

# Minority history in museums

## Between ethnopolitics and museology

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**Abstract:** *From the 1980s, the ethnographic museums came under increased criticism for displaying indigenous peoples as people without history. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, this critique of the exhibiting practices began to make an impact in museums, and the notion that they should exhibit oppressed and silenced groups in society, and thereby act as agents for social change, gradually gained momentum. This development also made its mark in Norway, where several museums began to exhibit the history and culture of ethnic minorities. With this turn, the political situation of the minorities became relevant. The article investigates how the museological and ethnopolitical changes in this period influenced the way museums exhibited minority history. Two exhibitions from this period are analysed: Latjo-Drom – The Romani/Travellers' Culture and History at the Glomdal Museum and Sápmi – Becoming a Nation at Tromsø University Museum. The article discusses how the historical representations presented in these exhibitions can be understood within the contemporary museological and ethnopolitical contexts.*

**Keywords:** Historical representation, Sami, Romani, minorities, ethnopolitics, museology, Glomdal Museum, Tromsø University Museum.

Ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples have historically had a problematic relationship to the museum institution. Indigenous peoples were for a long time confined to the ethnographic departments, while many ethnic minorities were excluded from the museums altogether. With the growth of post-colonial studies in the 1980s, ethnographic exhibitions were subject to increased criticism for displaying indigenous peoples as people without history (Simpson 2001). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, this critique of museums' exhibiting

practices began to make an impact in the museum departments. The idea that museums should exhibit oppressed and silenced groups in society, and thereby act as agents for social change, gradually gained momentum in this period (Sandell 1998). This international trend also made its mark in Norwegian museums. The Norwegian Government's museum reform in 2001, named the display of cultural diversity as one of the museums' main objectives (St.meld. nr. 22, 1999–2000: 19). In the following years there were a

34 growing number of exhibitions about the history of ethnic minorities (Holmesland 2006). With this change in the museums' objectives, it becomes relevant to ask what historical narratives these exhibitions tried to convey and what made the museums exhibit these narratives. When studying exhibitions from this period, one should take into account that the narratives were products of, and functioned within an ethnopolitical and a museological context.<sup>1</sup>

This article will examine two exhibitions from this period; *Latjo-Drom – Romanifolkets/ Taternes kultur og historie* which opened in 2006 at the folk/open air museum Glomdal Museum (Glomdalsmuseet) and *Sápmi – en nasjon blir til*, which opened in 2000 at Tromsø University Museum (Tromsø Museum – Universitetsmuseet). The exhibition *Latjo-Drom* concerns the Norwegian Romani people, a minority which had previously been neglected by museums. The exhibition *Sápmi*, on the other hand, is about the Sami people, which have a long tradition of being displayed in ethnographic museums (Mathisen 2004). The ethnopolitical situation for the Sami and the Romani was quite different at the turn of the century. The process of ethnic revival amongst the Sami had begun after the Second World War, and in 1990 they obtained the status as an indigenous people. For the Romani people, the Norwegian assimilation policies ended quite late and the ethnopolitical mobilisation amongst the group began in the 1990s. In 1999 the Romani people obtained the status as a national minority in Norway.<sup>2</sup> By comparing two exhibitions about minorities in different ethnopolitical positions, displayed at two museums from different traditions, it should be possible to investigate what space for exhibiting minority history existed during this period.

The aim of this article is to analyse the exhibitions in light of the ethnopolitical and museological contexts in which they were created. A constructivist representational approach has proven fruitful for such an analysis (Hall 1997:24f.). With this theoretical perspective, the question is not whether the representations in the exhibition fulfill some notion of historical truth. The central question is rather how the representations can be analysed as a product of agents within an ethnopolitical and museological landscape and how these contexts gave the exhibition meaning (Lidchi 1997).

