

## Steps Toward An Analysis of “Sápmi: Becoming A Nation” Exhibition at Tromsø University Museum

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*Sápmi, en nasjon blir til* is the first exhibition ever made taking the stand to present the social-history of an indigenous political movement, by visualizing elements of a national discourse about ethnicity and assimilation, in which the main focus is not “material culture” nor art objects. By discourse I utilize Foucault’s French philosophical and political definition of “discours” (1995) intended here not as purely verbal-oral construction, but as institutional and material practice.

When I first visited Tromsø University as guest lecturer in 1993, I immediately became acquainted with the distinctive Norwegian term “Formidling” (Mediation of Knowledge). The paradox of such term is that it means different concepts in the languages I know (some Latin languages but also in English) and it is hard to find an all-fit translation for it: it must be understood in context. Sometimes as “mediation”, sometimes as “dissemination”, others as “interpretation” and even as “negotiation”. One thing is plausible: it is a core concept in Scandinavian academic practices of production of social scientific knowledge. Still, it triggers scholars to explore its meaning. It is a strong theoretical stand of a certain Norwegian social anthropology. In this way the aim of my fieldwork at Tromsø Museum is to gather and analyze examples of contextualization and to reflect upon how representation is affected by it. Moreover, this can become a reflection about how inclusive or exclusive for different audiences, such “museal” cultural politics may be.

For this aim, I start by analyzing failures and scores of existing projects, in order to provide a lively representation of these practices, which connect academics with civil society at large, not in general terms, but in the analysis of dynamics that researchers, social actors and specific audiences create together when they encounter and react to these representations: an inclusive and dialogical practice from one and side and a constructive, strident or simply dialectical critique on the other side.

These are important aspects because they provide the context to understand further how meaning is made beyond the commodity “exhibition”, and how it is transformed or negotiated/omitted/exalted, etc. Moreover, manifold narratives are elicited through the meeting with the audience. These representations are context-of-reception dependant. A scrutiny of the modalities of these meetings, from the fieldwork’s reflective practices, to the feed back sessions with social actors; from follow up exhibitions or productions of new media (books, films, catalogues, etc.) to surveys and monitoring of the exhibitions themselves, from local-national discursive debates, to transnational discursive representations, is my research’s agenda.

**Figure 1.** Iver Jåks's sculpture in the exhibition  
“Sápmi en Nasjon blir til”



## Introduction and Background

When I first visited Tromsø University as guest lecturer in 1993, I immediately became acquainted with the distinctive Norwegian term “Formidling” (Mediation of Knowledge). The paradox of such term is that it means different concepts in the languages I know (some Latin languages but also in English) and it is hard to find an all-fit translation for it: it must be understood in context. Sometimes as “mediation”, sometimes as “dissemination”, others as “interpretation” and even as “negotiation”. One thing is plausible: it is a core concept in Scandinavian academic practices of production of social scientific knowledge. Still, it triggers scholars to explore its meaning. When in 2003 he became the recipient of the Norwegian “Formidlingspris” (Prize for Dissemination of Knowledge) at the University of Oslo, Prof Per Thomas Andersen stated:

“Det er simpelthen ikke sant at det går an å skille klart mellom forskning og formidling, ikke nå lenger. Det fins former for innsikt – også faglig innsikt – som bare oppstår på møteplassene, det vil si i formidlingsrommene der kunstig atskilte fagfelter berører hverandre – og der enda kunstigere atskilte eksistensnivåer i våre liv kommer i meningsskapende kontakt. Formidling er ikke bare å gjøre allerede etablert kunnskap synlig. Formidling er å skape møteplasser for mening (Mediation is a way to shape an encounter for the creation of meaning)”.

It is a philosophical statement, even a good intention in the field of Humanities, but it is actually what a certain Norwegian social anthropology (probably enhanced by Barth and his early theories of processual anthropology in the ‘60s) has practiced and reflected upon since many decades (Eidheim 1993; Altern and Holtedahl 2000; Eidheim, Bjørklung and Brantenberg 2002; Arntsen and Holtedahl 2006; etc.).

What I think needs to be produced in order to revitalize this debate, is a study in which not only the academic text, but a more experimental mixed media<sup>1</sup> format conveys how projects which have Dissemination and Mediation at their core are achieved, documenting the meeting-spaces and the process of eliciting meaning where and when they occur too. It may attempt to render how production of knowledge go through processes of “repersonalization”

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1 Mixed-media is a concept that finds its more acute theorist in Mitchell (2005).

(Altern-Holtedahl, 2000:37) through the ethnographic process, and how exhibitions, display and installations in the Museum may as well keep accessible these levels of ongoing production of meaning, in all spheres: as a discursive, pedagogical and aesthetic aim. In this way the aim of my fieldwork at Tromsø Museum is to gather and analyze examples of contextualization and to reflect upon how representation is affected by it. Moreover, this can become a reflection about how inclusive or exclusive for different audiences, such “museal” cultural politics may be.

