

The Yoik Opens A Door to Sámi Oral Literature: A Path into Language, Identity and Self-Esteem

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Introduction

Recently, I read an essay by Tina Deschenie, the editor of the Tribal College Journal, on her memories and experiences of learning and teaching literature. She reminisced how, in her childhood, her father used to tell them – the children – stories about the Coyote in the Dine language. At home, she learned oral, traditional Dine stories and songs. However, she never got a chance to hear or learn them in school; neither was she ever taught anything about the written literature of the Dine. The stories they read in school were the ones that are found in famous American or European children's and young people's books and the so-called classics. She did not get to learn about traditional Indigenous narratives and works written by Indigenous people themselves until she began her studies at her tribal college of higher education (Deschenie 2007: 19).

The Sámi have similar experiences, and many authors have written how school has made Sámi oral tradition worthless and invisible (see e.g. Hirvonen 1999). In the past twenty years, when I have taught Sámi written and oral literature at the Sámi University College, I have seen how important it is for people's identities that they know and learn about the literature and culture of their nation. With the help of literature, we can construct a new Indigenous identity and self-esteem in the academy.

Postcolonial theories have aroused a great deal of interest in literary research in the Indigenous world, too, because they examine how authors of colonized regions break, through their texts, the hierarchies that European thought and use of power have created in these countries [see Ashcroft – Griffiths – Tiffin 1989 (1994)]. When I now begin to examine the knowledge I have gained as a teacher of literature, I will look at the teaching of Sámi literature as a decolonization process which has helped the students better understand their background, history and culture; it has also healed deep cultural wounds and strengthened the self-esteem of the students. When analyzing this process, I will make use of the Medicine Wheel and its tools according to the explanation of the Mi'kmaq Indian researcher Marie Battiste (2000). Through this wheel, we can map and analyze the influence of colonialism and find new ways of approaching research issues that arise from our own needs – and resolve them from the perspective of our own background.

According to Battiste, the Medicine Wheel has four doors: the Western, the Northern, the Eastern and the Southern Door. When we open the Western Door, we jump into the world of the autumn and map the many faces, contours and effects of colonialism, as well as the ways

it has controlled people's lives. The Northern Door is the "home of winter", but also the sphere of dreams, hopes and diagnosis. It is the region from which the diagnosis of colonialism emanates and through which we can study the distress and social impact that colonialism has entailed. Being a symbol of the spring, the Eastern Door is the door of civilization and light. It challenges us to find new types of solutions and to promote activities that nourish and empower us and restore our collective understandings of how to promote the common efforts of Indigenous peoples. The Eastern Door heals our collective identity, our communities and the spirit that sustains us (Battiste 2000: xxii-xxx).

The Southern Door is the door of summer, which opens the way to new views and equality between nations. Here, the focus is on our own traditions that protect and sustain us. By making use of them, we can preserve our own communities, education and governance; this also enables us to make use of Indigenous knowledge and systems and their applications. All this will benefit future generations and improve our lives and future (Battiste 2000: xxii-xxx).

With the help of the Medicine Wheel, I will now explain the ways of working that we have used in the teaching of both oral and written literature; I will also analyze the process that the students have gone through during their studies. Although I have not applied such an analytic method consciously in my teaching, I can now see similarities between the teaching and the Medicine Wheel. Thus, this paper focuses on how we can use oral Indigenous literature in learning our language, strengthening our self-esteem and building up a positive identity.

Sámi literature as a broad concept

Since the founding of the Sámi University College, our students have been able to study the Sámi language and Sámi literature as separate subjects; from 2009 on, they can get a master's degree in them. From the very beginning, the purpose of the studies in Sámi literature has been to learn about Sámi oral traditions and the written literature of the Sámi. The objective of the part on Sámi oral tradition is that the students will acquaint themselves with the different genres of oral heritage and their characteristics and local traditions; they also learn to know the most important sources and collections of traditions. The methods of teaching and learning include lectures, group work, network learning, individual learning, oral presentations and analyses.

Ever since the first year, the course on oral traditions has also included carrying out a small research project. The students choose or define the subject of the study themselves, interview people who are skilled in some sphere of Sámi heritage, gather information and write a research paper on the basis of the interviews. In recent years, the assignment has consisted of finding out about the *yoiks*, or Sámi chants, of the student's family or home region. Most students have found this an important and challenging task. The research connects the students to the history of their own community, family and society; it also honors and makes the Sámi heritage and knowledge mastered by the elders of society visible. In this way it brings the Sámi University College close to ordinary people. Therefore, I will, in this

presentation, especially analyze the learning process that takes place during this research and the impact it has on the students.