#### GLOMDAL MUSEUM AND THE ROMANI PEOPLE

Glomdal Museum was founded in Elverum in 1911 as a folk museum, which exhibited the rural culture from the Glomdal region. In the 1990s, the notion that museums should be agents for social change became influential also at Glomdal Museum. With a history of exhibiting Forest Finn and Southern Sami culture, it became natural for the museum to focus on ethnic minorities. In 1997 the museum began collaborating with Taternes Landsforening (TL) and examined the possibilities for creating an exhibition about Romani history.<sup>3</sup> When the Norwegian government offered an official apology for its historical atrocities towards the Romani in 1998, it also promised financing for the project at Glomdal Museum (St.meld. nr. 15, 2000–2001:7). The work on the exhibition began in 2004, and a reference group with members from the two largest Romani-organisations, TL and Landsorganisasjonen for Romanifolket (LOR), was established to secure Romani participation in the production of the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Controversial issues concerning content and ownership of the exhibition gradually

made the cooperation between the museum and the organisations more confrontational, but on the day of the opening, representatives from TL, LOR and the museum stood together when prince Håkon of Norway opened the exhibition (Møystad 2009:90ff.).

The ethnopolitical movement amongst the Norwegian Romani people began in the early 1990s, with the demand for reparation after the recently concluded assimilation policies (Hvinden 2000). The movement achieved realisation for some of its goals in the late 1990s, when the government officially apologised and simultaneously defined the group as one of Norway's national minorities (St.meld. nr. 15, 2000–2001). In the 2000s, LOR and TL established themselves as the two dominant organisations, but the cooperation between them was problematic and at times unfriendly. This aside, the organisations shared a goal in creating a positive image of the Romani, both within the minority itself and towards the majority population. The sociologist Rune Halvorsen described the situation for the Romani movement in the early 2000s thus: "A central element in the contemporary social movement amongst the Travellers is thus the question of what it means to be a Traveller today, and who they have been throughout history" (Halvorsen 2004:30). The Romani people were lacking some of the central symbolic elements that integrates an ethnic community. According to professor in ethnicity and nationalism, Anthony D. Smith, ethnic groups need a myth of origin to maintain ethnic boundaries and to give ethnic identity meaning and sentiments (Smith 1999:57f.). It is therefore relevant to ask if the exhibitions created in this period tried to convey such a myth and thereby overcome the image of victimhood.

Every ethnic group's myth of origin is

unique to that group, but according to Smith myths also possess a common form that can be broken down into component: a myth of location and migration which illustrates the relation between the ethnic group and a specific territory; a myth of ancestry which shows the symbolic kinship link between present members of the community and previous generations; a myth of a golden age that shows a period with cultural growth and heroic deeds; a myth of decline which explains why the golden age came to an end; and a myth of regeneration that shows how actions in the present are necessary for the creation of a new golden age (Smith 1999:162ff.). Smith's division of the myth of origin into component parts provides a useful framework for analysing an exhibition produced within this specific ethnopolitical context.

### A TRAVELLING HISTORY

The exhibition *Latjo-Drom – The Romani/ Travellers' Culture and History* is divided into twelve sections which convey the history and culture of the Romani and Traveller (*Tatere* in Norwegian) people in Norway. The exhibition consists chiefly of text and pictures presented as wall charts, objects in display cases, and some large objects like a caravan and a boat. The first section a visitor at the exhibition sees is called "Origins". One wall chart features the following text: "There are many persisting theories about the origin of the Romani/Travellers. While the language shows an Indian origin, different social phenomena throughout 500 years tell about a more mixed origin." A map shows the time of arrival of "the foreign people" to different cities in Europe. The Romani origin is thereby not pinpointed to one specific place, but rather related to migration and travel. With this nuanced and cautious description,

36 the exhibition avoided a controversial question both within the Romani movement and within the academic field of Romani studies (Willems 1998, Hancock 2006, Minken 2009).

In several of the sections in the exhibition, a golden age in Romani history is visible. This is most evident in the section called "On the way", which accounts for the largest amount of space in the exhibition. The golden age is closely connected to the period when travel was an integral part of the life of the Romani, and the concept of travel is portrayed as something essentially Romani. As one chart says: "What first and foremost characterises the Romani/ Travellers is their travelling way of life. Travel has been significant for this people's economic adaptation and it is a fundamental part of their identity." Different means of transport convey the continuity in this culture; by exhibiting a horse next to a car and a caravan, the exhibition conveys an image of how the Romani people adapted their travelling through the ages (fig.1).

