



Contested Sami Heritage: Drums and *sieidis* on the Move

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Abstract

This paper is about some objects of Sami origin and their movements between different museum contexts in an historical perspective. The study forms a part of my contribution to the research program “The sociomaterial dynamics of museum collections”, which includes three Swedish national museums in Stockholm: the Nordiska Museet (cultural history), the National Historical Museum (history/archaeology) and the Museum of Ethnography (third/fourth/non-Western world). My part of the project involves the Sami collections in these museums. For this paper, I have chosen to focus on two categories of objects – drums and *sieidis* – and the possibilities of analysing their role as actors in social networks and how they contribute to construct and maintain power relations between people and institutions.

Introduction

This paper forms a part of my contribution to the overarching research program “The sociomaterial dynamics of museum collections”, where I, together with Lotten Gustafsson Reinius (the Museum of Ethnography) and Fredrik Svanberg (the National Historical Museum), look into objects and issues at our three museums that in some way have been disputed or handled as problematic: Sami collections, human remains and repatriation. The dynamic interplay between material practices and social processes of change will be analysed with emphasis on turning points in collecting, classification, display and storage, as well as the movement of objects to, from and between the museums. Our underlying idea is that museum objects have a strong ability to define identity and social relations, and to create both conflict and reconciliation. Special interest is directed towards objects which after a long period of invisibility are activated – renamed, reordered, recycled, moved from storage to the exhibition space or vice versa, or replaced in other museums or locations. Our work hypothesis is that these actions form a fruitful analytical starting point for the study of cultural and social change (Gustafsson Reinius, Silvén & Svanberg 2012).

In an introductory paper on this subject, I considered the movements of Sami collections between our three national museums, thereby identifying the Sami as a part of Sweden’s cultural history (the Nordiska Museet), a historical/archaeological phenomenon (the National Historical Museum), an ethnographic/non-Western one (the Museum of Ethnography) or – later on – as an indigenous people in their own right (Ájtte, the Swedish Mountain and Sami Museum) (Silvén 2011). As a theoretical point of departure, I then indicated actor-network-theory, how the collections have become significant actors in social networks, together with museums, scholarly fields, political bodies, the Sami society and private collectors (e.g. Latour 1998, 2005). In this presentation I will narrow the scope to two categories of objects, inspired by such concepts as “the cultural biography of things” and the method of “following the object” and how these methods can be used to analyse materiality’s role in shaping social systems of value, power and aesthetics (Kopytoff 1986; Czarniawska 2007). My empirical examples will be sacred artefacts like ceremonial drums and *sieidis* in the collections of the Nordiska Museet, objects that illustrate particularly well the ideas of “The sociomaterial dynamics of museum collections” according to both new ethical considerations and new claims from indigenous groups. Consequently, although more indicated than developed in this short overview, a third theoretical category will be the concept of “decolonising/indigenous methodologies” (Smith 1999, Porsanger 2004), where knowledge and meaning are defined from alternative positions, compared to earlier research.

Sami cultural heritage

The Sami are an indigenous people, with their traditional lands stretching over northern Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia – today the transnational area *Sápmi*. For centuries there has been an intense circulation of Sami material heritage outside the Sami society, involving both museums and private hands. Collecting was particularly active from the last decades of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth and the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, the national museum of cultural history, was an influential actor. The museum’s Sami collections contain around 8,000 single objects, mostly relating to different aspects of everyday

life – living, housing, cooking, clothing, handicraft, hunting, reindeer herding etc. – but to a small extent also sacred and spiritual artefacts, less than 100 items, mainly acquired during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to a division of the collections between the national museums, in principle no human remains are kept in the Nordiska Museet; those few once held there have been deposited at the National Historical Museum. For now I will leave the issue about human remains aside and concentrate on non-human artefacts.

From its opening in 1873, the Nordiska Museet became a center for Sami collecting, field studies, research and exhibitions (Hammarlund-Larsson 2008; Silvéen 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). This position was further strengthened in the late 1930s, 40s and 50s when the ethnographer Ernst Manker became the first curator for the Sami collections, to which he contributed himself with field research, questionnaires, photographs, objects, publications etc. The collecting at both ethnographic and cultural history museums was at this time to a great extent characterised by transferring objects and knowledge from the periphery to the center, from inside or outside the country to the national museums in the capital.

