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The Control of the Cultural Borders between the Finns and the Skolt Sami

From Ambivalence to Respect for the
Border

ABSTRACT In this article, the control and drawing up of the cultural borders between the Finns and the Skolt Sami are studied. Before the Second World War, as illustrated in the travel book by Sakari Pälsi, the writer as well as the whole state of Finland tried to come to terms with the new “colony” and the new exotic “Other,” the Skolt Sami, within the Finnish boundaries. This led to ambivalent relations with both the new citizens of Finland and with the drawing up and control of borders. This was especially the case in crossing the cultural border, where no respect was shown to the guardians of the border, even though this role was paternalistically awarded to them. By the time of the release of the main work by Karl Nickul, the author himself and the state of Finland had come to terms with their “colonial” past. The “good state” was condemned by Nickul, ambivalence was absent and Nickul produced a true post-colonial piece, where the view emanates from the other side of the border, thus completing his personal quest to restore the Skolt Sami agency in research.

KEYWORDS cultural borders, Finns, Skolt Sami, cultural encounter, control of the border, Sakari Pälsi, Karl Nickul

Introduction

I shall discuss the control of the cultural borders in the encounter between Finns and the Skolt Sami during the period of Finnish rule in Petsamo from 1920 to 1944 and after. The borders negotiated by two Finnish scholars, Sakari Pälsi (1882–1965) and Karl Nickul (1900–1980), are studied. I shall concentrate on their negotiations concerning the border, as well as on the ambivalence found in the text by Pälsi and its disappearance in the text by Nickul.

The border has both a textual and a spatial dimension. The borders are drawn in texts through representations between “us” and “them” (Löytty 2005: 8; Newman 2006: 6), but borders have a socially constitutive dimension as well. Behind each border lies a symbolic relation, of which the border is a spatial indication. Not the border in itself, but the cultural and social juxtaposition creates the difference (Simmel [1903] 1997: 141–143). The border is a social relation, a lived experience, an identity and subjectivity. Avtar Brah asks how borders are created, and how they are controlled: who is kept outside, and why (Brah 2007: 89–90)? In a Finnish context one may also ask who is permitted to enter, and under what conditions?

In the most elementary sense, ambivalence means that one can adopt a different approach to, or hold a contradictory opinion about certain phenomena (Kuortti 2007: 19). Homi K. Bhabha writes about the deep-seated uncertainty of the aims, premises and results of the colonial process, where the whole colonial discourse is reduced to the colonial act of strengthening the differences and the national identity, by classifying the subjugated as lower and thus trying to control them. He uses the term ambivalence of the way in which the colonizer unconsciously or consciously acknowledges the similarity between the colonizer and the colonized, which creates tensions within the discourses and opens up the possibility of a more active role for the colonized (Bhabha [1987] 2007: 122–123, 131; Huddart 2007: 65–66). I connect the term *ambivalence* with the discussion concerning the control of the borders by asking whether the cultural borders drawn were respected or whether they were crossed ambivalently, without negotiation. What role was given to the Skolt Sami concerning this control, and was this role respected? More generally, I shall provide a short overview of representations of the Skolt Sami culture when the ethnic and cultural borders were drawn, and how these changed in Finland after the Second World War. I am also going to contextualize the texts to the political discourses of the era.

In this article I make use of border theories presented by the above-mentioned post-colonial theorists. There exists a need to justify their use, due to the marginality of post-colonial perspectives and discussions in Finnish academic and political discourses. The aim is not to write a programmatic,

uncritical post-colonial narrative of this encounter—criticized by Bhabha, for example, as over-simplifying, and missing the opportunity to look into the cultural interaction and colonized agency—but to shed alternative light onto the process (Brah 2007: 81–82, 99; Huddart 2007: 62–63; Kuortti 2007: 14). In addition, the substance of the sources (ambivalence) has guided the choice of theories. I claim that the term is usable in a Finnish context as well, since at the time of writing of Pälssi's work *Petsamoon kuin ulkomaille* (1931), Finland was in the midst of numerous identity discussions. One of these concerned whether Finland was an anti-imperialist state and how this fitted in with the expansionist plans of the state (Airaksinen 2008: passim; Vahtola 1997: 36, 57, 80–81). In Petsamo, a rare colonial moment occurred in a Finnish context, in the encounter with the Skolt Sami, the new citizens of Finland.