The section "The Romani/Travellers and the majority community" can be read as a myth of decline, where an explanation for why the golden age faded away is provided. The introduction to this section reads:

The policy towards the Romani/Travellers, from the later half of the 1800s and up until a few decades ago, entailed amongst other things forced sterilisation, forced relocation of children into foster homes and criminalisation of their lifestyle. This policy continued in the 1900s and had as its aim that the Romani people should adapt to the majority society and leave their travelling way of life.

Following this are charts about the different assimilation strategies and individual stories by Romanies that were affected by the policies.

The myth of regeneration underlines the need for collective action to recreate the essence

of the golden age (Smith 1999:67f.). A part of the section "Romani/Travellers today" imparts what is needed for the Romani people to survive as a group. The organisations TL and LOR were given a wall chart to inform about their activities. In addition, there are portraits of four persons with a Romani identity, together with a text where they underline the importance of transmitting the Romani heritage to the next generation.

Seen as a whole, the exhibition contains all the component-myths that according to Smith constitute a myth of origin (Smith 1999). In the ethnopolitical context at the time, this myth gave answers to central questions for the Romani movement: it placed the Romani as acting subjects in history and marked a break from the dominant victimisation narrative in Romani history. It also exhibited a golden age which tied the Romani identity to the culture of travel. This golden age did not only show who the Romani had been historically, but conveyed ideals and norms for the revitalisation of the contemporary Romani identity.

Not all of the answers that the exhibition provided were uncontroversial within the Romani movement. One example is the Romani people's newly gained status as a national minority. When this status was debated within the Romani movement in the late 1990s, many Romani expressed fear of being defined as an ethnic category in government policy, and they opposed the proposed status (Halvorsen 2004:56). This status is not questioned in the exhibition, but rather legitimised. The exhibition emphasises the group's 500 years of history in Norway and how the Romani culture developed in relation to the Norwegian society. This makes their status as a national minority appear as a natural category for the group. The example illustrates how the views of some Romanies



Fig. 1. Shortly after the entrance, a horse with a carriage greets the visitors to the exhibition. The culture of mobility is thereby presented right away in the exhibition. Photo: Glomdal Museum 2006.

were excluded from the exhibition, in order to create a concordant representation of the Romani people.

To construct a myth of origin, one has to select elements from the past that fit the myth and ignore contradictory elements (Smith 1999:65ff.). The process of selection is also essential for the museum, where the question about what objects deserve to be collected and exhibited has been fundamental throughout the institution's history (Eriksen 2009:117). Glomdal Museum wanted to transfer this process to the Romani people, so that the exhibition would be created *with* the minority, not merely *about it*. Through the reference

group, the two largest Romani organisations could influence the central content in the exhibition. As the example with the national minority status illustrates, this approach did not overcome the fundamental issue regarding self-representation. There were still dominant voices within the minority community that influenced what was presented, while dissenting voices were excluded from the exhibition.

While a myth of origin simplifies the past and thereby also excludes some voices, it might also help expand the ethnopolitical possibilities available to the Romani. The narrative of the Romani as victims gave Romani activists a basis for working towards reparations, but it



*Fig. 2. The campsite takes up a large amount of space in the exhibition. The carriages, the bicycle and the car illustrate how the Romani adapted their culture of travel over time. Photo: Glomdal Museum 2006.*

also made it difficult to define their identity in a way that encouraged self-identification (Halvorsen 2004:73). By displaying a golden age in Romani history the exhibition contributed to a positive identification within the group, which could lead to an expansion of the possible aims and strategies of the Romani movement. The section “Romani/Travellers today” highlights the golden age and its relevance for the contemporary Romanies, by underlining which cultural aspects from the golden age should be imparted to the next generation.

In the golden age, cultural elements like travelling and music are portrayed as an essence of Romani identity. This way of portraying a group of people has a long tradition in folk museums, where farming culture was portrayed as the essence of the national cultural history of Norway. We can

further see how the traditions from Glomdal Museum have been used to create authentic spaces in the exhibition. A caravan, a boat and a campsite have been decorated with appropriate objects that one associates with these places (fig. 2). This exhibiting technique seems to take inspiration from the open air tradition, where old buildings were exhibited with appropriate furniture to create an image of authenticity (Roede 2010:168).

