



# Small stories: A guide to learning and teaching Sámi arts and crafts

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## Abstract

This article is, first of all, based on my own experiences of learning Sámi duodji and how to make Sámi handicrafts. Here, I will try to analyse some Sámi methods of teaching and learning, keeping all the time in mind the teaching of duodji and its future.

I have learnt Sámi arts and crafts and how to make Sámi handicrafts at home, from my parents and close relatives. Through small stories, I will present what I have experienced while learning to make handicrafts; I will also analyse how my experiences are connected with the Sámi way of thinking and Sámi teaching methods.

## Introduction

We can no longer take it for granted that all Sámi children learn to do Sámi handicrafts at home or in their immediate neighbourhood. As a result of changes in society, *duodji*, or Sámi arts and crafts, is now increasingly taught by the school. There is reason to be concerned about whether schools will manage to pass down craft traditions to the next

generations. The situation is frightening especially in Finland and Sweden where Sámi handicraft is not even a subject in compulsory schooling. In the comprehensive schools of Norway, Sámi arts and crafts, or *duodji*, became a subject when the curriculum M87 was implemented in 1987. According to my experience, it is not certain that schools succeed in passing down the *duodji* tradition to new generations to the extent they should. One reason for this is that the school is based on the dominant culture and mainstream views, and, therefore, we must ask whether it is possible for schools to take into account the special features of making and teaching Sámi handicraft, e.g. the Sámi concept of time and the Sámi world view and teaching methods. Is there something in the Sámi view and way of thinking that could make it easier to teach *duodji* as well as other subjects in the present school?

## My learning: Sámi learning

### ***The Sámi learning environment***

It is autumn, and my mother and

grandmother are sitting on a low bench in the main room, by a bed. There is a cardboard box between them. My older sister and I are playing with dolls by the table. We can hear our aunt doing the dishes in the kitchen. Our grandfather, father, uncles and brother are out in the woods, tending the herd. Our mother and grandmother are talking and sewing reindeer fur boots. Our grandmother is wearing a light Sámi dress and an apron, and she even has a hat on. She has spun tendon thread ready and stuck the needles with the thread on her bonnet so that the threads do not get tangled. I see the cardboard box fill up with hair; the fur looks like a grey cloud. I run to the box and stick my hand inside all the reindeer hair – it feels soft and light. My mother is trimming a leg of a boot, letting the hair fall gradually into the box, and I also feel like trying trimming. My mother gets me a pair of scissors and a few pieces of hide that I can remove hair from, so that I will learn how to hold scissors. She shows how to hold the scissors and edge them under the fur and then cut the hair. She tells me to work on just a bit of hair at a time so





that the scissors will cut the hair. If I take too much, the cut will not be nice and even and the result will not look good. I practise trimming for a long time; I do not always manage to cut the hair, and sometimes I cut a hole in the piece of skin. We three work together, and I feel I have grown twice as big as I was earlier – especially as my grandmother praises me, saying that I am good at trimming and quick to learn. She promises that I will soon get to trim real leg pieces, and I feel like a real craftsman.

In the early summer, my grandfather is outside, working. He is barking poles for the frame of a Sámi hut, and I go over to him. I sit on my knees and watch him working. He cuts the bark with a knife and then pulls the bark back in two directions. I watch for a while and then ask whether I can also try. My grandfather says yes and tells me to come and sit in front of him so that I almost sit on his lap. He gives the knife to me, showing how I should hold it in order not to cut myself by accident; he himself holds my hand, and we start to remove the bark again. As we bark,

my grandfather asks whether I can feel how much I need to press the knife if I want it to cut the bark. When we have made a cut in the bark and it is time to pull it in two directions, I do not have the strength to remove it. The bark sits tight and I do not manage to loosen it, so my grandfather tears the bark off. When we have worked this way for a while, my grandfather lets me use the knife alone while he tears the bark off. As we work, he tells me about the skeleton poles of a Sámi hut: what they should be like, where and when they should be fetched and what one should do to them. He tells about his childhood and what life was like then, and what his parents and other relatives have told him. In the autumn he continues to give me advice about the poles of a Sámi hut and tent, a *goahti* and a *lávvu*, when he is smoking reindeer meat in a Sámi tent and I slip in to watch what he does.

### **The kinship network a sense of belonging together**

Aunt Inga is sewing a hemline part for her Sámi dress, as she needs to make herself a new dress for the festival on

Lady Day. I stand by her and ask: “Is it difficult to sew with the treadle sewing machine?” I would like to try but do not dare to say it straight out. I have already been able to try sewing with a machine that is worked by hand. We children got the old machine when our grandmother bought a treadle sewing machine. I suppose my aunt can read my mind, as she asks me whether I would like to try. First she makes me sew a small piece of cloth without thread. She tells me to treadle carefully, not too fast so that I do not sew my own fingers by accident.