In addition, Finland has been characterized as a good example of a unified nation created and constructed in literature. There was a literary project of distinguishing oneself from the Swedish and the Russians, which was a more dominant one than the identity politics that reflected the Finnish against their “weaker brother,” the Sami. The Skolt Sami had a special role in the process of writing a nation, since they were among the Finno-Ugrian people who were actually annexed to the Finnish realm through the expansive policies of the young state. This process, not free of racist/colonialist traits, found several textual expressions (Hatavara 2008: 315, 319–320; Lehtola 2005: 49–54, 58; Nyysönen 2008: 13–27).

The Ethnic Encounter between the Finns and the Skolt Sami

Finnish policies concerning the Skolt Sami are, in their multiplicity, difficult to define—they resulted in an odd mixture of integration, discrimination and highly progressive segregation policy. Already at the time of annexation, the two *siidas*¹ closest to the Finnish settlement, Petsamo and Paatsjoki, were in a process of disintegration, which was escalated by modernization. For the *siida* protected by isolation that practised a semi-autonomous subsistence economy, Suenjel/Suonikylä, there existed segregation, or a “protection” plan, initiated by the Skolt Sami and advocated by Karl Nickul. The war halted this plan, which would have resulted in an area of cultural protection. The most obvious trait, the Finnicization of the region, entertained a curiously selective grip on the Skolt Sami. The integration was not total, which may be partly credited to the racial and discriminating attitudes of the Finnish officials and partly to the defects of the modernization process itself. In the short period of the Finnish rule in Petsamo,

the modernization concerning the infrastructure and welfare services was never finished. There were, for example, defects in access to the Finnish elementary school system and to the itinerant teacher system. Still, the subsistence of the two *siidas* was destroyed in the process, as the Skolt Sami found their access to their traditional fisheries reduced. The Skolt Sami had to seek other, very often occasional sources of employment/subsistence (Lehtola 1999a: 149–153; Nyssönen 2006: 201–205; Peltö 1962: 30).

In travel literature, Petsamo was represented as finding itself on the borderline between wilderness and civilization, as the Finns entered the “new continent” with the modernization of the region in mind. It was standard practice to write simultaneously about wild, untouched nature and express firm belief in modernization and progress, and to depict Petsamo as an industrialized and modern part of Finland. This progress was identified and ethnicized to the Finnish realm in multicultural Petsamo. The multiculturalism of the region was a problem for many Finnish writers, who aimed to construct a monolingual and “mononational” Petsamo. The Finnish settlers were in the midst of a heroic struggle against the “chaos,” which was linked to the Russian people and the Skolt Sami living in the region (Lehtola 1999b: 519–522).

The experiences with and depictions of the Skolt Sami were in most cases negative and superficial. In Finnish travel literature, the Skolt Sami were typically represented as “known from their witchcraft and yoik” and one was able to meet them in the “original condition” (Lehtola 1999b: 517). The Skolt Sami were encapsulated deeper within primordialized and exoticized “otherness” than, for example, other Sami groups encountered within the Finnish borders. At worst, the Skolt Sami were represented as lazy, stupid and primitive, and their way of life as suffering from defects and being worse than the Finnish. The image of a work-shy reindeer thief was a constant. The Skolt Sami were racialized to the Russian and communist spheres, the great enemy of Finland before the Second World War. The religious border deepened the national and cultural one: the Skolt Sami practised the Orthodox faith, which was categorized as lower than the Lutheran faith practised by the majority of Finns (Lehtola 2005: 51–53, 57–58).

Pälsi Travels Abroad without Leaving Finland

Sakari Pälsi was an archaeologist, ethnographer, explorer and author who worked at the National Museum of Finland (*Biografiakeskus*). The title of his travel book, *Petsamoon kuin ulkomaille*, is difficult to translate, but literally it means “Going to Petsamo as if it was abroad.” Despite this, the book is a landmark of Finnish ambivalence in the encounter with the region and its peoples. I shall discuss briefly the borders crossed in Pälsi’s work, before going into the ambivalence concerning the borders.