For this aim, I start by analyzing failures and scores of existing projects, in order to provide a lively representation of these practices, which connect academics with civil society at large, not in general terms, but in the analysis of dynamics that researchers, social actors and specific audiences create together when they encounter and react to these representations: an inclusive and dialogical practice from one side, and a constructive, dialectical critique on the other side.

More studies on mediation of knowledge are needed where the actual meeting-spaces for the attribution of signification are visualized too and the existential and experiential connection among audiences, researchers and informants are also in focus. Eidheim et al. (2002), curators of the Exhibition I took as my main research topic, *Sápmi en nasjon blir til*, (see its online version on <http://sapmi.uit.no> and its catalogue) well describe the necessity of situating the various agents of this triangular dynamic in their interaction with the exhibition itself. The example is taken from an article published in the Norwegian journal of social anthropology, where they analyzed some of these issues emerged in the curatorial work for “Sápmi Becoming a Nation”:

“The visitors who meet our presentation have their own cultural competences. These represent as well potentials for interpretation, which are activated in the encounter with a presentation in which we’ve included conditions for experiencing a purposeful agenda (Griffith 1996). The audience come surely with their own most diverse preconceptions when it comes to the main theme.” (Eidheim et al. 2002: 131-132)

These are important aspects because they provide the context to understand further how meaning is made beyond the commodity “exhibition”, and how it is transformed or negotiated/omitted/exalted, etc. Moreover, manifold narratives are elicited through the meeting with the audience. These representations are context-of-reception dependant.

I am in the first phase of my postdoctoral inquiry, but so far my research’s agenda consists in the scrutiny of the modalities of these meetings, from the fieldwork’s reflective practices, to the feed-back sessions with social actors; from follow up exhibitions or productions of new media (books, films, catalogues, etc.) to surveys and monitoring of the exhibitions themselves, from local-national discursive debates, to transnational discursive representations. In order to do that, I am gathering data and documenting acts of mediation (to document the “triangular” process of production of knowledge in context) among scholars at the Museum itself and in their direct network. These scholars contribute to the research too, and I become in turn a mediator of instances and processes taking place among them and with their own environments and communities of study in the perspective of what Schneider practiced in his own multisided fieldwork: an “hermeneutic” between social actors and researchers (Schneider: 2006), but this theoretical trajectory was initiated by the seminal work of Clifford James, especially in “Routes”. It implies to explore museums as “contact zones” Pratt’s trope, as Clifford (1997:188) relates to it:

“In contact’s zones, Pratt tells us, geographically and historically separated groups establish ongoing relations. These are not relations of equality, even though processes of mutual exploitation and appropriation may be at work. As we have seen, fundamental assumptions about relationship itself – notions of exchange, justice, reciprocity- may be topics of struggle and negotiation. Moreover, contact zones are constituted through reciprocal

movements of people, not just of objects, messages, commodities and money.” (1997: 194-95)

The final outcome serves the community of interest surrounding the museum, as much as a further theorization on dissemination of knowledge, which is currently wished by many scholars, and not only at the national level.

**Figure 2.** Fifty Governmental reports (NOU) about Sami issues in fifty years.



## The Exhibition

“As disseminators of knowledge, ethnographic museums can still play a very important role in relation to multicultural society. (...) [Museum staff ] can place much greater weight on problem oriented research which studies various challenges tied to the understanding of global and multicultural processes. There is a growing international trend to let individual temporary exhibitions become projects with expansive vistas which address a phenomenon, a specific decade, a specific process or a concept. There is great need to progress from exhibitions which to a large degree only illustrate a theme/culture through objects and text, to exhibitions which profile reflections.” National Museum Authority Report section III (P. Rekdal 2001)

**Sapmi, en nasjon blir til** is the first exhibition ever made taking the stand to present the social-history of an indigenous political movement, by visualizing elements of a national discourse about ethnicity and assimilation, in which the main focus is not “material culture” nor art objects. By *discourse* I utilize Foucault’s French philosophical and political definition of “discours” as he did in *History of Sexuality* (1995) intended here not as purely verbal-oral construction, but as institutional and material practice. Discourse for Foucault is also to be understood in connection with the concepts of Power and Knowledge. As Yúdice (quoted in Message 2006:18) states: “Politics of representation seeks to transform institutions not only by means of inclusions but also by the images and discourses generated by them”. (Yúdice 2003:164). Thus, by reading the catalogue of the exhibition and moreover its website, it is quite clear that the curators from Tromsø Museum do not avoid, but instead make a point in telling a series of narratives in which themselves, as anthropologists and ethnographers, have been historically involved, becoming among those who contributed to the cultural critique which Sámi and Norwegian scholars developed (Minde, 2008) within the discourse on ethnicity over a period of 50 years, 1950-2000. As we read in the introduction to the website of the exhibition:

“Thus, our presentation is not only meant as a corrective to the conventional philosophy and practice of museums, but also to provide the public with means to grasp the implications of the emergence of Sami nationhood as a creative, innovative and cumulative process - a virtual revolution in political and cultural terms within the span of some decades. Moreover, we want to make the audience aware that museum displays-like the old and the new exhibit here in Tromsø Museum – are not just ”facts”, but presentations reflecting the interests, motives and historical contexts of those who made them.”