In *Sápmi* as a whole, these movements were reversed in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, due to growing Sami political activism and the strengthening of regional institutions in the north of Fennoscandinavia. In Sweden, the authority of the national museums in the capital was questioned, and in 1980 an exhibition at the Nordiska Museet was postponed half a year, due to a serious conflict between the museum and the Sami representatives (Silvéen 2009). In 1989, a new museum opened in northern Sweden: Ájtte, the Swedish Mountain and Sami Museum in Jokkmokk, northern Lapland. As an act of repatriation, the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm deposited its Sami collections there, and at the Nordiska Museet collecting slowed down dramatically. The old periphery started turning into a new center, the “nation” *Sápmi*, as a node in a global indigenous community.

Utilising my ongoing work, I will here outline the fate of some Sami drums and *sieidis* related to the Nordiska Museet. My main interests are not in current reclaiming and repatriation processes as such; instead I focus on analysing the dynamic movements of objects in a historical perspective, through different actors and networks, thereby depicting the biographies and trajectories of objects and collections. Why were the artefacts acquired by the museum and why returned? What power relations do they indicate or shape? What have been the political, social and cultural consequences of taking them from *Sápmi*, moving them around, and then back again? How to explain that Sami also helped bring them to the museum? How has the interest and influence of Sami actors in these processes changed over time?

In the current repatriation discourse, it can be noticed that the act of physical restitution is not the only way for indigenous peoples to take control of their heritage. Other possibilities are joint exploration of collections (Clifford 1999; Brown & Peers 2006) or the locating of objects kept in museums and other institutions and entering them into databases. Ájtte has contributed to several inventories of that kind, presented as a way to repatriate information about Sami heritage, but possibly this could also work as a first step in a physical restoration process (Recalling...; Edbom 2005; Kuoljok 2007; Harlin 2008). Yet another way to exercise control is to promote indigenous scholarly research, re-examine earlier source material and document indigenous conceptions that might challenge established interpretations of Sami heritage – or simply more actively integrate the Sami point of view in current research.



Fig. 1: A Sami delegation appointed by the government studying drums in the custody of the Nordiska Museet, 1945. From the left: Mattias Kuoljok, John Utsi, Anna Gustafsson, Ernst Manker (curator), Gustaf Park, Petrus Gustafsson, Isak Parffa and Nils Erik Kuoljok. Photo: Nordiska Museet.

The drums

The Sami ceremonial drums are testimonies of traditional Sami religious beliefs, where the *noaidi* – the shaman – used the drum to communicate with the gods, at times entering into a state of trance. But the drum could also be kept and used by ordinary people for predicting the future and for making important decisions in everyday life (Manker 1938: 17; Westman & Utsi 1998; Westman 2005; Viridi Kroik 2007). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the authorities defined the use of the drums as superstition and sorcery, which made them valuable as collectors' items among the owners of cabinets of curiosity and as ceremonial gifts between people in power in contemporary Europe (Manker 1938: 72). When the Christian mission reached Sápmi, many drums were confiscated – sometimes burned, sometimes damaged – and at

times their owners were brought to court, punished or in some cases even executed (Manker 1965: 113 ff.; Rydving 1991: 29 ff.; Rydving 2004/1993: 54 ff., Granqvist 2001). Some families didn't deliver their drums to the court, explaining that they were kept in the mountains (Manker 1938: 434 ff., 452). Even today drum remains can be found under rocks and stones in the Sami landscape, but nobody knows if they were once hidden or buried. If found, the drums are mostly left undisturbed in their secret places (Viridi Kroik 2007: 80 f.).

