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Conceptualizing *Oktavuohta* as a Storytelling Methodology in Sámi Research

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Abstract

Indigenous studies scholars of the last two decades have developed, illustrated, and advanced storytelling methodologies as Indigenous methodologies. Storytelling methodologies arise from within Indigenous peoples' own ways of knowing, constitute reparative practices, and are generative of Indigenous community, among other critical decolonizing aims. In this article, I situate Sámi-centered approaches to storytelling methodologies in the ongoing conversation on storytelling in Indigenous studies. In what ways can we promote storytelling methodologies in global Indigenous scholarship and at home in Sápmi which are grounded in Sámi ways of knowing and oral tradition? How can Sámi studies scholarship advance and integrate personal narratives or family stories as reparative practices and as generative of community? I illustrate one possible way forward through artistic and filmic representations of the relational concept of *oktavuohta* (connection, togetherness, belonging), and finally, through a story from my own coastal Sámi family oral tradition.

Keywords: storytelling, storytelling methodologies, Indigenous methodologies, oral tradition, personal narrative, *oktavuohta*, re-suturing

Introduction

By now, it is well-established that Indigenous methodologies foundationally arise from within Indigenous peoples own philosophies. Further, these ways of knowing are deeply tied to place, land, kinship, webs of relations, languages, and crucially, to stories or narrative tradition. While I did not grow up within physical proximity of my Sámi home, but rather returned as a young adult, I still came to know my Sámi place through family stories and local oral tradition. Over the years, I have heard family stories of dramatic events, like when my grandmother lost her mother, my great-grandmother, to the Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919. I have heard countless stories relaying the events of the Nazi occupation, the war, and the evacuation and burning of most of coastal Finnmark and North Troms. I have heard stories about local traditions, folk medicine and healing, religious conversions, marriages and courtship, lore, and values. Stories imparted to me local history, lessons, genealogy, and knowledge of land and



life; stories affirmed our undisputed and time immemorial belonging to extended webs of relations rooted in Sámi places. Through engagement with global Indigenous scholarship on storytelling or narrative methodologies and through hearing stories from my own and other Sámi families in my everyday life as a “returning Sámi,” I have come to deeply appreciate that stories make us who we are as a people (Jensen 2019a). “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are,” writes Cherokee scholar and author Thomas King (King 2005, 2).

Reflecting on all of these threads within a Sámi research context brings to mind the following question: In the development of Sámi Indigenous methodologies, in what ways can we promote storytelling methodologies grounded in Sámi ontologies and epistemologies? How can Sámi studies scholarship advance and integrate personal narratives or family stories as reparative practices and as generative of community? My intention in this article, thus, is to answer the call to develop Sámi-centered storytelling methodologies as a contribution to global Indigenous studies scholarship. In conversation with global Indigenous studies scholarship and with guidance from storytelling methodologies from Turtle Island/North America (Kovach 2009; Wilson 2008; Archibald 2008), I deliberate on one possible way of devising storytelling methodologies in Sámi research frameworks.

Some of the material I present comes from an earlier project on diasporic Indigeneity and storytelling across media (Jensen 2019a). In that project, Margaret Kovach’s “Conversational Method in Indigenous Research,” inspired my methodological approach to co-producing narratives of early twentieth century Sámi migrant women (Kovach 2010). The community partners, or storytellers, were grandchildren, relatives, and community members. Most of the stories they shared came from family or community oral tradition, arising from memory and often tied to material culture and places. The storytelling methodology unfolded over the course of the project, and in some sense, continues to unfold in the development of publications for community and academic audiences. Concepts and theoretical approaches came from within stories shared in unstructured, intersubjective, research conversations which were also video-recorded. As a seamless part of my everyday life in Sápmi, part of the methodology also included – and continues to include – consultation with Sámi friends, colleagues, and relatives, especially in relation to language, local history, and cultural practices.

The anchoring device which emerged in the project and which forms the basis for the Sámi-centered storytelling methodology is the concept *oktavuohta* – togetherness, oneness, connection (2019b). The concept came to me by way of a lithograph series by the Sámi artist Elle-Hánsa – Hans Ragnar Mathisen – Keviselie titled *Oktavuohhta/Unity/Unidad* and from a sequence from the 1987 film *Ofelaš/Pathfinder* by Nils Gaup (Gaup et al. 2012). I had also seen the term used in various contexts in Sápmi, for example, in the Sápmi in Solidarity with Standing Rock movement (Fig. 1). Since I am not fluent in Sámi, I consulted friends and colleagues who are fluent in the language about the use and application of the concept. Signaling our multiple co-existences and interconnectedness in a living world, the concept *oktavuohta* is foundational to Sámi epistemologies, ontologies, and ethics – as such, it is also one way of framing Sámi-centered Indigenous storytelling methodologies.



