

Samdok – Collecting and Networking the Nation as it Evolves

Bodil Axelsson
Linköpings universitet
bodil.axelsson@liu.se

The Samdok network has since the 1970s connected cultural historical museums in Sweden in a joint effort to collect and record the contemporary nation. Together the local, regional, special and central museums joining in on Samdok, form a networked museumscape in which Nordiska Museet act as a central node.

This paper will look into Samdok’s presentation of itself in books, reports and its regularly distributed periodical to understand how this network represents and materialises Sweden. It will tentatively argue that Samdok promotes societal and cultural, as well as scholarly and disciplinary, ideals of transformation and change. The network has re-invented itself over the years in order to keep up with transformations in the wider society such as globalisation, migration, and the move from industrialism to consumerism with the rise of the service sector. It has reinvented itself in terms of directions for collecting, and it has reinvented itself in terms of how it looks upon itself as an organisation by shifting from ideals of scientific rationality to reflexive cultural analysis. As a consequence, looking at Sweden from within Samdok, means looking at a nation and a network in perpetual change.

Samdok – Collecting and Networking the Nation as it Evolves

It is rather difficult to overlook the Swedish landscapes of museums. Today's structure is an inheritance – not a planned construction. Institutions have grown organically and autonomously over a long period of time. (...) This spontaneous growth has created gaps and overlaps in orientations and distributions of responsibility among the museums. (Kraftsamling! – Museisamverkan ger resultat. SOU: 2009: 15) (Authors translation)

As this quote from a recent report of a government commission suggests, the Swedish landscape of museums could easily be described as a rather disorderly and uncontrollable vista, a problem for centrally planned efficiency. The issue was on the agenda thirty years ago too. At that time, a group of museum people started to lay out plans for the coordination of at least one strand of multifaceted museum practices: collecting practices at cultural historical museums. Although the museums' storerooms were crowded with objects from the agrarian 19th and early 20th century, there was a lack of artefacts representing industrial work in the 20th century. The initiators of what later turned into Samdok raised the question on how to collect the artefacts of their own times without overburden the storerooms. To meet the challenge, it was suggested that the task of collecting ought to be divided into thematic areas and distributed between the museums. After several meetings and conferences, Samdok was conceptualised. The network started in the late 1970s, but it took years to fully implement and codify the activities in this ongoing, and still developing, network for collecting and report on contemporary Sweden as it evolves.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to explore some empirical research questions posed within the project Eunamus: European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, www.eunamus.eu. The questions concern “the birth of Samdok and its philosophical and methodological intentions”, “how and why change has taken place” within the organisation, “the kind of national history produced”, “the representative qualities of material collected”, and “the essential relationship between this unique museological development and musealisation of Sweden as a nation”.¹

These are my main points so far:

- Change is a strongly communicated ideal in texts on Samdok. The texts describe how the network continually reinvents itself, responding to societal changes as well to changes within university based ethnology.
- One of the most significant changes in the Samdok organisation was the restructuring of the working groups, the Pools. It coincided with debates on selection and supported a shift in the logic for sampling.
- Samdok is characterised by a high degree of reflexivity. The rationality of reflexivity replaced social scientific rationality within the organisation as a way to monitor collecting contemporary Sweden.

This paper does not discuss the two most recent changes within Samdok. In connection with the network's thirtieth anniversary, decisive powers within Samdok initiated an international committee for collecting, COMCOL, within the International Council of

¹ This research is part of the EuNaMus project, (European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen) a three year project (2010–13) funded by the EU Seventh Framework programme, originally commissioned by Tema Q Linköping University and Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, partners in the project <http://www.eunamus.eu>.

Museums.² In 2010, Samdok broadened its activities to comprise also issues regarding the development of existing collections, and a wider set of heritage institutions and professional categories were invited to join the network.³

CAPTURING CONTINUOUS CHANGE

The name Samdok is made out of the two word parts: “sam” and “dok”. Together they implicate the coordination of contemporary fieldwork research and acquisition by collaboration. The “sam” part stands for samordning (coordination), samarbete (collaboration) and samtid (the present or the contemporary).⁴ The “dok” part stands for dokumentation, Swedish for compiling information. Inspired by then current directions in the Swedish academic discipline of ethnology, Samdok complemented the collection of objects with methods such as fieldwork, interviews, photography and in some cases film making.⁵ The word “dokumentation” further associates to the production of produced problem based records of everyday life, and the use of the word also associates museum activities to practices of journalists, filmmakers, photographers and writers. Connecting to such a broader cultural trend, ethnologists strived to distance themselves from earlier generations of ethnologists, such as the folkloric romantic strands and the historical investigations of objects within the discipline.⁶