In travelling from the centre to the periphery one has to cross a mental border, very often from civilization to the wilderness. Pälssi travelled with his wife from Helsinki to the Arctic Ocean and back. The first border that Pälssi crossed was a natural border, as he travelled from “vilja-Suomi” (‘grain-Finland’) to the more barren, treeless landscapes of Lapland, *Terra Ultima* in a Finnish context, and on to Petsamo, thus demonstrating the dissemination of the borders, how they are spread along the journey and how their crossing is partially disconnected from geography and place (Schimanski 2008: 20). Pälssi’s work is a typical travel book in its way of reflecting mental power relations: Pälssi indeed travels from the centre to “abroad” and to the mystic, non-agrarian and primitive periphery (Varpio 2005: 31, 33, 38). The book ends with a depiction of the grain-fields of Southern Finland. This is intended to mark the difference in the national hierarchies. Finland was at this time still an agrarian nation, where the free peasant living and owning his land in the countryside represented the highest ideal of the Finnish nation and a backbone of society, which would secure the security of the young nation arising from the Civil War of 1918. Pälssi was only capable of perceiving the Finnish as being higher than the Skolt Sami, with their diverse and non-agrarian subsistence economy (Haapala 1997: 77; Meinander 2006: 166–167; Pälssi 1931: 10, 15–16, 29).

Odour constitutes a border as well. The hygienic discourse was a programmatic part of imperialism in many colonies of this period. It was both a physical and mental cleansing process, as well as “a push upwards” from primitiveness higher up in Western parameters and hierarchies. The aim of individualizing the colonial subjects from the primitive slavery of their surroundings was sometimes used as an argument (Adams 1995: 101–102, 112–113, 132–133; Thuesen 2007: 118, 128). This discourse is traceable in Pälssi’s writing and he starts his characterizations of the people he meets with observations on that person’s hygiene. One almost insurmountable border is encountered when visiting a home of two Skolt Sami. In Skolt Sami subsistence, fishing very often constitutes the main source of nutrition and the coffee served to the travellers in this occasion, reeking of fish, constitutes a border that the travellers manage to cross only with great effort and difficulty, reported in a humorous manner to the reader (Pälssi 1931: 40, 44–45, 72).

Ambivalence is very concretely present from the beginning of the book and concerns the nature of the region as a colony and Finland as a colonial state. Pälssi rejoices the trip “to abroad,” which at the same time is a trip “to our property,” to “the great colony of Finnish hopes and dreams.” He depicts Petsamo as friendly and hospitable, but simultaneously as a tough and frightening place. The ambivalence is also present in the way the “Lapps” encountered in Inari before entering Petsamo are represented:

they are lower in status, but on many occasions Pälsi thanks them for their tidiness and for maintaining their patriotic spirit, whilst adopting some marks of “civilization”. This ambivalence is deepest in the encounter with the Lappish gentleman, Juhani Jomppanen, an intelligent, cultivated, well-travelled gentleman who planned to nominate himself as the next witch in Sodankylä, since he possessed enough strength of character to replace the old, retiring witch; this is presented with only a slight sense of irony. Finally, in Petsamo, the view of the Skolt Sami is a racializing view of those with lower status, but as inhabitants of the wilderness the Skolt Sami also appear as a tough and persevering people, since in Finnish imagery the people of the wilderness were idealized for surviving in scarce and hard conditions and were sometimes ranked higher than the people living an easy life in the south. For the same reason, but to a greater extent, this also applies to the Finnish settlers who have established a house in Petsamo and who rank highest in Pälsi’s hierarchies. According to Pälsi, the Skolt Sami were starving as a consequence of not practicing an agrarian subsistence and way of life (Pälsi 1931: 7–9, 11–12, 18–19, 22–24, 27).

Southern Finland and the modernization introduced from the south are also represented in an ambivalent manner. People from the south had poorer qualities in surviving the Arctic environment, but Finnish modernization was already progressing in Petsamo, could not be stopped and was represented as a blessing to the region and to the people living there, including “the native, primitive nomads [...] if they are fit to do that.” On the other hand, the new impulses had taken away the “original force” of the Skolt Sami culture (Pälsi 1931: 53–54); this was a typical strategy in Finnish Petsamo literature, distinguishing between the authentic, “unspoiled” Suenjel-Sami and the “spoiled,” Finnicized Skolt Sami by the road.