And it is signed by all the curators together. They had indeed in mind first a foremost an already informed audience for their main thematic: Norwegian and Sami from North of Norway and by extension, all those interested in this particular debate. The exhibition did not mean to make every aspect too explicitly, as if it was a national museum in the capital of the country. This choice is evident, because the main target is the audience that is active in the discursive practices connected with the exhibition and the history of these regions, from the postwar period ahead.

**Figure 3.** Entering the exhibition *Sápmi- Becoming a nation*.  
Introductory room.



### *The Space*

Concerning the physical space, one separate subchapter will be dedicated to the description of the museum and the actual site of the exhibition, which in this short paper cannot be undertaken. To have a fairly good impression of it, it is nowadays possible to navigate the impressive 3D design of its locations in the online version of this exhibition (<http://sapmi.uit.no>). Quickly said, there are one entrance and three interconnected rooms, each addressing a particular period, from post war to current days (1999). The rooms were called by the curators: The Norwegian Room “The Making of the Welfare State and Quest for Equity” (1945-1960); The Sami Room “The Struggle for Equal Worth” (1960-1980) and The Indigenous Room “Sami Land (Sápmi) the Making of a Nation” (1980-2000).

The displays show only few captions or none, and this makes the signifying process of visiting the exhibition highly based on metaphors, associations, individual agency and extra verbal expressions. The visitor can express in each enclave (entrance and rooms 1, 2, 3) some freer forms of agency, which in other exhibitions are reduced to an obligatory linear “circuit”. The absence of many captions and longer texts can enable a more intuitive movement that in most cases follows personal curiosity and identification with certain parts of the display and not others. It allows for a freer movement, a return to sites that acquire a new meaning when one has understood or recognized other parts of the exhibition. A study of the corporeal motions around the various cabinets could also be relevant in order to visualize how people assign meaning to things, and how links between disparate cabinets are made.

### *Main Narratives*

Terje Brantenberg, anthropologist and project leader/curator of the exhibition, wrote in the final project description which constitute also the museum newsletter:

“The aim of the project is quite ambitious; it is the first attempt ever presenting an overview of the cultural and political movement of Sámi in Norway in the form of a museum exhibit. Our story is controversial for several reasons. By giving a general overview, we will always be open to criticism for our selection of events, actors and places. The very heading of the exhibition –Sápmi- “Sámi Homeland” or “Nation” – is also highly controversial. The term emerged during the 1980’s, replacing the older Sámi term Sámi Ædnam (Sámi Land), referring both to the territorial homelands of Sámi as well as being a political symbol of Sámi unity and nationhood, common for all Sámi. For some, the very term of Sámi nationhood is a provocation, and nothing but a political slogan.” (1999: 9).

And more recently he stated:

“Actually, we did not find difficult to describe **what** stories and messages (the exhibition) should treat. But something very different, was to make concrete suggestions about **how** the diverse themes should be illustrated, visualized.” (Norwegian Anthropological Association (NAF) Conference, Tromsø 2006).

Here, he formulates one of the basic questions, since anthropology has come to a point, after 30 years from the so called “narrative turn”, in which its claim for self-reflexivity is no more a controversy<sup>2</sup>, but a distinctive sign of identity of the discipline itself. The “situatedness” and

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2 The controversy I am addressing, is mainly based on the assumption that interpretative instances should be transformed into models resembling those of natural sciences. But a more subtle controversy, emerged after Geertz, was that defining Culture as Text to be interpreted, was eliminating the possibility for comparison with other media, for the geertzian “Text” was not a neutral metaphor, but indeed it was often associated and compared to the long tradition of academic and literary-essayistic writings. Those contrapositions between

constant positioning of the researcher, is part of the construction, production and dissemination of knowledge and cannot be hidden as a pure methodological “noise”. The point about mediation of knowledge through visualization is a crucial one, a productive one.

First the curators should mediate with the exhibition designer. To describe certain type of stories, to use words evoking stories: what did it mean? What were the media one should associate to words? The telling is characterized by verbal and bodily language (i.e. oral storytellers), or written and illustrated texts (i.e. children’s books). Preponderantly, this telling is using a descriptive form utilizing the same medium (language, oral or written). Stories are based on facts, chronicles, acts, actions as they are reported by various sources. They need a degree of performance in order to become appealing, but they can also be told or written maintaining their main features and messages from one teller to the next (Czarniawska 2004).

