

# Being May-Britt Öhman: Or, Reflections on my own Colonized Mind Regarding Hydropower Constructions in Sápmi

May-Britt Öhman

**Abstract.** Confronted by new knowledge of her own past, her own family history and a Sámi heritage, the author in this essay navigates on a familiar but now suddenly at the same time unknown Lule River, through familiar land- and waterscapes, now altering before her eyes. The essay is a postcolonial feminist search for the past, attempting at translating it to the present, and pondering on who the author, with this new knowledge, her self actually is. Or want to be. It is a reflection over what parts of her past that has been hidden to her, why it was concealed, and what those acts, by other people – contributing to hiding her past - means to her, today, for her academic research on large scale hydropower exploitations in Sápmi, Sweden.

## Tjällemgirrje: May-Britt's Log, July 22, 2008

*"My grandfather's grandmother, Sigmora, had a reindeer mark", I spoke to J. E. over the phone the other day. It was strange to speak of the reindeer mark as I'd only found out about it last Saturday, when my maternal uncle, A., mentioned it on the way home from Själlarim.*

*I'd traveled up to Själlarim from Luleå that Friday morning with relatives to meet with the Jokkmokk municipality official in charge of another uncle, F.'s, living situation. The bureaucrat wanted to return F. to his temporary rented apartment, and so remove him from the safety of the care home where he had been living since found on the floor of his apartment, completely dehydrated. No one knows how long he had been lying there on his apartment floor. He could have died! The same official wrongly advised my aunt that F. had daily supervision in the apartment, misinformation which was discovered only when F. was found. Fortunately, we managed to put a stop to these plans to return to the apartment. F. is to remain in the care home until settled with personal assistance in his old house.*

*I decided to stay overnight in Själlarim, F.'s home and my mother's parental home, where A., had been organizing the felling of trees all week to raise funds to fix the water supply. F. has lived his whole life in this house but had to leave in February as the water to the dwelling stopped suddenly – we suspect the pipe is old and broken.*

*A. undertook some genealogical research, or rather my mum did, and then A. compiled it in a computer file in early 1990s. ABC format. It was posted to me some years ago, sometime last millennium, but I couldn't open the file. I'd heard from my mother – in the mid 1990s – a little about our Sámi heritage, and a little about Sigmora being a real Sámi. The last **real** Sámi in the family. When I commented, "Aha, then we are Sámi!" my mother answered with a short but very expressive "**NO!**". I was so surprised by this very strong **no** from my otherwise gentle mother, that I never mentioned the matter again.*

*Then she became ill with muscular dystrophy, slowly losing contact with the outside world, and then it was too late to ever talk about it with her. So, I had an inkling of me having a small percentage of Sámi blood. However, of Sigmora – her registered name being Sigrid Elsa Larsdotter Rim – having possessed a reindeer mark, this I hadn't known. Uncle A. is only nine years older than me and the youngest of his siblings and*

*he doesn't know anything more than about our family's Sámi background than he and my mother, in her researches, has shared with me.*

*But it is exciting! And a fascinating insight into my heritage. Considering that Sigmora's sister married a man who founded a Sameby – Serri – it's even more interesting when I consider how the choices of my ancestors have formed my life. I wonder when the reindeer mark disappeared? How? When? Unlike her sister, Sigmora, married a man who was not a reindeer-herding Sámi. Looking through the census information from 1890, I see that Sigmora is not categorized as anything other than as a wife. But her sister is, in the very same census, classed as a Lapp – in the box for other information where the census-taker could add for instance ethnical markers, such as Laplander or Fin. Not to be confused with nationality – there remains a specific box for, "Nationality Other than Swedish".*

*We, A. and I, went at my request to look at Sjukksjokk – the old name for the village where Sigmora was born – and now the place where the waters from the Little Lule River flow into the Great Lule River through the constructed pipes from the Letsi reservoir built in the 1960s. I mentioned the book, Överskrida Gränser, [Trespassing Frontiers/Limits]<sup>1</sup> by Lars Wilhelm Svonni to A. Svonni's 2005 novel, describes how a small group of Sámi reindeer owners blow up the Suorva dam, with the consequence that all villages below it are destroyed. Some 10 000 people die. Also Boden, a city with around 30 000 inhabitants, is destroyed, whereas Luleå – the town in the delta by the coast, where I grew up and the current residence of my uncle A – is not as severely affected – in Svonni's scenario.*

*I mentioned this novel to see what A. would say, that is, to see what he thinks about the hydropower regulations. "Well, why not?" he said. "It'd be bad for Boden", I replied – telling him what happens in the novel. "And what about here, what happens with Själlarim?" I continued. A. said, "Probably nothing will happen. It is the Little Lule River".*

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<sup>1</sup> The Swedish word "Gränser" translates as both "limits" and "frontiers/borders"

## Dáhpa: What it means to be a Sámi Woman Cyborg

I quoted the above logbook excerpt initially in a paper to the Feminist Research Methods Conference, organized by Stockholm University in January 2009.<sup>2</sup> It represents part of an early attempt to write academically applying feminist technoscience theory to my postdoctoral research project, *Situated Perspectives on the Hydropower Exploitation in Sápmi: Swedish Technical Expansion in the 20th Century and its Impact on the Indigenous Population*. I started my PhD dissertation in 1999, focusing on large-scale hydropower in Tanzania. While the environment within History of Science and Technology was fruitful for understanding technoscience, entering the feminist technoscience environment (and its discourses) it has, in some ways, saved my sanity when confronting colonialism and techno-scientific realities.

