Gender and colonization in the Swedish Lappmarks

The purpose of this project was twofold: to use local court records to investigate Saami women’s experiences in encounters with representatives of the Swedish authorities during the 17th and 18th centuries, and to test the usefulness of postcolonial theories on Swedish colonial encounters in this time period. From the beginning the project met with considerable interest both from within Sweden and beyond and as a consequence I have been invited to participate in a number of networks which focus on colonization in a comparative perspective. These contacts, in conjunction with the fact that I was offered a contract to publish a much revised version of my American dissertation (Colonialism in the Margins. Cultural Encounters in New Sweden and Lapland, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), led to a certain change of focus in the project, towards comparative perspectives on Sweden as a colonial agent. The major findings of the project, as well as networking developments, are briefly outlined below.

Saami women, Swedish authorities and the colonization of marriages


Early on in the project, the empirical findings concerned questions of relationships between men and women, and on the management of marriages. Not because Saami women were only active within those areas, but rather as a consequence of the interests of the Swedish clerical as well as secular authorities. Already in the application certain trends were identified, such as the constitutive role of gender and social practices regarding sexuality and marriages for colonial relations. During the formative years of the court system set up at local market places in the Saami lappmarks women were present almost solely as participants in illicit sexual acts. This emerges as an area of conflict between Saamis and Swedes, particularly when analyzed in conjunction with the persistent Swedish concern with what was regarded as irregular and sinful Saami marriage practices.

In Swedish parishes women also appeared before the courts in large numbers as a consequence of their sexual activities. To chastise sex before marriage was an edict emanating from the Swedish crown and church. In general Saamis appear to have attempted to avoid confronting Swedish law in these matters. In some cases when the punishment was to be particularly severe – such as when one of the partners were married – the guilty parties were absent and nowhere to be found. At the beginning of the 18th century, the interest in policing sexual behaviors lessened – a trend observable also in the rest of the kingdom. However, church interest in controlling
Saami marriages remained a central issue in the civilization program. Already in 1603 it was noted in instructions to local officers in the Lappmarks that “whoring” must be curtailed and Saamis who “sold” their daughters to such activities would be punished by death. This understanding of Saami sexual and marriage practices persisted in texts well into the 18th century. The ignominious influence of Saami parents, with their repeated references to how things had been done in the times of their forebears, should be exchanged for allegiance to a Swedish patriarchal household system, based on Luther’s catechism, and Mosaic law. Northwestern Europeans in the early modern era shared cultural perceptions about the centrality of marriage to the entire civilization process. Attempting to extend to Saamis a uniform idea of one Crown, one Church, and one organism under God’s rule placed an inordinate emphasis on the regulation of sexuality and heterosexual marriage. Court proceedings, secular as well as clerical corporeal and monetary punishments, and sermons and teachings – all served to inculcate a proper respect for order, hierarchy, and masculine predominance in state as well as familial affairs. Sherry Ortner argues that the intrinsic link between states and patriarchy sets up fathers as the most privileged position. Following on her analysis I suggest that breaking the authority of indigenous mothers, and refashioning relations between men and women, and between generations, in “proper” marriages was not optional, but absolutely central to colonialism.

**Margins as a tool for gender and postcolonial investigations**


In the project application I introduced an ambition to combine postcolonial discussions about unstable categorizations and mutual, albeit assymetrical, influences with gender perspectives on power and agency. In this article I discuss theoretical and methodological tools for investigating Native women in colonial settings, but it is also a claim that these tools prove useful in elucidating new and different aspects of the intersection between gender and colonial encounters. I argue here that margins are tools for discovering women, concepts designating processes of marginalization across boundaries, and strategies of agency. Analytically I have come to use margins to identify four different positions or processes: as lines, spaces, processes, and strategies. From these abstract categories I develop a methodological toolkit consisting of questions to the sources. Can one find descriptions of marginal spaces, as spaces that are unclear, uncategorized, or uncontrolled? Where are lines drawn? Who is pushed out of a source, located in the margins, or ignored? And who enters in, perhaps uninvited or unexpected?
It is significant to differentiate between contemporary lines and margins drawn by participants in past events, and the kinds of demarcations constructed by historians. Women often occur – if at all – in the margins of the written documents left from colonial encounters. This obscurity must not be taken for granted. In terms of cultural encounters new kinds of margins emerge, namely those that are drawn by and around these meetings. Such criss-crossing boundaries, and zones of exchange enabled and demanded new forms of action, required novel skills, and created different forms for exclusion and inclusion. By shifting focus and placing that which is mentioned only in passing at the center new images emerge of people and agency in the past. Studied in this way margins reveal fundamental aspects of power and negotiation in colonial relations.

**Changing focus and future challenges**

This project grew out of an interest in the large body of international research on gender and colonization and came to develop a strongly comparative focus. This led to a number of contacts and networks, briefly discussed below, but it also meant that some things remain to be done regarding specific relations in Saami country. It is therefore my purpose to present this research in a book in Swedish, aimed to fill the need for course literature regarding Saami history, particularly with a gender perspective. This work has begun and consists of a thematic, ethnohistorical discussion of Saami experiences from encounters with Swedish influences during the early modern period. The themes chosen for this book concern the demands and opportunities of conversion to Christianity; women and property; sexuality and marriages; and trade.

The project and adjacent questions have been presented at several Swedish and international conferences, resulted in three Swedish articles, interviews in the media, public lectures, as well as informed at least three university courses. (See my homepage for further information: http://www.vxu.se/hum/forskn/info/gfu.xml).

Networks following upon this research include an invitation to serve as a board member for a Nordic network on colonialism and global history. Netværk for historiske studier af kolonialisme og post- kolonialisme received funding in 2005 for two years from the Danish Research Council, in order to organize three Nordic and international conferences and establish links between Nordic researchers. One result of this network is a special issue of Itinerario (forthcoming 2009) that focuses on Nordic colonialism. The focus on postcolonial issues continues in a funded network including Växjö University, Kalmar University College, and Blekinge Technical University College.
Another network, Ethnicity and Prejudice in Early Modern Europe, investigates the development of prejudice as a consequence of cultural encounters around the European rim in the medieval and early modern eras. The initiative comes from historians at the University of Lancaster and scholars from Great Britain, France, the US, Lebanon, Germany, Cyprus, Finland, and Sweden deal with issues of mythical constructions of regional cultures, relationships between dominating and subaltern centers and peripheries, the meaning of landscapes and natural borders, and the significance of settlement and land owning for identities and relationships between groups. These are questions I believe are fruitfully mined in a European context and in addition to my studies in Saami history, I contribute with a gender perspective on these issues.