Self-representation and minority participation became important ideals in Glomdal Museum’s work with the exhibition, but these ideals were not actually conceptualised by the museum when they began the cooperation with TL in the late 1990s. The self-understanding and position of Glomdal Museum in regard to the Romani people changed during the production process and continued to develop

after the exhibition opened. This process was not straightforward and there were also critical voices towards parts of this development within the museum. An example of this process is the educational program about the Romani people that the museum carried out in 2003. The program educated primary school classes about Romani culture and history, but received criticism from TL for its lack of Romani participation. In the aftermath of the project, the curator for the program expressed concerns about the museum's role in dealing with minorities:

We understand that the travellers are now in a situation similar to the one 'we' were in, during the building of the nation and the museum's childhood – exhibitions and conveying knowledge have a political aim – it should create a positive attitude, create pride and unity etc. – But are we not actually critical of such an goal? And: Can a museum policy such as this work today, when we simultaneously try to make exhibitions and programs that ask questions, provoke and offer a challenge for independent and critical thinking (Lahn 2006:51).

While there were several conflicts between the museum and the Romani organisations during the production of *Latjo-Drom*, this process led the museum to change its position. The primary curator behind the exhibition arrived at this conclusion after the exhibition had opened:

If the museums are to function as agents for change and give room for minority participation, they must also be prepared to let go of power and be open to new ways of organising the work. In the end, the museums must be willing to make changes, also within their own ranks (Møystad 2009:101).

The different levels of Romani participation and the different positions of the two curators,

illustrate how the museum's position was not finalized when they entered into the exhibition project. The Glomdal Museum's position got formed not only by changes in the museological field, but also by the ethnopolitical context that the museum encountered.

As mentioned, the exhibition was financed as part of the government's reparations towards the Romani people (St.meld. nr. 15, 2000–2001:14). During the production, TL and LOR raised the question of who should have the ownership of the exhibition, and claimed that they should be the formal owners. The organisations and the museum did initially not come to an agreement on this issue, so the Glomdal Museum asked the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development to clarify it. A representative from the Ministry attended a meeting at the museum and stated that the financing of the exhibition was made on the grounds that it was a department at Glomdal Museum. The representative advised the organisations to put the question about ownership aside and rather work on how they could get greater influence over the design and content in the exhibition. Besides, the museum director indicated the possibility that the Romani organisations could be given seats at the board of representatives for the museum foundation and in an expert group that would work on Romani issues after the opening of the exhibition (Møystad 2009:92). For the Romani organisations, pushing the question of ownership further would possibly have endangered the project, and they therefore continued the cooperation with the museum.

Rune Halvorsen has considered this process to be symbolic: the Romani organisations' claim was about ownership to their own culture (Halvorsen 2004:86). There is also a material aspect to these discussions. When the museum began to collect objects for the

40 exhibition, they took part in the construction of a cultural heritage of the Romani people. When this heritage came into existence through the production process, it also motivated the Romani activists to claim their ownership. For the Norwegian government, the process of collecting a material culture might explain why a part of the reparations was given the form of a museum exhibition. During the greater part of the twentieth century, the Norwegian state conducted a policy of forced assimilation, which aimed to eradicate the Romani culture (Hvinden 2000). By financing this exhibition, the government participated in collecting the remains of this culture and symbolically giving it back to the Romanies. The project gave the government both material and symbolic results in the reparations process, while the project was kept within the frames of existing museum and national minority policies.

