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Arctic Identity: Global, National and Local Processes of Construction and Transformation

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Background

Almost a hundred years ago, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, an Icelandic-Canadian polar explorer and anthropologist first used the expression the “polar Mediterranean”. He used the Mediterranean metaphor not only in terms of geography to show the central position of the Arctic Ocean surrounded by land masses, but most importantly, to claim that the Arctic is to emerge in a future as a new centre of civilisation (Steinberg et al. 2015). In this regard, the Arctic can be seen as a crossroads between East and West: indeed, in this case, East and West meet in the North.

In the beginning, the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” seemed so far from the Arctic, both literally and figuratively. However, as the polar Mediterranean, quite paradoxically, but rather logically, the Arctic fits the Faculty’s area of focus. I also believe that perspective on the Arctic opened from Poland allowed me for opening new lines of inquiry and raising novel questions. As the title of our PhD program suggests, the process of searching for identity has both global and local implications. The Arctic has proved to be a demonstrative example of integrating global and local, along with concepts of civilisation and borderland that we explored in our program.

My dissertation explores the global, national and local processes of construction and transformation of the Arctic identity. As I believe, researching identity, one inevitably faces a need to define own identity. Regarding my research, I position myself as an indigenous researcher. Therefore, I aim to understand the Arctic identity from an indigenous paradigm. In this connection, understanding the development of my own Arctic identity has been essential in advancing my research project. Locating myself in my research has been one of the most challenging tasks that my PhD project posed for me. Therefore, two processes — formation of my own Arctic identity and my research project taking shape went hand in hand throughout these years, encouraging each other’s development.
Problem statement

The research on Arctic identity is often limited to tracing and analysing the empirical examples. It is also limited by the use of surveys that aim to reveal its place within the hierarchy of identities. However, such approach does not encourage critical analysis, but interprets the results of the research in the colonial context: it places in the foreground of research not the Arctic identity, but its bearers — often indigenous peoples, as an object of research. It inevitably places the Arctic identity in the bottom of a hierarchy of identities. It thus associates the Arctic identity only with indigeneity and limits it to mere place identity, while, in fact, it relies on both indigenous and settler experiences of the Arctic as a homeland. While not very much has been written on Arctic identity in general, there have been even fewer attempts to bring these into conversation with each other from an indigenous paradigm. My research aims to fill this gap.

Importance

Instead of “leaving my indigeneity at the door entering the academic world” (Hart 2010:1), I bring it in with me. Moreover, in accordance with indigenous research methodologies, I understand the story of my own identity formation as a lens through which I can better see and understand the greater processes shaping the Arctic identity. Thus, I attempt to develop an alternative vision of Arctic identity. However, what is more important than what alternatives indigenous peoples can offer the world is what we offer each other (Smith 1999:105). The project is thus a proposition of how we, as indigenous researchers, could be studying the Arctic as a homeland, being fully aware of our location in our research.

Research objective and questions

The purpose of this study is to look at the Arctic identity from an indigenous paradigm. Defining my paradigmatic approach as indigenous has been a point of departure that helped me to formulate the research questions.

Firstly, I see the Arctic identity as a problem to be addressed, not the indigenous peoples as an object of research. I also regard the Arctic not as a passive background for identity, but as forming simultaneously with it. Therefore, I aim at focusing and revealing the processes, through which Arctic identity comes into existence. I look at these processes from global, national and local perspectives. The central question is how is the Arctic identity being constructed and transformed on the global, national and local levels?
Considering that the Arctic is actively forming simultaneously with the identity, this question involves three minor questions: how is the Arctic being shaped as a specific territory? what symbols are used to fill this territory with particular meanings and maintain its integrity? how the territorial and symbolic image of the Arctic is maintained and institutionalised?

Secondly, in line with indigenous research methodologies, I choose to locate my research within the decolonial framework, rather than post-colonial. Therefore, I aim to explore the decolonial thought in relation to the Arctic and Arctic identity. I reflect on how the idea of decolonisation may contribute to Arctic research. In this regard, I also try to understand how the Arctic identity may serve as a decolonising concept. Thus, the next question is how can the concept of Arctic identity contribute to the academic decolonisation of the Arctic? Further, I try to understand the Arctic in the context of a civilisational borderland so I ask myself how can the concept of Arctic identity help in understanding identity on the civilisational borderland?

**Content of the chapters**

The dissertation consists of seven chapters: introduction, theoretical, methodological, three empirical chapters and conclusion. The dissertation starts and ends with my personal reflections.

The introduction presents a topic and my personal background which has determined the choice of theoretical and methodological frameworks.

The theoretical chapter brings together the concepts of identity and the Arctic. The Arctic identity is conceptualised as a continuous, socially constructed process based on the perception of the Arctic as a homeland both for indigenous and settler communities. Today, the Arctic established itself as an identifiable place on the map. Therefore, it is now a means for advancing the reterritorialisation and restoration of a sense of belonging for indigenous, and a sense of rootedness for settler communities in the Arctic.