Samdok’s activities are elucidated in books and articles, many of which are published by Nordiska Museet Sweden’s major cultural historical museum, who also host the network. The paragraph above is based on a chapter, by Eva Silvén, in a book on Nordiska Museet’s collection practices over time. The chapter has been described as one of the key texts in a self-evaluative tradition within Samdok in which earlier texts are referenced and interpreted.⁷

Development, or more specifically change and newness, are recurrent rhetorical figures in texts on Samdok. As Elin von Unge states in her master thesis on Samdok, the organisation has itself changed over the years and today it aims at reporting at processes of change in society.⁸

The concept of change is recurrently deemed positive and associated with the concept of newness. New ways of approaching collection and field research is often rhetorically contrasted to the old practices of earlier generations of university researchers or museum employees. In the 1970s, Samdok was presented as a new way of organising museum work which would lead to improvements of previous, and old, unsystematic and excessive collecting. The initiators argued for a more systematic approach to collecting than the traditional museum practice of the more or less arbitrary accepting of gifts from the public.⁹ In a similar vein, texts produced in the 1990s and 2000s point to how Samdok has abandoned

² Fägerborg, Eva, ”Från Samdoksekretariatet, Samdok-forum, 2010:1. See also Comcol’s webpage: <http://www.comcol-icom.org/>, last accessed 2011.09.01.

³ Fägerborg, Eva, ”Från Samdoksekretariatet, Samdok-forum, 2011:1. See also “Programförklaring”, <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/Publication.asp?publicationid=2981&cat=305&catName=Om%5FSamdok&topmenu=143>, last accessed 2011.09.01.

⁴ Stadgar för SAMDOKverksamheten, Samdok by-laws Available at Nordiska Museet’s website: <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/Upload/documents/15.pdf>. Last accessed 2011.08.30.

⁵ Silvén, Eva, ”I samtiden eller för framtiden: Om ett kunskapsbygge i senmoderniteten,” in Hammarlund-Larsson, Cecilia, Nilsson, Bo G & Silvén, Eva, Samhällsideal och framtidsbilder: Perspektiv på Nordiska museets dokumentation och forskning. Stockholm: Carlsson bokförlag and Nordiska museet, 2004, pp. 151.

⁶ Silvén, 2004, pp. 202.

⁷ von Unge, Elin, When culture becomes heritage. In search of the Samdok discourse of collecting contemporary heritage. International Museum Studies Master’s Thesis, Göteborgs universitet (University of Gothenburg): Museion, 2008, p. 18.

⁸ von Unge, 2008, p. 19–20; 29

⁹ Silvén 2004. p. 174.

and moved forward from the type of scientific rationality that the initiators of Samdok nurtured.¹⁰

One of the shifts in field research and acquisition practices, pointed out in the literature on Samdok, is the way the network's ideal have altered from strivings to preserve that what withers away, often the closing down of factories, towards investigations of emergent phenomena such as structural changes in the industry or farming manifested in re-locations of businesses or the increased interest in small-scale, organic and local identity-creating food production. Carefully planned field research is deemed positive and contrasted to so called fire brigade turnouts, a sort of last minute rescue operations.¹¹

SAMDOK'S MOST SIGNIFICANT TRAIT: THE POOLS

Samdok has around eighty member institutions, most of them are museums. The members voluntarily join working groups, the so called Pools, perhaps the most significant trait of Samdok. Each Pool gathers representatives from institutions all over Sweden to focus field research and acquisitions to a specific thematic area. The initial eleven pools aimed at covering working life in industrial production, the service branch and the public sector. One pool, Home pool, was devoted to family life.

The Pools make up an additional network crisscrossing on top of the museum organisation in Sweden. The unruly Swedish museumscape is divided into central and governmental museums, county museums and municipals museums, depending on the responsible authority and spatial scope of the institutions, also mirroring the structure of political jurisdiction. The so called special museums make up an additional category of museums. The National Maritime Museums and Ájtte, the Swedish Mountain and Sami Museum are examples of special museums with memberships in Samdok.

