

# FESTIVALISING HERITAGE IN THE BORDERLANDS: CONSTITUTING ETHNIC HISTORIES AND HERITAGES UNDER THE RULE OF THE FINN FOREST REPUBLIC

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## ABSTRACT

The Finn Forest Republic is a three-day celebration of cultural heritage and local identity among the Finn Forest population, a people living in small rural communities on both sides of the border between Sweden and Norway. This festival has been celebrated since 1970, and has been an important element in the revitalisation and constitution of a Finn Forest identity. The article investigates how elements of the cultural heritage of the area have been used during the days of the Republic to constitute the idea of a common ethnic identity and a shared past, through a wide range of public displays and performances. The Finn Forest Museum plays an important role in the festival, both with collections manifesting a genuine material culture, as an arena for the performance of intangible heritages, and as a venue for telling narratives about the historic background of this culture. The character of the festival and the cultural heritage it celebrates implies historical references to the immigrant border culture, as well as to conflicts with the other dominant national majority cultures of the area. These cultural relations are presented in sincere as well as humorous ways, and allows for a wide range of identifications with the project of building a Finn Forest cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS: cultural heritage • Finn Forest • border • festival • everyday life

## INTRODUCTION

Every year since 1970, local culture and heritage have been celebrated in the Finn Forest (*Finnskogen*) area, in the borderlands between mid-Sweden (Värmland) and eastern Norway (Solør), and always in a little village called Svullrya, situated in the eastern margins of Grue municipality.<sup>1</sup> The celebrations take place during what is called the Finn Forest Days (Norwegian: *Finnskogdagene*), or the Finn Forest Republic (Norwegian: *Republikken Finnskogen*). The festival lasts for three days, and presents a mixture of various political statements and performances of local cultural heritage. Recurring elements in the program are an opening ceremony with the declaration of the Republic, hoisting of the Republic's flag, playing the anthem, and a presentation of the government executives of the Republic. Other performances are presentations of the cultural heritage of the area, and include among other things a wedding procession, a reconstruction at the local museum of everyday life in the old days, and an historic play about Finnish immigration to the area. On the whole, the ethnic and cultural heritage of the Finn Forest

plays an important role in the festival. This presentation of heritage in the context of the Finn Forest Republic can be understood from an ethno-political perspective. However, it is also possible to identify a history of uses of heritage. Through the forty years of this festival's existence, people have engaged themselves in these recurring activities for various reasons and ends. Activities related to Finn Forest heritage have been instigated to fight against the marginalisation of the area, to strengthen local identity and Finn Forest ethnicity, to preserve, organise and institutionalise Finn Forest heritage, or to strengthen local tourism industries. And these broader goals have of course been mixed with more subjective endeavours, like pursuing one's special interests, learning about history, earning money, or being entertained. But still the selected elements of heritage in the festival have been very stable through the years.

Today the word "heritage" is on everyone's lips, and it engages 'everybody', from enthusiasts searching for cultural identity, to tourism investors in search of profit. Many people make investments within the field of heritage – either as economic capital, or as engagement and unpaid voluntary work. From being a national responsibility – when a national heritage had to be preserved as symbols of homogeneity, on behalf of all of the nation state's inhabitants – heritage has become both contested and challenged from different angles. On the one hand, previously marginalised heritages have been revitalised and promoted by ethnic and cultural minorities striving to challenge the idea of a homogeneous national culture. On the other hand, commercial interests have begun to see heritage as an important part of branding, marketing and sales in businesses such as tourism, the experience industry, or the heritage industry. Both of these parallel developments can be tied to globalising tendencies within the heritage field, which have become apparent within questions of copyrights and trade marks on the one hand, and World Heritage, human rights, and indigenous property on the other. These tendencies have also paved the way for more subjective choices concerning cultural heritage, and this development has implications for new understandings of heritage in relation to collective projects relating to religion, nation and ethnicity. Later studies have concentrated their attention on the representations of heritages in various contexts, such as museums or tourism (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Bruner 2005). For Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett it is a central point that heritage should be understood as: "a new mode of cultural production in the present that has a recourse to the past" (1998: 149). This meta-cultural production involves adding values to certain cultural elements, but also a selection of such elements.

The literature on the constitution and production of heritages in different contexts is growing (for example, Anttonen et al. 2000; Siikala et al. 2004; Hemme et al. 2007). Festivals celebrating local or ethnic culture and local history and heritage are another field of activity that is presently gaining scholarly attention (Kuutma 1996; Selberg 2002; Gradén 2003; Hauan 2003). Festivals are especially interesting in this perspective, as they usually combine and blend many different elements of heritage to be represented and performed in the context of one big and intensive event. Therefore cultural festivals constitute a complicated area of research, with many different cultural elements being presented under one heading, and with a variety of possible interpretations and identifications among visitors of different backgrounds. This is also true for heritage, which is equally ambiguous and used in multiple settings. Border area heritages could serve as a striking example of this kind of multiplicity. Heritage constitution in border areas

is often subject to a heightened awareness from the bordering nation states, especially if the border has been contested, if the area has great symbolic value, or if there are important and rich resources of some kind in the area. However, border areas can also be populated by people who are seen as marginal in the national narrative, and as cultures that can be only very ambiguously determined as belonging to the national unity of the nation state.

