

Indigenous resistance and historical sources: The case of forced dislocation of northern Sami in Sweden.

Essay by Mats Hellmark

Introduction

A central challenge in postcolonial historical studies is compensating for the lack of sources regarding perspectives and voices of the colonized, especially the indigenous populations. It has generally not been in the interest of the colonizers to record negative reactions or resistance towards measures taken by the state, in particular when evidence could point towards suffering caused or injustices committed.

An illustrative Swedish case is the forced dislocation of northern Sami. A recently published nonfiction book, *Herrarna satte oss hit. Om tvångsförflyttningarna i Sverige (Our Masters put us here. About forced dislocations in Sweden, my translation)* by the journalist Elin Anna Labba, has highlighted the issue and invigorated the debate.¹ This essay will investigate the issue of resistance and the sources used in Labba's book and in some scholarly studies about Sami resistance in the Nordic countries and the forced dislocations in Sweden.

Postcolonial approaches

In the field of postcolonial studies and history various strategies have been applied for making alternative world views and actual opinions of the colonized populations in the past visible.

An in-depth approach has been to question the very basis for knowledge making, the dominant Enlightenment philosophy and Eurocentric world view (that also formed a theoretical basis for legitimizing colonial undertakings). For instance, Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the Indian *Subaltern Studies* initiative, further developed in Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of *Provincializing Europe*, have opened new perspectives.² For Chakrabarty the concept meant finding out in what sense European ideas, that were regarded as universal, in fact were drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions.³

Lost or threatened historical perspectives can be retrieved by examining oral history and traditions. Hans Hägerdal demonstrates the possibilities offered by oral tradition with examples from Timor, where explicit rules for record keeping and a network of narrators maintained oral archives stretching several centuries back. Oral history draws on the

¹ Elin Anna Labba, *Herrarna satte oss hit: om tvångsförflyttningarna i Sverige*, Norstedts, Stockholm, 2020.

² Rochona Majumdar, *Writing Postcolonial History*, Bloomsbury Academic 2010, p 25 and 44f.

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2007, p 10.

reminiscences of individuals. According to Hägerdal the unreliability of memory can be compensated, for example by comparison with written sources.⁴

The Concurrences methodology is a recently developed approach to mapping alternative realities and perspectives, focusing on global encounters. In an introduction, Gunlög Fur discusses the need for developing new sets of questions and methods that acknowledge a plurality of knowledge regimes.⁵ She also discusses the challenge of including other, non-academical, stories of the past. One described method is to extract the voices and different perspectives that can be found in the margins of colonial archives, thereby achieving a fuller look at the whole and a position from which to question the centre.⁶

The essay "Colonial Encounter in Early Modern Sápmi" by Daniel Lindmark is another example of utilising margins of colonial archives (in this case accounts of the schoolmasters of the Sami schools). He discusses examples of subversive attitudes among students in the 17th and 18th centuries: the headstrong youngster Anders,⁷ and Olof Sjulsson who later became sheriff. Sjulsson uses the education he received in a way which undermines the worldly and spiritual power of the authorities. According to Lindmark Sjulsson "exemplifies how skilful mimicking of language and reasoning applied by the missionaries and government officials was used to evade constraints and regulations imposed by them".⁸

The acculturation practice of the Swedish government in Sápmi, as described by Lindmark, has common traits with the assimilation of Native Americans. These attempts play a prominent part in *Encounter on the Great Plains. Scandinavian Settlers and the Dispossession of Dakota Indians 1890 – 1930* by Karen V. Hansen, a study that employs an ethnographic approach to history and a methodology closely affiliated to *the Concurrences methodology*.

With a starting point in her own family history Hansen finds ways of compensating for lacking documentation concerning both groups. Many types of sources are used, with a strong

⁴ Hans Hägerdal, "Oral Tradition and the Postcolonial Challenge, The Historiographical Autonomy of Non-Lettered Societies."

⁵ Gunlög Fur, "Concurrences as a Methodology for Discerning Concurrent Histories", *Concurrent Imaginaries, Postcolonial Worlds*, Brill/Rodopi, 2017, p.36.

⁶ Gunlög Fur, 'Reading margins: colonial encounters in Sápmi and Lenapehoking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *Feminist studies.*, 2006(32):3, 2006, p. 492f.

⁷ Daniel Lindmark, "Colonial Encounter in Early Modern Sápmi", *Scandinavian colonialism and the rise of modernity: small time agents in a global arena*, Springer, New York, 2013, p. 136f.

