believe this argument will be supported by the following discussion on the effects of community-based archaeology in the construction of Marke-Sámi cultural identities.

Community participation

In the 1970s and 1980s, previously suppressed peoples protested and demanded equal rights (Carroll 1982/2000). Alongside the demand for social equality, indigenous peoples also insisted on participating in interpreting their history and material culture. Up until that point, this was mostly done by Western archaeologists, anthropologists and historians (Attalay 2012). Community-based archaeology was seen as a means to achieve both empowerment and autonomy for indigenous groups all over the world (see for example Erikson 2003:528f.).

Up until the 1980s the Sámi culture, as we have seen, had been largely ignored or marginalized in visual representations of the history of Norway. As a result, Sámi history

was practically non-existent before the 1980s.[3] Likewise, the material remains of the Sámi cultures were of little interest. Consequently, when the Norwegian government in the 1960s mapped cultural heritage sites in Norway, they largely ignored the traditional Sámi areas. As a result, there is today a lack of knowledge and documentation of Sámi cultural heritage sites in Norway. In addition, the empirical knowledge of how Sámi cultural heritage sites appear *in situ* is lacking. This has proved challenging for modern-day archaeologists working in the areas of traditional Sámi settlements (Barlindhaug & Pettersen 2011:18), especially because most of the material remains of the Sámi are organic in nature, the traditional Sámi dwelling – the *goahti* or turf hut – being a prime example.

When turf huts go out of use, they suffer rapid disintegration. By the 1950s, most of the Marke-Sámi community had abandoned the turf huts in favour of ordinary houses. In the years following, little or no upkeep has been done to the abandoned huts. As a result, today they are mostly decayed (Finbog 2013:80) (fig. 3 and 4.). An additional factor that may

Fig. 3. Reconstructed turf hut at Gamtoft. Photo: Liisa-Rávná Finbog.

Fig. 4. Decayed turf hut covered in vegetation. It was discovered during the registration of cultural heritage sites in the Marke-Sáámi area. Photo: Arne Håkon Thomassen.

hinder the discovery of such structures is the traditional locations of the turf huts. Generally found in the marshlands or on the forest floors, the structural remains are today overgrown by vegetation and therefore almost invisible to the naked eye (Barlindhaug 2012:114). In other words, unless there is prior knowledge of such sites, archaeologists generally have problems locating the structures of the turf huts. In such cases community participation makes all the difference, particularly because the involvement of the local communities allows for the use of what is known as *local and indigenous knowledge,* a concept that UNESCO has defined as:.

> [...] cumulative and complex bodies of knowledge, know-how, practices and representations that are maintained and developed by peoples with extended histories of interactions with the natural environment. These cognitive systems are part of a complex that also includes language, attachment to place, spirituality and worldview (quoted by Barlindhaug 2013:11).

Local and indigenous knowledge has proven to survive uninterrupted for as much as

four generations (Barlindhaug 2012:114). Despite the discontinued use of turf huts it is consequently, at least in theory, likely that some people within the Sámi communities still have knowledge about the construction and upkeep of turf huts. These individuals, hereafter described as tradition bearers, will also most likely be aware of where the local turf huts of old, or at least their structures, can be found (see for example Finbog 2013:80). The collaboration with local *tradition bearers* thus allows for several opportunities. Firstly, archaeologists may discover previously unknown (to the discipline if not the community) cultural heritage sites. Secondly, museums that employ tradition bearers may reconstruct traditional dwellings (and other structures) for educational and disseminational purposes.

In the Marke-Sámi area the Várdobáiki museums have had great success when using tradition bearers – with regard to both the registration and the reconstruction of cultural heritage sites (Andersen *et al.* 2011:13). As a result, the museums, for one thing, ensure the survival of tangible heritage sites relevant for the local Marke-Sámi community. Additionally the museums have also preserved – in writing – local and traditional knowledge that is specific to the Marke-Sámi area. This secures the continuity of the local intangible and tangible heritage alike. The benefits of doing so are of course important to the museological and archaeological community but, as was the case with oral-historical research, community participation has far-reaching consequences for the local community as well.

