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Rethinking the fate of Nenets cultural artefacts in Finnish museums

Many artifacts of Nenets culture are housed in ethnographic museums across Europe, including Finland. They were originally collected and brought there by ethnographers and folklorists who traveled to Yamal to study the local cultures. For Finland, notable figures in this endeavor include Matthias Alexander Castrén, Toivo Vilho Lehtisalo, and others.

Nowadays ethnographic museums increasingly strive to overcome their imperial pasts, cases of restitution of cultural objects to their rightful communities are becoming more common. As a representative of the Nenets people, I wonder if repatriation processes could be applied to Nenets cultural objects. I'm also interested in exploring what these artifacts are and what meanings they carry. I would like to delve into their history and understand how they ended up in museums.

Earlier, I conducted a small-scale study of Nenets artifacts in the collections of museums in Leipzig and Dresden. Then I discussed this experience with people from the Nenets community. Thus, I understood how such work can happen, what its directions are, and what to pay attention to.

In particular, I was interested in the principles of reciprocity outlined by indigenous researcher Elizaveta Yaptik (2023) in her dissertation on the reciprocal relationships in Nenets culture. According to these principles, when someone receives a gift from a Nenets individual, they become entwined in a relationship with them, as accepting such an item carries a sacred obligation. Consequently, I speculate that Nenets artifacts housed in European museums may carry similar obligations. Nevertheless, there are practices aimed at releasing these obligations, allowing the items to transition into another realm. Hence, I wish to investigate the nature of these artifacts, their journey to museums, and contemplate potential courses of action.

I hope that through this it is possible to initiate a conversation about the heritage of Nenets culture. I also want to think about whether repatriation of these objects is possible, and what can be done with them so that there is no debt behind them.

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