Figure 1. Original caption: (Cecilie Grape] “Mii doarjut min oappaid ja vieljaid Standing Rockas/ We support our brothers and sisters at Standing Rock. Dearvodat Olmmaivakkis/ Greetings from Olmmaivaggi.” (© Roger Mandal, 2016)


Herein, I will use the terms “personal narrative,” “storytelling” and “narrative research” interchangeably. In keeping with the global Indigenous scholarship which this article engages for guidance, I privilege the term storytelling when specifically pointing to methodologies: storytelling methodologies. Most of the scholarship I rely on is written in English, but some texts could be considered interlingual, as epistemological framing comes through Indigenous

languages. The conversation will begin with a discussion of storytelling methodologies in global Indigenous contexts, with localization to Sámi research contexts and relevance for the *oktavuohta* storytelling methodology; then I narrate the genesis of conceptualizing a Sámi storytelling methodology through the concept. Finally, I share a family story from oral tradition that illustrates storytelling as a generative act of love and means of creating *oktavuohta*.

Storytelling Methodologies as Indigenous Methodologies

Many Indigenous studies scholars, especially from Turtle Island/North America, have illustrated how and why narrative traditions or storytelling are foundational to Indigenous research (Kovach 2008; Wilson & Taylor 2005; Wilson 2008; Whiteduck 2013). Still others have taken this one step further and conceived of narrative or storytelling methodologies in Indigenous research paradigms. For example, Cree scholar Shawn Wilson illustrates a storytelling approach to Indigenous methods and methodologies by integrating or weaving personal and family narratives into his academic study, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Wilson 2008). A more explicit example of a storytelling approach to Indigenous methodologies, and the most relevant to the *oktavuohta* Sámi storytelling framework is Sto:lo scholar Jo-Ann Archibald's influential Indigenous storywork methodology: "The words *story* and *work* together signal the importance and seriousness of undertaking the educational and research work of making meaning through stories, whether they are traditional or lived experience stories" (Archibald 2013, 2). She advances and applies seven principles in her storywork framework: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, wholism, interrelatedness, and synergy, stating, "Storywork is also an Indigenous methodology" (Archibald 2013, 4). Further, Archibald's storywork methodology has formed the basis of a recent global Indigenous studies anthology titled *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* co-edited by herself, Jenny Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo (Archibald et al. 2019).

Language is a critical dimension of Indigenous methodologies, as languages underpin worldviews that make meaning which are deeply tied to oral tradition. Within the Sámi context, Rauna Kuokkanen and Jelena Porsanger, among others, have specifically argued for the use of Sámi concepts in criticism, theorizing, and methodologies. In an earlier essay on Sámi literary criticism and aesthetics "Towards an 'Indigenous Paradigm' from a Sami perspective" (2000)



Kuokkanen advanced a Sámi-centered research paradigm, explaining the significant role of modern Sámi writers in carrying “Indigenous paradigms” forward. Signaling the value of using Sámi concepts, she analyzes the work of Sámi authors who write in their mother tongue as “ofelacat” (sic), “noaidiit,” and “duojárat” (Kuokkanen 2000, 425–26). Kuokkanen’s statements on “symbolic language” and the power of language to “create realities” are especially germane to storytelling epistemologies; also, the acknowledgement of diversity among Sámi writers and exercising agency when they have learned to write literature in the Sámi language as adults has broader implications for storytelling methodologies. When conducting research in the interest of our own communities, the concepts we use to frame research are significant because language is one of the important modes through which people create meaning, connection, belonging, and community.

In a chapter addressing the use of Sámi concepts in modern approaches to theorizing culture, Jelena Porsanger argues that traditional knowledge can also be used in contemporary research contexts. She describes a number of concepts which have relevance for Sámi storytelling methodologies, including: “/.../oktavuohta that describes a relationship between more than two things, which are interconnected and make a one [sic], okta” (Porsanger 2011, 66). Further, she addresses the use of Sámi concepts in modern research contexts while drawing on traditional knowledge, bringing into focus abstractions and specific knowledge and making them generalizable. With explicit reference to Indigenous methodologies, Porsanger has written that:

Celebration of Sami diversity makes the voice of the diverse Sami groups heard. Sami research can find inspiration in a great variety of Sami traditions, diversity of Sami views and Sami perspectives, in Sami philosophy and epistemology. The use of Sami epistemology/.../can be useful for the development of research[er] methodologies. The use of a variety of Sami concepts is a challenge for Sami researchers. Modern ways of theorizing can be developed, and thus Sami research can be modern without being separated from Sami tradition. (Porsanger 2011, 62)


Also of value for Sámi storytelling methodologies are Porsanger’s endorsement of bringing Sámi terminology with specific local meanings into modern ways of theorizing in global Indigenous studies scholarship and her attention to a diversity of voices in Sámi research. I would advance a critical point here: diversities in Sámi research ought to be inclusive of voices

from not only recognized Indigenous strongholds of cultural practices, but also of the marginalized families and communities who have endured different sets of consequences from colonial processes. While such an approach could spur tension in local communities, even those people who have acquiesced to aspects of forced cultural assimilation or those who commit lateral violence against their own people, ought to be included in this “diversity of voices” in Sámi research. Storytelling methodologies framed in concepts which reflect our continued belonging – despite colonial rupture – offer ways of understanding and healing in our communities.