In parallel to their destruction, drums were also delivered to state owned research institutions and colleges and later on transferred to the National Historical Museum (Manker 1938: 450). Over the centuries, many researchers and writers showed interest in the drums, but the most significant texts were written in the middle of the twentieth century, by the above mentioned Ernst Manker. In the beginning of the 1930s, together with his wife, he searched European museums and collections and found around 80 Sami drums (71 + 6 "unauthentic" + 4 without drumheads) which he presented in one of his major works, *Die lappische Zaubertrummel* in two thick volumes (Manker 1938, 1950). The title means "The Sami witch-drum", but nowadays they are usually called ceremonial drums, shaman drums or Sami drums. In this work Manker described the traditional Sami religion and its beliefs, where after he examined every single drum in its materiality – how it was made, what material and what kind of technique had been used, constituting the base for the classification of the drums in various form categories, related to different geographical areas (Manker 1938). A fascinating detail that sheds special light over the biographies of the drums is that the names of the former owners are written on some of the confiscated drums, most of them still readable almost 300 years later (Manker 1938; Viridi Kroik 2007: 69 f.).

Manker's thorough material approach was a substantial contribution to earlier drum research. It had, on the one hand, focused on the role of the *noidi* in Sami religion and his use of the drum, on the other hand, on the supposed meaning of the figures on the drumhead, according to Sami cosmology (Manker 1938: 20; 1950: 139 ff.). However, Manker put the same effort in copying, identifying and trying to understand the signs on the drums as in his description of the other material features (Manker 1950). He interpreted the brownish-red figures – coloured by alder bark – as a kind of story-telling, about the real world and the world of the gods. His many publications, both scientific (above) and popular (Manker 1965), made this image world accessible for generations of readers, and the symbolic figures came to inspire, among others, contemporary artists in their work. Successively the signs have also been used for popular culture and tourist purposes, even in Sami contexts. Today they can be found on t-shirts, coffeecups, lighters, key chains and other souvenirs, a use that sometimes has been questioned on ethical and ethnopolitical grounds.

