Sámi Archaeology and Postcolonial Theory—An Introduction

Marte Spangen, Anna-Kaisa Salmi, and Tiina Äikäs

Abstract. While researchers within Sámi archaeology have dealt with issues closely related to postcolonial theory and critique since the 1970s onwards, this has rarely been done with explicit mention or coherent use of this theoretical complex. This somewhat paradoxical situation was addressed in a session at the 14th conference of the Nordic Theoretical Archaeology Group at Stockholm University in April 2014, an initiative that eventually resulted in the present collection of articles. In this introduction we briefly present the historiographical and discursive background for the debates that are outlined in the following contributions.

Sámi Archaeology

The first six articles of this issue of *Arctic Anthropology* are devoted to Sámi archaeology and postcolonial theory. In this introduction, we will briefly present these concepts and their contexts, as well as the reason for initiating a debate about their interrelation. A certain amount of background knowledge may be necessary to understand the following texts, which is why we start the introduction by establishing some basic facts: The Sámi are indigenous people of northern Fennoscandia. They are stereotypically associated with reindeer herding, but Sámi culture and lifestyle have varied greatly both geographically and chronologically. Historically, Sámi subsistence strategies were based foremost on fishing and hunting, sometimes in combination with agriculture, animal husbandry, and small-scale reindeer herding. Large-scale reindeer herding for meat production is a relatively recent phenomenon

and is only performed by some Sámi. The Sámi of today are highly integrated into the societies of the nation states they live in, and, at least in the Nordic countries, they have relatively high levels of education, employment, and living standard, especially compared to many other indigenous populations in the world. However, there are still important controversies concerning general acceptance of Sámi identity and cultural expressions, as well as aspects such as rights to self-determination and land use. The controversies have their historical background in centuries of active suppression of Sámi identities and cultural expressions by nation states and majority populations. The repressive and colonizing strategies have changed over time, and they included intensive and partly coercive Christianization; taxation and integration into political and judicial systems; industrialization of Sámi areas; and forced assimilation (e.g., Hansen 2011; Lehtola 2015; Ojala 2009; Rydving 1995). The attitudes towards the presence of a

Marte Spangen, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies, Stockholm University,
Wallenberglaboratoriet, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden; marte.spangen@ark.su.se

Anna-Kaisa Salmi, Department of Anthropology, F48 Edward Wright Building,
University of Aberdeen, AB24 3QY Aberdeen, UK; asalmi@abdn.ac.uk

Tiina Äikäs, Archaeology, P.O. Box 1000, FI-90014 University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland; tiina.aikas@oulu.fi

Sámi minority identity in Fennoscandia have also fluctuated. Depending on the political climate and academic discourse of the given time, archaeological and other discussions about Sámi origins and status have included views that they were the original Stone Age inhabitants of Scandinavia, an understanding that they were immigrants that came from the east in more recent times, and a present academic debate about the emergence of Sámi ethnicity rather than the origins of the Sámi group in essentialist terms (Hansen and Olsen 2014:9–39). According to the last-mentioned approach, it has been argued that persistent exchange and trade contacts with neighboring (farming) groups were instrumental for the initial emergence of this ethnic identity sometime in the Early Iron Age, while the foundation for a sense of cultural unity may be traced further back in time (e.g. Hansen and Olsen 2014:28–29; Jørgensen and Olsen 1988; Odner 1983).