### TROMSØ UNIVERSITY MUSEUM AND SAMI ETHNOPOLITICS

From the 1970s, the ethnographic museums came under increased criticism for their portrayal of indigenous and non-European people (Simpson 2001:35f.). In the 1990s, this critique started to make an impact in museum departments and many curators wanted to distance themselves from the traditions of the ethnographic genre. Despite these intentions, it was still unclear how the museums could break away from their former exhibiting practices (Lidchi 1997:199). This development also made its mark on the department of Sami ethnography at Tromsø University Museum. The museum's history of collecting and exhibiting Sami ethnographic objects goes back to the late nineteenth century (Vorren 1972:111f.). In the 1990s, the museum's traditional ethnographic exhibition from 1973,

*Samekulturen*, was increasingly seen as a problematic representation of Sami culture. But instead of changing *Samekulturen*, curators in the Department of Sami Ethnography decided to create a new exhibition in addition to the old one. The work on the exhibition *Sápmi – en nasjon blir til*, started in 1997 and the project was divided between two workgroups: one group with academic expertise relevant to the Sami and one group with expertise in producing and designing exhibitions. The initial idea was that the academic group would produce a narrative that the exhibition group then would transform into an exhibition. In practice, however, the groups worked closely together and the academic group had to make changes and compromises in order to transform their written narrative into a museum exhibition. With the exception of an external exhibition designer, the members of the workgroups were all staff at Tromsø University Museum. The exhibition was opened by the president of the Sami Parliament in 2000.

Two events set the stage for Sami ethnopolitics in the 1990s: the establishment of the Sami Parliament in 1989 and the Norwegian government's ratification of the *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, ILO 169* in 1990. The Sami Parliament was dominated by two parties in the 1990s: the Norwegian Saami Association (NSR) and the Labour Party. NSR had been a central ethnopolitical organisation in the Sami movement since the late 1960s. It became a political party with the establishment of the Parliament and it was the governing party from 1989 to 2007. The Sami Labour Party was founded ahead of the first election in 1989 by Sami members of the Norwegian Labour Party. The party was kept integrated in the Norwegian Labour Party, which created a complicated relationship between the central leadership and the Sami Labour Party (Mellingén



2004:66ff.). Both within and outside of the Sami Parliament the question of Sami rights to land and water was a major issue in this period. The ratification of ILO 169 laid the framework for the debate, and the question was how the convention should be implemented in Norway. The second government commission on Sami rights delivered its report in 1997, but at the turn of the century the Norwegian government had not yet decided the matter (NOU 1997:4).

The exhibition *Sápmi – Becoming a Nation* is divided in four rooms which are organised sequentially. The main part of the exhibition consist of three rooms that are structured narratively and chronologically, in which the first room displays the beginning of the story, the second room covers the middle and the

third room the end. To analyse an exhibition that has such a clear narrative structure, an adaptation of the philosopher Arthur Coleman Danto's model for historical narratives, outlined in his work *Analytical Philosophy of History*, has proven fruitful (Danto 1965). Danto's starting point is that historical explanations take the form of historical narratives. To explain historical change  $x$  to a subject, the narrative has to begin by showing the subject without  $x$ . The main part of the narrative will have to portray the events that caused  $x$  in the subject and has to conclude by showing the subject with  $x$  (Danto 1965:236ff.). The central question is what historical change the exhibition aims to explain and what events and processes caused this change.

*Fig. 3. The photo shows two central walls in the room "Show Sami Spirit". The wall on the left shows the political differences between the Sami organizations, while the wall on the right displays Sami cultural expressions from the period. Photo: June Åsheim, Tromsø University Museum 2011.*



42 **THE SAMI NATION ON DISPLAY**

In the first room of the exhibition one encounters several large portraits. In the majority of the photos, there is nothing that suggests that these people have a Sami identity. In their diversity, the portraits confront the stereotypical image of the Sami as reindeer herders and encourage the visitors to reflect on what Sami identity can entail. The room is not directly linked to the following narrative that is presented, and might be considered an introduction to the subject matter. At the entrance to the next room, the exhibition is introduced by a short text: "This is an exhibition about the Norwegian Sami struggle to develop the Sami national community after World War II." The following three rooms have an oblong hexagon shape where objects, photos and texts are exhibited along the walls.

The first room has the heading "All for Norway!" and covers the period 1945 to 1960. The room has thematised the destruction of Northern Troms and Finnmark during the war, and the subsequent rebuilding, school policies, exotic portrayal of the Sami, the welfare state and the modernising of Northern Norway. It highlights how these processes were based on Norwegian language and culture and the result of these developments are portrayed in an installation with the heading "Sami do not want to be Sami". The installation shows the population census in the municipality Kvænangen in 1930 and in 1950, where a large portion of the population went from defining themselves as Sami to defining themselves as Norwegians. The installation summarises the historical period: Sami identity was pushed to the side by Norwegian modernisation.