During Christmas, all of our grandparents’ children and their families used to gather at our grandparents’ place. We grandchildren got the chance to play together. The day was so short in mid-winter that we could not play outside for very long. It must have been sometimes difficult to come up with something that the lot of children could do in the long evenings. However, one night my older sister and I knew what we wanted to do: we wanted to knit. Our father and Niillas, our son-in-law, were going out to tend the herd in the morning, and they did





not have a potholder with which to lift the hot pot. We had seen such a thing in the school kitchen, and we thought that our father and Niillas would need one out in the woods. We asked for knitting needles and yarn. Our grandmother got us some yarn but could not find suitable needles for us. We started to feel really disappointed, because we could not knit and show others what we could do; we also felt bad when we thought that our father and Niillas might burn their hands because they did not have a potholder. Suddenly our uncle Ántte went out, just to return slightly later with two pairs of needles. He had made us needles so that we could knit. You can imagine how highly we thought of our uncle at that moment: he was the nicest and the most skilful person in the world right then! Now we could knit, and, of course, we started to compete who was the quickest one. My sister, who was older and had knit more than I, was the fastest. When I tried to hurry I lost a few stitches here and there, and was about to start crying. Aunt Inga was cooking, and she came to help me and managed to make me want to continue knitting.

## Teaching by living

At the beginning of one summer, I got to go to get bark with my grandmother; she packed along a lunch for us. I, too, got to wear a belt with a knife. We walked for a while; the house must still have been in sight when I started to ask whether we would soon begin to cut bark. While walking, my grandmother told me what kind of place we were looking for and what kind of willows would be suitable for bark. She told me about the best time of the year and the best phase of the moon for getting bark. She also explained me how to communicate with nature: people are not masters of nature but part of it. People must ask nature for permission to take, and, after taking, also thank for their share. We must behave well in nature; we must not shout nor quarrel, and we must not destroy anything intentionally. We must not take more than we need. We reached the place where we were supposed to collect bark. My grandmother showed me different kinds of willows, telling what their bark would be good for. As she started to

cut willows, she showed me how to do it so that there would be some willows left everywhere; that way, we would not destroy the area for other creatures, for example mice and birds, that also make use of willow thickets. We cut off the branches, my grandmother the thickest ones and I the smaller ones. Out of these branches we built a fire on which we made some coffee and broiled some dried reindeer meat. During the coffee break, my grandmother told me what she had experienced as a child when she got to go along to get materials from the woods. Her grandmother had told her what to do in the woods: how one must keep in mind all the places, hills, rivers, lakes, etc., so that one will learn to find one's way.

## Guide and learner

After compulsory schooling I started again to spend more time making handicrafts with my mother. Now, my mother had assumed the role of my grandmother: she gave me advice on how to work, what to do and why. Gradually, I dared to try more things myself and craft on my own. My mother







was my guide, but she began to give me advice only when I asked for it. She let me try and make mistakes and learn from them. Sometimes she could correct my mistakes, while sometimes I had to start all over. I remember when I sewed my first hemline. I had sewed the decorative ribbon on my own but had not held it tight enough. I had to take the ribbon out, and that took long, as I had to be careful not to destroy the broadcloth or the ribbon. At one time, I was cutting out a Sámi dress alone, and my mother was sitting close by knitting. She watched me and what I did, but without me noticing. Suddenly she asked me whether I was going to cut out the part in the way I was planning to. I wondered why she suddenly doubted my ability to cut out the dress, as this was the last part of the dress. My mother asked me to look at the piece closely, as there was something wrong with it. I looked for a long time, trying to find the mistake, but could not. My mother helped me to notice what was wrong; she told me to look at the broadcloth and see whether all the parts had been cut out the right way. When I checked the broadcloth, I

realized that I was about to cut out this last piece the wrong way. As we worked on our handicrafts, my mother told me how she and her grandmother had sat crafting and how her grandmother had advised her on the shape of the dress, how one should decorate it, what kind of decoration was suitable, and how parts should be cut out so that no material was wasted and the dress would feel good to wear.