The highly influential Anishinaabe scholar, cultural critic, and author, Gerald Vizenor, has reminded us that Indigenous stories manifest as acts of survival and resilience. Our stories are pathways for pushing beyond persistent narratives of victimization and erasure. Applied extensively in Indigenous literary studies, especially in Turtle Island/North American contexts, Vizenor’s prolific work is perhaps best known for the concept *survivance*. Commonly understood to mean not mere survival, but survival plus resistance, *survivance* is the art of refusing narratives of ongoing victimization and the condition of living imaginatively, despite ongoing domination in settler states (Vizenor 2009).

Like the concept *survivance*, there is an array of concepts in the Sámi language in everyday use which derive from the term *birget*: “to manage,” or “to get by.” This constellation of terms or concepts could be interpreted as Sámi ontologies of resilience, perseverance, and thriving (Jensen 2019b). Of relevance for Sámi storytelling methodologies, are recent studies by the Sámi literary scholar Lill-Tove Fredriksen and Lecturer in Sámi journalism, Liv Inger Somby, both of whom analyzed narratives using concepts related to *birget* as epistemological frameworks. Fredriksen theorized through the term *birgengoanstatt* – “the art of coping” – in her study *Depicting a Sámi society between tradition and modernization: The strategies of coping in Jovvna-Ánde Vest’s trilogy Árbbolaccat* (Fredriksen 2015).¹ Similarly, Liv-Inger Somby, in her study on the everyday lives of inter-generational Sámi women, theorized that silenced histories also reveal *birgen* and *birgehallas*, which she defines as “to manage life” and “to manage work, life, people, and money” respectively (Somby 2016, 1–3). By moving beyond a narrative of simply resisting, but rather storying resilience, perseverance, and thriving

¹ The Sámi title is: *...mun boadán sin manis ja joatkkán guhkkelebbui... Birgengoansttat Jovvna=Ánde Vesta románatrilogiijas Árbbolaččat.*



through Sámi people's own ways of knowing, Sámi-centered storytelling methodologies are decolonizing methodologies. Further, when approached through an ethics of careful listening, affirmation, and understanding, storytelling in Sámi contexts constitute reparative practices which have the potential to heal individuals, families, and communities.

Kovach's and Wilson's important works on Indigenous methodologies and methods have illustrated that storytelling, stories, and personal narratives are, epistemologically, on par with the written word in Indigenous methodologies. By weaving their own narratives into their respective research on the topic of Indigenous methodologies they have offered direction on the alignment of Indigenous ways of knowing, self-in-relation in research and writing, and the value of narrative and storytelling as integral and interrelated parts of Indigenous methodologies and knowledge-production. With regard to using story as method, Kovach has written:

Story, as a method, is different from culture to culture, and so its application falters without full appreciation of the underlying epistemological assumptions that motivate its use. Indigenous people versed in their culture know that sharing a story in research situates it within a collective memory. Likewise, Indigenous researchers ought to know of the deep responsibility of requesting oral history –i.e., an individual recounting of a particular happening. A researcher assumes a responsibility that the story shared will be treated with the respect it deserves in acknowledgement of the relationship from which it emerges. (Kovach 2009, 97)

Wilson assumes the role of the storyteller in his study in three formats: direct discourse with the reader, with letters to his sons, and in conversations with other scholars; here he introduces himself as the storyteller:

The use of an Indigenous research paradigm when studying Indigenous peoples requires the holistic use and transmission of information. Consequently, I present the information in this study in a way that is more culturally appropriate for Indigenous people by taking the role of storyteller rather than researcher/author. Indigenous people in Canada recognize that it is important for storytellers to impart their own life and experience into the telling. (Wilson 2008, 32)


Through using a storytelling strategy or methodology in the text, he strikes a balance between a conversational or oral form of communication and the necessary abstractions of academic discourse. In addition to Kovach's and Wilson's methods and story in their own works that outline and apply Indigenous methodologies, other Indigenous scholars such as Waziyatawin/Angela Cavender Wilson (Wilson & Taylor 2005), Kristin Jernsletten (Jernsletten 2011) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Smith 2012) have also integrated intersubjective oral histories, personal narratives, and storytelling as methods into their scholarship.

In her 2005 study, *Remember This! Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives*, Waziyatawin uses oral history and oral tradition as principal sources and structures the text within Dakota language, epistemologies, and ontologies, stating: “/.../ this book relies on and privileges Indigenous oral tradition, specifically the stories of Dakota elder Eli Taylor” (Wilson & Taylor 2005, 1–2). Each bilingual chapter heading reflects a central theme in the collective story of the Dakota people, shaped and defined within the Dakota language. Likewise, Jernsletten frames her doctoral study *The hidden children of Eve: Sámi poetics Guovtti ilmmi gaskkas* (Jernsletten 2011) within oral tradition and storytelling through multiple voices, including the voice of her father, the late Sámi language professor, Juhu-Niillas-Nils Jernsletten.