The next room has the heading "Show Sami spirit!", covers the period 1960 to 1980, and displays the political and cultural resurgence during the period (fig. 3). It has thematised the Sami

political organisations, the Sami commission of 1956, Sami geographical names, Sami mass media and the Sami cultural revitalisation. The room places emphasis on how the Sami began to act as political and cultural agents, and how this started a nation building process.

In the last room, one is met by a wall with the heading "A nation emerging", a photo of a woman holding a Sami flag on the Norwegian Constitution Day, and a quotation from the constitutional amendment §110A, which states that the government is obliged to give the Sami people the opportunity to develop their language, culture and community. The room concerns itself with the years 1980 to 2000, and thematises the political struggle that took place during the planning and construction of the Alta-Kautokeino power plant and the Sami rights to land and water. The last wall in the exhibition features several photos from Sami political and cultural life, displaying the vitalisation and diversity in the Sami national community.

Viewed as a whole, the rooms can be read as a historical narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end, and it can be summarised as follows: after the Second World War, Norwegian modernisation led to the marginalisation of Sami identity and culture. This marginalisation provided the backdrop from which the Sami people started to act politically and culturally from about the 1960s and onwards. The process created by the Sami in this period can be described as a nation building process and its results can be seen on the large wall of photos in the last room of the exhibition. The question of interest in this article is how this narrative made sense within the ethnopolitical and museological landscape in this period.

Part of the construction of national narratives is about creating contrasts in relation to other ethnic or national communities (Eriksen

2010:134f.). In *Sápmi*, the Norwegian nation is contrasted to the Sami nation. In the first room, Norwegian modernisation is shown as threatening Sami identity, and it is this modernisation that the Sami are reacting to in the second room. To portray the Sami in contrast to the Norwegian was not uncommon, but the manner in which this is done in *Sápmi* provides further ethnopolitical implications.

In the first room, the Norwegian modernisation is spearheaded by the welfare state. This is underlined by a short text:

The post-war period was marked by the introduction of the welfare state and the ideal of equality. There should be no differences between rich and poor – or between Sami and Norwegian for that matter. In official parlance, Sami people were referred to as ‘Sami-speaking Norwegians’ as late as the 1970s.

The Labour Party’s role in the welfare state is displayed by exhibiting party posters from the period. In the second room, there are charts concerning two Sami persons which were politically active in this period: Per Fokstad and Hans Opstad. Fokstad is presented as a “Sami politician” and a quotation by him portrays a pioneer in the Sami national movement. Opstad on the other hand is presented as a “Sami Party politician”. He is not quoted, but there is a descriptive text about him. “As a Labour politician he wanted to find political solutions to Sami problems – but they had to be Norwegian solutions. All political activity was to take place within the framework of Norwegian party politics – also for the Sami population”. The charts about Fokstad and Opstad show that some Sami actors are portrayed as pioneers in the Sami national movement, while Sami in the Labour Party represent Norwegian political solutions. It could be expected that an exhibition

about the Sami political development would portray the Labour Party’s participation in the Norwegianisation process, but what is striking about the description at *Sápmi* is how Sami involvement in the Labour Party is defined as something inherently Norwegian. The exhibition portrays social democracy and the Labour Party as representing something separate to the Sami national community.

In a paper presented at the Northern Norwegian History Seminar in 2002, historian and head of the Labour Party’s advisory board on Sami issues, Bård A. Berg, criticised the exhibition:

The exhibition portrays the two most important Sami political groups – NSR and the Labour Party – as heroes and villains in the narrative of how ‘the Sami nation’ came to be. Tromsø Museum is actually taking a stance in an internal Sami-political discourse (Berg 2004:109).

