3. Strategies of decolonisation: Portraits of elderly female pioneers in the Sami ethno-political movement

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Abstract
This article is about elderly Sami women who are front figures in the ethno-political mobilisation movement, acting from artistic platforms or in traditional political arenas. The Sami culture has been described as male-dominated and Sami women as dually oppressed, belonging to a minority people while also being women, but there are many Sami women, especially the elderly, who in recent decades have emerged as prominent figures in the fight for the survival of Sami culture. How do these prominent figures describe their own position and status? What strategies do they use, as elderly Sami women, to enter the Sami and non-Sami public spheres? How do they tell their story, what is it that motivates them, what obstacles have they faced and what has helped them? This chapter conducts an intersectional analysis on an individual level of the strategic approaches of three women. I have looked at the way these strategies emerge in the women’s life stories. Depending on special circumstances, either currently or earlier in their life, ethnicity, gender, age and class are emphasized to various degrees in the different narratives.

Keywords: age, Sami identity, gender, social class, ethno-political mobilisation, life-stories.
Introduction

‘No, I have never given up. You can’t. But you can notice that in Swedish contexts, it may matter that you’re short, Sami and a woman. You get a feeling that they aren’t listening. No they don’t! They aren’t listening but chuckling. It gets embarrassing,’ says Sigrid Stångberg, a retired head teacher from the Sami school in an interview on the Sami website www.samer.se. She is one of the driving forces behind the revitalisation of the South Sami language, and she is also involved in a number of other Sami rights issues. On the website she is described as follows:

Sigrid Stångberg always had at least one hundred projects going on at the same time. Sigrid Stångberg is one metre forty-eight tall, has spoken at the UN, invited President Clinton to her home town Tärnaby, lectured all the men of the Sami Parliament in domination techniques, and brought up two boys and hundreds of Sami schoolchildren. When the Swedish church initiates projects about the abuse of Sami children, they call Sigrid ‘Sagka’ Stångberg. When Frode Fjellheim wants to meet some people to talk about Sami history, Sagka is invited to the composer’s home in Norway. When Sami children in Tärnaby want to put on a play, she sorts out the props. (www.samer.se/4079)

This chapter is about elderly Sami women who, like Sigrid, are front figures in the ethno-political mobilisation movement, whether they are acting from artistic platforms or in traditional political arenas. The Sami culture has been described as male-dominated and Sami women as dually oppressed, belonging to a minority people while also being women, but there are many Sami women, especially the elderly, who in recent decades have emerged as prominent figures in the fight for the survival of Sami culture.

The aim is to study the self-presentations of three prominent elderly Sami women, thereby analysing the decolonising strategies concerning their identity work. In order to create and maintain a positive self-image as Sami in a post-colonial society, they emphasise various combinations of the dimensions of ethnicity, gender, age and social class. How do they describe their identity work, their own position and status? What strategies do they use, as elderly Sami women, to enter the Sami and non-Sami public spheres? How do they tell their story, what is it that motivates them, what obstacles have they faced and what has helped them?
Historical background

When I have been interviewing Sami women of the younger generation, the elderly Sami woman is often emphasised as a strong unifying symbol for the Sami culture. Marie Boine, a world famous Sami musician, has a picture of an old Sami woman on the cover of the album ‘Iddjagiedas – In the hand of the night’. She often refers to her ancient foremothers as an inspiration and her first album was named ‘Gula Gula – Hear the voices of the tribal mothers’. Historian Anna-Lill Ledman, who in her dissertation work has gone through the magazine ‘Samefolket’, says that elderly women are constantly celebrated in personal portraits and obituaries as strong role models (Ledman 2012:131-132). But the high status associated with elderly women is mostly within the family and clan, and their power is informal. The first Sami woman in history who took her place in the public sphere was Elsa Laula (1877-1931), an activist who fought for reindeer owners, non-reindeer Sami and Sami women, and who in 1905 founded the Åsele Lappish Women’s Organisation (Lantto 2000:68). It was not until the 1970s that a Sami women’s movement developed in connection with the Sami ethno-political movement’s emergence, and the women’s movement has always raised questions about language, culture, economics and politics alongside women’s issues (Ledman 2012: 83-84). In the 1970s, it was not self-evident in Sami contexts for women to enter the public sphere. Sakka Stångberg, whose social commitment was aroused in connection with this movement, says that according to the traditional gender roles, the woman in official contexts should be happy and laugh, but not participate in discussions: ‘I was told that ‘You mustn’t be so capable, because then it will be hard for the men!’’ (www.samer.se/4079).