The title of my research project directly references Donna Haraway's *situated knowledges* and *partial perspectives* and Christina Mörtberg – with whom I share ethnic and geographic circumstances, (namely around Tornedalen, my maternal grandmother's territory) – has on several occasions encouraged me to dare to investigate further, researching my personal history.<sup>3</sup> In writing this essay, I rely on these inspirations and encouragements.

The essay's title paraphrases the film title *Being John Malkovich*<sup>4</sup> in that the process of my writing is to delve into my own mind, to try to discover my diverse identities, to attempt to conceive where my reflections of self originate. Why I see the things I see, and why I haven't noticed specific things before – these are things that gradually become more obvious to me. The film, *Being John Malkovich*, enacts the idea of numerous persons literally entering a portal in the movie star, John Malkovich's, head, and from there controlling his actions and thoughts. In a starkly visual way, the film, to my mind, relates Mudimbe's ideas of *colonizing structures* and the colonization of the minds of *natives*, and connects to the idea of the Harawayan cyborg.<sup>5</sup> While I will return to Mudimbe later on, let me first

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<sup>2</sup> Stockholm University, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Haraway, 1991, "Situated knowledges..."; I have met Christina Mörtberg several times, through PhD courses and at feminist conferences, among them this Feminist Research Methods, at the workshop gathering feminist technoscience scholars.

<sup>4</sup> Jonze, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Mudimbe, 1988 and 1994.

remind you of how in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway starts with describing the cyborg as:

...a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.<sup>6</sup>

As a feminist who approves of and is fascinated by technology and natural sciences – and is strangely attracted to the idea of large dams and gigantesque technological structures – and at the same time deals with a mix of science, technology, emotions, historical events, a forgotten family history, fiction, stories, and questioned identities, the cyborg may be my pilot. The Harawayan cyborg provides me with the audacity to stretch beyond established academic positivism and writing styles. It supports my attempts to analyze myself, and the boundaries between my own changing identities, and identities that have been constructed throughout history by other persons, for example, by representatives of a colonizing Swedish state, by my ancestors and the environment they lived in, and by the physical landscape in which I grew up. More than a year has passed since the first time that I used the logbook entry that starts this essay. My research project has gained momentum, and I have learnt considerably more about my own family history, and also through interviews, about local perspectives on hydropower in Sápmi. I have also spent an ultimately encouraging and theory-wise an enriching year at the Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University.

Nonetheless, in the process of writing this essay I have found it important to recapitulate my first feelings and thoughts in undertaking my postdoctoral research project, as I wanted to express them at the Feminist Methodology Conference, though now in a more elaborated version. I grew up in Luleå – by the delta of the Lule River, and I have visited Jokkmokk numerous times, especially my mother's family house. Thus the physical landscapes I visit are familiar to me. But before this, I had never entered the field of Sámi studies and my own family history was forgotten. So now, as a researcher, and as the person, May-Britt Öhman, I enter

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<sup>6</sup> Haraway, 1991, "A Cyborg Manifesto..."

unfamiliar grounds, I navigate, as it were, an unknown river. The very same landscapes and water-courses, turn out to be quiet different to those of memory, as I learn about myself and my forgotten history. The cyborg identity is my pilot in this journey into being May-Britt Öhman, through the first encounters with a new but at the same time familiar landscape. In my case, as in any research journal, my log serves to remind me of what has happened during my research missions, who I have met, what I have seen and what I have learnt. But not only this, it also helps me to see what has happened with myself, with my own thoughts and reflections. Naming it *the log* gives me a sense of navigation in time, space, and also a sense of reflexive navigation between fiction and realities, emotions and science – ultimately realizing that the boundaries in between these concepts are blurry.

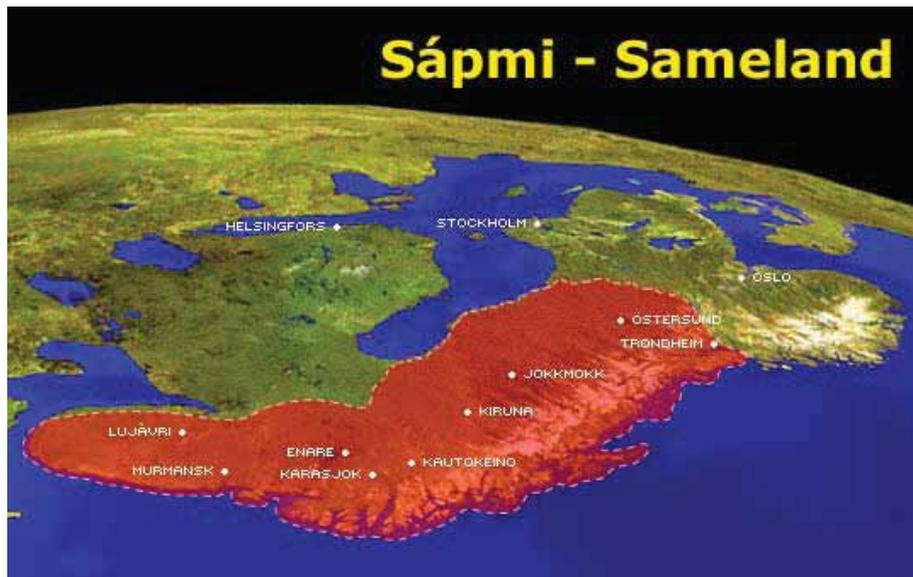
The ultimate issue at stake in this essay is about the definition of who is to be defined as a Sámi woman with a connection to reindeer herding. My work on Tanzania, and the large scale hydropower exploitation there gave me insights to the links, the similarities between Sweden and Tanzania, in regard to the treatment of the nomadic population, and their cattle. Thus, I wished to further investigate the case of Sweden, and Sápmi. My funding application described the empirical grounds within the study as identifying the situated experiences by the local inhabitants. I wrote that I would focus on, “Sámi women with connection to reindeer herding”. I chose this as I considered Sámi women to be rendered invisible, or *invisiblized*, in direct translation from the Swedish feminist concept *osynliggjorda*, in many respects; one of them being the Swedish state legislation, in which a real Sámi is a man.<sup>7</sup> My intention, as described in the application, was to identify perspectives, as well as, register any opposition to the hydropower made by these Sámi women. In addition, I set out to analyze if any space had been provided for these voices during the 20th century – within the processes of negotiations and actions – during the construction of the hydropower plants and their reservoirs. As I began, it seemed it would be easy to identify these women, given the limited scope of my project but, as noted in the logbook entry, very early in my research, my world-view was turned upside down. Unsolicited information (about the reindeer mark) from my uncle suddenly changed the assumptions on which I based my research questions, and illuminated my identity and family history in new ways. Without having thought about it before, I realized that I myself actually could be described as one of those “Sámi women with connection to reindeer herding”. I also realized that my ignorance of this, as well as my

