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Changes in Film Representations of Sami Culture and Identity

Introduction

My intention is to analyse changes in ideas and discursive strategies in selected films from 1929 to 2007 as regards representations of Sami culture and Sami identity in Finnmark. In different ways the films indicate a conflict of cultures and point to problems of exploitation of indigenous peoples, which may be regarded as part of Nordic colonialism.

The emphasis will be on *Lajla* (1929) and the prize-winning *Veiviseren* (1987). The story of the young girl Lajla is told from a non-Sami point-of-view, and the mode of representation of otherness is of importance. In 1937 an abbreviated version of *Lajla* by the same director was presented, and a comparison of the two versions will show changes in the representation of ethnicity. Per Høst's narrative documentaries *Same-Jakki* (1957) and *Sami-Ællin* (1972), seen from an ethnic Norwegian perspective, will briefly be discussed and compared to the ideas and discourse in *Lajla*.

The action film *Veiviseren* (The Guide) (1987) by Nils Gaup represents a totally different perspective by focusing on power relations, religious attitudes and ethical values. The language of the film is Sami. Finally, Gaup's most recent film, *Kautokeino-opprøret* (Kautokeino riot) (2007), a narrative based on historical events, will be briefly discussed.

Stereotypes and colonialism

The oldest film representation is based on J.A. Friis' story "Lajla" from 1881, and translated into Swedish, Dutch and French. Friis was a professor of Sami language and he wrote narratives and descriptions from Finnmark. *Lajla* refers to a real incident which Friis, according to a comment by the literary historian Francis Bull, has "given a romantic decoration accompanied by lively

descriptions of Sami folk life” (Bull:1963:773). The two film versions as well as the book depict the life of the Sami people as exotic and romantic.

In his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) Homi Bhabha explores what he calls the process of ambivalence, which he claims to be central to the stereotypical description of other cultures and is a major discursive strategy in colonial discourse. (Bhabha 2006:95). The representation of the Sami in J.A. Friis’ story “Lajla” from 1881 may be called stereotypical and may be elucidated by Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence, as it shows a romantic fascination for the aboriginal and unspoilt, and simultaneously reveals a discriminating attitude to what is conceived as underdeveloped and inferior. By repeating and fixing its prejudiced view of the Sami as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, Norwegian society could justify its colonialist supremacy (see Bhabha 2006:101). The following analysis argues that the representation of Sami culture and identity in the film *Lajla* from 1929, like the book from 1881, contributes to supporting a colonialist discourse.

Liberation from a false Sami identity

The narrative film *Lajla* is a two-and-a-half hour long silent film in black and white, directed by George Schnéevoigt and produced by Lunde Film in 1929. The visual representation of the course of events is supported by screen texts representing dialogue and the narrator’s explanations and comments.

The film demonstrates ambivalence in the description of “the other”. The Sami family of the narrative is rich and has an extraordinarily big reindeer herd. They live and work in harmony with nature, defending their flock against attack by wolves. The film realises consequently the impression of the romantic ideal of the happy savage. In this culture Lajla is brought up as the daughter of the Sami reindeer owner and his wife. However, her Sami identity is based on a deception, a secret known to the audience, but unknown to the protagonist herself.

The truth is that Lajla is the daughter of a Norwegian tradesman in a small community in Finnmark. On a journey by reindeer

and sleigh across the wilderness the tradesman and his family are pursued by wolves, the sleigh turns over and the cradle with the baby girl is lost. She is found by the Sami family and grows up in the belief that she is their daughter. When she is old enough her father arranges a marriage between Lajla and the son of his sister, an alliance which seems to be economically as well as ethnically motivated. As both of them will inherit the wealthy reindeer owner, the property will not be split by their marriage, Lajla's Norwegian blood will be assimilated in their descendants, and Sami ethnicity will be consolidated. This is not explicit in the narrative, but the explanation lurks under the surface. However, the alliance strategy of the Sami father comes into conflict with romantic love.

On an excursion with her father to the market Lajla falls in love with a young Norwegian tradesman. Her father recognizes him as Lajla's biological cousin. So the concealment of Lajla's ethnic origin is renewed and creates dramatic irony. The ethnic contrast and the implicit discrimination is highlighted when the young man's father states that no Norwegian would ever marry a Sami girl. The cultural gap is confirmed by Lajla's behaviour when she is invited into the tradesman's house and her reactions expose her primitivity and cultural marginality.