In building my theoretical framework, I turn to the sources of various genealogies. These are the ideas from Western and Indigenous thought. Moreover, it includes not only scholarly but also artistic works. The central idea that determines the scope of my research is the Arctic civilisation theory developed by Russian, indigenous Sakha (Yakut) scholar Uliana Vinokurova (2010). This theory is an example of how the Western and Indigenous knowledge systems can be combined to produce an integrated vision of reality. It has come to existence in the context of colonial critique and the rise of indigenous self-determination. It is largely based on the sense of solidarity and common destiny for indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Though it is based on ideas of civilisation
developed in the West, at the same time, it is rooted in the Indigenous ways of thinking and being in the world. Therefore, it can be seen as an integration of different knowledge systems which are equally significant and important, and which complement and enrich each other.

Further advancement of my research has been influenced by the ideas of Polish scholar Jan Kieniewicz (2005). His concepts of *borderlands and civilisational encounter* have been instructive in my understanding of the nature of Arctic civilisation, as well as the formation of Arctic identity. In light of his approach, I understand the construction and transformation of identity as processes of modernisation, which emerge as a response to challenges. In this connection, the development of Arctic identity can be seen as *searching for solutions in the face of global challenges*. This perspective is highly relevant since emergence of the Arctic has been greatly influenced by a growing awareness of the global climate change and environmental concerns.

**The methodological chapter describes the research methods and collected data.** As mentioned earlier, I choose to develop my project within the decolonial framework because the term “post-colonialism” suggests the state, while the “decolonising” has notions of the process, doing change (Tlostanova 2012). Unlike post-colonialism, which observes things in a certain state, the decolonising methodology creates space for critical analysis and encourages essential dialogue that challenges the influences of the colonialism (Linklater 2011:73). Therefore, indigenous research methodologies are decolonising methodologies.

However, indigenous methodologies do not reject non-indigenous researchers or Western canons of academic work, nor they privilege indigenous scholars just because of their background. Instead, they encourage critical thinking and ensure a more respectful, ethical and beneficial approach to indigenous issues (Porsanger 2004). Importantly, the indigenous research methodology is guided by respect, responsibility and reflexivity (Smith 1999; Porsanger 2004).

Focusing on the processes instead of peoples, the indigenous methodological approach allows to see what is omitted in earlier research and fill the gaps in knowledge about the Arctic identity. Therefore, while working with literature, I have attempted to explore the sources of alternative genealogies and make visible the ideas emanating from the Arctic. In interviewing state officials and academicians, whom I see as Arctic identity actors, I have employed the elements of *conversational method* which honours orality as a means of transmitting knowledge (Kovach 2010). Doing so, I let *people themselves tell about their experiences of Arctic identity*. Eventually, analysing the interview and survey materials, I have understood that we co-produced the valuable knowledge.
The main inspiration for analysis of the processes of formation of Arctic identity has been the framework developed by Finnish scholar Anssi Paasi who sees it as the simultaneous, interrelated processes of territorialisation, symbolic conceptualisation and institutionalisation (Paasi 1986). Importantly, my analysis does not aim to compare global, national and local levels. Also, it does not concentrate on either “bottom-up” or “top-down” storylines. Instead, it strives to produce an account of Arctic identity as a whole, exploring the intersections and interactions between the levels and perspectives.

The chapter on the global level discovers the global processes that shape the Arctic identity. The Arctic as a region has emerged in the 1980s forwarded by globalisation and end of the Cold War (Young 1986). The global challenges such as climate change, environmental pollution and human rights redescribed the Arctic as a scene of cooperation rather than conflict. These processes have revived Stefansson’s Mediterraneanist views on the Arctic Ocean as a uniting, rather than dividing ocean.

In 1996, the Arctic Council was founded by eight member states: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. The Arctic Council is indeed a symbol of Arctic identity. However, it took a significant effort from the indigenous activists to become its permanent participants. They had to convince the officials and academic community to understand that the Arctic is not an empty frontier, but a homeland for millions of people. This shift in paradigm has been an important milestone towards the academic decolonisation of the Arctic.

Therefore, the conflicts in the Arctic rather happen not between the states, but between different homeland and frontier perspectives. They can also be seen as different worldviews or value systems. In this regard, active indigenous participation in Arctic matters on global level maintains a strong presence of homeland perspective; but, of course, these two perspectives cannot be seen in isolation as they complement each other.

The future developments of Arctic identity depend on the abilities and willingness of its stakeholders to maintain efficient dialogue. Although Arctic identities have heterogeneous character, the shared Arctic identity will probably strengthen stimulated by the growing involvement of non-Arctic states into regional matters. Therefore, the Arctic identity as shared between eight Arctic states and its peoples will rely increasingly on contrasting and othering the non-Arctic states.
The chapter on the national level focuses on the Arctic identity in the Russian context. Perhaps not surprisingly, Arctic identity in national context relies on the Soviet concept of the “mastery of the North” and its corresponding symbols. The frontier narratives constitute the Arctic identity in both state articulations and human experiences. The mineral resources and their importance for national economic security are the reason for existence of the Arctic identity. Meanwhile, the notion of homeland including indigenous and settler experiences and expertise remains largely neglected. While manifested on the international scene, the Arctic identity is weak within the state itself. Moreover, the Arctic identity in the national context is unlikely to strengthen in the future. On the one hand, it allows for peaceful cooperation with the West. On the other, it challenges the limits and borders significant for Russia which builds its identity in contrast with the West. However, the debates on borders of the Arctic zone of Russia suggest that Arctic identity issues are more of an internal character. Notably, by driving forward their common identity, the northern regions of Russia can build and maintain the horizontal connections in the state with strong vertical of power.

