

Sara Hagström Yamamoto

*I gränslandet mellan svenskt och samiskt:
Identitetsdiskurser och förhistorien i Norrland
från 1870-tal till 2000-tal*

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Review by Thomas Wallerström

In her PhD dissertation *At the Border between Swedish and Sámi: Discourses of Identity and Prehistory in Norrland from the 1870s to the 2000s*, as it might be titled in English, Sara Hagström Yamamoto investigates the cultural and political border between the Sámi, the Swedes, and the Kvens (“kvänsk”), identities of the northernmost part of Sweden.

The Sámi, in international literature more known as the Lapps, are today largely accepted as an indigenous group in northern Fennoscandia and adjacent parts of Russia. They have lately been rivaled by the Kvens, a minority group within the minority of Finnish-language speakers in Northern Sweden that emerged as an identity in the 1990s, claiming that *they* are an indigenous group rather than the Sámi.

The Sámi and the Kvens both question the official Swedish version of (pre)history that emphasizes the Swedish colonizers and the pioneering industrialization in the North that began more than 300 years ago. There was and is very little place for the Sámi in that version of (pre)history. The Kvens in Sweden, for their part, struggle against the Sámi

and the Swedes for a place on the ethnic scene. While the Sámi have been an established category in European literature and research since the 16th century, the Kvens (and the other Finnish-language speakers in the North) have too long a time been stuck in backwater.

All in all, this is a situation probably recognizable to anybody with some knowledge about the uses of archaeology and the history of our recent post-colonial world: the frequent use of dichotomies such as We/Other, aside from ethnic versions of the past, have merged with polarized questions (*Who was first?*, *Where did they come from?*). Sara Hagström Yamamoto examines the history of that reductionism in Northern Sweden.

Her method is a discourse analysis of books used in elementary schools. In addition she analyses books and articles about (pre)history written by representatives of the different groups for the schoolchildren or the general public. The concepts *discourse* and *narrative* are used as methodological points of departure for the analysis of the texts but also as general perspectives for analysis and discussion.

The concept of “discourse” considers how languages, and sometimes also other modes of representation, take part in constituting a reality by symbolizing something in a particular way. Discourse analysis involves studying these structures of meaning, for instance how a concept like “Swedishness” or “Sámi” is provided with meaning through connections to other concepts, at the same time as other possible meanings are excluded. *Narratology* considers the structuring of a theme into a story through a selected sequence of events. It also provides valuable tools for the analysis of historical writings as stories. The narrative fixates the meaning of the discourse, for example a discourse of an ethnic identity, by turning complex history into a simplifying line of events. That line leads from the distant past to the present, making the present identity look like a natural destined outcome with a very long history.

That analysis spans over four chapters in the book. To start with, it describes the representation of Swedish national identity, especially its representation and implementation by texts used in the local elementary schools from the end of the 19th century until the mid-20th. The next chapter is a study of a number of Sámi representations of Sámi identity and history based on texts written by Sámi. This, in turn, is followed by a chapter that addresses representations of a collective Kvenish identity as it is presented by spokespersons for this relatively small identity, an ethnic identity *in the making* rather than one already established. All these narratives contrast with the image of the fourth category discussed, that of the inhabitants of the northernmost part of Sweden, the “North Bothnians” (norrbottningarna). This is a category that emerged

in the 1980s. It is defined by the geographic origin though it does not really include the Sámi and Finnish-language speakers.

Sara Hagström Yamamoto identifies significant differences between these narratives: the Sámi identity is associated with concepts like *hunting/gathering*, *the sijdda society*, *the relationship to the reindeer*, *a distinct culture*, *indigenous*, *interplay with nature*, along with *liability to taxes*, *deprived*, and *powerless*. “The Swedish discourse”, on the other hand, is characterized by associations to *farming*, *sedentary*, *ability to make progress (civilization)*, *exploitation of natural resources*, *expansion*, but also (regarding Northern Sweden) *retardation* and *periphery* in contrast to the prospering central parts of the nation. The Kvenish versions aim at establishing *continuity* back in time and the distinction of a Kvenish identity in present time, based very much on criteria for the definition of indigenous groups and an *imagined origin in the East*. According to the author, this presentation of the Kvenish group as a separate, distinct, ethnic entity with roots back in time, before conquest and/or state formation, is triggered by the rising, worldwide, political demands and contemporary acknowledgement of indigenous movements.