When asked, local tradition bearers in the employ of Várdobáiki state that the museum's use of their local and indigenous knowledge gives them a sense of pride in having such knowledge. In addition, they claim that the museum, by making use of local and indigenous knowledge, gives it a respectability which makes it desirable for the younger generations. This is also the case amongst indigenous peoples elsewhere when making use of community-based archaeology (Attalay 2012:244–246). This is especially important in relation to the Marke-Sámi area because tradition bearers often experienced degradation of their local and indigenous knowledge during the years of assimilation. During this time, the local community began to view local and indigenous knowledge as something shameful, and many began to ignore its existence (Finbog 2013:83).[4] They no longer shared this knowledge with the younger generations, and this resulted in the near-extinction of Marke-Sámi local and indigenous knowledge (Finbog 2013:63).

Today this trend has turned as more and more young people in the local Marke-Sámi community are asking the tradition bearers to share their knowledge. This is both encouraged and facilitated by Várdobáiki Museum. On several occasions, Várdobáiki has invited those who are interested to join them when the museum registers and reconstructs heritage sites in collaboration with tradition bearers. The participants in such events experience that this helps them in developing a positive relation to their cultural heritage. In particular, participants claim to feel pride in and acceptance of their Marke-Sámi culture and furthermore of their identity as Marke-Sámi (Finbog 2013:86). Some even claim that their participation allows them to take ownership of their Marke-Sámi cultural heritage – both the heritage that is tangible, such as cultural heritage sites, and also, through gaining local knowledge, the heritage that is intangible. I suggest then that the practice of community-based archaeology, as well as oral historical research, both creates and strengthens local cultural identities. Through these practices,

local tangible and intangible cultural heritage is shared in and within the Marke-Sámi community. I believe similar things can be said about the next and last act of heritage work to be discussed in this article.

The making of cultural identities

The last and final act of heritage work to be discussed is the concept of *heritage object*. When coining this concept, the historian James Clifford put forward a definition that was based on the following three criteria: the object in question must have a particular cultural value within a community; additionally it must be manufactured in accordance with tradition, and lastly: it must always be made by a member of the culture in which this object has its origins. When all the criteria are fulfilled an object should imbue its maker with a positive relation to his or her culture, ethnicity and identity (Clifford 2004:16).

The process of a heritage object, as explained above, may be exemplified by looking to the border areas of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico in America. For generations the Diné people living here have woven blankets that, according to tradition, have been made on upright looms specific to the Diné.[5] The blankets have significant cultural value: the patterns are old and usually limited to family heritage, and the iconography used in the weave often documents important events in the historical past of the Diné people. As such, the knowledge of making these blankets is reserved for those of Diné descent (M'Closky 2004). In the past, tradition bearers within the community passed on the local and traditional knowledge needed to make the blankets. Today this knowledge is acquired outside the local community through institutional learning and employed tradition bearers (Rodee 1983:91). Admittedly, many Diné today choose to attain this knowledge primarily for financial gain, but once acquired it often proves to have a positive impact on the weaver's cultural identity (M'Closky 2004:91).

Returning to the Sámi communities, there are many objects that may pass as heritage objects. Amongst these, as I have discussed elsewhere, is the *gákti* – the traditional dress of the Sámi people (Finbog 2013:72). During the years of assimilation those who wore the *gákti* were often a target for ridicule and degradation. As a result, by the twentieth century the use of the *gákti* had diminished and in some places totally disappeared. With the revitalization of Sámi culture in the 1970s and 1980s, the traditional *gákti* once more regained status and interest within Sámi communities. Sadly, in the Marke-Sámi area the prolonged lack of use had by this point caused the loss of traditional craft designs. In addition, the lack of local and indigenous knowledge necessary for making the *gákti* meant that there were no tradition bearers left. Following this discovery there was a long and painstaking process of reproduction based on old pictures and outfits that had been preserved in museum collections (Finbog 2013:71).