In order to find gaps in existing collections, the initiators of Samdok consulted the Outline of Cultural Materials (OCM), the standard system used by anthropologists, universities and museums for turning human life into cultural data.¹² In addition, they made use of categories developed with the fields of social science and planning. Mirroring the 1970s interest in industrial production and working life, the driving forces behind Samdok defined, demarcated and distributed responsibilities based on a model for statistics for the public sector, the commercial and industrial life, used by a government agency designated to produce data for decision-making, debates and research. To distribute the different strands of commercial and industrial life between museums, the working group turned to statistics for regional planning on types of business, numbers of employees and so on. This material was then to be compared to data from economic geography, that is the location, distribution and spatial organisation of economic activities across the regions.¹³ Even though the social scientific ideals in practice never had full impact, it was a strongly communicated ideal. Statistics and sociological categories provided the rational.¹⁴

¹⁰ Silvé, 2004; Silvé Eva & Gudmundsson, Magnus (eds), *Samtiden som kulturarv. Svenska museers samtidsdokumentation 1975–2000*, Stockholm: Nordiska museets förlag, 2006.

¹¹ Gudmundsson, Magnus & Silvé, Eva, "Tjugofem år i fält", in Silvé Eva & Gudmundsson, Magnus (eds), 2006, p.7, Björklund, Anders & Gustafsson Reinius Lotten, "Hjälteporträtt och räddningsauktioner", in Silvé Eva & Gudmundsson, Magnus (eds), p. 27, Johansson Ella & Eva Londos, "När senmoderniteten kom till Småland, in Silvé Eva & Gudmundsson, Magnus (eds), p. 31.

¹² Silvé, 2004, p. 174.

¹³ Nyström, Bengt & Gunilla Cedrenius, *Fördela museernas dokumentationsansvar – ett program för samtidsdokumentation vid kulturhistoriska museer.*, Nordiska museet, Samdok, Statens kulturråd, 1981..

¹⁴ Silvé, 2004, p. 174–179.

CHANGING WITH SOCIETY

The restructuring of the pool system in 1997 is considered to be one of the major changes within Samdok. It could be looked upon as a response to societal change as well as to changes within the discipline of ethnology. Industrial and commercial life in Sweden was about to slowly adjust to a post-industrial economy. At the same time, the discipline of ethnology directed their interest to issues of gender, ethnicity and globalisation. In addition, voices within Samdok directed the attention to that the focus on production excluded people who did not work (children, students, on sick-lists or retired). The restructuring merged the earlier set of pools into broader thematic themes, such as Local and Regional Spheres, Management of Natural Resources, Manufacture and Services, and Society and Politics, which could include changes in patterns of production and consumption, also including leisure activities. The pool for Sami Life was added in 1990 and the group for Cultural Encounters was formed in 1993. This last group does not form a proper pool, but strives to integrate matters on migration and ethnicity in the activities of all pools.

In the beginning of the 1990s, the first set of pools had noted that they had difficulties in fulfilling their assignments. A couple of them stated that their areas of responsibility included too many fundamentally different obligations, others referred to a lack of funding and support at their institutions. Some pools had very few active members. Several pointed to the challenge of keeping up with societal change, for example the pools for Textiles and Metal respectively, pointed to the fact that their respective branches were drastically restructuring, or even almost disappearing altogether as for the Swedish production of textiles. The Agriculture and Forestry pool called attention to changes due to technological developments and the Public Administration Pool had noted a shift to privatisation in the public sector.¹⁵

A proposal for a new pool system was developed and accepted by the pools and Samdok's member museums.¹⁶ In addition to the fusion of branch specific pools into broader thematic themes, the most decisive change concerned the way in which a set of perspectives and a row of challenges of social change was made to supplement the sectorial division of society. With regard to issues of representative sampling, the new pool organisation implied some new directions. The first set of pools aimed at representative samples of beforehand decided sectors for the production of services and goods.

The shift in official guidelines enabled Samdok to circumvent issues of representative sampling. The shift codified ideals already efficient among trained university ethnologist within the network. The meaningful, defined theoretically, supplanted the typical as the official ideal.¹⁷ Furthermore, by inviting Samdok members to specifically focus on the ways in which gender and/or ethnicity is constructed and enacted in specific social settings, to investigate how global flows of people, goods and information affect local life, or to compare how digitalisation affected public service sectors, a critical and qualitative research agenda replaced the empirical, quantitative paradigm.

THE FORMATIVE POWER OF THE NORDISKA MUSEET AND INSTITUTIONAL REFLEXIVITY

The Nordiska Museet hosts and finances Samdok's administrative unit, the secretariat. The secretariat is Samdok's executive body; its staff shapes the network's activities in accordance with the aims set up by the Samdok council and the interests of the pools. The council is the

¹⁵ This paragraph is based on the pool's reports in the network's periodical SAMDOK-bulletinen 1990–1992.