**Figure 4.** The threshold between two rooms, seen from room no. 1.



Moreover the visit of the exhibition doesn’t rely too much on captions and texts, and this is made so in order to induce audience to make sense of images, sounds, items in a freer, associative way. In this way, a more complex level of reflection and critique of what is not accounted for, by connecting, linking, comparing or discovering by oneself, can be enhanced. The captions, when they are there, do not really inform about the items and objects themselves, but more about why they were chosen as symbolic, emblematic, representative and about their value for certain social and political movements. During my fieldwork I will collect examples on why and how the few objects were chosen by the curators, their consultants and the designers and how the actual fact of working through things created findings, new meanings and aesthetic results.

When it comes to the actual presentation in the museum, many unexplained facts can be source of reflection, not everything has been explained. Audience can also, in a sort of complementary attempt, “fill in” the gaps or absence of images, stories, items and symbols by

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sensorial aspects, communication systems, logic categories had limited the analytical and representative construction of scholars in my view.

imagining their own. The exhibition enhances a sort of “political imagination”, if I may. To explore more this aspect, I am now going to present two items in the exhibition, in order to attempt an interpretation of their mode of functioning.

### First Item: Visualization of Statistic (Kvænangen)

**Figure 5.** Census in Kvænangen 1930. A device made to show the expression of ethnicity.



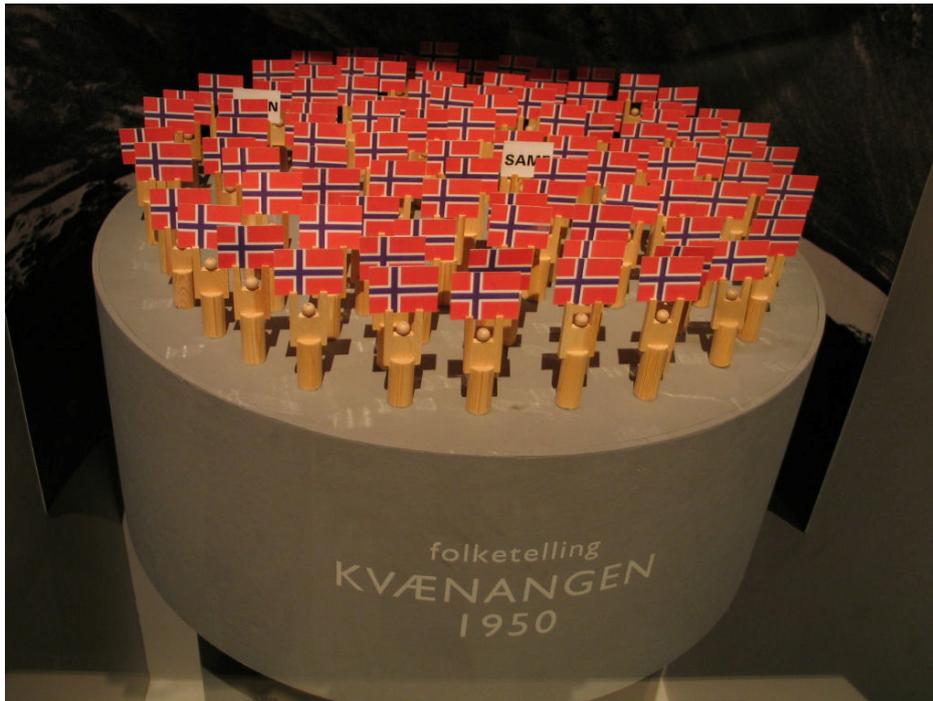
The device which was designed to visualize a statistic in Kvænangen (see the three pictures) is a cylinder that visitors observe behind a glass, but that can be rotated by pushing a button. Once rotated, the flags display a different average, corresponding to the percentage of Sami, Kvæn and Norwegian citizens censused over 20 years (1930-1950).

**Figure 6.** Rotatory movement.



The device works through Gestalt-like patterns: background and foreground, shift of average flags, black, white and red abstract colors, stylized human forms, flags as holder of identity, rotatory movement creating a sense of “hidden” and “exposed”...) etc.. Moreover, it also suggests that the portion contains the same average of figure in both appearances, but that *they* have made a change of identity, they hold a different flag. One must indeed realize that at the that time Sami and Kven flags weren’t yet invented, so the display is only using “ethnic” on a white sheet, as conceptual marker, not as a real flag.

**Figure 7.** Figures in 1950, same region.



It is the same “portion” in terms of population and territory, but the change happens in the way ethnicity is displayed, etc. It can eventually evoke a “cake”, which is not a neutral figure: it seems also based on metaphors proper to some of the Norwegian cultural practices. A cake is an artifact invested with sense of aesthetics, affectivity, pride, and highly genderized, not only in Norway (thus a socially rewarded Norwegian woman knows how to make good cakes, within a certain repertoire, and this seems to be a very rewarding skill). It appeals the community, being under the same “umbrella”, and it reinforces the metaphor of nation to be shared and valued together, deserving celebrations and coming together. It is a friendly metaphor.