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<sup>7</sup> Amft, 2002, 43f.

fascination of Sigmora being a *real* Sámi, could be read as part of the colonization of Sápmi. So, the aim of this essay is to accompany you, the reader, along on this journey, on how I learnt this and how it can be understood within a postcolonial feminist framework, inspired by Mörtberg, Haraway, Mudimbe and also supported by the work of authors within the Sámi studies field, as well as fiction by Sámi authors and about Sápmi.

Before I continue with the analysis and discussion of the logbook entry, and eventually attempt at providing some answers, I need to explain some concepts, names and settings that are part of the logbook excerpt and explains the context within which my cyborg and I navigate.



[Sápmi, Samiland, viewed from the North Pole. Picture: NOAA®.©ESA/Eurimage 1993. ©Metria 2001. www.lantmateriet.se. Illustration: Pär-Joel Utsi. Downloaded from the website of the Sámi Parliament in Sweden, 20090604.]

## Gärdda: Contexts

**SÁMI REINDEER MARK:** – is a specific way of cutting an owner's registration into the ear of the reindeer, and is unique to each reindeer owner. In Sweden, there

is an official register for these marks and the reindeer mark, accompanied by the strongly regulated reindeer herding right, itself is probably one of the most important ways to demonstrate that one is a genuine Sámi. While there have always been Sámi that were not involved in reindeer herding, participating instead in other economic activities, this identity marker was stipulated in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century by the Swedish Parliament, Riksdagen, and state authorities. The economic activities of the Sámi became regulated in Swedish law in the 1880s, through the first Reindeer herding act of 1886. The most recent version was passed by Riksdagen in 1973.<sup>8</sup>

Today, in brief, a Sámi is by Swedish legislative definition: 1.) a man 2.) a reindeer owner and, 3.) a nomadic mountain Sámi. This definition excludes among others: 1.) women 2.) non-reindeer owners and, 3.) *stationary* Sámi, like *Forest Sámi*. The reindeer mark requirement has shaped the self-identity of the Sámi, especially alongside the Swedification of the Sámi territory and the eradication of the Sámi language.<sup>9</sup>

**SAMEBY** – in direct translation from Swedish: Sámi Village. However, it is not a physical village. It is a coining of the Swedish state to regulate reindeer herding activities, and thereby, also an economic association of reindeer herders. To be able to own and herd reindeer in Sweden, one needs to be accepted as a member of a *sameby*, and to be accepted one needs to be a Sámi, and have the reindeer herding right as regulated in the Swedish reindeer herding act, along with a reindeer herding mark.<sup>10</sup>

**JOKKMOKK:** (*Dálvvadis* or *Jáhkâmáhkke* in Lule Sámi language meaning *curve of creek*) is the Swedified name of the municipality, which generates most of the electricity from hydropower production in Sweden. Despite this, it remains an impoverished municipality, receiving no income from the generated megawatts. At the same time, within the borders of the municipality there are three economic associations for Sámi reindeer herders – so called *sameby*– organized with a hundred reindeer herding private enterprises. This corresponds to almost half of the private enterprises within the municipality. The county of Norrbotten, to which

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8 Rennäringslag (1971:437)

9 Cf Amft, 2002; Lundmark, 2002.

10 There is a significant amount of material written about "Sameby", most of it is in Swedish. 113. However, the history of the *sameby* organisation is complex so for a short description in English of the phenomenon I recommend the website of the Sámi Parliament in Sweden: [http://www.eng.samer.se/GetDoc?meta\\_id=1220](http://www.eng.samer.se/GetDoc?meta_id=1220). (Latest acc. June 10th, 2010); Cf Lundmark, 1998; Rennäringslag (1971:437)

Jokkmokk belongs, as a whole is host to the biggest number of reindeer in Sweden, over 140 000 animals.<sup>11</sup>