In the second edition of the groundbreaking work, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012), Smith has underscored the necessity of narrative approaches in Indigenous research projects to reflect collective histories, and especially the importance of including women and elders:

Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every Indigenous person has a place. (Smith 2012, 145)

With reference to Lee Maracle and Craig Howe, Mallory Whiteduck has pointed to the continuities between orality, story, and theory in a text where she weaves stories her grandfather told her into the analysis (Whiteduck 2013). Here, she reveals that indeed, storytelling and stories are not merely methods and empirical material to be analyzed, but they



are co-produced knowledges, theories, and histories derived from stories arising from within communities. Co-production of knowledge with transformative potential, when in story form, can reach multiple communities – both Indigenous and majority cultural communities – in addition to academia. Approaches to storytelling or narrative research entail what Shawn Wilson has termed relational accountability in order to do right by the Indigenous community. In my research, I have found that “doing right by the community” can lead to more sleepless nights in the process than “doing right by the academy.” With that in mind, additional aims of using story as method and devising the *oktavuohta* storytelling approach in Sámi research include the following: to humanize obscured or silenced subjects of historical processes; to contribute to purposeful community-building and re-suturing webs of relations; and to contribute to the ongoing process of de-colonization.

In Sámi context, personal narratives of various forms have been features of Sámi literary tradition, especially more recent authorship. The last decade has witnessed a wave of life narrative writing consisting of various genres and forms, including biographies and auto-biographical writing, personal narratives in prose authorship, and auto-biographical statements in the media (Broch Johansen 2015, 2020; Tonstad 2012; Harsem 2019, 2020; Hætta 2015). While in the last decade, some Sámi researchers have integrated their own stories into global scholarship, the use of personal narratives as an integrated part of research have not been nearly as prevalent in Sámi contexts as in other Indigenous contexts (Jernsletten 2011; Jensen 2018, 2019a; Sarivaara 2012; Öhman 2010; Dankertsen 2019; see also Rasmussen and Outakoski in this special issue). Perhaps reticence on the part of many Sámi researchers to include their own voice or stories could be related to humility. This is reflected in Sámi cultural norms such as *vuollegašvuolta*, which in North Sámi literally translates to “the state or condition of being low” or “to be low.”

In the Sámi context, not telling one’s own story in the context of research or writing might be understood somewhat like the act of “yoiking oneself”; both could be considered bad manners because they could elevate oneself above others. Another possible reason could be due to the history of exploitative research practices where powerful outsiders came into Sámi communities uninvited, extracted local stories, interpreted them through a western colonial gaze, and gave little or nothing in return. The Lappologists and eugenicists are prime examples of the nature of exploitative approaches to research (Lehtola 2017; Keskinen 2019; Hirvonen


& Anttonen 2008, 28–45; Mattson 2014). It might have been more natural for Sámi to consider their contributions to research as “giving information” rather than making themselves and others vulnerable to the scrutiny of outsiders when sharing stories of deep cultural significance and local meaning. Further, ethical frameworks for storytelling research methodologies in Sámi and Indigenous contexts often diverge from national research ethics boards, which in contemporary research settings, can be a pre-requisite to conduct research that is funded or sanctioned by the institution.

Storytelling and personal narrative in Indigenous research methodologies most often arise from orality and oral tradition, thus storytelling research methodologies are on a continuum with orality and oral tradition. Oral modes of communication relay personal and community experiences, knowledges, and local histories. Oral history refers to shared experiences within a community; as such, “oral tradition” and “oral history” in Indigenous methodologies, arguably, align with Julie Cruikshank’s definition in: “Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues”:

Broadly speaking, oral tradition (like history or anthropology) can be viewed as a coherent, open-ended system for constructing and transmitting knowledge. Ideas about what constitutes legitimate evidence may differ in oral tradition and scholarly investigation /.../. Orally narrated accounts about the past explicitly embrace subjective experience. Once considered a limitation, this is now being recognized as oral history’s primary strengths: facts enmeshed in the stories of a lifetime provide a number of insights about how an understanding of the past is constructed, processed, and integrated into one’s life. (Cruikshank 1994, 408)

Cruikshank also reflects on two approaches to analysis of oral history, both of which also align with many Indigenous methodologies; one approach addresses power relations and social history, and another interprets the ways “such narrative forms influence and anchor memory” (Cruikshank 1994). These modes of analysis also reflect the in-process, flexible, and unfolding nature of stories told in oral tradition and in research processes. Further, oral tradition manifests intergenerationally within families, and also within communities.

Also germane to an understanding of storytelling methodologies is Canadian Studies scholar, Hartmut Lutz’s temporal treatment of oral tradition in Native American literature:



Much of the oral tradition is didactic in character, telling people about their origin (past), about their (present) position within the world and what their identity is relative to others, allowing them to continue (future). Thus, past, present and future, mythic time, historical time and individual experiences are included, to strengthen tribal identity. (Lutz 2002, 198)

Such temporal framing is common in the oral tradition in the Sámi context, and also exists on a continuum with silences or obscuring the most painful aspects of past colonial experiences. Oftentimes sharing a didactic story, with painful aspects obscured, was a way of protecting the next generation from the burdens of the past. However, stories often contain hidden knowledge of such experiences. Many Sámi, especially those people from marginal communities, or, who grew up in diaspora, gain knowledge of colonial trauma in their families through attentive listening, a dialogical part of the process. Combined with studied engagement with history, they are actively part of a reparative and re-suturing process, which is ongoing. The stories that arise from such reparative processes also become integrated threads of collective history and oral tradition.

