The starting point for this article is that museum collecting, collections, and exhibitions are not just more or less credible representations of Sami culture and history. They also have social and political consequences. Depending on content and perspectives, different kinds of objects, documents, and photographs may work as sociomaterial actors in the construction of identities, stereotypes, and power relations. The aim here is to analyse and discuss the both essentializing and emancipatory potential of museum collecting and collections. My focus will be the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, the Swedish national museum of cultural history, and more precisely the work of one of its more influential curators and scholars of his time, Ernst Manker (1893–1972). My interest in Manker emerges from a research project which explores his material, visual, and textual collections, created in a time when both the Sami and the Swedish society in general were experiencing profound changes.

The Work of Ernst Manker
The Nordiska Museet (opened in 1873) has a long history of interest in Sami issues, including the open-air museum Skansen (1891). The collecting was at the beginning intense, and while the artefacts were displayed in in-door exhibitions, Sami families were contracted to live and perform in the tents and turf huts at Skansen (Mathisen S.R. 2004; Hammarlund-Larsson 2008; Nylund 2008; Silvén 2008a, b). During the decades before and after the Second World War there was a parallel expansion of the museum’s Sami related activities, due to the work of the named Manker. Educated as an ethnographer, but acting also as an ethnologist, around 1930 he took up Sami research, and in 1939 he became curator of the Sami collections at the museum and head of the new “Lapp Department”. He carried out contemporary fieldwork as well as historical research, acquired a large amount of traditional Sami artefacts, sent out questionnaires to Sami informants, gave lectures, wrote articles, and published books. In the “Lapp Archives” he gathered earlier Sami related documents, manuscripts, correspondence, and images already in the museum’s collections, along with his own research material. Moreover, he curated the cultural-historical exhibition Lappendna (“The Lapps”), which opened in 1947 and was on display for thirty years. Manker retired in 1961 but continued writing for a further ten years and became a well-known researcher of Sami cultural history, with several hundreds of books and articles (Silvén 2010, 2012). The material he created, which he sometimes called “a central museum for Lappish culture”, forms a rich source for the study of Sami culture and history and is – of course – filled with compelling challenges.

Manker’s main interest was what he saw as the traditional and disappearing Sami culture. When modernization and mass consumption began to change older Sami ways of life, like many other scholars and curators he wanted to “rescue” as much as possible for museums and archives, for contemporary and future research. But he also saw this as a possibility for the Sami to safeguard knowledge about their own history and culture. Moreover, he seems to have had the idea that this was a way to allow development among the Sami and offer them the same...
possibilities of a comfortable life in modern society like other citizens. By leaving artefacts no longer needed to the museum, the Sami could, he said, with pride build a monument to their traditional culture – and move on (as I understand it), since he saw modernization as natural, inevitable, and righteous (Manker 1934, 1949). This view gives the museum a potential emancipatory role in societal change, which has not always been recognized.

But did it work that way? Research, documentation, collecting, and exhibiting can have both intended and unintended effects on contemporary political and social circumstances. The production of cultural heritage has often been criticized for creating essentialistic and frozen identities, but at the same time a distinct and documented ethnic character has become an emancipatory tool for many indigenous peoples and minorities of today (Smith 2006). This complex issue forms the background for my research. My main problem, both for this article as for the project as a whole, is what role Manker’s construction of a “Lappish museum” might have played in his time and after. Did the shaping of the “museum” – the collecting and creating of a Sami cultural heritage – help to legitimate Sami emancipation with its aspiration for modern ways of life, change and diversity, and the struggle for new rights? Or did the historical representation lock the image of the contemporary Sami to an essentialized, homogenous, and unambiguous past? Here I will discuss these questions by following two lines.
Firstly, the essentializing consequences of the general idea of defining, collecting, and exhibiting ethnic minorities and the priority that has been given reindeer herding in Sami representations. Secondly, the emancipatory possibilities of new museology, indigenous methodology, and other transforming strategies. Finally, I will say some words about the varying effects of different categories of museum representations.