The identity of “North Bothnian” is different from the other identities. It derives largely from the archaeological finding of an exceptional Mesolithic settlement in 1983, which since then has been excavated for a couple of years. Though the existence of such a settlement did not really surprise the archaeologists working in northern Scandinavia, the “trademark” *Vuollerim 6000 years* became something of a revelation to generations of former pupils of the local elementary schools.

With the Vuollerim excavation a long history emerged that predated well the written sources and narratives above all about Swedish colonization, industrialization and exploitation of natural resources. In contrast, the identity of being “North Bothnian” was based on concepts like *hunting/gathering* and *origin in the East* together with the still remaining associations to *civilization* and *sedentary* in the Swedish national discourse. The formation of this identity is documented by an investigation of the collection of press cuttings at the museum of Vuollerim.

At the time when the Vuollerim site was discovered, the Swedish discourse implemented in the elementary schools was in crisis: depopulation, unemployment, and lack of fulfillment of the vision of a progressive modern industrial welfare society. The gap between the imagined identity of being a Northern Swede and the everyday experience was too obvious, in turn underpinning the sense of being “peripheral” – not a “real” Swede. A tremendous public interest in archaeology was triggered, not only as a tool for political agendas as described by Sara Hagström Yamamoto, but also quite generally. The new understanding of

the settlement history was, however, not quite positive to the Sámi. As no archaeologist was willing to confirm the idea that the Vuollerim site represented the Sámi specifically, the idea of the Sámi as an indigenous group became undermined.

In her last chapter, Sara Hagström Yamamoto compares her results with other parts of the world outside Europe, all of which have a long history of colonization, large-scale exploitation of natural resources, and dominant populations with languages and cultures that differ from the local. Experience of a compulsive shift in languages and culture is prominent. The image of Northern Sweden fits well into a general pattern: how feelings of being inferior are met with ethnopolitically driven attempts to rewrite history and archaeology, in order to change the *imposed* narratives about the past. The contemporary political discourse with political documents like ILO 169 offers such groups strategies to avoid assimilation, discrimination, and a seemingly everlasting marginalization. The essentialism of the Sámi, Kvens and North Bothnians is thus a symptom, a response, with archaeological implications: questions like “Who was first?” In such “marginal areas” the general interest in archaeology and early history tends to become as huge as the power of thinking in oversimplified categories.

The conclusions are easy to accept, not because the author herself is from the North and hence familiar with the local impact of archaeology in the 1980s onwards, but most of all because of the theoretical and methodological merits of the dissertation. Some critical points can, however, be added by a reviewer who also happens to have been an archaeologist at a regional museum “who was there” when it all happened.

The interest in archaeology in Northern Sweden came to being as a total result, not only through the excavations at Vuollerim but also through the central political agenda in the 1970s that resulted in a) new official cultural politics meant to confirm regional identities, b) decentralization of cultural heritage management, c) the establishment of a department of archaeology at the University of Umeå, d) a new inventory of ancient monuments headed by the Swedish National Heritage Board but decentralized to Luleå, e) archaeologists at the local and regional museums (until then often regarded as unnecessary). The analysis of the “Vuollerim effect” is probably biased by the provenience of the press cuttings in the museum at Vuollerim. Another thing: the title of the book is somewhat misleading as the book is about four categories of people, not only the Swedes and the Sámi. Furthermore, the designation “Norrland” is too broad; the book is actually about the northernmost 25% of Sweden rather than the more than 50% indicated in the title.

Sara Hagström Yamamoto has, no doubt, written a good book about how identity conflicts emerge on a local level and how they interfere with archaeological and historical research agendas (former and present). It is an important book, a critical assessment of a research tradition and agendas, and hopefully it will help to create a more de-politicized archaeology in the North.