To begin with, those working on the construction of the *gákti* were few, but in the course of their work they made the new crafting designs available, thus allowing it to spread within the local Marke-Sámi community. In addition they would share their new local and indigenous knowledge by giving lessons to those in the community that wished for it and by doing so increased the number of new tradition bearers (Finbog 2013:69f.). Though initially done by individuals, the sharing of new local and indigenous knowledge has since been institutionalized at Várdobáiki. In collaboration with the local schools the museum each year offers courses to Sámi

Fig. 5. The making of gáávvtid. Photo: Ellen Berit Nymo Dalbakk.

pupils on the making of the traditional Marke-Sámi *gákti* (fig. 5). The museum, through its youth outreach programme, also arranges for the younger Marke-Sámi generation in the area to make their own traditional *gákti,* free of charge (Andersen et al. 2005:9). As a result, the making of the traditional Marke-Sámi *gákti* is steadily increasing – at least amongst the younger generations.

So far two of the criteria for a heritage object have been fulfilled: the makers are of Marke-Sámi origin, and the *gákti* is made in a traditional manner. As for the third criteria, I would argue that it is likewise obeyed.

Those participating in the courses offered by Várdobaiki tell of their sense of entitlement. One claims that making the *gákti* is akin to "making something that in reality belongs to you so you are actually reclaiming the right to be yourself!" (Finbog 2013:72). I interpret this to mean that the making of a *gákti* allows the makers to take pride in their cultural heritage and furthermore, lets the maker achieve ownership of the Marke-Sámi culture. To make a *gákti* is in other words to experience positive emotions related to the Marke-Sámi culture and in turn to the correlating Marke-Sámi identities. Other participants note that it is noticeably the young that have reclaimed the Marke-Sámi *gákti.* For the young, the *gákti* has become a visible symbol of their pride in and ownership of the Marke-Sámi cultural heritage (Finbog 2013:71f.). This assures me that the third criterion of Clifford's heritage object has been fulfilled. The Marke-Sámi *gákti* has in recent times achieved a significant cultural value for those of Marke-Sámi descent. It is also worth noting that the same is happening in many locations within Sápmi (Internet source 4).

As was the case with both oral historical research and community-based archaeology, Várdobáiki's use of heritage objects allows the local community to take part in and share new *local and indigenous knowledge.* It also gives the community an opportunity once more to take ownership of their cultural heritage – be it the intangible local and indigenous knowledge or the more tangible *gákti.*

In closing

The instances of heritage work that I have discussed here – oral historical research, community-based archaeology and art or object production – have one common thread: they facilitate the sharing of *local and indigenous knowledge* and thus strengthen the connection between the local cultural heritage and the local community. Heritage work strengthens the local people's ownership of their own tangible and intangible cultural heritage. This in turn boosts a sense of autonomy. As a result, local cultural identities specific to the Marke-Sámi area are today created, negotiated and strengthened in a joint effort between the local community and Várdobáiki Museum.

Notes

1. The Marke-Sámi have long been described as decendants of reindeer herders on the Swedish side of the border that settled along the coast after the borders between Norway and Sweden were set (Lysaker 1978:231, Vorren & Manker 1981:82, Storm 1988:16f.). However, recent research indicates that the Marke-Sámi descend from a mixed group consisting of the above-mentioned reindeer herders, local Sea Sámis and a more local coastal group of reindeer herders (Andersen 2002:5, 172–182, 422–424, Andersen 2004:140).
2. According to the professor of Finno-Ugric languages, Karl Bernhard Wiklund, *uldak* or *ulttak* is a word that has been borrowed from the Scandinavian languages and is the equivalent of the Nordic *hulder* (1916:71).
3. There are however some notable exceptions (see Simonsen 1959).
4. Several studies have shown that it is not unusual for ethnic groups that experience subjugation or repression to believe in the oppressors' reasoning for the oppression (Comaroff 1992:53, Mennel 1994:182).
5. They are also refered to as *navajo* or *navaho*, but *diné* is preferred.

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