Pälsi creates a representation of the Skolt Sami as the guardians of the cultural border, as the guardians of the “secrets” of the Skolt Sami culture. The ambivalence is most obvious here as Pälsi shows no respect for either the border or its guardians, but uses numerous Skolt Sami on his journey as guides and informants, lets himself be guided to the sacred places and excavates archaeological items to be collected in the museums down south in a true colonial manner. Nor is he distracted on another occasion by what he calls “Lapp hags” protesting in the background when they mistakenly believe he is in the process of opening a Skolt Sami grave. If Pälsi’s ambivalence worked on another occasions to restore the Skolt Sami agency, in his archaeological mission it achieved the contrary and the border was crossed despite protests (Pälsi 1931: 52–55, 70–72). The border was more unconditional/absolute against Norway than against the Skolt Sami, the new citizens of Finland. The problem with Norwegians is a constant theme in

the literature of the era (Nyyssönen 2008: 45–47). The negativity originated from known facts during this period: the poor handling of minorities of Finnish or Sami extraction in Norway, or the Norwegian doubts expressed about the minorities mentioned being a security threat, which Pälsi ridiculed. This deeper border, being official and protected by national and international legislation, is marked in the book by a scene where the travellers stop to celebrate and honour the first encountered boundary marker at the Finnish-Norwegian border, while the crossing of the old border to Petsamo, between Finland and what was then Russia is not mentioned at all (Pälsi 1931: 26, 30–31, 76–77).

Pälsi and his wife had to rely on the local people as guides and informants, and as cultural interpreters. Thus, for Pälsi, the cultural border was also a meeting-point, a bridge (Newman 2006: 8; Schimanski 2008: 31–32), which the Skolt Sami both guarded and could cross, but under Finnish premises. Pälsi did not merely meet the Skolt Sami at the border, in order to let himself be guided to their cultural treasures: he allowed the Skolt Sami to be integrated into the Finnish nation through his excavations, integrating them into the Finnish past. Finding themselves at this actual border (Lehtola 1999a: 153), the Skolt Sami intention or strategy has been described as cautious and protective of their culture.

Pälsi's work is an example of what Avtar Brah and Einar Niemi have written about: the complexity of the ethnic encounter, which is never a purely colonial one between the dominant and the subjugated. There may be purely numerical mismatches, where the dominant majority might not find itself in the numerical majority or (as in the case of Pälsi) discursive mismatches of representation, where the object of the colonial gaze finds itself in numerous subject positions (Brah 2007: 81; Niemi 2004: 92–93, 100–101, 116–117).

Nickul Writes Back from the Other Side of the Border

If Pälsi's text is a sign of Finnish ambivalence, this attitude and the lack of respect for the cultural border had disappeared in the text by Karl Nickul on the Skolt Sami published after the Second World War. The whole of Finland had new borders, and new borders were now being drawn in the political sphere, signifying a new political culture and new political orientation. International politics had changed drastically in the wake of the war and suddenly Finland had to establish friendly relations with the Soviet Union. The aims of the "new friend" were (and still are) unknown, but the Finnish political leadership lived under the impression that Finland was under threat. The friendship policy was undertaken in order to tackle this threat (Pernaa 2005: 177). This meant new limitations on what appeared to be democratic

in the new Soviet-friendly political constellation and, following the defeat of Hitler, diminishing possibilities of expressing hierarchies based on racial differences and biology. This process was slow (Nyssönen 2007: 76–77), but by the time of the publication of Nickul's main work, *The Lappish Nation. Citizens of Four Countries* (1977),² the racial paradigm had disappeared; one expression of this is that by now, the cultural border was actually appreciated and acknowledged, trying to maintain the integrity of the people and trying to reserve the discursive space of self-representation for them as well.

Nickul, a geodesist, the most prominent Sami friend in Finland and an expert on Skolt Sami culture, is coherent in his way of celebrating the unspoiled *siida* of Suenjel, protected by wilderness (a natural border) and, although split by national borders, sustaining its integrity in conditions of increasing contact elsewhere in Lapland. He also presents the border system maintained and adjusted by the *sobbar*, the Skolt Sami village council, as an institution securing the livelihoods of the whole of the *siida*. This view originates from the other side of the border: the Skolt Sami appearing as guardians of their borders who are capable of adapting (for example as active citizens) to the new conditions and the Finns becoming the threatening "Other," disturbing the sophisticated society, cultural integrity and indeed its borders. Even though Nickul had crossed the border and entered the Skolt Sami society in a very intimate way, respect for the border lacked the ambivalence present in Pälsi's work (Lehtola 2000: 41–57, 198–200; Nickul 1948: passim; Nickul 1977: 2, 6–7, 11, 17, 55–56; *sobbar* had lost its authority concerning the border after the war, see Pelto 1962: 83–86). If the work by Pälsi is also a landmark in the ambivalent relation to Finnish colonialism, the work by Nickul marks the impossibility of this idea in an "anti-imperialistic" post-war Finland.