### Forums of learning

There are also other means of learning than by making handicrafts at home and by observing one's immediate environment. Festival occasions that attract a great number of people are good forums for learning. My mother told me to observe what kind of Sámi clothing people were wearing; she explained to which area each type of clothing belonged to and to which family the wearer belonged to. She taught me to recognize family-specific features in the clothing of our area. She trained me to see the differences in the clothing of other regions, too, but advised me not to try to be an expert on them, as it was

important to respect and appreciate the people, craftwork, patterns and designs of other regions. However, she wanted me to know the handicrafts and clothing patterns of our own region as well as possible. My mother often says that one should know the traditions; only after having learnt them thoroughly, one can be creative in one's own way, if one wishes to. One should also know what Sámi *duodji* is – also what its background is – before one can start changing or renewing it. The same applies to the development of *duodji*: one cannot develop Sámi handicraft if one does not know the traditions, working methods and ways of thinking connected with it. I have learnt that a craftsperson always needs to plan and think about his/her work in terms of the seasons. Materials must be acquired from nature at a certain time, the treatment of materials takes its time, and each season is linked with the making of certain types of handicrafts. Acquiring materials is connected with what happens in nature, and the treatment of materials is the basis of crafting. Through the ages, *duodji*, or Sámi arts





and crafts, has been part of Sámi life. In my opinion, if a person has grown up with Sámi arts and crafts, his/her connection to *duodji* can be compared to connections between relatives and generations. *Duodji* comprises the grand-grand-grandparents, grand-grandparents, grandmothers and grandfathers, parents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, cousins, children, grandchildren and grand-grandchildren. *Duodji* is the collective property of the Sámi. We have inherited it from the earlier generations, and we have the obligation to convey its traditions to new generations as comprehensively as possible.

### Holistic thinking

In my small stories, one can recognize aspects of the Sámi world view and way of thinking. An example of this view would be the idea that human beings are part of nature and not its owners. According to Elina Helander, the Sámi world view is connected to the idea that humans depend on nature and, therefore, respect it. The Sámi understanding of the world becomes visible and survives

in the chores of everyday life (Helander, 2000: 171–182). It is important to live in harmony both with people and nature. In her book, Asta Balto writes about how the ecological way of thinking becomes apparent in her research material in the following way. People were not masters of nature: they had a humble and respectful attitude towards every creature. No animal was allowed to suffer in vain, and predators that were wounded or hurt were to be killed or cared for. People were to use the yield of nature sparingly and not exhaust the stock of game or waste what was found in nature (Balto, 1997: 125).

In my story about how my grandmother and I went barking, my grandmother guides me, through doing and words, into the Sámi way of thinking. Through her stories, she teaches me ethics, how I should behave, and how one can pay attention to both the worldly and the spiritual sides of life. This means that one must strive for a state of balance not just in one's own life but also as concerns the utilization of nature.

In his article, Mikkel Nils Sara (2000)

analyses the Sámi concept of time and seasons from the perspective of reindeer husbandry. He starts his analysis with the image of the sun; in the old times, it was depicted in the centre of the Sámi drum and had four corners. The image can be explained so that the sun depicts the annual cycle. Furthermore, Sara explains that the moon played an important role in how time was divided and when tasks were performed and natural phenomena took place during the year. There were tasks that were to be done while the moon was waxing (Sara, 2000: 2–5). Similarly, crafting requires that one knows and observes nature, the year and the seasons. The year, the weather and the growing season – what they have been like – determine to a great extent what kind of materials one can get both from plants and animals. In crafting, the acquiring and the treatment of materials depend greatly on nature and the seasons during which they should be gathered. Gunvor Guttorm (1999) analyses the influence of the moon on materials and life in general. Through examples, she shows how important





the phase of the moon has been for the acquiring of material and why this has been so (Guttorm, 1999: 91–95). My stories show how comprehensive, exact and deep my grandmother's and -father's knowledge of nature, time and the seasons was.

The family and the network that consists of relatives but also, for example, of godparents, friends and neighbours are significant in Sámi upbringing and teaching. Asta Balto calls this network a Sámi social institution. She analyses the role and the meaning of the family in upbringing, reflecting also on the importance of the fact that grandparents and other relatives include children in the community of adults and help teach, look after, support and guide the children until they grow up (Balto, 1997: 75–92). In a way, this guarantees that knowledge and skills are passed down, as the transmitting is not the responsibility of the parents alone. In my stories on Aunt Inga and Christmas, relatives play a central role. Everyone in the family participates in teaching and upbringing the children. Adults helped,

allowed and made it possible for my sister and me to knit. We felt that we were important and that our work was appreciated.

Ever since they are very small, Sámi children tag along when adults are engaged in their work, which means that, very early in life, they learn to see what kind of tasks need to be done and how they are done. They form a picture of the working process even though they do not yet participate in the tasks in practice. In Sámi upbringing, the focus is on learning and teaching. For instance, in the case of knitting, nobody told us potholders are not needed in the woods. Rather, the members of our family saw knitting as an opportunity of learning and a skill that would help us manage in life.