The curators behind the exhibition perceived the project quite differently. In an article published in *Norsk antropologisk tidsskrift* from 2002, “Museene, publikum og antropologien. Et formidlingsprosjekt ved Tromsø Museum”, three of the central curators presented their intentions for the exhibition. The curators made it clear that they wanted to position Tromsø University Museum in what they described as a Sami–Norwegian discourse. Their point of departure was that the “public narrative of Sami” lacked an understanding of the cultural and ethnopolitical development amongst the Sami from the middle of the twentieth century. The aim of the exhibition was to contribute to an understanding of these developments amongst its audience (Eidheim et al. 2002:126f., Eidheim et al. 2012:99ff.).

The differences in how Berg and the curators perceived the exhibition’s position



Fig. 4. The wall is located in the last room of the exhibition and displays the political struggle against the building of the Alta-Kautokeino power plant. The text reads “Alta – an environmental issue becomes an indigenous issue”. The monitor shows changing photos from the struggle, while the large photo of the mountain plateau in the background indicates how the Alta struggle is framed within the issue of Sami rights to land and water. Photo: June Åsheim, Tromsø University Museum 2011.

in the ethnopolitical context, illustrates how exhibitions concerning ethnic minorities work in parallel on two levels. On one level they deal with issues of majority–minority relations and the government’s minority policies. The curators behind *Sápmi* made their position in this landscape quite clear by trying to empower the Sami in the Sami–Norwegian discourse. On another level, the exhibition is also entering what can be seen as internal issues for the minority, such as ideological questions about the minority’s political project and identity. By exhibiting a national narrative about the Sami, Tromsø University Museum is clearly taking a stance on this level as well.

To be able to provide a relevant expression in the Norwegian–Sami discourse, it is necessary to use symbols that also convey something about what constitutes the Sami as a political

entity, thereby also taking a stance in an internal Sami discourse. That an exhibition about the Sami cultural and ethnopolitical development will enter internal Sami issues seems inevitable. The question is then how this has been done in *Sápmi*, and how it has been argued for by the curators. When Tromsø University Museum decided to apply a national narrative to conceptualise and exhibit the Sami cultural and political development in the second half of the twentieth century, it is curious how the breadth of contemporary Sami political actors that constituted this nation were not all integrated in the narrative. That the exhibition lacked a discussion concerning which minority voices the exhibition is empowering, makes this aspect of the exhibition problematic.

In the last room, a wall display raises the question about rights to land and water (fig.

4). The wall has four display cases, showing the resources of fishing, hydroelectric power, uncultivated land and mining. Under the heading “Who shall decide over the resources?”, all the government reports on the issue are stacked on top of each other, and there is a photo of a Sami person in a Norwegian courtroom. This conveys an image of the issue of rights to land and water as a matter yet unresolved, where the Sami are met by the Norwegian justice system.

The wall about land and water stands in stark contrast to the wall on the opposite side of the room, where the diversity in the Sami national community is displayed through several photos. The difference between these two walls conveys the exhibition’s argument in the debate on rights to land and water: it is the existence of a Sami national community that gives the Sami rights to land and water, rights which the Norwegian government has yet to acknowledge. This argument differed from what had been the usual stance in museum exhibitions: that the Sami’s long historical continuity in the region had been damaged and corrupted by modernity and the nation states (Olsen 1999:174f.).

This is not the only aspect where the exhibition differed from previous museum exhibitions about the Sami. The curators were conscious about the history of ethnographic museums in general, and Tromsø University Museum’s history of exhibiting the Sami in particular (Eidheim *et al.* 2002:127f.). An important aim for the curators was to create a clear break from the ethnographic genre. By displaying modern Sami history where the Sami are the historical actors behind the cultural and political development, the exhibition marked a clear break from previous exhibitions where the Sami were portrayed as timeless and exotic and often reduced down to some concentrated cultural essence (Mathisen 2004, Olsen 1999).

#### COMPARISON: DIFFERENT PASTS, DIFFERENT OBJECTS

The exhibitions *Sápmi* and *Latjo-Drom* were produced in approximately the same period and they both present ethnic minorities within the same nation state. The curators found themselves in different ethnopolitical contexts and different exhibiting traditions, but both museums had to deal with the question of what role museums should play in ethnopolitical processes. Despite the similarities, the result was two different museological expressions, and I would like to point out two central differences, namely the exhibitions relationship to time and to objects.