The change in the control of the border highlights how the border is not static but dynamic, temporal and constantly changing. Borders are created in an interaction with other actors, institutions and individuals (Newman 2006: 5–8; Schimanski 2008: 32). Obviously, conditions for the control of the border improved after the war for the Skolt Sami, who themselves strengthened the border. Some demonstrations of this are to be found in the field of academic research. The Sami are a well-researched group, but as early as 1975 the Skolt Sami in Sevetijärvi decided to question who benefits from the research on the Sami and the Skolt Sami *sobbar* refused to assist yet another research programme, well before the introduction of indigenous research ethics guidelines and protocols (*Sabmelaš* 1975). Thanks to an increasing sensitivity concerning the border, the encounter is no longer marked by the adjusting the Skolt Sami to Finnish discourses; instead, the power of definition has been taken by the Skolt Sami themselves (Ingold

1976: 10–11; Lehtola 2005: 51; Sverloff 2003: *passim*).

Many of the changes in the control of the border can be credited to the consistently respectful attitude Nickul entertained towards the Sami in his personal contacts and in his writings on Sami culture. However, the disappearance of remnants of hierarchicizing the Skolt Sami on the basis of authenticity or on the basis of theories concerning the evolution of societies,³ reserving the right of self-identification to the Sami themselves, took some time as far as Nickul himself was concerned (Lehtola 2000: 41–57; Nyyssönen 2007: 138–140). Most of Nickul's identity politics can be credited to him personally. In a political context, one can point to the codification of post-war Finland as a "good state," ruled by law and equality (see for example Alasuutari 1996: 155, 159). In the 1970s, especially, this way of perceiving the state of Finland as a representative of all things good, international solidarity, neo-Marxist anti-imperialism, friendly relations with neighbouring countries, etc. became the dominant imagery. The state of Finland was overwhelmed by the project of building a modern welfare state and remained a firm, natural frame of identification, no longer through the nationalistic, linguistic-cultural sense of belonging, but through a process of modernization and employment, marginalizing the idea of Finland as a colonial power as impossible.

Conclusions

Both the ambivalence concerning the borders and the Finnish colonialism in Pälsi's text, as well as the condemnation of Finnish modernization in Nickul's text took part within the discussion concerning national identity. For Pälsi, the control of the border was about strengthening differences and categorizing the Skolt Sami as lower, and thus distinguishing the young nation state of Finland as a modern, yet partially-inclusive state. For Nickul, identity politics were partially embedded on a loathing of the colonialist remnants of the nationalistic first republic. By labelling the Skolt Sami as the rational, good actors, the detrimental aspects of the modernization project were pointed out, as well as those concerning the consequences of an ambivalent border management.

As we already saw in the introduction, the border is a socially constitutive entity (Schimanski 2008: 31). The border is also a constitutive historical factor that includes and excludes and moulds the destinies of the different peoples finding themselves within the borders. The Finnish state chose to integrate the Skolt Sami, although in a selective and ambivalent manner. The Skolt Sami culture was not annihilated in the same manner as in Norway (Niemi 2002: 103–104, 108), but rather integrated and modernized. The coerciveness of this project was sealed by the Second World War and resettle-

ment. There was a serious, yet not totally successful effort to protect the Skolt Sami culture as well, one indication of which is the still-functioning *sobbar*. This can be credited to a great extent to the work of Karl Nickul.

NOTES

- ¹ A Sami or reindeer village, *siida* in Northern Sami, refers to both the area and the people living in the autonomous area of the *siida*. It is a governmental area for practising the Sami means of living (hunting, fishing and reindeer herding) with negotiable borders and was the main feature of community organization in most of Finnish Lapland until the end of the nineteenth century. Concerning the Suenjel Sami, the *siida* administration remained almost intact until the Second World War (Ingold 1976: 4–5, 8; Tanner 1929: 86–87).
- ² A revised edition of *Saamelaiset kansana ja kansalaisina*, published in 1970 through the Finnish Literary Society.
- ³ These hierarchies are evident in an earlier work on the Suenjel Sami (Nickul: 1948, 11–12). In this ethnographic work, the interest of knowledge lies in a tribal society's inevitable adjustment to Finnish society, a development that has to be made from a Skolt Sami initiative, if at all, since the development contains a risk of moral and material deterioration. Nickul strove for an equal outlook—the Skolt Sami culture would also contribute majority culture in the cultural exchange, while some features of the Skolt Sami culture would vanish.

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