In the story of my grandmother and me fetching bark, I use the phrase "Teaching by living "; with it, I refer to the way a person is him/herself involved while teaching another person. As the story and my grandmother's advice show, my grandmother had a deep and comprehensive knowledge of the Sámi

heritage and way of thinking. She was sure about her knowledge and skill. She lived and mastered the circumstances, and she shared her knowledge with me. By the phrase "She lived" I mean that she was both physically and mentally attentive in what she was teaching. She taught me the Sámi thought and world view both through verbal and body language. From everything that she did and said, one could see that she was humble and respectful towards both nature and our ancestors and traditions. By "mastering the circumstances" I mean that the Sámi way of thinking and world view were an integral part of my grandmother. She was like a spring from which clean water steadily bubbled. By "shared her knowledge with me" I mean that my grandmother gave, or taught, me her knowledge and skills.

The diversity of forums of learning shows how the Sámi have used all spheres of life for learning and teaching. They have noticed the opportunities and also made use of them. Indeed, the Sámi view of life contains the idea that one learns throughout one's life. The







Sámi ways of learning and teaching show, for example, that each person is granted the room and power to develop according to his/her talents, interests and endowments. Things are explained and taught as they are, but it is never said that one must follow a certain, set pattern. One is also guided to be critical and even suspect what one sees or hears: one should reflect on and assess things oneself and not always accept the way things seem to be. Proverbs and sayings play a central role in Sámi upbringing, and they are often used in the teaching of Sámi *duodji*, or Sámi arts and crafts.

## Discussion

Through these short narratives, I describe the Sámi way of bringing up children and especially the way children are taken along to participate in doing tasks ever since they are very small. It is a distinctive feature of Sámi upbringing and teaching that there are usually three generations working together. From the point of view of passing down the arts and crafts tradition, it is extremely important that three generations act together, as

the relationship between mother and child differs from that of grandparent and grandchild. The mother is closer to the child, and she will, for example, deal with the child's anger when he/she gets tired but still wants to do handicraft and then makes mistakes. The grandmother or -father, again, helps the child with making handicrafts so that he/she does not give up and get weary of crafting. The grandfather/-mother also helps the child to move on from an unpleasant situation by, for example, coming up with something else that he/she can do together with the child.

The learner observes the "master" making handicrafts and also participates him/herself in the crafting. Gradually, the learner is given more responsibility and becomes, eventually, a master him/herself. In my stories about my childhood, my grandmother is the master, my mother an advanced learner and I myself a mere novice. In my story about the time when I was a teenager, my mother has the role of a master who guides me – a learner who will eventually become a master. And when I become

a master, I also become the one who has the responsibility and obligation to pass down the craft tradition.

The Sámi ways of learning and teaching show, for example, that each person is granted the room and power to develop according to his/her talents, interests and endowments. Applying Sámi methods of teaching entails that things are explained and taught as they are, but it is not said that there is a certain pattern according to which one needs to work. Each person will, with time and practice, find his/her own way of working, putting thus also his/her individual mark on the handicraft. Proverbs and sayings are used to a great extent in the teaching of Sámi arts and crafts, or *duodji*, but also in upbringing and teaching in general (e.g., Guttorm, 1999). The learners of Sámi arts and crafts are guided to be critical and reflect on both the process and the result of their work. They should not believe in everything they see, hear or read – nor accept things without reflection.

The Sámi University College participated in the evaluation study program of the





curriculum reform Reform 97 that was initiated by the Department of Church Affairs, Education and Research. The task of the Sámi University College was to evaluate how the Sámi curriculum (O97S) of the 10-year comprehensive school was implemented in the Sámi schools. Altogether ten researchers from the Sámi University College were involved in this project. In his article, Mikkal Nils Sara (2003) explains how he understands traditional knowledge and the view behind it. He explains briefly how wide and comprehensive traditional knowledge is just in the sphere that can be connected with social and natural sciences and environmental studies. For example, he writes on traditional Sámi skills in this way:

Earlier, home, village, family and guest-host relations were, among the Sámi, the central institutions of organising relationships between people. They have been the places where people have acted and met, or the company in which the different tasks have been performed, discussed, reflected upon and evaluated. [...] And all the stories,

news, evaluations, learning and tasks belonged to one common sphere and could take place in the same room and time. When I say so, I also think of knowledge and customs that are connected with a wider unity of both concrete things and the spiritual and visionary spheres. They are part of the heritage that has existed ever since the Sámi have mastered their natural surroundings and had their own religion and explanations and rituals connected with it. In many activities, people communicated earlier with their natural environment not just through having an effect on and being affected by nature, but also through thought and words. Performing tasks entailed a certain type of disposition, thoughts, words and ways of behaving – all an integral part of the know-how (Sara, 2003: 126).