**HYDROPOWER AS A SYMBOL FOR PROGRESS AND MODERNIZATION:**  
in the 20th century, large-scale hydropower construction and electricity became a model for energy supply, and coincidentally a symbol of progress and of modernization.<sup>12</sup> Hydropower is, as the name indicates, energy taken from water. Using the energy of falling water as it flows from a higher level to a lower one provides this electricity source. A problem within hydropower production is that electricity produced has to be used immediately – it cannot be stored. On the other hand, the consumption of electricity varies over a day, over the year and over long periods, depending on a number of climatic, economic and political factors. This demand does not correspond to natural river movement. The solution to the problem of adjusting the flow of the river to the electricity requirements is to save the water in reservoirs, and to release it according to need.<sup>13</sup> The larger the hydropower plant, i.e. the greater its capacity measured in megawatts, the larger the water storage facility – the regulating reservoir – has to be. In consequence, high capacity hydropower plants demand large reservoirs (or this is the technical solution that prevailed throughout the 20th century).<sup>14</sup> The creation of the reservoirs, as well as, the daily and yearly regulation of water levels for the production of electricity have a number of serious negative impacts on the local inhabitants.<sup>15</sup>

**THE LULE RIVER:** is a major source for production of electricity within Sweden, received its name from the Sámi, *Lulij-jokko*, meaning the River of the Forest Sámi or the River of the Easterners. Starting out as two rivers - the Little and the Great, which until 1967 and the construction of the Letsi reservoir, confluenced at Vuollerim - the Lule river has its origins in the mountain areas between Norway and Sweden, and used to make its way in a continuous flow down to the Gulf of Bothnia. For many centuries, it was a central traffic-way and an important economic link between the two seas, and between eastern and

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11 Sametinget, 2010; Jokkmokk municipality, 2010.

12 See for instance Usher, 1997; McCully, 1998; Khagram, 1999; Hughes, 1983; Hansson, 1994; Thue, 1995.

13 Jakobsson, 2002, defines regulated rivers as technical systems.

14 The capacity of the hydropower plant depends not only on the water available, but also on each technical component of the construction, as well as, the daily management, including maintenance of the technical components, of the plant.

15 See for instance Goldsmith and Hildyard, 1984; Fearnside, 2001.

western societies.<sup>16</sup> The first hydroelectric plant on the Lule River was inaugurated at Porjus or as it is called in Sámi, *Bårjås* – meaning *sail* – in 1915. Construction of the first stage of the great reservoir at Suorva, upstream from Porjus, took place between 1919 and 1923. Since then, the Suorva Dam has been enlarged three times, to its present level and size. At the same time as the Lule River has been turned into an energy-producing factory, a staircase of reservoir and 15 power plants and a total installed capacity of 4350 megawatts, an annual output of almost 14 terawatt hours – corresponding to more than a tenth of the totality of Swedish produced electricity.<sup>17</sup> Or, in another measure, provided by Vattenfall, the Swedish Power Company, the Lule River “produces enough electricity to bring light to the whole of Sweden, 24 hours a day, 365 days per year”.<sup>18</sup>

**THE COLONIZATION OF SÁPMI:** The colonization of Sápmi, starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, has been described by several authors.<sup>19</sup> The exploitation of Lule River can be read as but one element of the Swedish state’s continuing colonization of the north, of Sápmi. While the colonization is still not a part of the national Swedish historical narrative, it also is not something set on the Swedish school curricula, not even for children living in the effected areas. Most Swedes do not know anything about this colonization, and if they know something about the Sámi it is as cultural curiosities, that is, something belonging to the past that can be studied at museums, including the much visited outdoor museum Skansen in Stockholm.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from large-scale hydropower projects there are several other industrial ventures: forestry, mining, windmill parks and infrastructure projects including railway and road building. The mining involves both current mining and international prospecting for uranium. At the same time, the Swedish government is increasing the region’s militarization through, among other things, allowing NATO and US combat flight-training operations over reindeer herding areas

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16 Cf Fjällström, 1996.

17 Electricity production in Sweden is up to 90% based on equal parts of hydropower and nuclear power, with the nuclear power functioning as a stable base, and the hydropower being easier to regulate corresponding to the different consumption needs over the seasons. Vattenfall, undated; Åhrling-Rundström, 2009 ; Hansson,1994, 272; Nilsson,1972, 10.

18 Short note in the Swedish version of the brochure ”A journey along LULE ÄLV,” Vattenfall, 2008, 2.

19 Cf Kvist, 1992; Sörlin,1988, 33f; Fur,1992.

20 Cf Fur, 2008; Skansen (undated)

during sensitive periods of the year.<sup>21</sup> These activities, which are increasing, together with a policy of keeping the region as a haven for predators, place reindeer husbandry – the traditional and important economic activities for Sámi people – under pressure, threatening its existence.<sup>22</sup>

**COLONIZED MINDS – THE EXAMPLE OF VALENTIN MUDIMBE’S DISCUSSION OF AFRICA:** in brief, for the reader unfamiliar with Mudimbe’s thought, he argues that European colonial empires promoted an idea of a *primitive Africa* in order to justify the colonial occupation of territories.<sup>23</sup> The ensuing colonization – carrying this image of primitivity – brought with it complementary actions, which Mudimbe calls the colonizing structure, “the domination of physical space, the reformation of, and the integration of local economic history into the Western perspective *natives’ minds*” [emphasis retained].<sup>24</sup> Within this colonizing structure – a tripartite structure embracing the physical, human and spiritual aspects of the colonizing experience – followed a system of dichotomies: “traditionality versus modernity, verbal versus written, societies based on agriculture and customs versus urban and industrial civilisation, barter economy versus high production economies.”<sup>25</sup> Mudimbe argues that in Africa attention is often focused on the development that eventually will occur when a transition has been made from one paradigm to the other, from one extremity (underdevelopment) to the other (development). He claims that this vision is not only misleading, it also shades the space between the often pejorative term, *African tradition*, and the projected modernity of colonialism. At independence, Mudimbe continues, these images from history, perpetuated by the colonisers, were not erased but have been brought into the era of development assistance.<sup>26</sup>

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21 Although Sweden is not a member of NATO, still in 2009, the Swedish government allowed parts of the NATO training operation Loyal Arrow to take place around the Vidsel base, in a period when reindeer calves are newborn, June 8th-16th . In 2010, the NATO operation “Cold Response” took place around the Norway-Sweden frontier, *Riksgränsen*, Feb. 17th to March 4th.