The young Norwegian declares his love for Lajla, but she is conscious of her ethnic inferiority: "I am only a Sami girl." Even so, the couple plans to elope, but when he does not turn up, Lajla's prejudice is confirmed: never trust a *daro* (a non-Sami). She resigns and accepts her father's Sami marriage arrangement. The old Sami servant cannot bear to see Lajla so miserable, and sets out to find the young Norwegian and confront him with his deceit. When the young man assures him that he really wants to marry Lajla, the truth is disclosed: "Lajla is Norwegian – she is your cousin."

The following film sequence builds up to the climax and the turning point of the narrative.

After a dramatic race across the mountains and fights with wolves, the young Norwegian reaches the church where Lajla's wedding ceremony has started. He flings the door open and cries

out: “Stop (...) Lajla is not Aslak Lågje’s daughter. She is my relative and shall be my wife.”

Lajla and her Sami father are reconciled in spite of the social disgrace she has caused him. He probably realises his guilt, and when the young man tells Lajla about his desperate financial situation, the Sami father proudly declares that they should not forget that she was the rich Sami’s daughter. All obstacles have been cleared away, and the story has a happy ending. Romantic love is united with ethnic purity. Accordingly, the solution avoids any transgression of the dividing lines between Sami and “daro”. Instead the film confirms the importance of stereotype and race: the ethnic Norwegian girl is liberated from her false Sami identity. Nevertheless, one may object that romantic love is the winner, for the disclosure of Lajla’s identity might never have happened unless the young Norwegian had passed the test and declared that he wanted to marry the Sami girl. Homi Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence proves to be relevant to this discourse. Sami people may be regarded as inferior, but in this story true love supersedes even ethnic barriers. Lajla’s true identity is revealed in the film as a bonus.

Moderating oppression and ethnic barriers

In 1937 a revised and abbreviated version of *Lajla* was produced by the Nordic Film Company in Copenhagen with the same director. It is a black and white film with Swedish sound-track. A great many details have been altered, yet the main chain of events is kept unchanged.

When Lajla’s Sami suitor turns up, Lajla’s mother expresses her doubt, the first sign that the action of the story may change direction. The sign is repeated more explicitly when Lajla’s mother is dying while the family is moving their herd in spring. Lajla refuses to follow the Sami code and leave her behind, and her mother reveals Lajla’s identity, though no one seems to notice: “Lajla is not one of ours. Her”daro” blood cries out against us.”

Lajla falls in love with a young ethnic Norwegian, not a tradesman this time, but a student of divinity, son of the vicar. When the young man proposes, he assures Lajla that nothing can

prevent him from marrying a Sami girl. Romantic love is more explicit from the start of their relationship in this version. The young man sets out to meet Lajla and elope with her the night before her Sami wedding, but is attacked by wolves and badly wounded. When he is found he seems to be dying, but when Lajla, wearing her bridal crown, sits by his side and calls him her beloved, he wakes up, and her Sami wedding is cancelled. Lajla's love for the "daro" is stronger than her obedience to her Sami father. When the vicar arrives to what he thinks is his son's deathbed, and wonders why his son has not told him about his love, Lajla who is conscious of her ethnic inferiority, explains: "Would the daro have given his son to a Sami girl?" The vicar admits that he would not, but he has changed his opinion. At this point there is a clear difference between the two film versions. It would not have been necessary to disclose the secret of Lajla's Sami identity at all in the 1937 film. The alliance is recognised in spite of ethnic and cultural difference. Not until all is settled does Lajla's Sami father reveal that Lajla is also a "daro", but in this version there are no family ties between the lovers. The film ends with the wedding of Lajla and the vicar's son, and the ethnic difference is of no importance. This is made clear when the vicar during the wedding ceremony addresses Lajla as "the daughter of Aslak Lågje." So it all ends in joy, harmony and happiness.