**Defining Sami Identity**

How, then, did Manker’s contemporary political, cultural political, and ethno-political landscape look? In what historical context were his collections and publications created? What ideas and ideologies affected and legitimated the scholarly search for knowledge about Sami issues in his time?

The shaping of the new Swedish welfare state from the 1930s onwards had to handle different social categories of people not only in terms of class and gender, but ethnicity as well, although race was the current concept, in both scientific and popular contexts. With the expansion of industrial society from the late 19th century, the pressure to extend permanent...
settlements and to exploit the natural resources in northern Sweden grew. Conflicts arose in the reindeer grazing areas, leading to the first legislation defining and protecting reindeer herding as an exclusive Sami right (1886). In addition, the discriminatory view of Sami that later on was expressed by race biology and the “Lapps should be Lapps” policy began to influence many people’s minds. According to these ideas the Sami were reckoned an inferior race, which was taken as justification for attempts to keep them outside the growing industrial society and the coming welfare state. They were allowed to carry on with the traditional nomad reindeer herding, but otherwise they were supposed to be protected from modern life, which they were not considered able to cope with (Lantto 2000:40 ff.; Lundmark 2002:63 ff.).

When the state decided reindeer herding to be exclusive to the Sami, it also reserved Sami rights for reindeer owners. During the main part of the 20th century, this legislation (with a series of subsequent and complementary laws) formed the basis for the definition of Sami and the discourse on Sami identity, both inside and outside the Sami society. “Real” Sami were reindeer herders, particularly nomads in the mountains, and good reindeer herding was nomad reindeer herding. This created a gap between the nomadic reindeer owners and other kinds of Sami – like those living from hunting and fishing, the more stationary forest Sami, Sami settlers, Sami in other professions, and those living in other parts of the country. But it also forced the mountain reindeer herders to continue living as nomads. In the Sami political discourse, no other aspect but nomadic reindeer husbandry could really find a legitimate place (Mörkenstam 1999; Lantto 2004).

In the mid 20th century the state finally gave up the “Lapps should be Lapps” policy and the demand for nomadism and instead promoted the rationalization and modernization of reindeer herding, like any other industry. In parallel, the urge for assimilation of ethnic minorities was generally strong in the 1930s and 40s. Well-known examples include the policy against the Roma and the sterilization programme directed against marginalized social categories (Broberg & Tydén 2005/1991). Still the Sami succeeded in bringing their ethnic mobilization to a new level and in 1950 the first nationwide organization was constituted: The National Association of Swedish Sami (Svenska Samernas Riksförbund, SSR). Instead of representing an anomaly, from the 1960s on the Sami came to take the role of a recognized minority and an indigenous people, and at the end of the 20th century, language and culture came to constitute a new basis for being Sami. The problematic legislation concerning reindeer herding and Sami rights still persists, but today the discourse has broken up and admits other ways of defining Sami identity, which can be viewed as a kind of emancipation (Mörkenstam 1999; Lantto 2000, 2003).

**The Authority of Reindeer Herding**

Although the Sami society always has been characterized by multiple ways of life, the reindeer as an animal and reindeer husbandry as enterprise have become the icons of Sami culture and identity. When Sami are represented, the reindeer is usu-
ally present – in museums and other media, in research, literature, and popular culture, as well as in the Sami self-images. The symbol of the reindeer is common throughout Sápmi, in spite of varied conditions in different nation states. From an international perspective, Sami and reindeer are often synonymous with the arctic areas of the European mainland. Behind this situation, we can find the state and its legislation, but there have also been other actors.

Manker and his colleagues certainly knew there were other ways of being Sami, but to become a recognized scholar it was an advantage to focus on reindeer herding, the core of Sami identity. For example Manker set up eight questionnaires, among which the most comprehensive were about “The reindeer’s biology and ways of living” (1941, 152 questions) and “The reindeer herding of the Sami” (1941, 240 questions plus subquestions). Even if the other lists dealt with different issues, the answering persons – “the Lappish body of representatives” (“den lapska om-

budskåren”) – consisted mainly of men from the different local reindeer herding Sami communities (siidas) (Silvén 2012). Also the objects Manker acquired for the museum mainly represented the nomadic parts of the Sami society. Consequently, a great deal of his publications focus on the life of the reindeer herders and in his exhibition, the long reindeer caravan constitutes a central element. Thus, in Manker’s time, the scholars didn’t – or couldn’t – give Sami from other professions and areas enough legitimizing support to be acknowledged as “real” Sami. Another consequence, in our time, is that these groups can’t find as much source material in museums and archives, when they want to reconstruct their history. Manker’s deep and thorough descriptions of reindeer herding and nomad life are valid, but they are not the whole truth about Sami life and culture.