Many of these characteristics could be applied to the historical situation of the Finn Forest population. To describe and analyse some of the elements that make up the content of the Finn Forest Days, could therefore be a path to follow in order to investigate some of the political, social, and economic implications of using cultural and ethnic heritages in the context of a festival. In addition to these implications, the Finn Forest Days can serve as an example illustrating how the history of heritage production itself has established certain patterns and structures, and in that way limited what can attain status as Finn Forest cultural heritage in this context. The continuous celebration of this festival in the same place for 40 years has of course also established some normative understandings of what the real festival should be like, which foreclose some cultural elements while they approve of others. It turns out that this specific 'selection' of cultural elements is deeply rooted in earlier descriptions of the Finn Forest area, as well as in descriptions made by earlier cultural scholars from Finland, Norway and Sweden (Huovinen 1986; Tvengsberg 1986; Christensen 1992; Virtaranta 2008). The description of the composition of the Finn Forest Days will therefore have to start with events prior to the initiative to create a festival in 1970.



Photo 1. Entering the Finn Forest Republic.  
Photo by Lizette Gradén 1999.

#### CREATING NARRATIVES OF A FINN FOREST CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Finn Forest area was from 1580 and approximately a hundred years afterwards populated by emigrating Finns who originally came from the Savolax area in Finland (Østberg 1978; Broberg 1988; Tarkiainen 1990; 1993). They belonged to the eastern Finnish culture, and made their living by slash and burn cultivation, where they cultivated rye in the ashes. The immigrants were commonly called "Forest Finns" by their new neighbours (Finnish: *metsäsuomalaiset*; Swedish: *skogsfinnar*; Norwegian: *skogsfinner* or *finnskoginger*), pointing both to the areas where they could be found, their manner of living, and their ethnic background. Other similar terms are "Rye Finns" (Norwegian:

*rugfinner*). More derogatory characteristics were also in use, such as “Vagrant Finns” (Norwegian: *løsfinner*) or “Troll Finns” (Norwegian: *trollfinner*).<sup>2</sup> In this way, the local population in the Finn Forest area found themselves in a borderland between the nation states (and monarchies) of Sweden and Norway, and with certain historical and ethnic ties to the nation state (and republic) of Finland. Presently there are no political or cultural conflicts along this borderline, and there are no great practical problems connected to everyday crossings of the national border, although historically this has not always been the case.

A specific interest in the Finn Forest population can be seen in Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian scholarly contributions through time, and the motive for instigating this kind of research has been religious, political, cultural or scholarly, and usually a mixture of thereof. A considerable interest in this migrant population was, as one would expect, raised in Finland. One pioneer was Carl Axel Gottlund (1796–1875), who as a young student travelled in the Finn Forest areas in 1817 and 1821–22 (Gottlund 1984; 1986). He is sometimes called the ‘apostle of the Finn Forest’. This was not so much due to his religious efforts as to his sincere concern for improving the cultural and social situation of the population in these border areas. He had found a Finnish-speaking people who complained about little understanding from their civil servants of Swedish and Norwegian background. He preceded with a proposition that the Finn Forest areas on both sides of the border should be divided from their respective Swedish and Norwegian congregations, and be given the right to form their own Finnish-speaking congregations, with their own churches and with a Finnish clergy (Niemi 2003). Although the border could not be described as tense, as Sweden and Norway were in a union at this time (1814–1905), the project was still seen as highly threatening because it was being realised by a subject of the Russian Empire. Sweden had just (in 1809) lost the whole of Finland to Russia, under which it was now a Grand Duchy (1809–1917). The idea of a more or less autonomous Finnish area in the borderlands of Sweden and Norway was not considered acceptable.

This interest in the area from a foreign state eventually also brought researchers from Sweden (Nordmann 1994 [1888]) and Norway (Sundt 1974 [1852]; Østberg 1937–38; 1978) to the area. The focus of these investigations was often on elements differing from the majority cultures and on the history of these settlements (Bladh 2002a; 2002b). But Finnish interest in the area persisted. Gottlund had documented a rich Finnish cultural heritage in the Finn Forest. The era in which Finland was building an identity as a nation state gave rise to a strong interest in the documentation of Finnish national heritages, and some Finn Forest traditions could be connected with Kalevala poetry. For years, the Finn Forest was considered a repository of ancient Finnish culture, and many Finnish scholars visited the area to collect this valuable material (for an overview, see Virtaranta 1986).