The attitudes towards the future of a Sámi minority culture and identity have also varied, but in Norway and Sweden the articulated government policies from the mid-1800s until quite recently were mainly to assimilate the Sámi population into the majority cultures, following evolutionist and Social Darwinist ideas that this would be for their own good because the “less developed” Sámi culture would not be able to survive in a new modern, industrialized world (Hansen and Olsen 2014:328; Minde 2005; Ojala 2009:94). The nation states have chosen somewhat different strategies to deal with this minority issue, also depending on the economy of the regional Sámi groups. In Sweden, reindeer herders in the 20th century were actively encouraged to retain their traditional housing, clothing, and nomadic life style (the “lapp¹ shall be lapp” policy), while Sámi with less diagnostic lifestyles, in the majority population’s view, such as Sámi with other economic subsistence strategies, were subjected to intensive assimilation policies (Ojala 2009:94). In Norway, the country with the largest Sámi population, assimilation has been a pronounced government strategy in the 20th century, including for instance, a ban on Sámi language in schools and demands for ethnic identification through Norwegian language and surnames to buy land. The oppression included strong negative stereotypes relating to the Sámi language, clothing, housing, life style, physical appearance, and alleged mentality. In Finland, the strategies have been less overt (see below and Lehtola, this issue), and in the 1970s Finland could be considered a frontrunner in Sámi issues. Since then there has, nevertheless, been opposition to Sámi self-determination, demonstrated by the fact that Finland has still not ratified the ILO convention No. 169 about indigenous and tribal peoples’ rights. At the same time many inhabitants

of Finnish Lapland have applied to be accepted as Sámi in order to gain the rights of Indigenous peoples (Lehtola 2015). The Sámi of Russia have not been systematically assimilated in terms of cultural traits but have experienced immense pressure due to colonization, Christianization, deportations, and forced collectivization (Ojala 2009:205–208).

Sámi organizations and individuals worked to enhance Sámi rights throughout the 20th century (Zachariassen 2012), but the Alta conflict in northern Norway in the late 1970s and early 1980s was a turning point. The originally environmentally grounded protest against building a dam for hydroelectric power in an important reindeer-herding area became an eye-opener for the Norwegian majority concerning Sámi rights or the lack of such. As a consequence, there was a newfound sympathy for both Sámi political issues and for Sámi culture in general. Consequently, Sámi identity, culture, and language has been slowly restored to more internal and external acceptance from the 1970s onwards. Nevertheless, many who could have identified as Sámi if they wanted to are still reluctant to admit to any such ancestry.

This revival encouraged a critical look at research on Sámi issues, which in the 19th and 20th centuries was primarily performed within ethnography because the Sámi were seen as a static “nature people” without history (Hansen and Olsen 2014:2–4). For instance, archaeologists Audhild Schanche and Bjørnar Olsen pointed out that the archaeology of northern Norway had been studied with no regard to Sámi pasts at all, although it was generally accepted knowledge that two cultural or ethnic groups had inhabited the area at least since the Iron Age (Schanche and Olsen 1983). At the then-recently founded and radical University of Tromsø, Sámi issues were emphasized in many subjects, including history and archaeology. The coining of terms such as “Sámi history” and “Sámi archaeology” exposed and challenged the hegemony of research on what was called “Norse” or “Norwegian” issues and aimed to “deneutralize” those terms to create room for the overdue study of other pasts (Hansen and Olsen 2014:6).

The term Sámi archaeology is still controversial in some research environments, as it is sometimes understood to implicate an *a priori* understanding of a certain past as decisively Sámi, and because Sámi archaeology is frequently perceived as more political than “other” archaeology. In our opinion, the term is certainly part of a decolonizing process of, firstly, admitting the Sámi a past that may be studied through archaeology and, secondly, restructuring the profoundly nationalistic and colonial project of archaeology to encompass a postcolonial world view that also includes the input and concerns of the Sámi, both professionals and nonexperts. This does not mean

that these political aims are always prominent and articulated issues in all studies of Sámi pasts, but they are part of the discourse, and they undoubtedly resonate with a wider postcolonial critique. In the present context, we find “Sámi archaeology” to be a useful general term for archaeological research that concerns Sámi pasts or the Sámi population in particular, though not referring exclusively to research on objects and structures specifically or singularly related to the Sámi: the actions of and relations to non-Sámi groups and individuals over time, and indeed any activity in areas of Sámi use and habitation, are of course also part of the Sámi pasts (Olsen 2004).