Even the Sami political movement had to adapt to the reindeer as a key symbol. Early spokespersons, in the beginning of the 20th century, like Elsa Laula and later...
on Torkel Tomasson, advocated a broader, more ethnic definition of Saminess, according to historian Patrik Lantto in his thesis about the Sami ethno-political movement. But to be accepted as legitimate actors in relation to the authorities they had to follow the discursive rules at that time. However, the link between Sami identity and the reindeer was not so evident from the start, and, at that time, many actors feared the extinction of reindeer husbandry. From the 1940s, when the industry recovered, reindeer herding became the focus of the Sami movement, which was proved (among other things) when the SSR was founded on the basis of the Sami siidas – the reindeer herding communities (Lantto 2000:280 ff.).

**Ethnic Identity, Race Biology, and Minority Rights**

In principle, any act of identifying a collective of people is problematic, even if the intention is to protect an ethnic group and promote equality with the help of exclusive rights, as in today’s indigenous and minority politics. Formulating group criteria often starts a process of essentialization and homogenization, and the distinction from the (imagined) majority usually ends up in a hierarchical order. From this logic, in different popular and scientific contexts, Sami characteristics have been described as historical, static, and bestowed by nature, which placed them below the supposedly better Swedish qualities on a cultural and social scale (cf. Mörkenstam 1999:7 ff.). Different kinds of scholars contributed to this, particularly in the fields of ethnology and ethnography during the 20th century. Manker was connected to both these disciplines, which tried to order the world by defining people, delimiting object categories, and establishing cultural areas and borders. Vast collections of artefacts, images, and data about different aspects of the material environment, social relations, and cultural codes were gathered in museums, archives, and publications.

This research and collecting was carried out in parallel with the development of physical anthropology and race biology, which for decades were considered legitimate sciences (Broberg 1995; Ljungström 2004; Lundmark 2007). Here, cultural features were not sufficient, physical and mental distinctions also had to be defined, which then could be applied in eugenics policy. But even without that practice, this research established an essentializing norm, deciding how to talk about and describe different ethnic and social groups of people. Like many others of his contemporaries, Manker shared, more or less, the views and concepts of race biology. In some of his publications he used its terminology to describe the appearance and bodily constitution of the Sami, and he uses expressions as “racial features” and “Sami types”, even so late as in his last books in the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Manker 1963:42 ff., 1978:38). But during his many tours in Sápmi, he made friends among the Sami, which probably is the reason that he generally didn’t draw the same discriminating conclusions about their mental characteristics as within the pure race biology. In the chapter “Race and temper” in the book *De svenska fjällapparna* (”The Swedish Mountain Lapps”), for example, he presents the usual stereotypes about the Sami, concerning their appearance, the shape of
their skull, and their cognitive race-features (Manker 1947:39 ff.). But then he starts arguing against, or at least, nuances these images, point by point, although still with a patronizing gaze. “Are the Lapps a good-looking or ugly people?”, he asks, and then begins to answer: If you flip through an anthropological photo album, you are inclined to agree with Carl Linnaeus in his description of a meeting with a frightening Lapp woman. But, Manker continues, the pictures are true only anthropologically, not humanly:

In front of the measuring equipment and the camera, these faces have often petrified to hard, soulless criminal portraits. When the camera sees them in bustling life, with facial expressions and a twinkle in the eye, the Lapps appear – like other people – as they look in reality, not always so beautiful according to Indo-European standards, because every race has its own beauty norm, but often pleasant. Their smooth and easy movements also enhance the impression. In their beautiful costumes they are, in short, a treat for the eyes (Manker 1947:44, my translation).