The investigations of intangible heritage in the Finn Forest area focused attention on everything that was culturally different, and most probably also strengthened the impression of an exotic and foreign culture that had survived from the past (Salminen 1909). Some of the people who related the narratives about supernatural experiences to the folklore collectors in the Finn Forests themselves attained a legendary status. Kajsa Vilhuinen (1855–1941) was called “the last wise woman (Finnish: *tietäjä*) of the Finn Forest”, and contributed to the idea of these forests as a relic area with old magic

runes connected with the Kalevala metric poetry (Salminen 1933). To an even greater extent, the legendary Niittahon-Jussi (1873–1964) was established almost as a cult figure in popular media culture of the 1950s. In Norway he was the main character of two popular books (Grønset 1953; 1957), and played the main character in a film (Wold 1956) distributed both in Norway and Sweden. He was also a frequent guest of the media, and in Sweden he appeared on the most popular TV show at that time, *Hylands Hörna*. In Finland his popularity was even greater, and his status as an informant for Finnish professors of language and folklore gained him more institutional honour. He was awarded medals, met with Finnish president Urho Kekkonen, and a society was established in his name, the Niittahon Jussi Seura, to work for increased knowledge of the Finn Forests in Finland and to arrange travel to the area.

This version of an exotic Finn Forest culture inhabited by a strange people who were engaged in supernatural and mysterious activities, soon also entered the field of popular culture. 'Life in the Finn Forests' became a very popular subject during the 1950s offering a recurring theme in popular music, literature and film. Romantic Swedish movies with titles like *Life in the Finn Woods*; *Ursula, the Girl in the Finn Forest*; and *The People of the Finn Forest* (Johansson 1947; 1953; 1955), are indicative of this interest. The central element in all these presentations was, however, just how the Finn Forest represented an ancient exotic Finnish past, where mystique and witchcraft ruled the sparsely inhabited forest areas (Christensen 1992; Mathisen 1993).

The focus on the Finn Forest culture as something that was very different from the surrounding majority cultures, as a culture that both in a material and immaterial sense represented something to be associated with a distant past, and as something exotic, to be associated with mysticism and sorcery, can be seen as a result of several parallel processes. Early descriptions of the Finn Forest population as a foreign culture with people well versed in magic and witchcraft, and scholarly interest from folklore collectors who saw the incantations as their material of prime interest, established the impression that Finn Forest culture equalled witchcraft and sorcery. Soon this also became a part of the "auto-ethnography" (Pratt 1992) of the region, a way of communicating with visitors, and eventually an element in the constitution of a Finn Forest identity, something that could be performed to the outside world. Finally, this was also something that could be used to bring the Finn Forest out of the marginal position they occupied as a border area. In relation to cultural heritage and its preservation, the Finn Forest heritage was the primary element that could make a geographically marginalised district into a core area. In relation to tourism, romanticised versions of the Finn Forests and a peculiar mysticism could form the basis for developing just the product that some tourists were eager to experience. This image of the marginalised Finn Forest culture was one of the elements that produced a certain version of the border culture. However, another aspect of promoting the Finn Forests as something very special and genuine was rooted in more political motivations, and this led to the instigation of the Finn Forest Republic.

#### THE FINN FOREST REPUBLIC AS POLITICAL AND CULTURAL PROTEST

The initiative to start the Finn Forest Days can at one level be understood as a political enterprise to revive an area that had become marginalised in the political and economic

development (Gustavsson 1987), and as a revitalisation of history and culture in these local communities, a movement that in the beginning of the 1970s was emerging in several Norwegian local communities as a protest to increasing centralisation in politics and in the economy. The author Åsta Holth (1904–1999) was a central person in organising the Finn Forest Days right from the beginning. She was also the first president of the republic, an office she was awarded for life.<sup>3</sup> Åsta Holth can be understood as one of the great ‘mythographers’ for the Finn Forest people, and in that sense as a successor of Carl Axel Gottlund and Niittahon Jussi. Yet she brought some quite new elements to the construction of a new Forest Finn identity, although she was clearly also building this identity on the past. Her series of three historical novels from the Finn Forests (Holth 1955; 1963; 1967) are important epic versions of local history and identity. In these novels she brought the past to life, and brought the earlier both stigmatised and marginalised Finn Forest identity a new feeling of pride and self-esteem.

But Åsta Holth was not only active as an author. Besides producing both fiction and non-fiction related to the Finn Forest area, she was also a pioneer of local cultural heritage preservation. Among other things, she worked to revitalise one of the old Finn Forest folk costumes. By 1970, this was made the official festive costume for the area, and it very soon became an important visual marker during the celebration of the Finn Forest Days. In parallel to her great interest in the past, Åsta Holth was also active in leftwing politics from her younger days, and from 1952 to 1969 she represented the Communist party of Norway at Grue municipality meetings. According to her understanding, there was no contradiction in being occupied with conservation of culture and heritage on the one hand, and being involved in radical politics on the other. As she saw it, the local history of the Finn Forest could serve as a learning example to understand economic exploitation and social injustice in relation to an ethnic minority. Her primary focus in the historical novels was on the conflicts between the Finn Forest population and the Norwegian authorities, and her understanding of the powers leading to marginalisation of the Finn Forest culture, and the economic exploitation of the people and the resources in the area, was informed by the same political position.<sup>4</sup> Revitalising Forest Finn past and heritage could be seen as a project that was parallel to the political work against the majority government officials, and economic forces threatening local businesses. The celebration of the Finn Forest Republic has still, at least to some degree, preserved this rebellious character from its initiator.