22 Cf Beach, 1997; Nilsson Dahlström, 2009.

23 Mudimbe, 1988.

24 Mudimbe, 1988,2.

25 Mudimbe, 1988,4.

26 Mudimbe, 1988.

## Ájgge: Reflections on how the past meets the present

The logbook entry was written in late July 2008, when I set out to begin some preliminary interviews for my new research project then. Now reading it guided by the cyborg identity, within a feminist postcolonial framework, several aspects can be traced which at a closer look display issues of colonization. These include the draining of the resources of a region, and how the memory and the history of a place and a people has become forgotten, hidden, and structured to fit into a colonizing state's history writing.

On the occasion quoted in the extract, there was another reason than the research project for me to visit the area around the Letsi reservoir, which is the area where I spent parts of my summer when growing up. I wanted to support my uncle F. in receiving the best care possible. He was ill with a genetically hereditary muscular disease – he was to die in 2009. Having experience of my mother's suffering and dying from the same muscular dystrophy, I made an effort to ensure his wishes relating to his care were respected. As my other uncle, A., was there for the same reason, I asked him to accompany me on field studies in the area – in his own backyard as it were. A. had grown up here. He, together with F., owned the parental home – they were forest owners, and used to catch fish in the river before the establishment of the Letsi reservoir (finalized in 1967).

## Colonizing Structures 1: Sigmora and I – What Took Us So Long To Meet?

It was on this trip that A. told me about Sigmora and the reindeer herding mark. Coming back home, I followed up on this new information and learnt more about the choices made by persons earlier in history that have made me consider myself as a Swede. Sigmora, who was my uncle's great grandmother, the last *real* Sámi in our family, married a *hemmansägare*, a landowner (as opposed to the Sámi who were reindeer herders and not landowners) and became a *Swede* at least according to the official census registration of 1890. The forest and its logging became part of my uncles' heritage, and also my heritage, replacing reindeer herding. With this followed another lifestyle, and another official categorization. As mentioned

above, Sigmora's sister, marrying a Sámi reindeer herder, was in the same census categorized as a Sámi. Well, to be honest, she was actually categorized as a "Lapp" which is kind of similar as "Indian" for native Americans or "Negroe" for Africans. Kind of demeaning. Lower status. The Other. Thus, only four generations ago, a century before my birth, a marriage was the means whereby a step taken from *Sámi* status to that of *Swede*, as defined by the Swedish state – for a woman. I believe it was with this that followed a loss of memory of the Sámi tradition. Or, maybe – I should say – there was an active loss of memory as in an effort was made to hide or forget the past, and so overwrite the family's Sámi heritage. Not being a reindeer owner anymore, in a society where real Sámi had reindeer herds, gave my mother and her family the option to pass for Swedes. And my mother's strong *No!* as referred to in the logbook entry –when I expressed the thought we might be Sámi, stands out as part of this active loss of memory, a forgetting strongly encouraged by the Swedish state. While not explicitly mentioned in the excerpt, shame is an important concept for understanding the strong *No!* from my otherwise gentle mother. It is also a factor in relation to the complexities of Sámi identities. When my mother grew up, the Forest Sámi who no longer had reindeer (or perhaps never had had any) worked hard to adapt to the Swedish policies that categorized the populous into *real Sámis* versus *Swedes* with the classification *Swedes* being the privileged one. Lennart Lundmark's work on the categorizations of Sámi verses Swede and Andrea Amft's work on gender issues within Sápmi gave me insights into my own forgotten family history, which so obviously was a part of a bigger picture, that of the colonization of Sápmi. Annica Wennström's novel, *Lappskatteländ*, (Lap Tax Land) turned my insights into an account of how the categorizations might have played out in the everyday life and emotions, for my mother, for my grandfather and his parents and grandparents before him. Looking at my logbook entry I started understanding the feelings, among them shame, that made my mother fiercely deny her Sámi heritage.<sup>27</sup> Such refutation is a consequence of a combination of state policies, encouraging certain behaviors and promoting Swedification, and it influenced people's behavior towards one another – a colonization of the minds of the natives in theorist Valentin Mudimbe's terms.

Furthermore, at the very start of my research, I was confronted by my assumptions about who Sámi women with a connection to reindeer herding were, along with presumptions about the construction of my selfhood. When I told J.E.,

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<sup>27</sup> Wennström, 2006; Lundmark, 2002, 63; Amft, 2002.

a Sámi reindeer owner, and photographer, filmmaker, and author – that I was going to interview Sámi women involved in reindeer herding, and asked for his advice on who to approach, my terms of reference proved more complicated than I initially thought. J.E. replied by asking *whom* I defined as *Sámi*. At that moment what seemed a simple definition, against the new knowledge about my family, immediately became more nuanced and more troubled. When writing the fund application, a year earlier, it had seemed quite simple. But, as I just had learnt more about the history of my family, and the choices – by ancestors or by the Swedish state - that made us *Swedes*, it became more complex.