⁸ Ibid p 138.

focus on oral history. She interviews as many knowledgeable persons as possible, especially from the Dakota group (as their version of events was downplayed and less documented).⁹

The radical strategies of dislocation, separation and/or assimilation vis-à-vis the American Natives has been a heated debate for long. In Sweden the discussion about colonizing efforts and racial prejudice towards the Sami has been increasingly on the agenda. For instance, the racial prejudice in the educational field and the scientific practice of race biology was the subject of the acclaimed film *Sameblod* by Amanda Kernell (2016), artists Sofia Jannok and Maxida Märak have raised the same issues in their songs, and Linnea Axelsson's poetical novel *Aednan* about Sami families' 20th century experiences of, among other hardships, the forced dislocations, was awarded the August prize in 2018.

The forced dislocations

The dislocation of Sami reindeer herders and their families to more southerly locations took place in the first part of the 20th century, with a peak during the 1920s. Gunlög Fur has described these policies as "clearly [...] colonial practices".¹⁰

Negotiations between Sweden and Norway regarding grazing lands and fishing led to a closing of the border for the seasonal migration, a distinct break with traditions and previous laws. Drastic policies empowered local authorities to forced slaughter of reindeer and removal of families. Over 400 Samis from Karesuando and Jukkasjärvi were forced to move south. There they came into conflict with other Sami people.¹¹

The historian Patrik Lantto has studied the forced dislocations as ways of solving problems in the Swedish Sami policy, with special emphasis on the earliest attempts at dislocations that took place in the 1890s.¹²

His sources are official documents and letters, largely deriving from the correspondence and protocols of Lapp bailiffs (state officials). He finds that there was successful Sami resistance to the dislocations in the 1890s. The authorities' position was weaker then and the attitude more understanding towards the problems than later. The Sami population also acted more jointly and through legal actions. The resistance in the 1920s was more individual in character

⁹ Karen V. Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains: Scandinavian settlers and the dispossession of Dakota Indians, 1890-1930*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p 19ff.

¹⁰ Gunlög Fur, 'Dealing With the Wrongs of History?', *Visions of Sápmi*, Arthub Publisher, Røros, 2015, p.138

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Patrik Lantto, "'Att det för lapparne skulle vara likgiltigt hvar han flyttade": tvångsförflyttningar som problemlösning i svensk samepolitik', *Människor i norr : samisk forskning på nya vägar*, 2008, p 141.

and therefore easier to break.¹³ Lantto quotes the Lapp bailiff J. O. Holm about the first dislocations in the 1920s: "The Lapps have performed the move with joy despite the many difficulties and also costs and some loss that accompany a move of this kind" (my translation). Lantto questions the described willingness.

The first moves in the 1920s were shorter, but as the pasture lands in the region Norrbotten gradually were filled up the authorities suggested moves to distant areas in Västerbotten and Jämtland. The ambition was to coerce the reindeer herders to move, with forced dislocation as a looming threat.¹⁴ Resistance started to form, but written petitions concerning health and economic problems were constantly turned down by the authorities.¹⁵

Lantto describes two strategies for avoiding dislocation, besides the petitions. Some reindeer herders initially ignored the authorities' demands. Others feigned acceptance, but started the move too late in the season, and therefore found reasons to halt and settle in the southern part of the region. Some attempted both the strategies, possibly inspired by the success in the 1890s. This time all were however forced to move in the end.¹⁶

In the recently published nonfiction book *Herrarna satte oss hit* the journalist Elin Anna Labba writes about the forced dislocation of northern Sami in the 1920s and 1930s. Her ancestors were among the dislocated.¹⁷

The family connection is one of many similarities with Karen V. Hansen's *Encounter on the Great Plains*. Labba's book is based on almost 100 interviews with elderly people who participated, as well as older interviews, pictures, yoiks, letters and official documents. A major difference is that Labba's book does not feature footnotes or present sources in a systematic way. Instead voices and documents form a fragmentary choir, lamenting the human consequences, the longing for the lost home grounds and the hardships suffered.

The silencing of the yoiks is a recurrent theme. The dislocated could no longer express themselves in the traditional way, and the new settings inspired no yoiks.

In the archives of the authority Lappväsendet Labba finds few traces of protest from the dislocated, but many complaints from southern Sami villages against the move, conflicts that

¹³ Ibid p. 151f.

¹⁴ Ibid. P 148.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 149.