The Finn Forest Days start with the opening ceremony on Friday afternoon, an apparently solemnly performed spectacle with the hoisting of a flag, playing of an anthem, and proclamation of the Finn Forest Republic<sup>5</sup> as a sovereign state, independent of Norway with its own president, ministers of state, and government for the days of the festival. However, the elements of this performance reveal the fact that is not to be taken altogether seriously. This ambiguity is visualised through a slight manipulation and inversion of conventional symbols of state and nation. The flag that is solemnly hoisted is a kind of inversion of the Norwegian flag: the length is almost double compared to the Norwegian flag, the bottom colour is green instead of red, while the cross is black on grey, instead of blue on white, and turned the wrong way. In this way the flag can be understood as signifying an antithetical position in relation to Norwegian values, in the carnivalistic way of turning values upside down (Bakhtin 1984). It is a humouristic marker of the Finn Forest Republic as an institution that revolts against

mainstream Norwegian values, by establishing alternative and opposite values. However, some people are also capable of giving more sincere interpretations of values represented in the flag of the Finn Forest Republic, where the green symbolises the forest, the black represents ashes and the grey, smoke. In this way central elements and deeply felt values in the Finn Forest cultural history can be related to the flag, in a performance that must be understood as heartfelt and jocular at the same time. This ambiguity runs through the whole festival, and is an important element in making the Finn Forest Republic into a spectacle.

After the opening ceremony, the next recurring item on the program is the honouring of a memorial of the Finn Forest apostle, Carl Axel Gottlund. This act is often performed by the Finnish ambassador to Norway, something that creates a link to the country of origin for those who once emigrated to the Finn Forest area and who formed the local culture that is now being celebrated. However, there is also a reference to Gottlund's failed attempt to establish the Finn Forest as a relatively autonomous area in the borderlands between Sweden and Norway back in 1823. There is also a triumph in this: now this idea is being realised during the days of the Finn Forest Republic, at least in a symbolic sense, and for just the three days of the festival.

The Finn Forest Republic is in this sense a symbolic expression of cultural communality and of cultural, political, and social resistance. The political ideas of the Finn Forest as a special area that could deserve to claim a symbolic autonomy can in this way be declared, but these ideas also need to be demonstrated. During the festival there certainly are possibilities to do just that in a wide range of different arenas, and these ac-



*Photo 2. The Finn Forest hymn is performed at the opening.  
Photo by Lizette Gradén 1999.*

tivities all establish Finn Forest heritage and culture as a central subject to be presented in this context.

#### ENACTING THE PAST IN A MUSEUM CONTEXT

Finnetunet (English: Finn Farmyard) is a special museum of Finn Forest culture in Solør and Värmland, and was established in 1942. It is an open air museum of the Skansen or Scandinavian model, now containing 13 buildings situated very centrally in Svullrya village. In 2005 the museum became a part of the Norwegian Forest Finn Museum, which has 4 different departments, and the administration is now situated in Svullrya. In 2007 this museum was given governmental financial funding, and attained responsibility as the national museum of the Forest Finns in Norway. This was due to the fact that the Forest Finns had been granted the status of a national minority by the Norwegian state in 1999.<sup>6</sup> Both at the Finnetunet museum department, and earlier at the neighbouring Gruetunet museum department in the village of Kirkenær, extensive and important work has been conducted for many years to document the old Finn Forest culture.

When the Forest Finn Republic has been declared on Friday afternoon, the Finnetunet museum is located in the middle of this state, and becomes an important venue for many of the activities that will take place during the festival. These activities are not only tied to research, documentation, or pedagogical activities. The museum functions as a festival arena because it is readily accessible, and at the same time it already contains all of the elements and requisites necessary to tell a narrative of the Forest Finn cultural heritage in the right context. The Finnish past and the old Forest Finn culture is to be found ready, and hands-on in this environment, and it already puts on a spectacle. Here one can find historical documentation and scientific proof that the population in the Finn Forest area shares a unique heritage and an authentic material culture of their own. All the old buildings that would belong to a typical Finn Forest farm can be found here; a smoke cabin, a barn, a cowshed, a smoke sauna, a store house and so on. And all the buildings are filled with the objects and utensils that used to be necessary for work at a farm like this in the past.

There is also a much more explicit link between this material past and the people living in the area that is being used for performance during the festival days. On Saturday morning the museum area is the venue for a big and varied performance called *Everyday Life* (Norwegian: *Livet i hverdagen*), where the life of the past is revitalised by local people (and animals) who enact everyday living and demonstrate working techniques as they used to be performed a hundred years ago. The people acting are all dressed in clothes that can be associated with 'the old days' and enact the past in all areas of the museum. Some men perform as hay movers in the field, others as blacksmiths in the smithy, as forest workers logging timber, as horsemen transporting timber, or pose as rafters by the river Rotna, which runs through the museum area. Everything is arranged according to traditional gender roles, with the women raking hay or taking care of the work that needs to be done inside the museum buildings: cooking, baking, spinning, weaving, and knitting. With local participants of different ages placed in these familiar museum surroundings, the relationship between people of the present day and of the



material past becomes almost seamless and organic.