Manker continues

Another old cliché is the talk about the Lapps’ untrustworthiness. It’s not without a real basis, because a Lapp hardly follows the clock and rarely arrives on time. Perhaps he also does more often what he wants instead of what he should. But he seldom displays any actual dishonesty; theft is as rare as despised (Manker 1947:46 f., my translation).

Apparently Manker had the same mixed feelings as many other ethnographers, when the scientific categories met with their own experiences, and when bonds of friendship had been tied over the ethnic boundaries. In general, his descriptions of people and their ways of life were marked by respect, interest, and even admiration. He could describe the Sami as a proud people, as an “elite” or as “aristocrats”, which, on the one hand, purposely placed them higher in the social hierarchy compared to other minorities, and, on the other hand, emphasized them as “pure Sami”, who honoured their people and their culture (cf. Manker 1970:9, 1978:7, 24, passim). Most likely the race biology’s characterizations (in spite of the negative judgements) appealed to his fascination for the “authentic” or “genuine” Sami and the idea of a Sami essence. But since he simultaneously supported the need for emancipation from traditional roles to a more modern and multifaceted definition of Sameness, this must have created a conflict for him, or at least an ambiguity, from today’s point of view.

Other factors than race biology behind the interest in defining ethnic identity were related to the contemporary political situation. Earlier in history, there was no minority policy in today’s sense, but in practice there was one, based on duties instead of rights. It was made up of laws and rules with restrictions for certain categories of people to move around, settle down, practice their religion, do business, marry, or speak their language. But a new situation arose after the First World War, when different groups of people became minorities in new nation states and new views were established in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Consequently, for the League of Nations (UN’s forerunner) the minority issue was considered a key to international political stability. Minority rights ought to be guaranteed, with the double purpose of creating similar opportunities for all inhabitants and making it possible to maintain and protect ethnic characteristics in new contexts (Mörken-
Eva Silvén, Constructing a Sami Cultural Heritage

Another step was taken after the Second World War, by the creating of the UN in 1945 and the *Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Following the events in Europe around 1990, the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* was launched in 1992 and the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* in 1995. Every country that ratifies these two conventions can then decide on their own national minorities, based on language, cultural features, and historical presence (Nationella minoriteter 1999:11 ff.; Silvén 2011). But compared with the flexible and multifaceted view of ethnicity and identity in today’s social sciences, the minority policy’s categorizations, rights, and privileges are fixed and static in the defining of ethnic identity. The special rights that are offered in order to promote equality and to protect an ethnic or cultural individuality, at the same time run the risk of locking people up in essentializing and marginalizing categories. In his thesis about the Swedish government’s construction of Sami identity, political scientist Ulf Mörkenstam discusses this problem. With references to Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser and others, he points to the possibility of avoiding the essentializing drawbacks associated with special rights, provided they are open and form a “temporary” or “preliminary” minority policy (Mörkenstam 1999:231 ff.).

**Packing the Black Boxes**

But how could such a policy, as well as a more flexible view of identity, be connected to museum collections? These are usually seen as the opposite of everything that is temporary and uncertain – stable, categorized, classified, locked up in storage, or displayed in permanent exhibitions for decades. Rather, museum collections could be said to counteract the suggested preliminary policy, being, in fact, material instruments for stabilizing social groups and social relations in the long run. In the perspective of actor-network-theory and using sociologist Bruno Latour’s concepts, the collections are non-human actors in sociomaterial networks, shaped by contemporary scientific and political contexts. The object categories that in the 19th and 20th centuries were collected as the most representative for Sami identity are still defining – and delimiting – the museums’ prospects to tell the history of the Sami. From such a view, it is possible to argue that the collections transport earlier interactions from history to the present, and that they keep the social relations in place long after the former museum curators have left (cf. Latour 1998:274 f., 279 f., *passim*). Every time someone looks for data about Sami people – longing to know the Other or looking for one’s own history – certain statements and concepts turn up. Some people find their position as the “core” of the group confirmed by lots of material, for example about reindeer herding, while others remain empty-handed. Some find empathic portrayals, others stereotypes and discriminating descriptions. Modern and updated forms of Sami life are generally rare, which confirms the traditional and historical image of the Sami.