The ideas of this quote and its last sentences become concrete and visible in the story in which my grandmother and I went to fetch bark. As my grandmother worked and talked, I experienced things, learning something all the time. This illustrates aspects of what I mean

by talking about “Teaching by living “. This is something that we teachers – at all levels of education – need to keep in mind when teaching. We need to think about how we, as teachers, master and grasp the whole field and subject that we are teaching. Naturally, one person cannot know and master everything, but we can know and be proficient in our own field.

In her monograph, Vuokko Hirvonen writes about the pedagogical orientation of Sámi teachers and schools and how this orientation affects teaching (2003, 100). We Sámi teachers need to reflect on our orientation. Sámi educational institutions, in turn, need to reflect on their meta-orientation. But we also need to think about what we would want our approach to teaching to be like. On the basis of Miller and Seller (1985), Hirvonen presents three types of meta-orientation. The first one of them is the transmission orientation, in which the teacher plays a central role in teaching. The second position is called the transaction orientation; it emphasises comprehensive knowledge, which is







seen as a living process and something that changes. In such education, individual and collective learning are not differentiated from each other, but methods and other teaching practices are based on social relations of learning, having their roots in Dewey's view of upbringing (Hirvonen, 2003: 100–104). The third orientation is the transformation orientation, and it emphasises social enhancement and personality development as the goals of education and upbringing. It contains an orientation that is humanistic and focuses on social change; the emphasis is on teaching skills that promote personal and social transformation. It also contains an orientation that is part of social progress and aims at attaining harmony with the environment instead of exerting control over it. Furthermore, this approach also entails spiritual and emotional communication with and ecological respect for the environment (Hirvonen 2003: 105).

From the perspective of the orientations presented by Hirvonen, I can discern the transformation orientation in my

grandmother's teaching. Certainly, my grandmother's upbringing had my social enhancement and the development of my personality as its goals. This must be the – either conscious or unconscious – objective of all parents. I also see an attempt to attain harmony with the environment. In addition, my grandmother pays attention to spiritual and emotional communication with the environment and to ecological respect for it. My grandmother adjusted her doings and actions to the environment so as not to damage or destroy anything intentionally. She communicates with nature before doing anything and thanks afterwards for her share.

## Conclusions

Now that I have been working at the Sámi University College, I have learnt more, for example, about Sámi day care centres, their work and their contents, but also about the plans that steer their work. I have paid attention to the fact that it is very natural to do Sámi arts and crafts, or *duodji*, together with the children at day care centres, but, at school, *duodji* hardly exists. I

have also noticed this with my own children who have gone to school: they have very seldom done any Sámi handicrafts at school. One reason may be that the number of lessons allocated for the teaching of Sámi arts and crafts is small, or perhaps schools do not consider *duodji* important. It is also possible that teachers are not so skilled in Sámi handicraft. One reason behind this is that *duodji* is a voluntary – not a compulsory – subject in teacher training. Thus, students choose subjects that they are interested in or that they think will be of use for them in their working life as teachers. Apparently, priority is seldom given to Sámi arts and crafts when such choices are made. The fact that aesthetic subjects are not held in high regard in the mainstream school systems of the Nordic countries also has an effect on the situation.

In the school, the focus could be on *duodji* and practical work in general, so that all the subjects would be involved. For example, it would be possible to apply mathematics, studies



on nature and the environment, the Sámi language, history, *duodji*, music, physical education, etc. when making rattles. In the subject "Nature" pupils could learn about the different tree species, in environmental studies, about conservation, in Sámi, both spoken and written language, in history, for example, how and for what the Sámi have used different kinds of wood, and, in music, how to make sounds, what rhythm is and what rhythm instruments are like. All this could be dealt with when making handicrafts, and, as the pupils would come up with questions, it would be possible to look for more information. A variety of resources could be used: it would be possible to have elders as co-teachers, to benefit from the families/networks of the children themselves, to use books, photographs, etc. This would probably make cooperation between the school and homes more natural. Of course, such methods require resources, research and development before they can be implemented. One solution might be to conduct action research into the issue, and such research has already yielded good results. For example,

the Sámi University College and Luleå University of Technology have cooperated on research and school development in 2005–07 in a project that was run by Asta Mitkijá Balto and Gunilla Johansson. Another example is the master's thesis of Mathis Bongo in 2005, for which the Sámi University College received a quality award.

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