[View from the second floor of F.s and my mother's parental home outside Jokkmokk. It was constructed in the 1930s by my grandfather S., and his brother, on the lands owned by my grand-father. February 2009. Temperature -30 Celsius. Photo: May-Britt Öhman ©]

While my grandfather's grandmother Sigmora was defined as Swede, and her sister was defined as Sámi (Lapp), in the official census of 1890, today, there is only one way in Sweden for a Sámi *to register* officially as Sámi. This statement can be made by enrolling as a voter in the Sámi Parliament (located in Kiruna, Sápmi and established by the Swedish state in 1993). In the document for voter registration, when I – encouraged by a newfound Sámi relation – did so before the elections in 2009, I had to mark a box stating: *I am a Sámi*. Then I had to refer to a direct relative, no more than two generations distant, who claimed one of the Sámi languages as part of the home environment when they grew up. Considering that the Swedish state prohibited, in effect, the Sámi language, to those who were to be

Swedes (as against those who were to retain their Sámi identity), I am the last generation of my family who is probably able to claim this right, according to this specific definition – stipulated in the Swedish law.<sup>28</sup>

Filling in the document, I referred to my grandfather, S., the grandson of Sigmora, as I figured he must have heard Lule Sámi growing up. Of course, I cannot be sure of this. I mean, I haven't until recently, at the age of 40, fully embraced the fact that my grandmother, who was from Tornedalen, grew up speaking *meänkeli* – also called *Tornedalen Finnish* and spoke this language with her siblings – and whenever she would meet others from Tornedalen – as an adult.<sup>29</sup> So, it occurs to me that two languages have been lost for me. I could have had three languages, as many older Sámi have in the county of Norrbotten. Having no Sámi language, and no reindeer, it is hard to find superficial attributes that may give me a Sámi identity. So then, how would I be defined as a Sámi? How was I to define the Sámi women that I was to interview? According to which attributes?

J.E., however, was not thinking of any of this when he asked me whom I defined as Sámi. It turned out that his motivation in asking was to see if I would be okay with interviewing women who were not born as Sámi, but had married Sámi men and lived a Sámi life – with reindeer herding – for several decades. Would I accept them as Sámi women for the purpose of my interviews? From that moment on the phone, I began to ask myself, what does it mean to have a *connection* to reindeer herding? I explained to J.E. that I use my criteria of Sámi women with a connection to reindeer herding mostly as a way of limiting the number of people to interview, but that on the other hand, I had a broad perception of the category. While stating this, I realized that I, myself, could be considered one of these women. In this matter, state politics and decisions taken in the Swedish Parliament regarding the Sámi people, and reindeer herding rights during the 19th and 20th century, play important roles directly and inadvertently. I was only starting to discover them and at the same time realizing that I probably would have the right to have reindeers, if I so would wish. And if I wanted to, in order to strengthen my Sámi identity, I would, at the same time be thereby adapting to the

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28 Sametingslagen, SFS 1992:1433.

29 Tornedalen is the region on the Swedish side, bordering Finland. Up to 1809, when Finland was conquered by Russia, the river Torne was not a border river, but an inland river. Meänkeli was, like Sámi languages, prohibited to children at school. Only recently, since 1999, a recognition has been made, and work is made for the preservation of meänkeli (along with other national minority languages in Sweden). Regeringens proposition 1998/99:143.

Swedish state's colonizing structures, within which one has to own reindeer to be a *real* Sámi.

## Colonizing Structures 2: F. and His Wish To Come Home

Directly related to the hydropower exploitation in Sápmi, another part of colonizing structures that I see, and find myself upset over as I reread the logbook extract, is how my uncle F., was treated by the Jokkmokk municipality, and the state authority dealing with social insurance for old and/or sick people – *Försäkringskassan* – always with reference to the lack of financial resources. When talking to an older relative living in Jokkmokk, I was informed that in the 1950s the politicians did not bother to obtain any benefits for their constituents from the hydropower exploitation – they didn't even try. A historical investigation could probably shed more light on this. Nonetheless, Jokkmokk remains a poor municipality. The good times of money coming in to the area because of reservoir constructions lasted only for a few years, with high employment, and consequently money circulating within the region, but, then, nothing.

In addition, the municipality does not have funds to pay for adequate care of its aged and infirm in the last years of their lives. In May 2009, F. died at the age of 56, after having spent only one month in his home. He had then spent more than a year at the care home, where he repeatedly said that he was not at ease, that he had no privacy, and that he wanted to go home. But F. had been caught in a catch 22 situation; not being accorded enough hours of home care because he was living in the care home, and not being able to move home because of the too little hours of home care. Finally, the only reason that F. was able to come home at all, almost a year after my logbook entry, was because my partner and I went to his home and during the first week stayed with him during the hours that he had no official assistance. Only then, did a representative for *Försäkringskassan* agree to come to analyze the situation, with a view to see if F. needed more assistance; the representative immediately accorded him more hours.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the hours accorded did not cover the night time, and thus at night F. was completely on his own. The municipality, which can provide a “night patrol” of municipally employed health workers who come by at night, stated that my uncle's house was too far away from

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<sup>30</sup> PMB, 2009.

a specific location in Jokkmokk for them to take on the responsibility for this. The limit for this assistance was 20 kilometers, F. lived 22 kilometers away. Also, the option of having an alarm button enabling him to call for immediate help in the event of an emergency was also denied for this reason. Instead, we were asked to request this as a favor from a neighbor in the village.<sup>31</sup> I and my uncle A. felt that such a responsibility could not be expected from a neighbor, as we felt it would be terrible if something happened and the neighbor was out. Or embarrassing for F. if the alert would about going to the toilet. Before we had had the time to go further with our concerns about this, F. passed away. Fortunately, for the family and himself, F. did not die alone in his bed one night, but at a hospital after pneumonia.