Is the fact that so many hold a shifted flag a historical improvement? The device is no to be charged with prejudice in the conception of Norwegianization, but indeed, it is not a “strident” image of a nation. It is domestic, almost childish (Lakoff and Johnson: 2005; Gullestad: 2005). The fact that the device can be seen also as a children’s carrousel, which the visitors can actually switch by themselves through a simple button, makes the item a “performing” object, even in a minor degree. This installation is acted by visitors, it makes a “trick”. But perhaps they do not get the “pain” or the striding history behind the shift of flags. It “happens” in a switch, a “click” covering an historical period of 20 years. It has something light, funny and it reduces the sense of conflict that one could derive from such a change in ethnical adherence. The designer tried to visualize a message: the one concerning how people signified their ethnical belonging after linguistic/economic assimilation. So, by trying to

interpret the message hidden in this particular item, one can approach as well the discourse that the curators wanted to signal in the exhibition, the cultural and political critique, if one may. It is only by making people reflecting and acting the device that one can observe these aspects. The item could help visitors to notice how such a message became able to produce other meanings, how discourse was evoked through visual metaphors like that. In a way the designer of the exhibition was searching for a visualization of a fact (the census of Sami subjects in Kvænangen over 20 years, between 1930 and 1950). But in my interpretation, he and the curators ended up as well visualizing a latent discourse that still is implicit in mainstream Norwegian history.

Further on, Brantenberg said that the most difficult was to find out and communicate *how* themes should be illustrated, visualized. *Themes* are per definition a linguistic conceptualization, a synthesis, an abstraction that only language can operate by reflecting over how various topics compose a larger thematic. Because this exhibition wished to operate at the level of *discourse* this was obviously the core of everything. One could say that discourse is thematic per definition. It makes abstractions and synthesis: a discourse is a critical philosophical practice, produced and reinforced in social and political arenas. A discourse can be manipulated by different social actors. A discourse seeks for consensus, but it is always controversial. This was intended by the curators, I do not think I am speculating too far here. But part of the research I must still conduct will try to demonstrate *how* it was dealt with.

The message of the installation about the census in Kvænangen (majority and minority, ethnicity as flexible and changing in some short laps of time, linguistic acquisition as equating ethnic belonging, etc) is also, at another level, the metaphor born out of a certain discourse, the one I evoked above, about nation as constructive effort for equality, first of all by protecting those who are included in its citizenship. The fact that the human figures on it were very stylized, makes impossible to address questions of gender, age, disability etc. Again, these differences are disappearing in a more “statistic based” average of generic “people”. In this respect, it works as a sociological item, less as an anthropological one, if one may. But what visitors got out of it? Did it work mainly as a visual statistic, or as a funny discovery about national change? Or more, an ironic item making the otherwise too serious exhibition more friendly? Visitors are different in gender, nationality, ethnicity, age etc. How the device operates, and for whom? Who was the ideal audience the curators had in mind? Was it the same as the one the designer had in mind? Etc. When one pushes the button of the case, one thinks about an early child-like audience. But the rest of the exhibition doesn’t really appeal to the same age span... It is an artifact that served the purpose of visualizing an abstraction and a materialization of statistic, sociological facts. But in the way it turned out, it also became a signifier of discourses addressing the assimilation process, as the curator wished. It nevertheless used symbols which are appealing for reconciliation, celebration of national pride, more “positive” in my eyes than the fact they wished to problematize and the conflicts and pain behind the enculturation process.

## Second Item: The Road Sign from Kåfjord

**Figure 8.** Road sign from Kåfjord region, north Troms.



Conversely, the road sign from Kåfjord, written in double language, Sami and Norwegian, seems a very different item. It signifies beyond its signifier, so to speak. It is not a road sign like another. It is ruined with bullets marks. The item does not provide any explanatory caption on purpose.

Kåfjord is a coastal Sami region, for those who know (not many indeed, even in Norway). Where do the bullets come from? “Nordmenn”, Norwegian locals? Is it the old vendetta between racial discriminated ethnic minorities and settlers, going on here? But what happens if we make the hypothesis that the bullets come from Sami themselves? The hidden pain of coastal assimilated subjects, disappeared into the “Fornorskning” (cultural and linguistic assimilation) much earlier than other Sami...?

The road sign is an item in a museum, invested with symbolic meaning (the one I evoked above, and many others): it is not like an arrow, a necklace, a mosaic or an axe in an ethnographic museum. It is the actual road sign, which was target of racist<sup>3</sup> actions. It is an historical piece, in that respect, like the shield of a warrior in a certain battle. It is de-contextualized and made visible in such a strong degree, that most of the visitors are taken by

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3 I use concept of race obviously not as synonymous of “ethnicity” , but in the sense that race is culturally constructed by dominants in order to create subalternity (Gramsci), by utilizing ethnic difference, which is not biological proved, but socio-politically constructed. An act can be provoked by racism. But I never say that this or that person “is” racist. The act creates racism, the persons are not “racists”. It is a social pattern, not a judgment over people.

a deep emotion, when they realize its message: actually that the bullets have erased the name of Kåfjord in Sami language.