The Western Door: The closed doors of yoiking are opened

Yoiking is one of the most visible and best-known features of Sámi culture. It is Sámi oral poetry. Until the past few decades, yoiking was, as a part of Sámi culture and identity, suppressed in many regions. Nevertheless, the study of the cultural, social and spiritual significance of the Sámi tradition of yoiking has been one of the main themes of this education. We do not teach our students *to yoik*: we teach them *about yoiking*. At the beginning of the studies, yoiking and the concepts connected with it are defined, and the students get a general picture of the research that has been carried out on yoiking. They also learn how the Sámi knowledge and skills of yoiking have, through ages, been passed down from one generation to another as well as gathered and preserved. After defining oral traditions as literature, we also reflect on and analyze the lyrics of yoiks with the help of literary tools and cultural knowledge.

For centuries, yoiking was a forbidden and punishable act, and, as a result of this, the skill of yoiking was almost totally wiped out from many areas. The prohibitions against yoiking were launched in connection with the conversion of the Sámi into Christianity – a process, which grew more intensive in the Nordic countries in the 1600s. Christianity did not manage to destroy Sámi culture and spirituality on its own, but it was supported by the ideology of nationalism that spread from mainland Europe to the Nordic countries in the mid-1800s. Its main slogan was “one nation, one language, one state”. It was based on an ideology of uniting, which resulted in that the culture and language of the main population gained a foothold and the needs of minorities were forgotten or considered as dangerous from the point of view unity. It was also commonly thought that smaller peoples, such as the Sámi, and their linguistic and cultural needs could be ignored in the development of society (Aikio-Puoskari 2002: 94–95).

This view has been most visible in education, where it has been extremely difficult for a long time to teach the Sámi language and to use Sámi as the language of instruction. Although the Sámi are the Indigenous people of the Nordic countries, they and their culture have not been taken into consideration in national curricula, textbooks and teaching. Thus, the school system has, for more than a hundred years, intensively built a picture of a homogenous nation, without paying attention to the cultural and linguistic pluralism that prevails within these nation-states. This dogma has not just had an impact on the attitudes of the dominant population but also the views of the Sámi themselves. The school has been guided by a thinking that is based on colonialism, Eurocentrism and universalism; according to it, the thinking, religions and customs of Western countries are of a higher level than those of Indigenous peoples or the peoples of other non-familiar regions. The school has taught many generations of Sámi to reject and look down on their own language and culture (cf. Smith 1999: 64). Indeed, one of the methods of colonialism is to make people estranged from their own culture. Although we have not lost our language or given up our identity, many of us do

not know the values and customs of our culture; neither can we pass them down to new generations.

As the relationship of the Sámi to their own culture is characterized by such a heavy historical burden and silence, it is no wonder that when our students have been getting ready for a research trip, some of them have reflected in the following way on how difficult the assignment feels: “In my family or area, there are no longer any yoiks. So what can I do?” Students are distressed and feel that they cannot do their assignment. How can we help them in this situation?

Finding words and terms for closed doors: Opening the Northern Door

When the Western Door has closed doors, the Northern Door opens the way into looking for responses to the prohibitions. What has happened, when the students have not learned to know their own culture and are afraid of failing their assignment? According to Marie Battiste, such experiences are the result of cognitive assimilation (imperialism), which entails manipulation so that other nations’ knowledge systems are suppressed and considered inferior to the dominant knowledge system [1999 (1986)]. This is the way the school system has functioned for example in Sápmi, when it has based its own epistemologies and knowledge systems on just one system, leaving out the perspectives of the Sámi.

A good example of this is yoiking, the epistemological starting point of which lies in reciprocity, in both receiving and giving, in the gift. The studies on yoiking tell that yoiking is a gift, which a person can get from the earth spirits or other natural spirits. However, the most common way of getting it is to learn it from one’s parents and relatives. In many Sámi areas, you are not supposed to make a yoik for yourself: you must get it as a gift from someone else. The recipient of the gift can, in turn, yoik another person, an area, an animal or a feeling. Rauna Kuokkanen explains this logic of the gift so that it deals with many Indigenous peoples’ characteristic way of thinking, which is based on the reciprocal principle of the land and its gifts. In ordinary language, this means and is understood as “giving back” or “returning”. When we give back, we maintain a balance in human relationships and in the relationships between people and the socio-cosmic order (Kuokkanen 2007: 145; see also Kuokkanen 2005).