But there are some cracks in this mirror of the past. While the old man who moves the hay in the museum field still knows how to use his scythe, and uses his whetstone with rhythm showing that he is an experienced man in his work, the young girls who are raking the hay do not seem to be very experienced in the way they use their tools. This might always have been the situation, but now the old everyday working situations on a farm have disappeared with the invention of new technology. There are problems in recreating a 'living' version of the past that have something to do with knowledge and practice. This offers some challenges for the organisers of the festival. The old people complain that the young ones are not too enthusiastic about being taught the old ways of doing work. And the old people themselves who are supposed to do the teaching, are gradually becoming fewer and fewer. This represents a common dilemma in the representation of the past, and in the production of heritage displays.

As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it with reference to the processes of giving culture 'a second life as heritage': "The production of hereness in the absence of actualities depends increasingly on virtualities" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 169). Talking to some of the people who perform the old working techniques also reveals that some kind of 'semi-professionalism' is taking place here. Many of the artisans are not really from the Finn Forest area, and in the course of the summer they participate in many similar events, where they perform their skills. The next step in heritage revitalisation might be that the old people are all gone and the enactments have to be based on the meta-knowledge of old working skills processed by conservators and museum workers, by people who are active in certain old skills as a hobby, who have learned something about it at a weekend workshop or who (at the least) are able to perform a choreographed version of work processes that they only have experience through visual media. At this point former working skills have also been turned into pure performance, and they only exist as virtual expressions of heritage. As yet, this is not the case in the Finn Forest area, but as performative versions of local culture in tourism are substituting earlier forms of livelihood, these virtual and theatrical expressions of heritage might increase.

Combining everyday life and the spectacular in this context means to stage examples of everyday life as it used to be in the past. Both the museum venue and the festival constitute an arena where the boundaries between the past and the present are becom-



*Photo 3. Demonstrating old handicrafts.  
Photo by Stein R. Mathisen 1999.*

ing blurred and diffuse, and this is also true for the division between performers and spectators. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1998: 47) has described how exhibiting the quotidian originated as a way of describing 'other people' in exhibitions, with live people from other cultures performing their everyday work and activities. While such performances depended on, and created, a sharp divide between those in the spectacle on the one hand and the spectators on the other, what is happening in the museum context during the Finn Forest festival does not seem to be quite as dependent on this division. Most of the performers are local people who can also be seen in other 'everyday' occupations in the local community throughout the rest of the year. In this way, the boundary between the performed past and the present audience is not completely fixed.

Visitors and tourists are also allowed to participate in some of the activities that are being demonstrated. A new profession to be exhibited in 1999 was a portrait photographer. Even though he used modern technology, the photographs came out with the right aura of the past. For the customers, it was possible to borrow and dress in clothes from the end of the 1800s, have a picture taken and within minutes receive a sepia toned photograph in which they see themselves as participants in an imagined past, with the timbered walls of the old buildings in the museum as a background. This photographic illusion resembles what is going on in the recreation of the everyday of the past in the museum. It also reveals that this is a kind of identity project that is open, at least at some level, for everybody to take part in. Participant consumption is open even for outsiders, especially if they are willing to pay the price, and if they are willing to accept some of the new smells, tastes and other corporal and sensual experiences that this might imply.

#### CULTURAL CONSUMPTION AS EXCLUSION OR INCLUSION

But in this context it is important to be aware of the fact that during the days of the Finn Forest Republic the reviving of old working techniques is not purely pedagogical. The revitalisation of the past is also meant to create identification with an ethnic background, a cultural environment, and a place. Therefore it is also important that the Finn Forest culture is exhibited as something that is different from the surrounding majority culture, and in certain aspects in opposition to it. One of the 'working processes' that is performed every year at the museum has a clear reference to this local ethnic community's rejection of the official values found in majority society. As a symbolic and somewhat carnevalesque inversion of Norwegian (and Swedish) laws and rules, there is also a demonstration of 'moonshine' (Norwegian: *hjemmebrent*; Finnish: *pontikka*) production inside the museum area. The production of strong liquor is strictly forbidden in Scandinavian official laws, but not necessarily considered a serious crime in distant rural areas if it is produced for personal consumption. Here, during the days of the Finn Forest Republic, and in full publicity, a man produces illegal liquor down by the river, inside the museum area. And the visitors are invited to have a taste of the illicit product. This is one of the most popular activities during the Finn Forest Days.

The meaning of the moonshine production is further underlined by a little theatrical play that is performed at certain intervals. The Norwegian sheriff (Norwegian: *lensmann*), dressed in a uniform that clearly places him in the past, arrives to investigate



Photo 4. Production of 'moonshine'.  
Photo by Lizette Graden 1999.

the liquor-producing business, but he is told to keep his nose out of this. When he still, in the name of the Law, wants to stop the illegal production of liquor, he is resolutely thrown into the river by the locals and the moonshiner. The performance always receives much acclamation from a congregated audience. This is a condensed, narrative version of how the relation between the Finn Forest and the Norwegian government is understood. The Finn Forest is described as an area that is both marginalised and at the outer edges of the law, but also as a rebellious area, directed by alternative values. The population has to rely on their own resources and capabilities if they are to sustain life in this area.