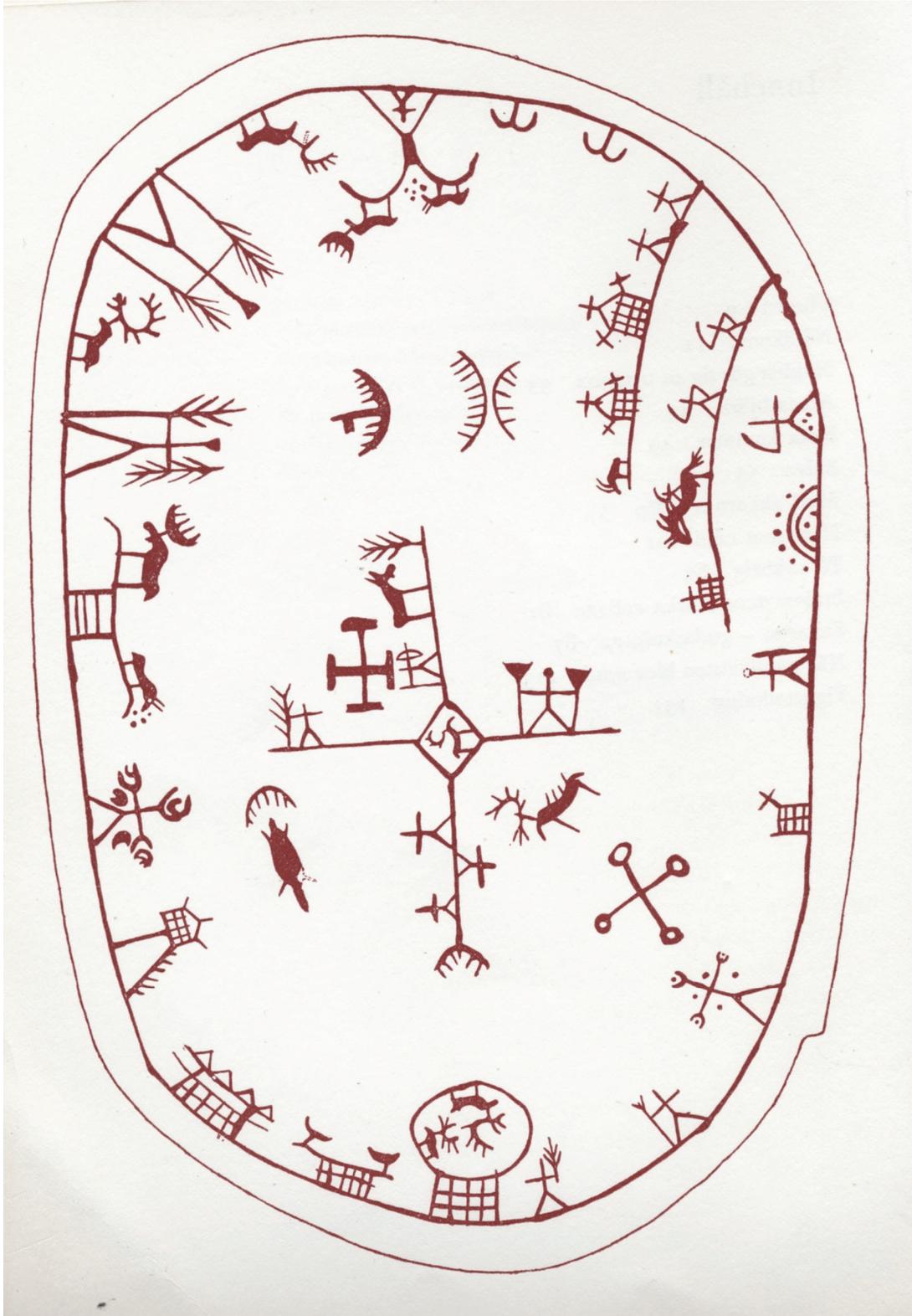


Fig. 2: Ernst Manker's copy of the drawings upon a drum from Lycksele, southern Lapland, where he interprets the figures as mythological beings as well as elements from real life (Manker 1965: 8).

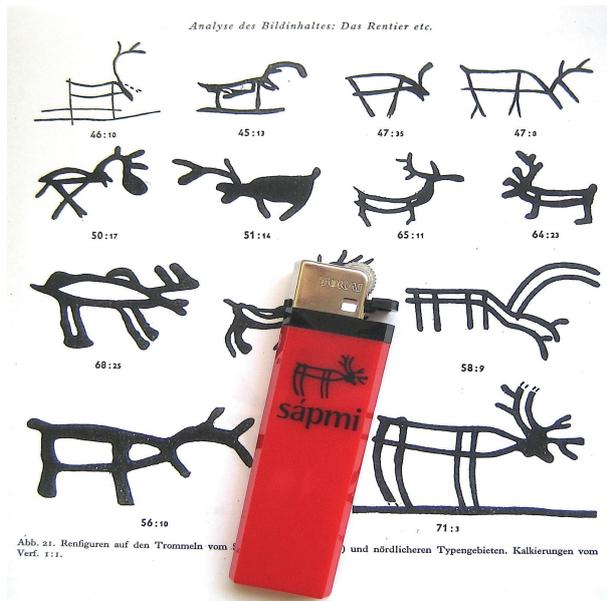


Fig. 3: The design of the lighter is copied from one of Manker’s drawings of reindeer on the drums (Manker 1950: 35).

Among the known drums, 34 are in the custody of the Nordiska Museet, the rest scattered across different European museums, thus a part of a common cultural heritage (Edbom 2005). In 1943, 25 of the drums at the Nordiska Museet were deposited from the National Historical Museum as a result of Manker’s ambition to bring the Sami material heritage in the national museums of Stockholm together in the Nordiska Museet, thereby creating there a “Lappish central museum” (Hammarlund-Larsson 2008; Silvén 2010, 2011). The transfer from the Historical Museum was significant; from symbolising state superiority over Sami culture and identity, the drums were now turned into a representation of traditional Sami religion in a foundation for Swedish cultural history, the Nordiska Museet. Four of the drums in the collection are today on long term loan to museums in the north, another ten deposited at Ájtte, as a kind of repatriation. At Ájtte, most of those drums are on display in the permanent exhibition *Trumtid* – “Drum Time” (Westman & Utsi 1998).