Postcolonial Theory in Archaeology

From its first development within English literature as a new theoretical framework to “read” colonial societies in the postcolonial situation of the 1970s (e.g., Said 1978), postcolonial studies is now an integrated subject in at least the English-speaking parts of the academic world (Loomba 2005). While initial postcolonial theory was focused on the recently emancipated colonies of Europe and heavily influenced by Michel Foucault and his studies of power relations, postcolonial studies currently encompass a broad range of theories and radical critique not only relevant to colonial encounters in the more traditional meaning, but to a constructivist understanding of social identities and societies in general and, in particular, to the deconstruction of the hegemony of certain voices in written history. A main purpose is to identify and explore alternative histories, including that of the voiceless “subaltern” (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1988; see also Källén, this issue).

On the one hand, surprisingly, archaeology and material evidence have rarely been discussed in postcolonial studies, even if it is a source material that should be especially suited to give a voice to those who have left no trace in written records. On the other hand, the access to minority histories has been discussed at length within feminist and indigenous approaches in archaeology but only recently within a more explicit postcolonial theoretical framework. Instead, postcolonial theory was first integrated in the archaeology of colonial encounters of the Roman Empire, concerning the “Romanization” of the colonized peoples and the frontier situation of colonial encounters between Native Americans and Europeans in North America. Postcolonial theory has also been used in critical studies of the close relationship between the development of archaeological practice and theory and the colonial process between 1850 and 1950 (cf. van Dommelen 2011). Indigenous archaeology has been established much as a counterbalance to this “colonial archaeology.” One methodological

response to greater awareness of postcolonial critique has been a trend of “cooperation,” where archaeologists attempt to include local communities in their projects to ensure their interests are being looked after. These attempts have, nevertheless, been criticized for rather reproducing colonial ideas by suggesting that local populations are not able to manage their own heritage and history properly, according to our western preconceptions, and to obscure the continuous hegemony of western scholars (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2010). Despite these uses of postcolonial theory and critique in archaeology, it is only quite recently that there have been more specific attempts to contextualize postcolonial theory when looking at archaeological material (van Dommelen 2011).

Sámi Archaeology and Postcolonial Theory

Sámi archaeology is concerned with all the above-mentioned issues, in terms of questions about the dynamics of past colonization of the Sámi and of the Sámi areas, questions about the dynamics of the past and present archaeological practices in Sámi contexts, and questions relating to specific archaeological materials. Indeed, the term and practice of Sámi archaeology itself may be seen as an example of postcolonial critique. Hence, it could be argued that Sámi archaeology has dealt with matters closely related to postcolonial theory and critique from the 1970s onwards, and archaeologists working with Sámi pasts have used terms coined within this tradition, such as “hybridity” and “creolization” (Bhabha 1994), but often without referring to the explicit postcolonial theoretical framework. This can be problematic because the terms have a somewhat different use and meaning within the postcolonial theoretical context than in everyday use, which can easily result in misunderstandings.

At the 14th Nordic Theoretical Archaeology Group conference (Nordic TAG), hosted by the Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies at Stockholm University in April 2014, we wanted to highlight this issue by proposing the session “Sámi archaeology and postcolonial theory.”² Our aim was not necessarily to advocate more use of postcolonial theory in Sámi archaeology but rather to discuss if and how it is already used today, what a more explicit use of this theoretical complex may contribute to our understanding of Sámi pasts and our practice of Sámi archaeology, our practice of Sámi archaeology, and, perhaps as much, what it cannot contribute. In line with the overall conference theme “Archaeology as a source of theory,” we also wished to explore if Sámi archaeology can contribute to new theoretical developments.

The session included extensive debates about the theoretical background, terminology, substantivist and constructivist understandings of identity, stereotyping, indigenous methodology, community archaeology, and more. This issue of *Arctic Anthropology* is a welcome opportunity to make some of the discussions available to a broader audience, while also widening the scope to some issues and approaches that were less prominent in the session debate. The present contributions are based on papers prepared for the session. They touch upon a range of current issues in Sámi archaeology and include various theoretical approaches, which should make the debates relevant even to other research areas. The contributions elucidate the complexity of Sámi history and archaeology, in terms of national and regional differences, as well as the entanglement of historical trajectories and the Sámi responses to colonial processes with present research and politics.