In this way many of the performances during the Finn Forest Days demonstrate differences and draw borders. However, people visit the festival from far and near. This is not a venue that in any way can be described as hostile to foreigners. And the festival contains rites of inclusion as well as performances of exclusion. One might say that tasting and drinking the moonshine that is offered by the distiller is one such possibility of signaling a desire to be a part of the Finn Forest community. Other such possibilities are also connected to the consumption of food associated with Finn Forest culture. In the smoke cabin, several women are occupied with the production of traditional food characteristic of Finn Forest culture (Sunde 1952; Gottlund 1984: 200f; Nordmann 1994: 104). Some of this food is for the men and women who perform *Everyday Life* in the museum, although visitors can also buy their food here. It is possible to get the 'national dish' *motti* (Finnish: *mutti*), which is a dry, lumpy porridge served with fried pork; *silpu*, a stew made from potatoes and pork; and *hillo*, which is a raw porridge from rye flour and cranberries. These simple and former everyday meals are today considered to be

an important and emblematic part of Finn Forest cultural heritage, and in this process they have become a part of the standard festive dishes to be served in contexts where a Finn Forest identity is being celebrated. They stand for a knowledge that is tied together with life, ecology and work in the Finn Forest area, but they also represent dishes that are very different from standard Norwegian dishes. In this way, it is literary possible to consume Finn Forest cultural heritage, and the act of eating typical Finn Forest food becomes a kind of cultural communion. This is the case for both visitors, who are initiated to a new cultural context, and insiders, who want to have their cultural identity confirmed. When the consumption of 'exotic' food is performed in a public context, the ritual character of the eating is further reinforced.

Becoming a participant in the Finn Forest community is made possible in several ways during the days of the Finn Forest Republic, without necessarily considering it as a more permanent status. Cultural consumption offers the possibility to experience elements of a culture, and in that way practice a sort of familiarity with aspects of an historical or living culture. This way of experiencing a culture is typical of touristic activities, and in that context often linked to Dean MacCannell's concept of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell 1976). However, this case demonstrates that cultural consumption is not only linked to questions of authentic and in-authentic experiences, or whether these experiences take place in back-stage or front-stage arenas. The event of actually taking part in a festival or a spectacle can lead to an experience similar to taking part in a religious ritual or a social ceremony, where the goal is to feel a sense of being included in a community.

#### CULTURAL IDENTITY BY ETHNICITY OR CONSENT

Historical plays have become very popular in Norway, and every summer hundreds of plays performing and dramatising historical incidents from local history take place at festivals and other venues all over the country. The other great performance during the Finn Forest Days is the annual performance of *The Play about the Immigrants* (Norwegian: *Spillet om innvandererne*). This play (Wiger 1998) takes place, like *Everyday Life*, inside the local museum area and has been performed there every year since 1994. In this way the museum and the buildings are made scenes and requisites for the historical play. The plot is based on elements from the history of the local community from 1625 up to our own time, and the main theme is Finnish immigration to the border area. The play can be characterised as historical in the sense that many of the characters' names match historical persons, and that real historical incidents are the raw material of the plot. In addition to the main theme, the play relates the political and economic circumstances that continued to influence the life of the Finn Forest population for the next four hundred years. And in this sense the play takes on mythical dimensions, because the main characters continue to be the same during all those years. The stories are tied together by the narrator Jussi, the oldest of the kin and the mythical 'wanderer of the Finn Forest', who communicates with historical persons and supernatural creatures alike. This character borrows recognisable traits from the historic Niittahon Jussi, although he is also mythical since he is exactly the same through the centuries. He directs the Finn Forest population through political fights, wars, and other hardships, but he is

also on good terms with the invisible people (Norwegian: *huldra*) and other supernatural creatures in the forests.

The play follows the fate of typical, everyday people who have lived (or might have lived) in the Finn Forest. It starts with two married couples: Per Larsen Räsälä with his wife Inkeri, and Steffen from Mullikkala with his wife Mari, who arrive as immigrating slash and burn Finns to the area around Lake Røgden in the beginning of the 1600s. The actors who play these married couples become the main characters throughout the play, so in that way they also picture all of their descendants in the Finn Forest, up to our own time. In this way these individuals appear as representatives of an ethnic group being formed through the encounters with representatives of changing authorities and majorities. The majority of these encounters are conflicts which, according to the central idea of the play, formed the ethnic and cultural consciousness of the people who have settled and populated these forest areas. The other elements that have formed them are nature-given conditions: the forces of nature, and the supernatural powers to which they have learned to adjust, and that keep shaping the ethnic culture and the consciousness of these people. Since the actors are the same over a very long span of time, they appear as mythical characters. And in the same way as myths they can carry ambivalent messages about what life should be like in the Finn Forest.