¹⁶ Ibid. p 150.

¹⁷ Elin Anna Labba, *Herrarna satte oss hit: om tvångsförflyttningarna i Sverige*, Norstedts, Stockholm, 2020, p. 11f.

would linger and deepen as the groups used different methods of herding and had different traditions and languages.¹⁸

The Kemi family dared to challenge the authorities about the move, even taking the train all the way to Stockholm to appeal to the king. Instead of leniency they received an extra harsh treatment and were dislocated forcibly two times.¹⁹ An included newspaper article from Norrbottens-Kuriren has a clearly derisive tone, describing the family as "stubborn".²⁰

The common method of resistance, according to Labba, was clandestine, silent. People were moving closer to each other ("Smyger", sneaking, they call it themselves), families were delaying the moves deliberately, finding practical excuses and kept on reuniting and finding old friends in defiance of the prescribed destinations.²¹ "The elderly like to tell this, that in midst of all the subordination there was a little bit of protest", Labba writes, adding that tricking the authorities was a welcome source of laughter in the midst of the difficulties.²²

Evasive strategies of defiance

There is another recent study describing strategies of Sami resistance in colonial conflicts of the same period. Veli-Pekka Lehtola, a professor of Sami culture, writes about Sami responses to nationalistic ambitions, modernization, and asymmetrical power relations in the Finnish municipality of Utsjoki in the 1920s and 1930s. The conflicts were less pronounced in Finland compared to Sweden, and the responses he describes are not of the outspoken kind. Referring to other studies of indigenous resistance he identifies other possibilities for small communities to handle demands from the majority culture besides recognisable resistance or collaboration: tenacious adaptation with more subtle forms of everyday resistance.²³

His major source actually is fiction, but a fiction that is based on years of knowledge gathering as county constable in Utsjoki. E. N. Manninen wrote a lot of nonfiction based on his experiences, which he later used for novels describing the fundamental dissimilarity between the cultural understandings of the Sami and the Finns.²⁴ When Manninen first came

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁹ Ibid., p 143 and 151.

²⁰ Ibid., p 153.

²¹ Ibid., p 105 and 155.

²² Ibid., p. 105.

²³ Veli-Pekka Lehtola, "Evasive strategies of defiance – everyday resistance histories among the Sámi", *Knowing from the indigenous north: Sámi approaches to history, politics and belonging*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2019, p. 30.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

to Utsjoki he shared the typical view of Finnish authorities, regarding the Sami as a lower people. The task for the authorities was to raise their consciousness and morals to the level of a modern society by alienating them from their old habits. A decade later he described the Utsjoki Sami as "cunning, scheming, relatively enlightened and flexible". A central theme in the novels is the urge of the Sami to evade any kind of official outside order and control.²⁵

Examples of this form of evasive strategies were both based in cultural differences, for example a different, circular conception of time – task oriented and focused on seasonal rhythm rather than on the clock – and an eluding way of answering questions. Sometimes questions were met with silence, other times answers expanded into stories and anecdotes.²⁶ In the case of the so-called reindeer thefts that the constable of the novel must deal with, Manninen stresses the constant use of double communication, metaphors and euphemisms.²⁷

Lehtola links these strategies to other subaltern groups usage of minor disobedience, evasion, silence, irony, and double communications as ways of coping with the enemy, as well as amusing themselves at the expense of the authorities. Lehtola also raises the thought that the Sami utilized the prejudices placed upon them by outsiders, for example presumed stupidity, slowness, or laziness, could function as a cover for conscious disobedience.²⁸

Conclusions

Resistance is not always the obvious and visible. For indigenous populations as the Sami it can also take the shape of silence, feigning acceptance or playing cunning games with the authorities, turning their own weapons against them. These strategies can be seen in accounts of Sami resistance all the way from the early modern examples of Lindmark's essay to Lehtola's description of evasive strategies of defiance in the 1930s.

Retrieving lost voices and opinions of oppressed and sometimes silenced indigenous populations requires conscious work. The examples show that methods such as extracting from the margins of colonial archives, using fiction and other non-academic sources or digging deep into oral history through interviews and examining longstanding traditions can be useful. An important factor that has been lifted in postcolonial studies is questioning the very knowledge regimes of Eurocentricity, opening for different cultural perspectives.

²⁵ Ibid., p 33.

²⁶ Ibid p 34f.

²⁷ Ibid p 40.

²⁸ Ibid p 42f.

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