Sámi studies scholar, Vuokko Hirvonen writes about oral tradition and knowledge passed down orally in the Sámi context. Like other Indigenous peoples, the Sámi tradition of writing literature is relatively new and it flows from oral tradition and the yoik tradition. She refers to personal narratives or life stories influenced by the oral tradition as heterogenic “reminiscence literature” which contain “mythological, historical, and (auto)biographical features” (83). Like many other scholars engaged in life narrative or storytelling methods, she addresses the issue of “truth” in Sámi storytelling:

The term reminiscence literature (*muittašangirjjálašvuohtta* in Sámi) has been coined from the North Sámi verb *muittit*, “to remember”. In North Sámi two terms, *muitalus* and *máinnas* (“story” and “tale”), are used in connection with the prose tradition; of these *muitalus* is a story which is in some way based on beliefs and reality and which people consider to be more or less true. The term *máinnas* is more clearly linked with the imagination, although in practice, the Sámi do not necessarily make a clear distinction between the two terms (see Samuli Aikio 1984:


86). In other words, *máinnas* and *muitalus* are not a binary pair of terms like the terms *fiction* and *truth*. (Hirvonen & Anttonen 2008, 83)

Questions about truth, evidence, fact, fiction, and bias in orally told accounts in research have been exhaustively addressed over several decades and in various fields, including social sciences, humanities, and health sciences (O'Dea 1994; S. Smith & Watson 2001; Polkinghorne 2007; Andrews et al 2013; Maynes et 2008; Sidonie & Watson 2010). In the widely disseminated and applied text *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001) by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, they thoroughly review and deliberate on these questions and offer interpretive insight for life narrative or oral forms of telling in research. The expansive study deals with various genres of life narrative writing and from disparate cultural contexts, including in the contexts of marginalized peoples, like Indigenous peoples. Relevant for storytelling methodologies in Sápmi, especially in this era of truth and reconciliation, is their attention to and interpretation of Aboriginal Australian author and artist Sally Morgan's autobiographical/family narrative novel *My Place* (1987):

The power of Sally Morgan's *My Place*, at once the narrative of a young woman coming to claim her identity as an Aboriginal Australian and an exposé of the effects on the older generations of her family of the colonial practices of forceful removal and assimilation, resides in its acknowledgment of an official history of the Australian nation and its insistence on inserting the history of indigenous Australians into the national dialogue. (Smith & Watson 2001, 11)

In the novel, Morgan not only narrates her own story of recovery of Indigenous identity and journey to her place, home, or "country," she opens up for the voices of three generations of her family, highlighting both their experiences of profound racialized and gendered oppression, but also their resilience and perseverance. Further, akin to the reminiscence literature that Hirvonen points to above (Hirvonen & Anttonen 2008, 83), Morgan weaves her grandmother's traditional knowledge and beliefs into the narrative of the novel (Morgan 1998).

Indigenous studies scholars have employed various terms for the craft of weaving as metaphors for storytelling methodologies (Archibald 2008; Lutz 2002, 224–225; Driskill 2017). Stories and storytelling in local communities are knowledge(s) worthy of consideration in research. Sámi stories about ancestors, beliefs, and knowledge shared orally within families and



communities over generations, effectively become threads of woven meaning which sustain webs of relations arising from within particular places or locations. However, we need not be embedded in that place for that story or those story-threads to weave or bind us to that web. In Arising from within Sámi philosophies and reflected in Sámi cultural production the concept *oktavuohta* – togetherness/connection/unity – offers one way of thinking about storytelling as part of our way of sustaining community and belonging. Another feature of this storytelling methodology is that stories can *continue* to sustain community and belonging over great divides, that is, for people living outside of their ancestral areas, whether that be in Oslo or North America.

***Oktavuohta* as reflected in film, lithographs, and stories**

A sequence from the 1987 film *Ofelaš/Pathfinder* by Nils Gaup and the lithograph series *Oktavuohta/Unity/Unidad* and corresponding story by Elle-Hánsa – Hans Ragnar Mathisen – Keviselie were instrumental in coming to the concepts of *oktavuohta* as the basis for a Sámi storytelling methodology. The denotative meaning of *oktavuohta* as a term in everyday use means – something to the effect of – connection, togetherness, or unity. When applied as part of a framework and interpretive device in storytelling methodologies, the concept anchors the ideas of interconnectedness, community, relationality, and extended relations embedded or tied to lands and places. A Sámi-centered approach to conceptualizing a storytelling methodology comes resoundingly through in a sequence from *Ofelaš* in the following lines: “*Mii leat buohkat dušše oasis dan stuorra, agálaš oktavuođas/We are all just parts of the great, eternal unity.*” These lines reflect the ontology of *oktavuohta* as intended in the storytelling methodology.