There are different possible ways to be committed to work for the preservation of Finn Forest cultural heritage, to support the festival and in that way gain membership in the Finn Forest culture. Common for these engagements on the local level are that they involve continuous work and serious commitment to a project promoting an ethnic heritage. This can be understood as a community project on the one hand, and as an individual project on the other. Regina Bendix has pointed to the significant change in the relation between heritage and identity, and between ethnicity and individuality:

Ascending into the realm of a particular heritage requires reverence, learning, and investment. Evolving from the crumbling politics of late 19th century heredity, heritage is a self-absorbing or self-realizing project, typical of late 20th century concerns with individuality and selfhood, projected onto problematic constructs of group or ethnic pasts. (Bendix 2000: 51)

A changing set of actors in the play are over the years usually all amateurs from the local community. Some of them are themselves often descendants of the characters they portray. Giving life to passed ancestors of course create a genuine feeling of historical depth for the local participants and audiences who are able to acknowledge these connections through history. Local schoolchildren, housewives, a nurse, a shopkeeper, a student, a museum worker, and a forester are also actors in the historical play. The boundaries between the past and the present become more porous. In this way the historical play continuously generates new narratives and new connections between culture, space, and ethnic identity. The picture of what it means to be a member of the Finn Forest society today is given perspective and depth by enacting narratives of what this used to be in the past. But the outlining of these possible historical connections are in the hands (and heads) of each individual participant in the drama, and a matter of individual choice. If any one should market their interpretation of the past too strongly at the expense of other versions, this might threaten the kind of consensus that collaborative projects in a small local community depend on. This might in the long run lead to devastating conflicts over competing versions of the common past.

## A PLAY ABOUT KINSHIP AND DESCENT

One of the oldest performances during the Finn Forest Days is the Wedding Procession. It is not actually a 'real' wedding, because a new performing couple is chosen for this task every year, without necessarily being in a relation. The show is a representation of old traditions and local heritage, with music, dance, songs, folk costumes, horses and carriages; but also a presentation of values that are held in high esteem in the Finn Forest. The procession starts by the church and ends up at the museum, where the spectators are seated in the same arena and at the same benches where *The Play about the Immigrants* was taking place. The scene has now become the venue for the wedding dance and for the traditional 'tree-stump dance', where who in the couple is going to take on 'the leading role' in the marriage is determined. Elements in The Wedding Procession point to values that are important in the Finn Forest context, such as children and reproduction, and kinship and genealogy.

In 1999 the festival had a new post on the program, following the wedding dance. This was initiated by Rolf Berntzen, a genealogist from Torsby, on the Swedish side of the border. He had taken the initiative to form a genealogical society named Räsänen. It turned out that the majority of the audience present at the show had received a personal letter from Rolf Berntzen informing them that they were descendants of Räsänen (the very same Räsänen who had inspired Merete Wiger to make him and his wife main characters in *The Play about the Immigrants*), and on this occasion they were offered the opportunity to become members of this genealogical society. After opening music with ballet dancers, two of the main characters from *The Play about the Immigrants* entered the scene: Pekka from Räsälä and his wife. Then they presented a new and more 'correct' version of the Räsänen's travel from Finland to the Finn Forest. This version should, at least in some aspects, be understood as a critique of, or a correction to, Merete Wiger's version in the play. Among other things it was stressed that the name of the wife should not be Inkeri, but Kari Olsdotter. It had also turned out that the couple, who played the Räsänen's, were themselves descendants of the married couple they portrayed in the play. All this was according to Berntzen's extensive database on the Räsänen family.

This stressing of genealogy and kinship in fact communicates something very different from the more open ethnic message in *The Play about the Immigrants*. Blood and kin are understood as more important than heritage, ethnic culture, and myths about a common history. The performance ended with the genealogist Rolf Berntzen handing over a document to the somewhat baffled 'prime minister' of the Finn Forest Republic, where he demanded that all the descendants of the Räsänen family, now counting more than 20,000 people from all over the world, should be given full citizenship of the Republic. Against the background of the small number of inhabitants in the Svullrya area where the Finn Forest Republic is convened, this act was something between an invasion and a *coup d'état*. This might not have been the intention, but the performance (which might well have been called *The Play about Kinship*), shows that heritage and ethnic culture is not the only passage to the past. This interpretation of the past based on kinship is both wider and narrower than the one based on a common ethnic culture. It is wider in the sense that it potentially includes more people, but it is narrower in the sense that you cannot be included unless you are a direct descendant of one of the first immigrants. Rolf Berntzen ended his performance by inviting anyone who would be

interested among the Räsänen descendants to come to the Old Peoples Home, where he had installed his computer program and the database with all the 20,000 descendants, and where you could find your place, if you belonged to the right family.

Questions of kinship, genealogy and descent can imply a narrower frame within which to identify Forest Finn culture, but it certainly widens the territorial aspect, as descendants anywhere on the globe can claim potential belonging in the Finn Forest family. Cultural identification, on the other hand, narrows down the geographical location of the Finn Forest to a 'core' area, while opening up the possibility to identify oneself as a member of the Finn Forest cultural community for a wide range of reasons. Culture and heritage is also the strongest element in the festival, and kinship only seems to be celebrated as a part of this cultural identification, and not so much as an end in itself. This underlines the importance of cultural heritage, and narratives of a common culture and history as the most important basis of the celebration of the Finn Forest Republic.

#### DIVIDED BY BORDERS, UNITED IN CULTURE

Following the Finn Forest Republic through its history of forty years, and analysing the historical context from which this festival has emerged, as well as the historical background (and myths) that the organisers have chosen to attach their project to, reveals how this has structured the festival's cultural content through the years. Contextualising the elements of the festival is important to understand why some elements of the local heritage have gained in importance, while others have become less important. The longer history of heritage constitution among scholars of Finn Forest culture, as well as the use of this heritage in popular culture, has influenced the outline of the festival in important ways. It is also easy to realise that social, political and economic relations in this border area have faced the local population with problems that could be met with this recourse to the past.