For example, while the majority population in Norway became more aware of Sámi history and issues during the late 1970s and 1980s, primarily due to the Alta conflict, Sweden is experiencing a similar conflict concerning land use and industrial development today. In their article, Jonas Nordin and Carl-Gösta Ojala emphasize the importance of understanding the long historical roots of the colonialist activity in northern Sweden in order to tackle current controversies about mining enterprises in Sámi areas. They suggest an archaeology of the Early Modern colonial landscape and mining industry would enhance the understanding of the situation today. The current debates are entangled with a range of issues that mirror the relationship between the Sámi and Swedish State authority in Early Modern times and today. Nordin and Ojala present some important examples where Sámi archaeology and present cultural rights are intertwined, and they discuss the potentials of postcolonial critique and indigenous archaeology in Sámi contexts.

Finland has had a less overt colonizing policy towards the Sámi and the Sámi areas, and it has even been argued that the word and concept “colonialism” is not applicable to the situation in Finland at all. Veli-Pekka Lehtola devotes his article to discuss the more subtle implementation of colonial pressure on Sámi culture, language, and land use to show the relevance of a postcolonial approach to Sámi history even in Finland.

Bryan C. Hood goes into detail about how the Early Modern colonial encounter played out between the Sámi and other parties in the north, with a discussion about the possibilities and limits of postcolonial theory (as opposed to postcolonial critique) concerning this little-researched thematic within archaeology. Contrary to the recent focus on positive Sámi agency and symmetrical relations, he finds it essential to acknowledge and

understand the power asymmetry in Early Modern trade and taxation. He suggests an interesting eclectic theoretical framework to comprehend the occurrence and maintenance of Sámi repression, as well as the Sámi household responses. This approach is the basis of two case studies from inner Finnmark in today’s northern Norway, mainly based on 16th-century tax records.

Another intriguing case study is presented by Ingela Bergman and Greger Hörnberg, who demonstrate how the centuries-long history of stereotyping and homogenizing the Sámi as mobile pastoralists of an uncultivated landscape, as opposed to the civilized Swedish or Nordic majority population and their cultivated and settled country, is still heavily entrenched in the questions and answers of current research, leading researchers to disregard the early evidence of cereal cultivation in Sámi contexts.

The article by David Loeffler gives another interesting example of how a fixed understanding of Sámi pasts may have obscured the duration and geographical extent of Sámi habitation, land use, and religion in Sweden. His starting point is the recent registration of certain curious stone circles, which he interprets as Sámi ritual sites built in a time of intense religious and cultural suppression. While a general interpretation of stone circles as Sámi offering sites has been questioned (Spangenberg 2013), Loeffler also presents several other historical, ethnographic, etymological, and archaeological data that may indicate a Sámi presence in the woodlands of the southern parts of the county of Västernorrland.

Loeffler’s article exemplifies how difficult it is to discuss ethnic affiliation of specific archaeological material and other evidence of the past without presuming various features to be static lasting ethnic markers or cultural traits. According to a constructivist approach, whether explicitly based on postcolonial theory or not, the complexity of the use, users, and chronology of cultural environments should not be underestimated. However, precisely more archaeological investigation is one of the few ways to ensure more detailed knowledge about specific historical situations. Historians have regretted the lack of sources that reflect the contemporary Sámi views on the colonial contexts, and archaeology is particularly suited to expose these lacking “subaltern” voices.

All the authors emphasize the potential contribution of archaeology, but while Bergman and Hörnsand and Loeffler treat defined archaeological materials, the other articles focus on the colonial encounters with extensive use of historical sources. More than anything, this is symptomatic of the current state of archaeological exploration of the time periods, geographical areas, and themes they discuss. The limited investigations in the northern parts of Fennoscandia and the rather

recent acknowledgement of Sámi pasts as a relevant subject for archaeology mean that only fragments of the possible sources of knowledge have been researched so far. Future studies are likely to expand, but also transform, our current understandings. As the articles indicate, archaeology is instrumental to revealing and contradicting past and present stereotypes, mapping colonizing strategies towards the Sámi, and investigating what actual practices these strategies have entailed and still entail, both on the part of the ruling majority and in terms of group and individual responses from the Sámi. As commented by our discussant Anna Källén in her article, postcolonial theory and critique are no doubt useful in these contexts as established theoretical frameworks that correspond with the current strands in Sámi archaeology. The approach may help to identify relevant future research questions and to discuss these with reference to and inspired by a much broader debate on similar issues worldwide. Hence, a more coherent use of postcolonial theory and terminology may be one way for Sámi archaeology to develop further into a yet more reflective, accessible, and consequential research field.