From Same-Jakki to Same Ællin – from romantic preservation to criticism of ethnic marginalization

Two documentary films about Sami culture by the Norwegian film director Per Høst also demonstrate a change in the representation of Sami culture. In Per Høst's first film, *Same-Jakki* from 1957, Sami culture is represented from a social anthropological point of view as a nomad culture on the point of disappearing. The film director wants to inform and encourage empathy and insight, nevertheless the result is ambiguous. The narrator's voice-over expresses a romantic admiration for Sami culture, but his commentaries simultaneously tend to indicate a picture of the happy savage, a primitive, but extremely clever marginal tribe in the wilderness. In doing so, Per Høst's film illustrates what Homi

Bhabha calls ambivalence in colonial discourse. The film expresses a stereotype, and a romantic yearning for unspoilt life, but also hints at a colonialist attitude to the primitive. (Bhabha 2006:95,101).

In the modernized version of *Same-Jakki* with the new title *Same-Ællin* from 1972, the idyll has been replaced by critical realism and marks a shift in the colonial discourse. Criticism of political obstacles to the survival of Sami culture are clearly expressed, first and foremost the Norwegian colonisation of areas where the Sami have pasture rights. Keeping reindeer seems to have no priority when development of a water course is on the political agenda. The film narrator also objects to what he calls servility towards tourism and to the Norwegianisation policy that reduces the importance of Sami language and culture. The narrator expresses a hope that new generations of Sami people will be able to transfer sustainable elements of their culture into new forms, for instance using modern technical equipment. Whereas *Sami-Jakki* tended to present an idyllic, romantic, even nostalgic picture of the old nomadic life, *Sami-Ællin* looks forward and encourages a de-marginalization of Sami culture.

Moral values and courage in the Sami fight against oppression

The Lajla films are not Sami. In *Lajla* as well as in Høst's documentaries Sami culture is seen by a non-Sami narrator, and the Sami is "the other". There was a radical shift in perspective when the Sami director Nils Gaup presented his narrative film *Veiviseren* (The guide) (in Sami *Ofelas*) (1987). It is an action film based upon a thousand-year-old Sami legend. Gaup's film focuses on power relations, religious attitudes and ethical values. The narrative perspective as well as the language is Sami. The film boosted the self-esteem of the Sami population and also appealed to an international public.

In *Veiviseren* the point is not the opposition between Sami and Norwegian cultures. Sami mentality and values are contrasted with the hostility and aggressive violence of a Finnish-Russian tribe, the "tsjudes". The setting is the plains of Finnmark, an Arctic wilderness with howling wolves. The events take place in

an unidentifiable, distant past. The story is a young boy's struggle to save the Sami people from attacks and massacre by the "tsjudes".

The Sami tribes are victims and the tsjudes are savagely violent executioners. They appear as a collective without individuality, dressed in dark clothes, carrying weapons and marching militantly in the deep snow. They spare no-one and are worse than the wolves, one of the Sami men states.

In the film, the Sami boy Aigin escapes from the tsjudes' slaughtering of his family and joins another Sami tribe. The sage of the tribe, a shaman and guide, is threatened with death by the tsjudes unless he agrees to be their guide across the mountains. The young boy interferes and offers to lead the tsjudes if they spare the sage's life. Nevertheless, the sage is killed and the boy is forced to guide the tsjudes. He takes them along the most dangerous route, and on the brink of the precipice suddenly cuts the rope. The tsjudes tumble into the abyss, and the Sami tribe praises Aigin as a hero in a language which resembles the biblical descriptions of Christ: [He] "gave his life. For our sake", "We shall always remember the boy who sacrificed his life in order that we should live". The boy, however, is not dead. He struggles to find his way across the mountains and has an experience of epiphany when in a vision he sees the mythical reindeer ox that the old sage had encountered and several times described to his tribe. This magic revelation gives the boy extraordinary ability, and he is now fully accepted and integrated into his new Sami community, and even appointed their new spiritual guide and sage.

The film portrays Sami religious ideas and cults, phenomena like magic, taboo, shamanistic drumming, evocation of spirits and experiences of trance and visions, not as curiosities, but as part of their philosophy of life. The sage preaches fellowship and solidarity, they are all connected by invisible ties, while the "tsjudes" do not belong to a fellowship. *Veiviseren* describes a cultural clash between the "tsjudes" who steal and kill to benefit themselves, and the Sami people who are conscious of belonging to the fellowship of men and nature and demonstrate the ability to share. In the film narrative, the Sami people are victimized and idealized. The young

hero's bravery and self-sacrifice show that the Sami do not give in, but resist their oppressors.