Figure 2. Sequence from the film *Ofelaš/Pathfinder* (Gaup et al. 2012)²

Set in pre-colonial Sápmi, during the time of the *noaidi* (Solbakk 2015, 11–47), the film centers around the young Áigin whose parents and sister were killed by the *čud̥it* – the murderous marauders from the East (Fig. 2). While stewing in anger and self-pity over his predicament, he meets the *noaidi* Ráste in the *lávvu* and laments over how he is all alone in the world. But Ráste astutely reminds Áigin that everyone and everything – indeed all life – belongs to *oktavuohta* (subtitled): “Your mind is clouded with thoughts of revenge. You must remember, we are all but parts of the whole [We are all just parts of the great, eternal unity]³. We are children in a greater family. The *čud̥it* have forgotten this. Don’t you forget it!” Áigin insists, again, that he is all alone, his family is dead, to which Ráste re-iterates Áigin’s connection to *oktavuohta*, stating “You may feel that way, but you are bound up in the greater family. You are not free, unshakeable bonds hold you to us.” Yet again, Áigin challenges this idea. “How can I trust something that can’t be seen?” At this point, Ráste covers Áigin’s nose and mouth, preventing Áigin from breathing while stating, “You still can’t see it?” Áigin struggles to break free while Ráste states:

But now you can feel that something is there. You can’t see it in the air, but your very existence is tied to it. “In this way all things are bound together, intertwined.

² The sequence with English subtitles can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0UsbV65Ms>

³ The subtitles in the film sequence diverge from a more comprehensive translation of the lines *Mii leat buohkat dušše oasis dan stuorra, agálaš oktavuođas* to English, provided by Máret Láilá Anti (2021).

No man can ever tear himself apart from the whole. But it can happen that he loses sight of the whole. When he does, he is like the Tchudes [*čudit*]. Men who have lost the path. They stumble blindly towards self-destruction. (Gaup, 1987)

If we understand the *čudit* as a metaphor for the colonial sheriffs, tax-collectors, missionaries, and schoolmasters – those who meted out psychological and sometimes physical violence against the Sámi people, we see that colonialists “lost sight of the whole.” When conducting research within the thinking of *oktavuohta*, Sámi studies scholars recognize their place in the “whole,” and they work to undo colonial harm. At the same time, like Áigin, whose vision was clouded by thoughts of victimization, powerlessness, and revenge, Sámi people can also lose their way and forget that we all belong to *oktavuohta*. Indeed, Sámi people can also “stumble blindly towards self-destruction.” The self-destruction can take many forms, such as self-hatred, addiction, and acts of lateral violence committed against one’s own people. When we apply principles of connectedness and adhere to the idea that we all belong to *oktavuohta*, also in our approaches to research, then we understand that anything we do to the whole, we do to ourselves.

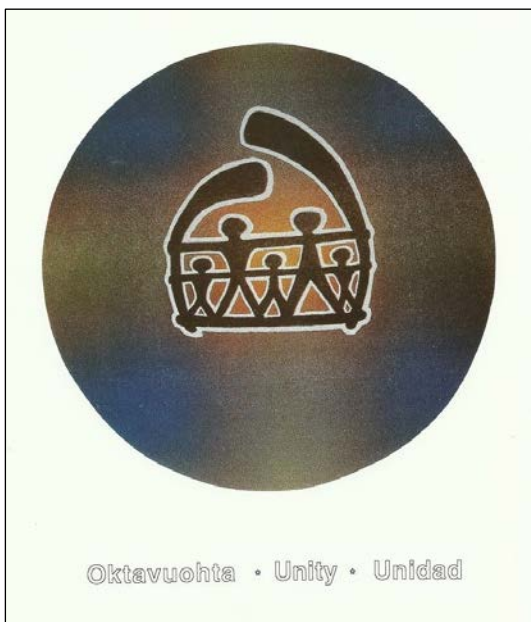



Figure 3. *Oktavuohta - Unity - Unidad* by Hans Ragnar Mathisen.
(© Hans Ragnar Mathisen)

Here, I use the term *oktavuohta* in the sense reflected in the lithograph created by the Sámi artist Hans Ragnar Mathisen – Elle-Hánsa – Keviselie (Fig. 3) and with the meaning derived

from within a story (abridged) he shared with me. The story and the image reflect how I intend the term to represent an overarching concept that is foundational to *oktavuohta*:

In the old days, the Sámi didn't have their own silversmiths, so they would usually go to a Norwegian silversmith with a design. The first Sámi silversmith, Aslak Siri, came to me and asked me if I could come up with some designs or symbols for the Sámi pendants. He knew me and I knew the Siri family. I started by looking at the drum symbols. One striking symbol is *bieggaolmmái*, or the wind-man, he is depicted with having at least one shovel, sometimes two. He is standing with the two shovels that are triangular and they have one pin that is pointing down. I thought that was a very typical and recognizable symbol – *bieggaolmmái* – the wind-man. He uses the shovels to shovel the wind from his caves onto the earth. And whenever he decided that there was enough wind for the poor people, he would shovel the wind back up again. So that is the story behind that. I modified the shovels to become kind of an arc, or more rounded and bent them toward each other, but with an opening. That was the first stage of the development. Then, instead of one figure, I had two and then added a little child in-between them, stretching his hands up towards the parents. Then I made the *oktavuohta* symbol as it is now by adding two more children, not stretching upwards but holding each other's hands, attached to the parents. I was studying at the art academy when I finally decided to make a print of it. First, I made sketches and drawings, first a black and white drawing, then a woodcut, and finally the lithograph, the one that you see now.