The permanent exhibitions in particular formed an influential and conserving genre with strong effect on the public for years or decades, by tempting visual presentations, a popular approach, and high
credibility. To continue following Latour, they can be considered as “black boxes”, a useful analytical concept for what is taken for granted and not questioned, created by a series of interconnections between human and material actors (Latour 1998:19 f.). Stuffed reindeer, clothed mannequins, raised tents, handicraft, and traditional religious items became standard elements in these exhibitions (cf. Mathisen S.R. 2004; Silvén 2008a). The life of the nomadic reindeer herders was illustrated by genre scenes, like the long caravan with loaded reindeer or a male Sami either with a lasso, posing behind a reindeer with magnificent antlers, or sitting in a reindeer-pulled sledge. These scenes became so normalized and apparently unproblematic that their discursive content was hidden, both in terms of distinctions between different categories of Sami as between male and female gender. Also the archives and object collections became such “black boxes” with standardized contents and recurrent categories and classifications, which fixed the Sami to certain social positions and cultural expectations (cf. Stewart 1993; Svanberg 2009; Rogan 2010; Muñoz 2012). In a study, the Sami politician Per Mikael Utsi declares, regarding the Nordiska Museet:

It’s noticeable that the systematizing of the Sami archival material differs in a remarkable way from the folklore archives’ classification of Swedish folk culture. The collecting of material has been directed to the exotic and divergent in Sami culture (Utsi 2007:69, my translation).

As a part of the museums’ society-shaping function, both exhibitions and collections have in this way helped create the general image of the Sami.

Unpacking and Reinterpretation

From my point of view, ways to challenge this situation are offered by post-colonial studies on museums, minorities, and indigenous peoples as well as by the “new museology”, which since the 1990s has generated critical research about the museums’ production of meaning in different historical, political, and social contexts (cf. Karp & Lavine 1991; Bennett 2004; Karp et al. 2006; Knell, MacLeod & Watson 2007). In these fields of research one can find methods like putting new questions to collections, testing new terms and classifications, as well as focusing ambiguity and hybridity, thereby trying to unseal the “black boxes” and uncover the processes of creating ethnic identities and other social relations. This has also been the idea behind my research project: how did Manker contribute in creating the image of “Saminess”, what methods and research ideas were used, what was included and excluded, and how did the result came to be accepted as just a matter of course? The collections, catalogues, exhibitions, etc. contain material for such analyses and deconstructions, and – as in my study – it is necessary to explicitly include the collectors and their motives as well (cf. Herle & Rouse 1998; Penny 2002; Gustafsson Reinius 2008; Svanberg 2009). A recent set of inspiring contributions to these issues is offered by the anthology Unpacking the Collection, based on actor-network-theory and other aspects of agency and materiality (Byrne et al. 2011).

This kind of research could be defined as a “transformative solution”, referring to philosopher Nancy Fraser in her discussion about the relationship between cultural recognition of ethnic groups and
their social and political rights (Fraser 2003). In her analysis of the mechanisms of social ordering, she introduces the concepts of affirmative and transformative solutions. The affirmative solutions try to create equity primarily through the recognition of minorities and other cultural or social identities – for instance by including them in the common cultural heritage. The transformative solutions, on the other hand, are directed against the society’s value systems and aim at a destabilization of prevailing norms and social power structures. One such method could be to investigate how minorities and other identities have been constructed, how they are maintained, and how they could be changed in order to achieve an equal citizenship. To analyse, deconstruct, and unpack the “black boxes” – as described above – could be such a strategy. If we assert that museums have the power to produce problematic conceptions about people, they should be able to contribute to the opposite as well, and help create alternative images and narratives.4