When the missionaries and the clergy condemned and forbade yoiking, they also rejected a central part of the Sámi world view, breaking a tradition of thousands of years. This also meant destroying an important ontological part of Sámi culture. Eventually, the Sámi themselves, too, began to consider yoiking as a sin and a worthless activity. Through the prohibitions, people have been silenced, and they have kept silent, in their own culture, as they have been deprived of their right to express their deepest feelings in their native language, through the traditional ways of their culture.

Yoiking has also been the primary feature of the identity through which the Sámi have expressed and made visible the fact that they are a distinct people. Yoiking entails strong

social and collective ties that unite families and communities, thus consolidating the sense of belonging together among the Sámi. The pentatonic melody of the yoik, or *luohiti*, its departure from Western musical forms and the Sámi language that is used in yoiking have, in turn, resulted in that the representatives of the dominant culture have considered yoiking a strange tradition (see e.g. Acerbi 1802). On the basis of this musical difference, both the representatives of the Church and many researchers have defined yoiking as “the language of the Devil” and as something of an inferior nature. Such assessments have created value hierarchies and dichotomies, in which Sámi culture is looked down on and considered unattractive. As concerns this issue, Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith has noted that research is the central element of the colonization process, as it justifies the definition of knowledge (1999: 173). This statement works the other way, too, when the Sámi get the chance to analyze and resolve the mistakes of earlier studies and, at the same time, build new types of knowledge systems on their own terms and present this knowledge to dominant populations. In this way, the Sámi can bring the marginal into the center and express their views and criticize the ideologies of hegemonic cultural centers (cf. Salazar 1991: 102).

The door of light: Knowing the yoiking history of one’s family gives a sense of value

The Eastern Door is the door of civilization and light, as it symbolizes the spring and the beginning of new life. As concerns yoiking, the door of remembering has been kept closed in many Sámi areas. Even today, the prohibitions against yoiking have an effect on the minds of many people. During their research trips, our students have experienced this, but they have also learned how to open closed doors.

In connection with the research tasks, the parents of some students have denied that they can yoik, but the students have learned the truth later, when other relatives or friends have remembered the yoiks of the parents or told that the parents used to be skilful yoikers when young. Such events arouse conflicting feelings in the students, who start to wonder why their parents do not want to tell about their yoiking skills. Will they dare to share this new piece of information with their parents at all, and do their parents want to open the door of secrecy? Mostly, such stories have had a happy ending: this small study has helped the parents of the students and other relatives talk about the yoiks of the family and their yoiking skills, inspiring family members to yoik again. This has also made the students feel extremely happy about finding out about the yoiks of their family.

It is important to note that not all Sámi have lost their yoiking tradition or their skill of creating yoiks, and the yoik can again be heard publicly. The environment sees the yoik as something that has great value and is an important cultural symbol, a sign of the family, and another name of the person: The yoik is one of the greatest gifts, or presents, that a person can give to another person. It is a sign of the fact that the close relative – for example mother, father, sister or grandfather – who has yoiked you loves and appreciates you greatly. If someone yoiks you out of love for you, you are linked to society at large and to the line of generations; this way, you have received a new identity and a new name. Some students tell

that they got a “child’s yoik” already as a child (usually) from their mother or father. When they grew older, they got a new yoik, which was, typically, based on the first yoik. The recipient of the gift can him/herself become also a giver of a gift: the students also tell that they have yoiked their children. This is a manifestation of the logic of the gift, according to which a good experience in an individual creates the need to share the experience with other people (see Kuokkanen 2007: 147).

The yoik is strongly connected with the Indigenous logic of the gift, and this explains why the assignment has aroused a variety of conflicting emotions from delight to hatred in the students. Some of them have admitted, after analyzing the yield of the research trips and hearing about other people’s ties to yoiking, that they feel envious because they do not have a yoik of their own; they may also feel spiritually poorer because they have not learned to yoik. This can be interpreted so that, in the sphere of yoiking and the yoik, they have not been able to share either the philosophy of giving and returning a gift or the concrete experiences connected with it. There are also students who find yoiking strange as, for them, it is not familiar since childhood or schooldays. To their ear, yoiking does not sound beautiful. The reason behind this is that, as a result of colonization, they have become estranged from their own culture.