¹⁶ Silvé, Eva, 1997, "Samdok inför år 2000. Förslag till förändring av organisation och verksamhetsinriktning". Remissupplaga. Stockholm: Samdoksekretariatet, Nordiska museet, 1997.

¹⁷ Silvé, 2004, pp 183–185; von Unge, 2008, p 42.

policy making and overall decision-making body. It is headed by the director of the Nordiska Museet and is made up of one representative from each museum category, that is municipal, county and special/central museums. The Nordiska Museet's research council gives advice with regard to research related issues.¹⁸

It is the secretariat and the council rather than the Nordiska Museet per se, that holds the final formative power of Samdok. The secretariat keeps records of the network's activities and edits the network's periodical in which articles on ongoing projects and reports from the pool's meetings are published. The secretariat also runs the data base, available on the internet, in which the member museums' projects ideally should be registered.¹⁹ The actual projects, tapes and transcripts of interviews, fieldwork notes, photos, and objects, are archived and stored at the respective member museum. The secretariat also administers webpages, on the Nordiska Museet's website, with guiding documents and bibliographies of project publications.²⁰

Samdok may be described as a dispersed and diffused organisation, difficult to pin down. The member museums take part in Samdok's activities on a voluntary basis, and the members balance and adjust their engagement in Samdok with their own museum's means and ends. Far from all contemporary field research and acquisitions at the museums are initiated in the framework of the pools and Samdok. Many projects are initiated locally and they could be instigated by access to project funding and different types of local initiatives. Today, each pool meets once or twice a year to report and discuss plans and ongoing investigations. The meetings have turned into highly appreciated and valued platforms for method development.²¹

As to uphold the quality of the directions and focus of Samdok's policies, the Samdok council and the secretariat have initiated, and published, a row of evaluations. The first ones were performed early in the 1990s and they were to be followed by a comprehensive evaluation, designed as a research project, a decade later. The research project ran over several years and resulted in a row of reports in which Samdok related activities in seven museums were assessed by representatives from the museums themselves. Its main outcome was an edited collection with chapters collaboratively authored by university based researchers and the museum professionals who had performed the assessments.²² The overall tone of the edited collection is reflexive. The main editors of the book, as well as several of the authors, follow the academic ethnology into the footsteps of the reflexive turn within anthropology, discussing the poetics and power of representation. In the edited collection's afterword, Samdok's practice is discussed as an instantiation of the power to represent, and the discussions touches upon the representation of multiple social categories such as gender and ethnicity.²³

The recurrent, and interlaced, evaluations of Samdok could be linked to related, yet different, styles of reflexivity. In his work on cultural performances, Victor Turner, directs the interest at ways in which rituals and performances are "reflexive in the sense of showing

¹⁸ Stadgar för SAMDOKverksamheten, SAMDOK by-laws Available at Nordiska Museet's website: <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/Upload/documents/15.pdf>. Last accessed 2011.08.30.

¹⁹ Samdok-registret, <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/Samdokreg/?topmenu=143>. Last accessed 2011.09.01.

²⁰ "What is Samdok?", <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/Publication.asp?publicationid=4213&topmenu=143>. Last accessed 2011.09.01.

²¹ Interview with Eva Fägerborg, the head of SAMDOK secretariat, Nordiska Museet, Stadgar för SAMDOKverksamheten, Samdok by-laws Available at Nordiska Museet's website: <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/Upload/documents/15.pdf>. Last accessed 2011.08.30.

²² Silvén & Gudmundsson, 2006.

²³ Isacson, Maths & Silvén, Eva, "Historia med framtidsvittring", in Silvén Eva & Gudmundsson, Magnus (eds), 2006, 154–155.

ourselves ourselves ... arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves.”²⁴ When the evaluations are published in the network’s periodical and circulated, the members, scattered around Sweden at institutions with different aims, can mirror and reflect upon their own practice. Anthony Giddens casts reflexivity as a key trait in late modernity. Institutions as well individuals constantly monitor themselves in the light of new knowledge. The result is that many aspects of contemporary social life are subject to constant revisions.²⁵

Samdok’s evaluations encompass both codifying activities, at the level of descriptions, reproducing the organisation, and reflexions and revisions, allowing the network to adapt to changing circumstances. I would also suggest that the evaluations allow the network to monitor itself and in relation to funding agencies they may serve as authorising and legitimising documents. The quote that started this paper is from one of the ongoing discussions in the sphere of cultural politics on how to distribute power, resources and responsibilities between Sweden’s museums when resources are limited.

²⁴ Myerhoff, Barbara, "Life History Among the Elderly." In *The Cracked Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

²⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press, 1991.