[Uncle F., when he had finally managed to come back to his home, on a walk helped by one of the home care personnel and accompanied by my dog Lexie. April 2009. Photo: May-Britt Öhman ©]

When I read this tragedy within the framework proposed by Mudimbe it becomes larger than a tragedy suffered by my family and I. Things could have been different. Jokkmokk could have been a rich municipality; its inhabitants could have prospered from incomes from the hydropower production. F could have been allowed to live his last year in the home that he loved, with sufficient care. Instead, the Swedish state, via its power company, manifested in the power transmission lines, drains the local resources through power lines southwards;

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<sup>31</sup> ÖI, 2009.

colonialists who live in areas far away from Jokkmokk enjoy the benefits of the dammed river.

## Colonizing Structures 3: How Do You Love Or Hate a Dam?

Rereading the notes in my logbook entry which end with a reference to the book, *Trespassing Borders/Limits* or *Överskrida Gränser*, in Swedish, and remembering Mudimbe's words the colonizing structures seem so obvious to me. While the benefits of the Lule River are enjoyed elsewhere; the people living in the river valley experience the dangers and downsides of the exploitation. *Trespassing Borders/Limits* relates this other side, about how the dams are dangerous for the local people. It also tells how people in the Lule River valley are angry because of the abuse of the area, the destruction of the landscapes and water courses. Svonni, himself a Sámi, lets his anger flow in fiction as he describes how a group of Sámi reindeer herders blow up the Suorva dam – protesting destruction caused by the damming, and protesting the death of close family members due to dangerous water regulation in wintertime.

In the novel, the city of Boden on the Lule River – located about 30 kilometers inland from the coast – is completely destroyed. While (hopefully) the actions of the novel forever will remain the stuff of fiction, nonetheless, in my entry A. expresses this anger shared, on the evidence of my interviews, by many others in the valley.

I grew up at a time when the hydroelectric scheme was already a *fait accompli*. Born in 1966, I have never known of anything else. Growing up I never realized that we went fishing on a reservoir, that is, in a state controlled lake. When I, as a child, never could catch a fish in the river I always thought, it was because I was a bad angler. My own experience of Swedish industrialization is rather the one of the idea of progress – the fascination of the large hydropower plants – and the production of electricity. That is the story that I have learnt, in school and through the promotion of hydropower as a green electricity alternative. Also, my father had an engineering firm, a subcontractor to the iron works in Luleå, providing electrical installations. To me, the production of electricity was something good, the pride of Sweden. It was only by talking to A., I began to sense and understand another aspect of the modernization story, the loss and destruction of both habitat and economy.

Finally, one interesting aspect of the novel, mentioned in the entry, is that it has a sort of happy ending – at least to me. While the city of Boden is destroyed, and while 10 000 people die in the disaster, the city of Luleå – the capital of the Norrbotten county, located at the coast delta – prospers as tourists invade to witness the destruction. Later, as I started exploring this scenario, asking questions to more initiated persons, I realized that in the case of such a disaster, there would be no such happy ending. Instead, there would be a long lasting nightmare, not only for the municipalities involved, but for Sweden as a whole – with severe effects on the national electrical grid and on the whole gulf of Bothnia, and probably extending to the whole of the Baltic Sea – the sea adjacent to most of Sweden. Moreover, I am not sure how many of the people of the Lule River valley comprehend this potential danger.

Involved in a political youth organization in the 80s, I campaigned against further exploitation of the so far unexploited rivers, arguing among other things for the more efficient use of the existing hydropower plants. However, at the time I did not learn anything about the dangers of large dams. I always thought that they were mostly harmless, apart, of course, from destroying fishery, forest and pasture lands. Even so, warnings had sounded earlier. In the 1983 a leakage was discovered at the Suorva dam. In 2007 a journalist at a local newspaper in Luleå produced a series of articles about the horrific consequences of a dam failure at Suorva.<sup>32</sup> But, still, there have been no protests, and hydropower is still considered a green alternative. My cyborg asks me what happened to my political activism: Have you become subservient? Or just tired? Me, myself, May-Britt, I, think it's scary subject matter. I prefer to not to contemplate it. I turn to the words of Mudimbe for rescue – could this ignorance be seen as a colonization of the mind of the natives? Can I leave it at that? Or maybe I'll start a research project on dam safety? The ultimate response of a scholar.

## Lárvav: Rounding up and Sorting out the Reindeer

The logbook excerpt illustrates how my experience from the first interviews and attempts at understanding crucial issues become an emotional journey. Starting out with what I believed a simple definition, Sámi women with a connection to

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<sup>32</sup> Ezpeleta, 2007.

reindeer herding, turning to my own area, my own *backyard* and thereby, my own family history, I was drawn into my project in an unexpected way. From studying others, my research now touched my bare skin. When reading about the colonisation of Africa, I found it upsetting – it is a grim record. I read Mudimbe's book, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, (1988) and the sequel, *The Idea of Africa* (1994) and his ideas made sense to me – within the African context but, as I set out to interview people in Sápmi, I remembered Mudimbe's discussions. How the minds of the natives had been colonized. And I started seeing parallels with the events taking place in Sápmi and how these events have played out on people living there, not the least on myself. Emotions – including confusion, sadness and frustration – directed my attitude to my subject-matter as the relation between the hydropower exploitation and the historical and, current colonization of Sápmi become increasingly obvious.