In connection with the Sami political mobilisation of the 1960s and 70s, Sami people became interested in the traditional religion and the drums, as both material and immaterial heritage. Today there are people performing drum ceremonies, making copies of historical drums or making new drums with symbols of modern life, representing our own time (Lindquist 1997). Not surprisingly, there are different opinions both inside and outside Sami society about this use of heritage. For example, the inclusion of one of the Sami handicraft artist Helge Sunna’s modern drums in an exhibition at the Museum of Ethnography started a debate within the museum about what should be considered as “authentic Sami art” (Durand 2010: 102). The responsible museum curator and Sunna meant that the “authenticity” of the drum lay in the creator’s knowledge of the tradition, the environment and the materials used, as well as in his ability to express his own vision of contemporary Sami culture. The critics, however, recognised only “authenticity” in the reproduction of the traditional forms of the past centuries (ibid.).



Fig. 4: In the Nordiska Museet there are two drums on show in the permanent Sami exhibition. To the left one from northern Lapland, depicted in Johannes Schefferus' *Lapponia* (1673/1956: 127) after it was collected for the Swedish chancellor Magnus Gabriel de la Gardie as a document over Sami culture and religion (Manker 1938: 18, 785 ff.). To the right a small one from Jokkmokk, northern Lapland, with an unusual form, compared to the known types in museum collections, and consequently questioned as "false". Photo: Mats Landin, Nordiska Museet. (Inv.no. 228846, 73190a.)



Fig. 5: A contemporary Sami drum, made by Helge Sunna in 1999, for the Museum of Ethnography. Around the frame the traditional drum symbols. To the left a helicopter, multi-storey buildings and cars, to the right people going alpine skiing and bird hunters with rifles. In the center the Sami flag and the rocket base Esrange in Kiruna, located in the middle of *Sápmi*. Photo: Museum of Ethnography. (Inv.no. 2001.18.1.)

Right now, there are no formal claims for restitution of the drums in the Nordiska Museet. But there is a popular opinion, saying that the drums ought to be kept in the Sami area or in the Sami central museum, Ájtte. It's said, that if you listen carefully you can hear the drums in the Nordiska Museet mumbling and humming, longing to "go home". Another story tells about how happy the drums that were brought to Ájtte were when they arrived, jumping all night long and triggering the burglar alarm, again and again.

The *sieidis*

In the landscape there used to be special places and objects, known by the term *sieidi*, which the Sami regarded as sacred (Manker 1957, 1965: 87ff.). These could be a part of a cliff, a remarkable stone or an unusually shaped piece of a tree, mainly formed by nature but sometimes adjusted by people. The *sieidis* out of stone are the most common type in museum collections. According to the traditional religion they were worshiped together with offerings like reindeer antlers, meat and fat. Among the mobile *sieidis* many were removed from Sápmi in times when the Sami didn't appreciate them as heritage, as they do today – sometimes with the aid of Sami people, sometimes against their will. There are nearly 40 *sieidis* in the collections of the Nordiska Museet, most of them taken from the mountains by travellers, scholars and tourists and after some time in private hands donated to the museum. Today such collections are questioned, regarding how the objects are kept according to traditional values, and if they should be in the museum at all instead of being returned to their original setting.

If we compare the biographies of the *sieidis* to the corresponding ones of the drums, there are certain differences, although both kinds of artefacts may have ended up in the same museum collection. The drums have a long history of being kept in governmental custody since they were confiscated during the Christian mission, which was one way of colonising the north and subordinating the Sami to the Swedish nation state. The background of the *sieidis* is, on the other hand, rather an effect of colonising the north by tourism and travelling, but also by direct museum collecting. *Sieidis* were one object category that Artur Hazelius, the founder of the Nordiska Museet and the connected open-air museum Skansen, was particularly interested in when he sent out his "collectors" in the 1890's, with the aim of acquiring a material base for his new museums (Hammarlund-Larsson 2008: 91 ff.).

To continue the comparison: the drums have a public history. As material heritage they have been researched in several ways and their symbolic figures have been used in artworks as well as in popular representations of "Saminess". Both contemporary drums and different kinds of replicas are manufactured today. The history of the *sieidis* as collectors' items is of a more obscure character. After entering the museum collections, most *sieidis* have been stored, barely researched (except Manker 1957), some of them displayed, but mainly left in peace. In parallel to the popular narratives concerning the drums, it has even been questioned if all the stones defined as *sieidis* in the museum collections really are authentic, or if the collectors were enticed by the Sami into carrying away ordinary stones, leaving the sacred ones behind. Like the narratives about the drums, these stories are not necessarily believed to be true, rather they are means to express feelings and wishes among the Sami.