Family is, of course, very important for me, because for most of my childhood I didn't have a family. I grew up in an institution. I did not call the image *bearaš* – the Sámi word for family – because you know, a family can be anything. Everyone can see it is a family, I don't need to repeat that, so I chose *oktavuohta* which means “togetherness.” *Oktavuohta* is also symbolic of whatever background, age, gender, ethnicity, or whoever we are. We are really one family. *Oktavuohta* is an idea that transcends many cultures. Togetherness reflects the meaning better than unity, because unity can be forced, it can be uneven, political, or institutional. (Mathisen 2018b)



Elle-Hánsa is an important figure in Sápmi, and he has lived a life reflective of the sense of *oktavuohta* conveyed in the story: “we are all really one family.” Throughout his lifetime, Elle-Hánsa has traveled to different places in the world, building relationships and community with various peoples, and particularly Indigenous peoples. For example, he was one of the first Sámi cultural ambassadors to visit diaspora Sámi people living in North America. While there, he met a coastal Sámi woman, Albertine Josefine Svendsen from Árdni/Arnøy at her home in Duluth. He was an early Sámi activist in the movement for Sámi rights, where he brought art together with activism. When he was visiting some Native Americans in Minneapolis in 1975 (or 1976) he heard that there was a Sámi librarian in Duluth who was an initiator of Sámi American cultural revitalization. That librarian was Rudolph Johnson, Albertine Svendsen’s son. Elle-Hánsa then traveled to Duluth to meet Rudy and his family. He especially remembers meeting the elder, Albertine. At the time he met her, she was in her nineties and had been living in Duluth for over sixty years. They even spoke some Sámi together. On his artist’s website, Elle-Hánsa included an article that Rudy Johnson had written about Sámi American cultural belonging, and in connection with a memorial Elle-Hánsa wrote on the advent of Rudy’s passing in 2007, he reminisced about his meeting with the family in Duluth:

/.../ They have two sons and a daughter, one of their sons Kai had already studied Sámi language in Kárašjohka and spoke it well. Rudy’s mother (Albertine Svendsen) was also there sitting in her rocking chair with her handwork, knitting. She asked if I knew where Árdni (Arnøy) was, a large island in Romsa/Troms county used by her relatives for summer pasture of their reindeer herd. She spoke a little Sámi, but would rather speak Norwegian, a child of the time of the harsh assimilation policy. She told Rudy as a child in Duluth: “Speak English or people will think we are foreigners! (Mathisen 2018a)

Elle-Hánsa is, perhaps, best known for his artistic maps of Sápmi with place-names only in the Sámi languages.⁴ His maps have covered multiple regions and large tracts of the Sámi homelands. Countless Sámi people have the maps hanging in their homes, and people are especially delighted to receive maps from their own areas with place-names in their own Sámi languages. When Elle-Hánsa visited Rudy’s home, Rudy brought out a map, exclaiming: “Have

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9VGvDwuKWA>


you seen this map of Sápmi with all the names in Sámi?” To which, Elle-Hánsa responded: “Seen it? I made it!”

He visited the Johnson/Svendsen family several times over the years, and he has been instrumental in connecting other Sámi artists and cultural ambassadors with various Indigenous communities. He not only shared Sámi knowledge with diaspora Sámi families, he has also collaborated on projects with them, for example with the Sámi American artist Kurt Seaberg in his development of a Sámi calendar (Jensen 2012). The Johnson family has also visited Elle-Hánsa in Romsa/Tromsø several times. On one of their visits, he commissioned an exhibition featuring some of Solveig Arneng Johnson’s paintings during the Nana Indigenous Festival in 1998.

Oktavuohta – togetherness and connection – is foundational to maintaining communities and identities over time and across great divides. A consequence of colonialism is the rupturing or fracturing of community; maintenance, creation, and continuity of communities and connections are sutured through storytelling.

Many of my family’s stories reflect *oktavuohta* in that they function to maintain ties, suture disrupted ties, and serve as reminders of our un-breakable connection and belonging to Sámi places. One such story I first heard while looking at a photograph of my Sámi great-grandparents which hangs on the wall of my childhood home in Minnesota. My father traveled with the photograph when he moved there in the 1960s. Photographs of my great-grandparents often prompted stories that gave insight into our family history, which includes our (sometimes) repressed coastal Sámi background. He told the story in fragments over time. When I weave all the story threads together, I imagine the story unfolding in this way:

It must have been after the darkest period of winter, but before Easter when my (child) father, Harald, was pitched forward onto a boulder while out skiing with two of his older cousins. He was just six or seven years old. But even though he was bleeding profusely from his forehead, he was more worried about disappointing his mother for breaking the tip off his ski (again!) than worried about the gash on his head. One of his cousin’s exclaimed “You’re bleeding like an ox! We have to go to grandmother! Grandmother can stop bleeding!” The scene that follows has played out in my imagination many times. I see the little boy (looking



a lot like my son at that age), sitting on a chair at the kitchen table, the kitchen is inornate and functional. His legs are hanging and fitful, they don't touch the floor. There is a large window overlooking the fjord and a woodburning stove, a black kettle jiggles on the burner. My great-grandmother, dressed in black, has an apron and a long dark braid in her hair. She sits down across from him. The look in her eyes is both of seriousness for the task at hand, and kindness. Then I hear the voice of my adult father: "She held a large, sheath knife to the gash on my forehead and mumbled something I did not understand." Later, I asked him what he thought she might have been saying, and he said, "I don't know. Maybe it came from the Bible. Maybe it had something to do with the parting of the Red Sea." (Harald H. Jensen, personal communication by Ellen Marie Jensen, January 7, 2021)

Over the years, I have heard fragments of this story told again by relatives in Sápmi, although the part about my great-grandmother's knowledge and of a specific Sámi healing practice is mostly left out or is glossed over with statements like "she helped him."