Veiviseren is an action film with the ingredients of violence, fighting, manslaughter, heroic courage and love, but it is but also a film that allows symbolic interpretations. The story may be regarded as an illustration of the battle between good and evil and of the value of seeing man and nature as an entity. In a figurative sense, the conflict between the Sami and the tsjudes may be seen as a criticism of aggressive "tjsude"-attitudes today towards the rights of the Sami people.

In fact, the film is far more than an action film. It conveys Sami culture as more than joik and throwing a lasso; it received international attention and contributed to strengthening Sami consciousness and their wish to preserve their traditional ideals. Simultaneously, the film undermined stereotypical conceptions of primitivism and marginality.

Injustice and abuse of power

In January 2008 Nils Gaup's recent film *Kautokeino-opprøret* (Kautokeino-riot) had its first performance in Tromsø. The film is based upon historical events in 1852 when a group of Sami rebels attacked the local authorities and the tradesman and bar-keeper of the village Kautokeino. The historical riot has been explained as a result of religious fanaticism and individual madness and lust for revenge, but later historical and social anthropological research have pointed out severe social and economic oppression and exploitation (Kristiansen 1999).

Nils Gaup presents his interpretation of the cause of the riot as long-standing injustice. His film focuses on the story of one extended Sami family who become the victims of power abuse and exploitation by the authorities and the trader who sells spirits. Compared to previous films, *Kautokeino-opprøret* seems to be more concerned with social class than with ethnicity, though these issues are combined in the story. By introducing a hire-purchase system the trader has tempted Sami men to excessive drinking, the result of which is vast debt and consequently a reduction of their reindeer herds and the foundation of their economy. The power

balance between the tradesman and the Sami population is upset when a majority of the Sami population) turn their backs on the church to join the religious community of Lars Levi Læstadius. He preaches against excessive drinking, and the tradesman loses customers and faces economic ruin. He joins the priest who also wants to regain his congregants in his effort to suppress the new religious movement. The alliance between local authorities (priest and police) and private commercial interests results in further injustice and oppression of the people. By verbal strategies and by presenting controversies in a biased fashion and insisting on obedience, the local authorities provoke aggressive reactions. The priest appeals to the court to take prisoners, and the humiliation and oppression of the Sami population escalate. When their suffering eventually becomes unbearable, rioting becomes the only alternative.

Two of the most prominent discursive tools of the film are the rearrangement of the chronology and a voice-over in the opening and closing sequences. The voice belongs to the female protagonist, who in a flashback narrates to her son what really happened before, during and after the riot, when two of their family members were executed and she herself was sentenced to seventeen years hard labour. An inner narrative frame within this frame of narration starts with the preparation of the act of execution and ends with the beheading of two of the Sami men. The story demonstrates the escalation of injustice that results in the riot. The very last sequence shows mother and son as she concludes her tale of suffering by emphasizing the importance of passing this story on, never forgetting it and always keeping hope alive.

Conclusion

From 1929 when the silent film *Lajla* appeared, it is possible to trace gradual changes in the film representations of Sami culture and identity. The *Lajla* films as well as Per Høst's documentaries depict cultural conflicts connected with ethnic identity and power relations. Sami culture is described as exotic and ingenious, and the ethnic identity of the protagonist turns out to be crucial for the

solution of the story in the first film version of *Lajla*, but of less importance in the modified second version. The narratives are told from a non-Sami perspective with stereotypes, which, in line with Homi Bhabha's theories about colonialism, include ambivalence.

The radical shift in the film discourse of Sami culture came with Nils Gaup's *Veiviseren* in 1987. Gaup's films, *Veiviseren* og *Kautokeino-opprøret*, are Sami productions in Sami language. Sami culture is no longer represented as romantic and inferior. The ambivalence and the stereotypes do not exist in Gaup's films. His films break with the old oppressive colonial discourse of ethnicity, portray Sami tradition and history from a Sami perspective, and explore the opposition between good and evil, justice and injustice. The Sami people are not happy savages but are an oppressed group where class perspective seems to count more than ethnicity. There are reasons to believe that *Kautokeino-opprøret* will strengthen consciousness of power abuse and of social and cultural confrontations in the past, and that it may encourage a renewed debate about the rights and the position of the Sami people in the multicultural Norwegian society of today.

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