Creating a link between the people of the past and the people who are living in the Finn Forest area today depends on interpretations, and the constitution of narrative versions of this connection between present and past cultures. The construction of territoriality and space that is implicit in the declaration of a separate Finn Forest Republic in the border area between Sweden and Norway has not been seen as a political threat to any of the neighbouring nation states. This has to do with the fact that the republic takes place, but is not realised, at the same time. This again is related to a narrative that firmly anchors the Republic in constitutions of cultural heritage and the past. The three-day-long Finn Forest Republic is not really, directly or sincerely, anchored in present day political and economic realities, or in any territorial claims. Elements of old culture and past Finn Forest history, marginalised in time and space by the nation states of Norway and Sweden, or exoticised by research and popular culture, have been retold and re-contextualised as narratives of a cultural and ethnic unity across national borders. This cultural movement has added a new kind of value to certain cultural elements, roughly as outlined by Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, by valuing them as different, as past, and as worthy of exhibition (1998: 150 ff.). The valorisation of the past and its heritage has also created a sort of cultural unity.

And yet, as has been pointed out in other contexts, the constitution and valorisation of heritages must also be seen in connection with economic processes (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998). The Finn Forest Republic started as a cultural and political project, to fight against the marginalisation and depopulation of the Finn Forest area, with local culture, heritage and history as points of departure. However, this development has also, at least for some individuals, been successful as an economic project. Heritage preservation has created jobs and possibilities for artisans and carpenters as well as museum workers, and Finn Forest culture and heritage have to a certain extent created possibilities for tourism and for economic opportunities in the service and experience industries. Should the introduction of commercial interests become too strong, it would probably threaten other aspects of the festival based on voluntary work and idealistic dedication. The united effort of the Finn Forest Republic depends on the feeling of having a common cause for which to fight, and this is something that has been immanent in the work with this festival throughout its history.

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### NOTES

1 Grue municipality is administered from the administrative centre of Kirkenær. The way people in the Finn Forest area relate to the different parts of the municipality is that the administrative centre, Kirkenær, is situated in *bigda* (the village), while Svullrya is in *skogen* (the forest).

2 The term Forest Finn can also in itself be understood as derogatory, compare the European thinking that can be found in the etymology behind the term "savage"; French: *sauvage*, from Late Latin: *salvaticus*, alteration of Latin: *silvaticus*, meaning wild, but literary: of the woods; from Latin *silva* = forest or wood. (Cf. *Savage* 2010.) At the same time, the forest is connected to very positive connotations within a Finn Forest world view (Mathisen 1992: 18).

3 After Åsta Holth's death in 1999, no new president has yet been elected. The search for a candidate who would match her many qualities has not been easy, and any potential candidate must have feared the comparison with the late president.

4 Such understandings of the history of the Finn Forest is also supported by local folklore



(Keinänen 2007), earlier activists and collectors (Keinänen, Bjerén 2006), and by scholars of Finn Forest history and ethnography (Godø 1975; Niemi 2003).

5 An interesting parallel is worth noting here. At the beginning of the 1990s the Finn Forest Republic and the festival had visitors from Estonia. A cultural delegation from Setumaa performed at the festival. The Setu people can be seen as a people who experience a similar situation to the Finn Forest population, with their people living on both sides of the border between the republics of Russia and Estonia. At this time, the situation on the Russian/Estonian border was getting more difficult and at the same time the Setus were active in similar efforts to revitalise their culture. They were inspired by the Finn Forest Republic and the cultural festival, and from 1994 they have arranged a similar annual festival in the Setu area, where they celebrate the Setu Kingdom Days (Jääts 2000: 664; see also Kuutma 1996: 125; and Kuutma 2006: 220).

6 The Forest Finns were given this status as a national minority together with Kvens (Finnish speaking immigrants in northern Norway), Jews, Roma (Norwegian: *sigøynere*), and Romani (Norwegian: *tatere*), when Norway ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1999.

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Field notes from Finnskogdagene 1999, Stein R. Mathisen.

Film footage from Finnskogdagene 1999, Mathis S. Mathisen.

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Johansson 1947 = *Livet i Finnskogarna* (International distribution: *Life in the Finn Woods*). Film, 92 minutes, black & white. 1947. Director: Ivar Johansson. Production: AB Sandrew-Produktion, Stockholm.

Johansson 1953 = *Ursula. Flickan i Finnskogarna*. Film, 99 minutes, black & white. 1953. Director: Ivar Johansson. Production: AB Sandrew-Produktion, Stockholm.

Johansson 1955 = *Finnskogens folk*. Film, 86 minutes, black & white. 1955. Director: Ivar Johansson. Production: Sandrews, Stockholm.

Wold 1956 = *Finnskog og trollskap*. Film, 86 minutes, colour. 1956. Producer and director: Gunnar Wold. (Based on Grønset 1953.)

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