In the international field of post-colonial studies, and particularly during the last decade, a parallel critical perspective has developed. “Decolonizing” or “indigenous methodology” has grown into both a subfield and a vital theme, serving as a means mainly (but not exclusively) for minorities and indigenous peoples to re-interpret the heritage from alternative positions (Smith 1999; Porsanger 2004; Brown & Peers 2006; Loring 2008; Sleeper-Smith 2009; Boast 2011). In the Nordic context there are some studies of that kind, related to Sami heritage. In earlier post-colonial research the Sami have, for example, been presented as heavily exploited victims in the travelling “living exhibitions” of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This view has been challenged in a new doctoral thesis, which instead describes the participating Sami as conscious and strategic actors (Baglo 2011). The corresponding turn can be observed concerning the exhibitions in the late 1900s’ new Sami museums in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Earlier, the critics believed that these museums repeated the stereotypical Sami images from the mainstream museums, staging timeless presentations focusing on reindeer and reindeer herding (cf. Olsen 2000). New research disputes this criticism, asserting that what is perceived as stereotypes have another meaning in this different context (Mathisen, S.O. 2010; Lien & Nielssen 2012). The timelessness should not be viewed as a colonial “ethnographic presence” (Fabian 1983/2002) but as corresponding to Sami views of time, with history more intertwined with the contemporaneous. The focus on the reindeer should, on the other hand, be understood as a way to promote singularity when a new identity was to be created, using the means that had been defined as Sami and thereby connected with special rights. Instead of a more negative interpretation of this as “auto-exoticism” or “self-orientalism”, concepts like “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1985/96) and “reappropriation of indigenous images” (Sissons 2005:9) have been introduced in the scholarly analyses of these processes, linking up with other studies of key symbols for ethnic groups as well as nations (Ortner 1973; Kaplan 1994). Minority and indigenous policies require a distinct individuality, with specific and acknowledged characteristics. Essentializing and stereo-
typing symbols can then be used for emancipatory purposes, strategically as well as tactically, as above, regarding the role that reindeer herding was given in the early Sami movement. You keep the symbols, but charge them with new meaning—which makes the potential contradiction between essentialism and emancipation less distinct and more ambiguous.\(^{5}\)

**Different Representations – Different Narratives**

Another way to nuance the picture is to compare different types of representations and their respective effect—here exhibitions, object collections, and photographs. The aforementioned exhibition *Lapparna* ("The Lapps") showed what had become history already at its opening in 1947. But during its thirty years on display it must have blurred the boundary between past and present, owing to the continued use of traditional costumes and other Sami practices. Sometimes Sami visitors were dressed exactly like the mannequins in the exhibition, which created a strange mirroring effect, judging by photographs from the time. The visitors used the costume as honorary dress on certain occasions and later on more explicitly as an emancipatory tool in the growing ethno-political movement. But did the dress, in the context of the exhibition, work as a positive continuity for an indigenous people, claiming their land rights and culture since time immemorial? Or did it lock the contemporary Sami to essentialized attributes and historical living conditions?

Also the Sami artefacts of the Nordiska Museet had—and still have—an emphasis on past times. Fully 40 per cent of the total collection of over 6,000 single items was accessed before the year 1900, around 35 per cent 1900–50, and 15 per cent after 1950 (Hammarlund-Larsson 2008:87). But the artefacts that were taken to the museum during the first half of the 20th century and during Manker’s time, all

Ernst Manker guiding a group of students from the Sami Folk High School (Samernas Folkhögskola) in Jokkmokk in the exhibition *Lapparna* ("The Lapps"), 1954. Photo: Nordiska Museet.
were of the traditional kind. The new objects, that replaced the old ones among the living Sami, were not regarded as suitable for acquisition; what we today call contemporary collecting was not an issue. At the time when that view was established among the Swedish museums, in the 1970s and onwards, the main responsibility for Sami research and documentation was transferred northwards, to the expanding regional museums and universities and to the new Sami principal museum Ájtte, the Swedish Mountain and Sami Museum in Jokkmokk, Lapland (Silvén 2008b:14 ff.). As a result, in the object collections of the Nordiska Museet there are few traces of the radical changes of Sami living conditions during the 20th century.