Endnotes

1. “Lapp” is an obsolete derogative exonym for the Sámi.
2. See session program at <http://www.archaeology.su.se/english/about-us/events/conferences/xiv-nordic-tag-2014/sessions/s%C3%A1mi-archaeology-and-postcolonial-theory-1.154934>.

References Cited

- Bhabha, Homi
1994 *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Gonzalez-Ruibal, Alfredo
2010 Colonialism and European archaeology. In *Handbook of Postcolonial Archaeology*. Jane Lydon and Uzma Rizvi, eds. Pp. 37–47. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Hansen, Lars Ivar
2011 Norwegian, Swedish and Russian “Tax Lands” in the North. In *Taxes, Tributes and Tributary Lands in the Making of Scandinavian Kingdoms in the Middle Ages*, vol. 2. Steinar Imsen, ed. Pp. 295–330. Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press.
- Hansen, Lars Ivar and Bjørnar Olsen
2014 *Hunters in Transition. An Outline of Early Sámi History*. Leiden: Brill.
- Jørgensen, Roger and Bjørnar Olsen
1988 *Asbestkeramiske grupper i Nord-Norge*. Tromsø, vol.13. Tromsø: University i Tromsø, Institutt for museumsvirksomhet.
- Lehtola, Veli-Pekka
2015 *Saamelaiskiista—sortaako Suomi alkuperäiskansansa*. Helsinki: Into-kustannus.
- Loomba, Ania
2005 *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Minde, Henry
2005 Fornorskinga av samene—hvorfor, hvordan og hvilke følger? In *Sámi skuvlahistorjá 1*. Svein Lund, Elfrid Boine and Siri Broch Johansen, eds. Kárášjohka: Davvi Girji.
- Odner, Knut
1983 Finner og terfinner. Etniske prosesser i det nordlige Fenno-Skandinavia. Oslo Occasional Papers in Social Anthropology, vol. 9. Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo.
- Ojala, Carl-Gösta
2009 Sámi Prehistories: The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in Northernmost Europe. Occasional Papers in Archaeology, 47. Uppsala: Societas Archaeologica Upsaliensis.
- Olsen, Bjørnar
2004 Hva er samisk forhistorie? In *Samisk forhistorie. Rapport fra konferanse i Lakselv 5.–6. September 2002*. Várjjat Sámi Musea Čállosat, 1. Mia Krogh and Kjersti Schanche, eds. Varangerbotn: Varanger Sámi Museum.
- Rydving, Håkan
1995 The End of Drum-Time. Religious Change among the Lule Saami, 1670s–1740s. *Historia Religionum*, 12. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Said, Edward W.
1978 *Orientalism*. London: Routledge.
- Schanche, Audhild and Bjørnar Olsen
1983 Var de alle nordmenn? En etnopolitisk kritikk av norsk arkeologi. In *Kontaktstensil*, 22–23. Tora Hultgren, ed. Pp. 115–147. Tromsø: University of Tromsø.
- Spangenberg, Marte
2013 ‘It Could Be One Thing or Another’—On the Construction of an Archaeological Category. *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* XXX:67–80.
- Spivak, Gayatri C.
1998 Can the Subaltern Speak? In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. Pp. 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- van Dommelen, Peter
2011 Postcolonial Archaeologies between Discourse and Practice. *World Archaeology* 43(1):1–6.
- Zachariassen, Ketil
2012 Samiske nasjonale strategier. Samepolitikk og nasjonsbygging 1900–1940: Isak Saba, Anders Larsen og Per Fokstad. Kárášjohka: ČáliliidLágádus.