In this way the road sign operates a shared meaning with those who belong to the region and have taken part in a similar local history. It also makes again those who are tough, tough and those who have shot the bullets remembering their self-destructive action. It makes those who are moved to tears feeling the harshness of history, but also a bound with the place. In the fruition of the road sign, there is plenty of out-coming. Its presence in a room which otherwise is very “friendly” looking, with nice portraits and items in cases, it is a sort of slap in the face of collective, local memory. It is a warning sign: we enter in a sort of “memory zone”, which is being painful and controversial, in which there are not only clear enemies, but where the contradictions of the Sami identity are also emphasized. Especially if we think that the bullets are shot by Sami themselves. But how this sign operates for more cosmopolitan, international visitors? And how for South Norwegians<sup>4</sup>, who know very little about the history of the North?

How should we look upon such an item? Contemplated? Observed? Interpreted? Minimized? Because it is what it is, a “real” item collected from the road, an authentic remain so to speak, less conceptual than the statistic-cylinder-with flags, it could be said that it is less charged with metaphors. But in fact, it is not. Actually, it is a producer of metaphors, images, it is a maelstrom of sensations, memories and evocations. And most of all, it calls for stories to be told. Each bullet seems to hide one individual story, an epoch, some desire of expressing anger but also visibility. A road sign should inform about a direction to follow in a given region: Kåfjord. The fact that it is in double language, means that in the region two languages (Norwegian and Sami) have the same status. A bilingual region. But also, a region where by looking at those bullets marks on the sign, hunters are “outraged” citizens! Or maybe, simply, a region in which playfully, youths learn how to use their fathers’ rifles by shooting street signs as targets. And they score points when they hit certain “words”?

What do visitors express encountering the sign in the exhibition itinerary? And to elicit emotions and interrogations, like rage and pride, were these some of the aims of the curators? The road sign does not reproduce a discourse about nation-making and identity, like the “cake” with flags, nor does it illustrate it. It signifies, as a thing invested with affective and political meaning, especially for visitors of the region from where it comes from. An item like this, calls for stories and chronicles to be told: after the first recognition (it is a road sign) and identification (it is marked by bullets, a symbol of violence against a place and its inhabitants, against oneself, etc.) one wants to understand more: why this happened, and maybe more important, if this still does happen today. The location of the road sign as a gatekeeper in the exhibition is also signifying that, from now ahead, if one follows the itinerary of the display, one can make sense of that sign differently. In this respect the road sign is also a medium to raise consciousness and curiosity for the discourse the curators wish to describe and criticize. The street sign operates a semiotic “metalevel” of communication. It serves historical purposes for the exhibition itself, as a material cultural item in many ethnographic exhibitions; it represents a sociological symbol of a collective and shared local history; it rises the questions whether and how this could happen so recently in historical terms, and it enables the visitors to enter a sort of metaphorical re-imagined “Kåfjord”, a territory of Sami society, a borderline sign, marking a no-man’s land of political violence: the portion of space between two rooms: the past (room 1) and the very present (intro-room).

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4 For instance at Oslo Kulturhistorien Museum, fellow Phd student, Mari Mathisen, is currently working with a similar road sign and group of Oslo-based rappers in action-exhibition about integration and multiculturalism. Total Teater, in North of Norway, also used the road sign in its performance.

**Figure 9.** Threshold between rooms seen from the intro-room.



Brantenberg said that the curators had many stories and descriptions they could retell to the designer. What are the stories behind the road sign? How are they maintained alive, how are they still hidden? How such an item could “represent”, make sense in various ways, and still not be a simple reification, as in the more conventional ethnographic museums? Because through the work of interpretation visitors could discover aspects of society, get emotions or be touched, reconstruct events and visualize one of the aspects of “Forsnorskning” (namely aspects of a discourse of political assimilation and integration) the road sign did not reproduce a discourse like the “cylinder-with flags”, but it addressed individual reactions in order to raise consciousness and to induce desire for production of meanings and stories. Before the “friendly” cylinder presenting the Kvænangen statistic stays a destroyed road sign engraved by shots. One must start to make the connections, because the exhibition is based on this challenging form: visitors are invited to lift up their awareness and interest, but if they remain passive, the exhibition won’t give them too much to reflect and feel and maybe to be remembered.

If the device addressed the topic of ethnic identification (each figure holding a flag) in a little nuanced way (the only change: one Norwegian flag or the name of an ethnic group without flag, but no other signs on the figures themselves) but to a certain level of abstraction about ethnicity, assimilation and nationalism, the road sign, conversely, operated at the level of psychological identification (one who could shoot, one who could be shot, one who lived there, one who discovered what happened there, etc...) and created that identification by an increase of awareness. The flag holders represented a fact, the road sign represented untold stories and social disruption. The rotator cylinder reinforced a discourse about the nation (becoming more and more of an emblem) while the road sign represented Kåfjord people and

by synecdoche all the attempts to erase bilingual identity from the North, discriminating Sami people as in the old times.