More recently, my father returned to Dalve sagje for a family gathering, and as usual, people were remembering and sharing stories. One of his many cousins at the gathering – and one of the cousins he had been out skiing with that day – motioned in the direction of the boulder's location on the settlement. They took a short walk to the boulder together while recounting the events of that day, many years ago, when my father was pitched forward onto the boulder, hit his head, and bled like an ox. When they got there, his cousin said, while pointing: "Here it is. Here is the boulder where you hit your head. Now we call it Harald's stone!" This was the first time my father had heard that the boulder on Dalve sagje had been named after him. For all the years he had been away, his relatives had been calling it Harald's stone, but he needed to return to the land to be given the story. When I followed up with my father about including these stories in a research article, he stated:


I guess I had not really thought about how often that story gets told by our relatives, or that I have told that story to you (all) so many times [I have heard him tell it to his grandchildren too]. I don't know if I really believe that the knife ritual healed me. Maybe it was just the cold metal that helped. But I do know that my

grandmother loved me. She did what she did out of love for me. (Harald H. Jensen, personal communication by Ellen Marie Jensen, January 7, 2021)

People unfamiliar with coastal Sámi history and lifeways might be scratching their head, wondering what all this means. Readers or scholars seeking obvious cultural shibboleths to authenticate this story as a “real” Sámi story might be disappointed. But for those of us with a connection to coastal Sámi places recognize coded meaning. That is, the story is part of our meaning-making, it is part of our collective storywork. These are Sámi stories because Sámi people tell them and they relate to Sámi time-immemorial places: this is also Indigenous sovereignty. This sort of storytelling practice is common, in fact, it is so every day that I cannot really remember a time when I visited elders and they did not tell stories. They tell stories about relatives and elders that came before them. They tell stories about the war, childhood memories, and places. They tell stories about our origins. My father’s storytelling style could be animated and evocative. When I met some of my elders in Sápmi for the first time, I learned that this was the storytelling way of our family. As Sámi American folklorist, Tim Frandy, states “Family stories, or the action of storytelling, is intended to teach; storytelling is a tool for passing on practical knowledge, as well as transferring deep cultural codes which are rarely, if ever, explicitly named. The listener processes the story, interprets, and participates and the whole process is reciprocal or dialogic” (Frandy 2017). In other words, Sámi cultural knowledge is often embedded in stories, that is, encoded in the stories are worldviews, values, behavioral norms, and beliefs. It is important to listen to these stories with both our minds and our hearts; through my family stories, I have learned to better think my heart and feel with my mind.

Conclusion: notes on *oktavuohta* as storytelling methodology

Using concepts such as *oktavuohta* for ways of framing and interpreting Sámi storytelling research, would likely not live up to the rigor of the scientific research framework whereby concepts are synthesized in advance of starting a project and promptly calibrated to the various aspects of the question. Here, I have offered an approach to a Sámi storytelling research methodology which elucidates, illustrates, and implements concepts that arose from within stories themselves. In this way, the concepts have shaped my thoughts and feelings about the research process and provided interpretive insights and a Sámi-centered ethic. The concept of



oktavuohta is an invitation to engage Sámi epistemology, ontology, and social practices in a presentation that includes a diversity of Sámi, global Indigenous, and allied voices. Also, I have invited people to reflect on ways of connecting, enacting, or creating togetherness, belonging, and unity – *oktavuohta* – with and through storytelling as a research methodology. Storytelling – as a means of connecting – affirms, upholds, and constructs *oktavuohta*, or that “we are all just parts of the great, eternal unity.” While storytelling is foundational to community, connection, and belonging, the togetherness – *oktavuohta* – elicited in storytelling is not one of uniformity but made up of a diversity of voices and inter-connected parts of a whole.

Honoring stories which arise from within communities as legitimate sources of knowledge and theory might also be understood as re-suturing a fractured whole. Like Indigenous communities all over the world, many Sámi communities have been fractured by colonialism, people have endured harsh assimilationist education and loss of language, traditional ways of living, and cultural identity. But like Áigin, who forgot his connectedness when he lost his immediate family only to be reminded by Ráste that he is not alone and that “all things are bound together, intertwined,” we must also remind ourselves that we are not alone. We still have communities, we still have our stories, and the land is always there to welcome us home. Altogether, personal or family narratives in Sámi research can sustain our relations to place, land/lands, knowledges, all forms of life, languages, kinship and extended networks of belonging. Conceptualizing personal narratives as storytelling research *with* and *through* concepts arising from within the Sámi culture and language(s) constitute an approach to Indigenous methodologies. Storytelling has the potential to re-suture our sense of belonging after the fracturing of colonialism. Storytelling is instrumental, indeed, necessary to our understanding of and the regeneration of our place in the “unbreakable bonds” of *oktavuohta*.

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