Still there is (at least) a third category of representations – photography. Manker was a well-known and respected photographer and many of his pictures of the more traditional Sami ways of life have been used in different contexts, and some of them have turned into veritable icons. But there are exceptions that open up a crack in the historizing, homogenous image of the Sami. Among Manker’s photographs from his many field trips, from the late 1920s to the late 1950s, there are pictures that show the contemporary use of new types of clothing, household utensils, motor vehicles, and other kinds of material culture – just the kind of objects that weren’t acquired for the museum collections. Manker included these photographs in his popular travel books, which he published on average every third year during his career. These books were widely disseminated among the public, and like the exhibition, I believe they must have influenced the conception of the Sami. The narrative was often about the process of

“While the old cultural forms thus survived in the halls of the museum, on the outside modern life found new ways and means to proceed – to exist” (Manker 1970:151, my translation). Axel Larsson and his (here anonymous) wife on their way home from a reindeer separation in Malå, Västerbotten county 1952. Photo: Ernst Manker, Nordiska Museet.
change, the break between old and new, between tradition and modernity, and the photographs visualized, for example, the hybrid mix of modern sports jackets and peaked caps together with older parts of the traditional dress. Obviously, Manker became conscious of the discrepancy between these contemporary depictions and the museum representations. In the last chapter – “The museum and the life outside” – of the retrospective book Åter mot norr (“Back to the North”), he reflects over this: “Every culture has had or has its time, and the Lappish herding culture’s time was up. But its bearers, the people, continued their lives, in the direction of new adaptations. It was high time for the museum curator to rescue the relicts, to take care of what could keep the culture alive as history, inside the museum walls. More important than the hours at the exhibition case and the desk became the tours in the field, the contacts with people, with life itself out there, which left one cultural form in order to try to master a new one” (Manker 1970:149 ff., my translation).

Conclusion

In this article I have endeavoured to analyse and discuss some aspects of the Nordiska Museet’s representations of Sami history, in relation to contemporary worlds of ideas and societal contexts such as ethnography, eugenics, minority rights, and ethnopolitics. I have regarded the museum collections as sociomaterial actors and reflected upon their role in the construction of identities, stereotypes, and power relations. This material has often been shaped with essentializing and homogenizing purposes, but it can also be used in an emancipatory way with the help of different theoretical, methodological, and political tools, like for example indigenous methodology and new museology. It then turns out that the potential contradiction between essence and emancipation is not always so clear cut, and that the effect can vary depending on what kind of material and which forms and actors we are talking about.

My starting point was the question whether the creating of a Sami cultural heritage helped to legitimate the Sami aspiration for a modern life, or if the historical representations locked the image of the contemporary Sami to the vision of an essentialized, homogenous, and unambiguous past. The answer seems to be yes to both parts of the question. I believe that it is an asset for an indigenous people like the Sami to have been recognized, made visible, and represented in the common cultural heritage. It is good to have a collection of historical objects and narratives, but they must be subjected to scrutiny and be reinterpreted in order to break up the historical social context of which they are a part. In my opinion, museums and archives have a responsibility to contribute to this kind of new use of their collections. By doing so, earlier “truths” could be deconstructed and destabilized, which might make it possible to open up the historic discourse, reformulate the object of knowledge, and provide new subject positions for today’s Sami, according to the current ethnopolitical situation.

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Notes

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2 As a museum professional I have many times experienced the impact of permanent exhibitions on the visitors, representing timeless truths and historic stability in a changing world. During the second part of the 20th century, due to regular collaboration between schools and museums, these exhibitions were also presented to generations of children as a scheduled part of the curriculum.

3 Such an ambition was also one of the starting points for the Nordiska Museet’s permanent exhibition Sápmi – on being Sami in Sweden (2007), which is built upon five post-colonial themes and includes the museum in the narrative (Silvén et al. 2007, Silvén 2008b).

4 However, of course one must ask if these practices as well will result in an equally effective sealing of new roles and power relations.

5 Regarding the use of Sami symbols not only in museum exhibitions but for tourist purposes as well, see Mathisen S.R. 2010. Also Sami artists use Sami symbols, like the dress, strategically in their performances and in contacts with media (Ledman 2013:172 ff.).

6 More exactly, 13 books were published in 32 years (1928–59). They were to be found in many local public libraries, and several friends and informants have memories of the books being kept in their parents’ book shelves.

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