Also, one should remember about the fundamental difference between the notions of “Arctic zone of Russia” and the Russian Arctic. The first suggests an administratively controlled entity limited by defined borders. It is interpreted in strictly economic terms around the Northern Sea Route and thus has strong marine connotations. While the notion of the Russian Arctic is territorial and more humanised. It is not limited by borders and state agencies and implies historical and cultural meanings. In studies of the Arctic, the decolonising, indigenous paradigmatic approach would encourage the focus on the latter.

Research from indigenous paradigm also involves the discovery of alternative genealogy of Arctic identity. In the national context, it can be made through the reclamation of the roots of current Arctic policy and identity of Russia. Here, I argue that they were originally developed by Sakha (Yakut) indigenous scholars and leaders starting from the late 1980s. It is discussed in detail in the last empirical chapter.

The chapter on the local level of Arctic identity explores its role as a decolonising concept on the example of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Sakha (Yakutia) is one of the most active and well-known members of the international Arctic community. The local level is where the indigenous aspect is the strongest. Therefore, this particular case has been the most demonstrative for the analysis of Arctic identity.
The emergence and development of Arctic identity in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) was a response to the challenges of a local, national and global character. The political and economic crisis of the 1990s required from the republic’s leadership to take responsibility in the conditions of a devastated economy and social system. In a broader sense, it was a responsibility for the future of the peoples who largely depended on the natural environment not only in terms of subsistence but also in terms of identity. The Arctic identity brought together the peoples regardless of their ethnic belonging around the ideas of environmentalism and human rights. For Sakha (Yakutia), the motivation behind building the Arctic identity has been raising awareness and drawing attention to the problems existing in the region. The Arctic identity in the local context is an appeal to the federal centre to exercise the sense of responsibility rather than “mastery of the North”.

Despite its character as a double periphery in the Far North and the Far East, Sakha (Yakutia) succeeded to develop its Arctic identity independently from the centre, long before it was proclaimed on the federal level. Development of the Arctic identity meant reaching for the greater regional autonomy, and these processes have developed at the same time. First and foremost, it meant greater responsibility. Sakha (Yakutia) not only took that responsibility but offered a solution for the global challenges of the twenty-first century, such as climate change, environmental pollution, indigenous rights and education. It has been done through the conceptualisation of the Arctic as a homeland determined by an insider, indigenous perception of the Arctic.

However, the autonomy and ability to construct and transform its identity makes Sakha (Yakutia) a civilisational borderland (Kieniewicz 2015) rather than a periphery. Therefore, the Arctic identity should be seen as a decolonising concept, overcoming the complexes of the colonised. It encourages restoration of a sense of belonging, dignity and fate-control. In this connection, indigenous people should be seen as simultaneously actors, claim makers and stakeholders of Arctic identity. As a tool for reterritorialisation and revitalisation for local communities, it is probably destined to develop within the frameworks of broader decolonisation processes. Visibility of local representations of Arctic identity secures its central role as a homeland. Therefore, the local aspect of Arctic identity will remain highly important in the future.

The concluding chapter pulls together the findings. I claim that decolonising, indigenous paradigmatic approach is highly relevant for the Arctic research. Indigenous scholars forward the view on the Arctic as a homeland, conceptualising Indigenous research methodologies and knowledge as equally significant and valuable as Western. The concept of Arctic identity
successfully combines such dichotomies as East and West, homeland and frontier, indigenous and settler. Therefore, it helps to bridge different worldviews and knowledge systems.

Stretched across regions, states and civilisations, the Arctic provides the opportunity to think and act beyond the borders. Thus, it helps to overcome the limitations of narrower frameworks. For academia, it is an overcoming the colonial paradigm that supports frontier understanding of the Arctic leading to notions of backwardness and inferiority. The concept of the Arctic as a homeland provides the everyday context and basis for social identity, cultural survival and spiritual life. Eventually, research of Arctic identity from an indigenous paradigm is able to enrich the academic knowledge about the Arctic with new perspectives and visions.

**Conclusions**

Finally, I argue that the human dimension should be central in the Arctic research. The Arctic history is a history of stabilising and ensuring human presence in one of the harshest environments on the Earth: therefore a human, not minerals, should be considered as the most important resource found in the Arctic. So, what defines the Arctic identity in its widest sense, is an Arctic human, for whom the coldest inhabited place on Earth is the warmest place called *Home*.

The title of our PhD program, “Searching for Identity: Global Challenges, Local Traditions” was itself a powerful methodological suggestion. In the spirit of our program, I tried to understand the Arctic identity as a continuous process of construction and transformation, brought to life by global challenges and supported by local traditions.