The Southern Door: The future of the yoik

The Southern Door is the door of summer, which opens the gate to new views and equality between peoples. In connection with their assignment, students have traveled to their home regions to gather information about the yoiks of their families or areas. For many, the research trips have opened a whole new world and the rich spring of yoiking which can be tapped without fear of it being drained.

After collecting the information, we gather in the classroom and each student tells about the results of his/her research to the group. The method of teaching and learning is collective, and the whole group participates in the discussion. This way, every student contributes to the building of the common good and the shared experience. Often, this is a very special learning situation, as the students come from a variety of Sámi areas and environments. Each area has its own style of yoiking, and the yoiking experiences and backgrounds of the students can also be very different.

Such meetings of students can be interpreted through the theory of social learning, which has discussion as its starting-point – in the same way as Socrates used discussion in his teaching. This method is characteristic of Indigenous cultures, too. It means that the knowledge, traditions and values of the students themselves are also taken into consideration and appreciated in education (Kirkness – Barnhard 2001). This was also confirmed by the words of one of our students, an adult who had already studied in many schools: “Imagine, I am already at the age of a grandmother, and never before has my Sámi background and cultural

heritage been paid attention to and appreciated. Isn't it strange? This makes me feel almost ecstatic!"..

During their research projects students learn about the yoiks and the history of their family and about the yoiking tradition. This process could be called the decolonization of the mind. For example, one student found out completely new things about her grand-grandfather and the yoiking history of her family. Her grand-grandfather was a Christian, who worked as a parish clerk. Everyone knew that he sang hymns beautifully, but none of his grandchildren had ever heard him yoik or knew nothing about his yoiking skills. The student also listened to yoiks in old yoik collections – and found many yoiks sung by her grand-grandfather. In one book, she also found a photograph of her grand-grandfather, and the text under it said that the man was a skilful yoiker. When the student interviewed more relatives, she found a relative, who said that he yoiked when he was alone out on the fells. He had never dared to yoik in front of his friends. Without this assignment, this hidden information would never have come to daylight: the student would never have come to know this. In this case, the yoik clearly empowered the student; it became a source of pride for her and part of her identity.

As a result of such information, the students have redefined themselves, accepted new aspects into their Sámi identity and realized that yoiking is part of Sámi cultural heritage. The kind of learning is a social process, a result of cooperation during which collective feelings, information and experiences are shared. Such teaching and learning conditions are very probably similar to the learning situations in the traditional *siidas*, or Sámi villages, and families – the environments Mikkel Nils Sara calls “shared rooms”, in which people of different ages met and reminisced about different kinds of things (2003). Each person told his/her story as the others listened, commented and added their views. People learned the structures of narration in the same way they learned to yoik and create yoiks.

Sámi knowledge and heritage changes pedagogy

The oral tradition of our ancestors contains a great amount of worldly wisdom – all based on their experiences. Therefore, Sámi oral literature opens the gate to knowledge and interpretation. Through oral literature, we can tell where we come from and share our personal histories and identities as well as the histories of our communities – and attain collective integrity. The oral tradition, here yoiking, reflects that which is important for us, and, through language, we express our own world view and values. This world view has grown from our surroundings and from the connection we have with nature and all living creatures.

Traditional narratives, stories, myths, yoiking, proverbs and beliefs are the spring that we can tap in building a positive identity. Therefore, Sámi oral tradition plays an important role in managing and promoting the Sámi language and culture, as well as in strengthening the identity of the individual. With the help of literature studies, it is possible to build a positive

Sámi identity and a new kind of subjectivity and to consolidate Sámi culture. Then, a strong identity will give us strength to look forward and create a –shared room”, a better future.

The Sámi University College can, through the kind of research, teaching and learning methods that I have discussed in this article with the help of Battiste’s Medicine Wheels, advance the epistemological interests and the world view of the Sámi into the sphere of the academy. Such a pedagogic approach proves that the students can take responsibility for their learning, which, of course, promotes deep-level learning. At the same time, this way of working and doing research is connected with Sámi culture and its views of knowledge. This process also entails the collective sharing of information and experiences, which, in turn, enhances spiritual well-being and will gradually heal the whole Sámi society.

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