**Figure 10.** Monitors with interactive videos are placed in some of the rooms in order to be used by visitors.



## Visitors, Curators, Analysts

“A closer, more ethnographic, look at particular sites of heritage collecting and performance than one gets from the political-economy systematisers, often tells an ambiguous, open-ended story. There is undeniably, a systematic aspect to the proliferating politics of heritage, ethnicity and tourism. But it’s a system of worlds in contact rather than a world-system.” Clifford in Coles (2002:68)

### *What Are the Messages of the Visitors, Concerning These Two Examples?*

I have not yet come further in the analysis of the messages and questionnaires which the curators obtained by a certain number of visitors. These type of studies are not competing with other forms of analysis, but for me, they mostly do not suffice to render the processual and interactive mode which users experience. It is not that in interpreting the exhibition like a “text” we deny the importance of ethnologic fieldwork and observations in situ, nor that we avoid to analyze the visitors’ feedback and elicitations. The work of analysis is parallel and integrated; we need to insert more and more users perspectives into the interpretations and to base them on these. It can be seen also as if the renewed experience of visitors creates a performance of identification and personalization that can be captured in progress and that constitutes the action over the Exhibition as Text and Artifact. In this, the curators can learn

and improve, or simply transform some of it, accordingly. But also, they can write about this process, in order to help other curators, anthropologists, museologists and conservators to make new exhibitions in the future.

One important question is: Did the way visitors make sense of the exhibition match the curators' expectations? Or does their aim be a very different one? It seems that the main preoccupation of the curators was to represent a discourse about cultural and political assimilation and mainly about Sami Political Movements after the II WW, in a national context, with a long history of cohabitation, and to show how ethnographic exhibitions, most of the time, hide such aspects by highlighting mainly items, material culture and descriptive/objectifying displays. In this respect one has to see the four areas of "Sápmi en Nasjon blir til" in the very space of the museum: behind the last room, there is a sort of monolith. Behind that, one room hosting temporary exhibitions with installations and conceptual art. Behind this one, another room consecrated to religious items from churches and chapels in North of Norway, which by the way looks also a chapel. A room in which visitors, suddenly, feel compelled to lower their voices and some of them even to sit at the benches and pray (personal observations made in the gallery).

**Figure 11.** Section of Museum dedicated to religious items from North of Norway



If most of the museum representations and presentations operate in what Fabian calls "allochronic" mode (Fabian 1991: 89), by doing so, curators and anthropologists reinforce a temporal distance between apparently a-storical "ethnic" items, which are not called to evoke a dialogue with mainstream national historical ones and to challenge it. In this way they deny the sense of what became a trope in critical anthropology, Fabian's concept of *coevalness*, an historical perspective linking the production of knowledge of researcher and social actors in the same historical contingency, in the same epoch<sup>5</sup>.

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5 Fabian critiques functionalist British anthropology and structuralistic French anthropology for this. He points out as both traditions mostly have kept at stake historicism as a step in ethnographic research, although Evans-Pritchard recognized the important of it, in his latest work.

**Figure 12.** “Samekultur” permanent ethnographic exhibition at Tromsø Museum: turf hut.



If the permanent ethnographic exhibition at Tromsø University Museum, “Samen Kultur” put up in the late 70s, was characterized by a certain lack of *coevalness*, by distancing the subjects and social practices represented to a non-sharable time, viceversa, “Sápmi en nasjon blir til” exhibition seems to operate exactly that recuperation of *coevalness*. It does that by courageously addressing contemporary time, recent events (differently from usual a-storical and arcaic-oriented ethnographic exhibitions): the events and discourses represented in “Sapmi en Nasjon blir til” are in the making, are contemporary, the curators are visibly part of them, and still they can be acted upon by visitors’ lived experience (as many visitors’ elicitation demonstrate).

It is an “inclusive” exhibition, for the social actors whose historical facts are narrated are still alive and can interact with it, because it is designed in such a way that plural readings and interpretations are possible. If one of the main ways social sciences have put the Other at stake was by moving it into remote zones of a-historical times, this exhibition conversely, dares to bring the issue here and now, even at the risk of being limited, biased, incomplete and not enough exotic.

Some questionnaires were filled by visitors. They were questionnaires of “ranking” type (one has to rank in terms of improvement or increase, “godt kjent (well understood), litt (little), ikke (not)”, etc.). But this system tells almost nothing about the processual and dynamic way in which knowledge is elicited, generated or shared<sup>6</sup>. In some ways the old

<sup>6</sup> When a given percentage said in the questionnaire: “har lært noe nytt eller ikke lært” I guess people think about learning as “getting information”. We know well that there is a distinction between information and

fashion questionnaire does not match the innovative style of the Sápmi exhibition, which as the curators stated in the catalogue: “wish to address links, connections, signifying practices” etc. To rely too much and to spend much time on the analysis of such questionnaires can be problematic, at least it seems to me. It somewhat collides with the intentions of the whole project and it also shows very little in relation to what guides experience when they introduce visitors, or what visitors have been able to contribute, after the exhibition, by being asked to elicit their perspectives in another medium than the schemes of questionnaires.