In *Sápmi* the narrative is built on historical chronology, which leads the dimension of time to become visible in the exhibition. By moving from one room to the next, one is also moving forward in time. In *Latjo-Drom* on the other hand, the thematic structure and the lack of references to any specific points in time causes time to become invisible in the exhibition. This also leads to an essentialist portrayal of the Romani people, where specific cultural elements such as travelling, music and family structure appear as an unchangeable essence in Romani identity. This might be considered as a form of strategic essentialism, where the idea of a Romani essence was useful to separate the group from the majority and to justify their status as a national minority (Olsen 2001). In *Sápmi*, there is no Sami essence on display. This can be explained by the post-colonial critique of the former ethnographic exhibitions, where indigenous peoples were portrayed in essentialist terms.

The exhibitions have also had different principles for what objects should be collected, how they should be exhibited and how they should be organised in relation to each other. In *Sápmi* it was the historical narrative that

46 decided which objects were to be exhibited and what value they had. In *Latjo-Drom* the objects had to be considered as typical or valuable to the Romani culture, and the museum conducted a traditional collecting of cultural heritage. An important reason for this difference can be traced to the curators' perspective on the relationship between objects and culture. The curators behind *Sápmi* renounced the idea that culture can be materialised through objects and then exhibited in museums. They aimed at presenting culture and ethnicity as social interaction and as a process undergoing constant change (Eidheim *et al.* 2002:134). This was quite different at Glomdal Museum, where the idea that objects can represent culture still persisted, and where the collecting done by the museum was about saving historical cultures from disappearing. Through the production of *Latjo-Drom*, the different objects that were collected came to constitute a material cultural heritage for the Romani people, something that previously had not existed for this group. In regard to the Sami, this material cultural heritage already existed at different Sami museum and at Tromsø University Museum.

While the museums ended up exhibiting the minorities' history in quite different ways, they faced some similar issues. When a museum turns towards exhibiting the history of ethnic minorities, questions of self-representation and which voices are heard in the exhibition become an highlighted issue. The two museums had different approaches in this respect. At Glomdal Museum the idea of minority participation became an important concept and a reference group tried to implement this by hiring staff with a Romani identity, and by attempting to integrate the Romani community in the work leading up to the exhibition (Møystad 2009). At Tromsø University Museum the production was kept internal, and the narrative was created

by academics possessing experience with research on Sami issues (Eidheim *et al.* 2002). At both museums the notion that an exhibition can be a tool for empowering the minority and giving them a voice in a public discourse, was an important ideal that guided their work. But as seen in this analysis, there was little concern for which groups and interests were empowered within the minority. In relatively small ethnic communities, the ability to form the image of the group in a museum exhibition would also have a considerable impact within the minority.

The analysis and comparison of the two exhibitions seems to indicate something interesting about the development in the museums at the turn of the twenty-first century. The notion that museums should be agents for social change influenced museums from different traditions in this period, but it seems that there was no general consensus on how that notion should be carried out. Even though these exhibitions were created in the same period, both the production processes and the museological expressions turned out to become quite different. This seems to indicate that when a museum turns towards becoming agent for previously silenced minority groups, the ethnopolitical context surrounding these groups becomes central in shaping the content and exhibiting techniques that are applied to the exhibition.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1. In this article the term museology is not only referring to the study of museums, but also covering the practices and theories within the museum institutions. See Desvallées & Mairesse 2010.
2. Both the Sami and the Romani in Norway are minorities within the same nation state and

therefore have to position themselves in regard to the same majority society and the same central government. They can both be described as ethnic minorities, as I do in this article, but with dissimilar minority status: the Sami as an indigenous people and the Romani as a national minority, each with different rights, based on different international conventions. It is worth noticing that the minority policy towards the Sami varies in the Nordic countries: in Finland and Sweden they hold the double position as both an indigenous people and a national minority.

3. The organisation was known as Romanifolkets Landsforening until it changed its name in 2005.
4. Glomdalsmuseet, *Årsmelding Romaniavdelingen 2004*, 20 Februar 2005.
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