Fig. 6: Today there is one *sieidi* on display in the Nordiska Museet. It originates from Sorsole, southern Lapland, where people still can retell the story of how it was abducted in 1925 and taken to the National Historical Museum. In 1943 it was deposited to the Nordiska Museet, together with the above mentioned drums (Manker 1957: 239 f.). Catalogue card, Nordiska Museet.

However, there are *sieidis* challenging this pattern and becoming individuals with a publicly known biography. For these *sieidis* it is possible to reconstruct their itinerary from the original setting through the hands of professional or amateur collectors to private homes or museums. The most well-known case is the story of one *sieidi* from Sieberboulda in Sirges Sami *siida* (community) in northern Lapland (Manker 1957: 170 f.; Kuoljok, Kuoljok & Westman Kuhmunen 2010). It was brought from its original location by two young noblemen, in the year 1900, during an adventurous mountain trip. After long-winded negotiations with the Sami guides, the visitors were assisted in bringing the *sieidi* with them (and some others, too). In 1905 one of the men donated it to the Museum of Ethnography, where it was placed outside the backyard entrance door, together with a totem pole from Canada (repatriated in 2006). In 1947 the *sieidi* was borrowed by the Nordiska Museet and Ernst Manker for his new Sami exhibition, *Lapparna* – “The Laps”, where it was given a prominent position surrounded by other *sieidis* from the

museum's own collections. According to Manker, the Sami Mattias Kuoljok, who collaborated strongly in the making of the exhibition, watched the arranging of his ancestors' divinity with mixed feelings, "... a sense of reverence that nevertheless didn't lead him to oppose the mounting of the *sieidi*. The context appeared justifying to him" (Manker 1957: 170). In 1981 the *sieidi* was also included in the following exhibition *Samerna* – "The Sami", in both cases representing traditional Sami religious beliefs and the idea of sacred places and artefacts. After insistent demands it was finally returned to the Museum of Ethnography in 2002, in order to be deposited at Ájtte together with the rest of its Sami collections.



Fig. 7: The mounting of the *sieidi* from Sieberboulda for the 1947 Sami exhibition in the Nordiska Museet. Photo: Lennart Nenckler, Nordiska Museet.

In Ájtte, the *sieidi* was once again integrated in an exhibition about religious beliefs – the earlier mentioned *Drum Time* – but this time together with its biography, including a detailed description of how it was brought from the mountains, according to a newly found diary of one of the young noblemen. Beside its own biography, the *sieidi* was also telling a story about the circulation and use of Sami heritage, a new dimension in the narratives of Sami history. The transfer to Ájtte was marked by an official and emotionally charged ceremony with participants from the Sami community concerned, Ájtte and the Museum of Ethnography (Ohre 2003; Kuoljok, Kuoljok & Westman Kuhmunen 2010). Despite having spent a long time in other hands and being branded by the collectors' inventory numbers, objects like drums and *sieidis* are obviously still experienced as authentic and affecting. Independent of what people believe in or not, these artefacts are today given new meaning and are handled with respect, according to history, heritage and religion.



Fig. 8: “Sieidi back in Sápmi. A happy and affected Apmut Kuoljok beside the returned sieidi.” *Fjärde Världen* 2003:1.

Conclusion

Sami representations in heritage and museums have always contributed to defining Sami identity and the societal position of the Sami. Museum collections and exhibitions correspond to changes in ideas and politics, but they also form a dynamic power that itself creates and reinforces change. By following the shifting fate of objects – in this case drums and *sieidis* – it is possible to analyse their role as actors in social networks and how they contribute to construct and maintain power relations between people and institutions. The method also offers the possibility of understanding the changing interpretation and assessment of museum objects and collections, especially when connected with conflicts and negotiation processes, inside as well as outside the Sami society. Materiality plays a central part but is not restricted to the tangible artefacts, it includes also a variety of imaginative representations. But the actual physical movement of objects to and from different places plays a central part in this performance. Place matters in the shaping of centres and peripheries, nations and identities, in the current global indigenous discourse.

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