If the exhibition requires absolutely a guide (be it a scholar or a pre-recorded auto-guide on headphones) in order to be really deepened, it is also possible to use the exhibition as a “classroom”, where one creates each time a laboratory in terms of generative knowledge. This is what the museum offers to school (of all levels) through the work of its specialized pedagogues. I have started work with Marianne Gjæver, who developed a very effective and adaptable pedagogy linking Same Kultur with Sápmi en Nasjon blir til.

Moreover, there is also a range of “guiding modes” now widely performed by the museum curators and anthropologist, be them for Indigenous people-activists, or for university students, for Sami individuals and groups for researchers and scholars etc.

Finally there is a model of guiding by external guides at Innovasjon Tromsø, a tourist-cultural agency, for tourists arriving with the coastal steamer and visiting Tromsø only few hours.

**Figure 13.** A child exploring the multimedia devices.



Coming back to the pedagogic aim of Sápmi, the context of reception changing, guiding adjusting, the “classroom-type” guide can become interactive, and a more complex knowledge can be produced, that the questionnaire cannot capture and render. One must find ways to explore audience’s dissemination of knowledge using participant observation, I guess. And this will be the second step of my current fieldwork.

In “Sápmi en nasjon blir til”, one has to make first sense of what one knows already, of what one can catch by oneself with one’s own methods. Visitors are called in a space that asks them to think about where and what kind of “knowledge” is possible to produce, how

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knowledge. Information can be passed onto somebody else, it can circulate as both an immaterial or material cognitive datum, while knowledge can only be generated and embodied by each in a unique way, mostly immaterial, because it is a dynamic process of cumulative “enskilment”, combining dynamically innate and social acquired patterns as Bateson well described in numerous of his works (and further theorized, among others, by Ingold 2000).

different and diverse knowledge can be, according to one subject's position (like in the example of the road sign which I articulated above). Self-reflexivity is enhanced.

## The Guest Book

There are different messages left on the guest book. It is a large, elegant book whose hard cover is made of "steinbit" fish dried skin, a technique developed by coastal Sami to make fish-leather belts, wallets and hard folders. The Guest Book was left in the site of the exhibition for one year and once terminated it was not replaced. Many categories of people wrote disparate messages in this book: mostly school pupils, Sami visitors, random tourists and some university students or backpacker travelers. Average in gender was quite balanced: as many men than women. The writing styles were free, spontaneous and somewhat mimetic in relation to the type of messages written by peers or by other people in the previous pages. Most of these visitors came to discover the museum as a whole, a minor average came only to visit "Sapmi en nasjon blir til". Almost all the messages were signed by surname and first names.

By reading these messages one could guess something about the cultural background of these visitors and also their acquaintance or not with the debate and discourse about Saminess, both in Norway and abroad (i.e., in France Sami "disappearing" are almost equated with whales according to the tone of most French messages).

Some of the messages, unsigned, offer an elicitation of forbidden words, sentimental-confessional mode, and some are completely out of place, using the book as a wall in a railway station. But these latter are only two or three.

I must analyze more in depth this document, problematising also examples which are not only positive, but I report here one message, which Brantenberg quoted in his paper, for it can become paradigmatic when retracing the whole history of denial and shame of being Sami, which occurred for many centuries. In it, we read:

"I feel that the exhibition is very good. Good for me, who has partially Saami background and I get to feel a sense of belonging, to finally let see and know to people who want to have its own. And who have worked for that. Get more courage then! I discover again more of the culture and expression within myself. In this way the city has a completely different way of expressing itself and the world is no more as it was when my ancestor (my Sami) lived. That is a time passed, but not lost, because of this enflamed soul. I am proud." (Not signed.)

The metaphors used here are very relevant, they call for a further analysis of this type of confessional-political message, I feel. There are many metaphors based on body parts (guts, face, gaze) and locations (cities, world) that call for the level local-global-regional of "complex connectivity" as Tomlinson defines it. (in Coles-Clifford 2001:59). The Norwegian word "ildsjelan" (soul of fire) when written by a Sami, cannot but suggest also the concept of "árran", fireplace, which is a symbol of sociality and exchange of perspectives, yoiks (Sami chanting) and stories. It makes thus the message even more political, because issued from a sense of communality ("my Samis") etc. I cannot now speculate too much on this, because one should talk with the writer also, but I find it relevant because personal, confessional and also, lyrical. It is one of the messages that remains in the mind of those reading the Guest Book. If this is a message that curators identify as a gift (personal communication), it would be relevant to analyze more what kind of historical ground the person who wrote offers as "visibility" (feedback elicitation) that prolong, so to speak, the exhibition's purposes beyond its walls.

**Figure 14.** An exhibition which demands an active interpretation from its publicum.



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