At the same time, mixed with my emotions of loss, are my sentiments of fascination towards large technological structures; it's my amazement over what humans construct and our attempts to take control over nature to produce power. Discussing my research with others, I at several occasions found my self trapped in a dichotomy, a division of stance regarding my response to large-scale hydroelectricity. I find that when exposing in seminars and lectures the horrible consequences – in many cases fatal to humans – of the hydropower exploitation in the north of Sweden, with photos and interview testimony, I receive comments to the effect that I only tell *misery* stories. "What about the *good* side of large scale hydropower?" I'm asked. And on numerous occasions I hear the question: "But how should Sweden produce its electricity if not using its watercourses? What do I suggest?" Crouching behind my identity as historian, I respond that it is not the responsibility of a historian to give proposals. My task is merely to write about the past.

However, my cyborg won't give me any peace. "The past is part of the present!" she says, in a steady voice, eyeballing me and then slaps a mosquito on my cheek. Or was it a caress? Remembering Mudimbe, I am forced to think about what happens to the place between tradition and progress. What is the vision that shades the space between them? The view that either one is for development and modernity – and thereby large scale hydropower, *or*, that one is against it is too limiting. Those against development are posited as keepers of the tradition, the Sámi old fashioned romantic way of living a hard life with reindeer herding, without modern comfort; but, what about the space in between? What if I am both fascinated by the large technical structures – on the one hand – and I like

electricity and the benefits come with it. At the same time I recognize the damage effecting the people living in the exploited area and regret the destruction of lifestyles, as well as, the problems consequential to hydro-electricity that we live with. What would a feminist position be, in response to this? How to act and speak when describing the issues? What stories to tell? What is the shaded space between the perceived tradition and the perceived modernity, in regard to Sápmi? Colonized minds of the natives. The notion is so immediate I taste it. Colonized minds. Natives. Is my own mind colonized? Am I colonized? Am I native, indigenous? And if so, what exactly does it mean? The questions just won't stop, they keep swarming around with the mosquitoes in the air, attacking any non covered skin on my body. I can't kill them all with a slap, nor ignore them. I have to deal with them. Sort them out.

To paraphrase the sophisticated work of the reindeer owners, and the advanced surveying and conceptual skills they use to spot their own and other's reindeer in a large herd, I, in my academic work, have not yet reached this level. I am not a good reindeer sorter. It's difficult to spot my own thoughts and distinguish them from those of others and there are too many others rummaging about in my head, attempting at controlling my thoughts and actions. However, at least I've identified one reindeer. My ignorance of the Sámi heritage of my own family, is a strong marker of colonization. History could have been recalled differently and I could have learnt about my Sámi heritage from my family and from my schooling. However, within the colonization of Africa, or other continents, the wiping out of knowledge and tradition, in short the obliteration of history, is a forceful tool. What has happened in and to Sápmi conforms to Mudimbe's idea of colonizing structure, colonizing the minds of the natives.

This work, on being May-Britt Öhman, is a journey for me. While researching the Lule River in its historical and techno-scientific contexts, at same time I have to sort all those persons that have entered my head through a historical portal, forming my vision of the physical landscapes. At this point, having learnt about one specific choice made, a century before my birth, which formed my life, I have opted to reclaim my own family history. I have opted to see myself as a Sámi woman with a connection to reindeer herding. What exactly this will mean for the future research, I am not ready to anticipate anything at this point. It is an ongoing process, a continued navigation on a familiar and at the same time very much unknowable river. I keep my logbook ready for new entries, for future analysis, and for future generations so they hopefully will not forget. My cyborg and me, we are ready to cast off to new enriching encounters.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge both financial support as well as relatives, informants, discussion partners and reviewers. A 24 month full-time research grant from the Swedish Scientific Council, Vetenskapsrådet, enabled my study. For turning my Swenglish into proper English, and providing helpful advices, I am much grateful to Ronn Morris. The Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University, provided the funds for Ronn's work. To my uncle Folke Nilsson; I send you my thoughts, for always joyfully welcoming me to your home and sharing your experiences, whether good or bad. You are with us, in our hearts. My uncle Alf Nilsson; thank you for your help in getting to know more about my past, and to understand more about the present. Very helpful and encouraging comments on the first version of the paper were given by Jim Barry and Birgitta Rydhagen. For encouragement and inspiration in feeling comfortable in my newfound Sámi identity, inspiring this essay, I owe Agneta Silversparf, one of the – if not the – most dedicated and well-informed Sámi genealogists in Sweden with whom I share a Forest Sámi ancestor. I also wish to thank Agneta for encouraging and helpful comments to one of the last versions of the essay. John Erling Utsi, thank you for guidance and inspiration. A huge thank you to my co-editors of this book, Christina Björkman, Pirjo Elovaara and Johanna Sefyrin. And finally, thank you Christina Mörtberg for all support to my vague ideas around belonging, identities, places. It is so important to have persons – feminists - like you showing the way ahead within academia, so that others dare to fearlessly launch ourselves along so far unknown paths.

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