To understand why the Sami women’s liberation struggle is linked to the struggle for Sami rights in general, it is important to be aware of the colonial and postcolonial history, a history which is dominated by racism and the oppression of Sami people (Sköld, Axelsson 2005). Sápmi, the area which is defined as the homeland of the Sami, extends over the northern parts of the former Soviet Union, Finland, Sweden and Norway. The Sami have gained official status as an indigenous people due to the fact that they are associated with a certain territory and history of colonialism. The traditional occupations of the
Sami have, ever since the Viking Age, been a combination of domesticated reindeer husbandry, hunting, fishing and farming. In 1886 a reindeer grazing law was instituted in which the state decided that reindeer husbandry was the only Sami occupation that was to be invested in. The laws of 1928 stipulated that only reindeer owners should be defined as Lapps and should belong to Sami villages and have hunting and fishing rights. This division and the injustice that it created is something that the Sami still struggle with today. The same law also stipulated that Sami women who married non-reindeer herding men should be deprived of the right to reindeer herding, and this remained the case until the legislation of 1971.

In 1673 there was a colonisation of Swedish Lapland whereby settlers were given tax exemption for fifteen years in exchange for cultivating the land. Due to this the Sami became a minority population in the area in the middle of the 1800s. Conflicts arose between the Sami and settlers concerning the rights to land, hunting and fishing, but there was also a mutual exchange between the parties. Some of the Sami started up settlements themselves. Through commercialisation of reindeer herding and state requirements for rationalisation, reindeer herding had gone from self-sufficiency to mechanized small businesses with growing herds and extensive tending. Over the years, reindeer herding became more and more displaced. Shrinking grazing lands due to road construction, logging, mineral extraction, tourism, etc. increasingly reduced the possibilities for the Sami to carry out reindeer herding.

Ever since the instigation of the Sami Parliament in 1993, the rights of the Sami who do not own reindeer have been discussed. Even though most people agree that the Sami culture is dependent on reindeer herding being allowed to continue to exist, many people claim that Sweden has not developed a proper policy for indigenous people. Instead they have concentrated their interest on only one profession – the reindeer owners. The number of Sami in Sweden today is estimated at 40-50 000 people (Hassler, see www.samer.se), but there are only 5 000 reindeer herding companies registered. Hence there are many who identify themselves as Sami, but who are left outside reindeer herding and the hunting and fishing rights of the Sami villages.

The Sami have been considered an inferior race and have been discriminated against in a number of different areas through history. Their religion has been banned, as has Lappish joik singing, and until the 1970s the Sami children were not allowed to speak Sami in school. This racism has led to many Sami los-
ing their language and their identity. Due to racism in the surrounding majority society, many of the Sami who were excluded from the Sami villages chose to hide their Sami origin (Olofsson 2004).

Even though the position of the Sami woman was formally weakened following the legislation of 1928, it was still strong in an informal way within the nomadic society. Reindeer herding was mostly done by the men, but the women were also very much involved (Ryd 2013). However, in conjunction with mechanisation in the 1950s, the snowmobile revolution, reindeer herding became more and more of a male occupation. Today, for the most part, it is the men who are reindeer herders and when a couple starts a family the woman often seeks employment outside reindeer herding.

Research overview, theoretical and methodological perspectives

The elderly Sami woman – dually oppressed or strong foremother?
Research about elderly Sami is a neglected field, both concerning the traditional nomad culture and in the modern Swedish society (Olofsson 2004). The only academic studies that specifically deal with the elderly Sami in Sweden are the articles of Lena Aléx (2007) and Marianne Liliequist & Lena Karlsson (2011). There is also a knowledge gap concerning the situation of women in the Sami culture. Most of the research culture has focused on male reindeer owners (e.g. Amft 2000). There are two opposing standpoints in the research on the Sami woman; one claims that the Sami woman – especially the elderly woman – has had a stronger position in society than in other cultures (Haetta 1996; Kvenangen 1996), while other researchers have described the Sami woman as subordinate and dually oppressed through her sex and her ethnicity (Amft 2000; Beach 1993; Olofsson 2004). Lena Aléx (2007) and Anna-Lill Ledman (2012) assume from their intersectional and postcolonial perspective a position in the middle in the academic discussion on the position of the Sami woman. Aléx claims that the elderly Sami women are balancing between different discourses. They see themselves as equal to the men and as living in the shadow of the male reindeer herders.

Andrea Amft’s criticism of the researcher who points out the strong position of the elderly women in the Sami society is severe and she says that there is a
strong myth about the elderly Sami women. However, it seems that Amft thinks that ‘myth’ is the same as something false, but in my opinion a myth is something much more complicated. A myth has something to say about reality, and a myth does something. A myth can be used in a strategy for ethno-political mobilisation and for feministic struggle. Strategic essentialism means that oppressed groups, for example Sami women, are able to point out former silent experiences and make themselves heard by political demands built upon an imagined, authentic, common identity (Ledman 2012). Spivak says that essentialism can have a political meaning for suppressed groups. Strategic essentialism means claiming one’s distinctive character as for example women or an ethnic group by emphasising certain qualities as fixed and unchangeable and through this trying to win support for one’s demands for rights (Spivak 1993:3-4).

In Sápmi today the elderly, and especially elderly Sami women, are symbols of Sami identity. The Swedish mining boom has resulted in a corresponding boom for the Sami identity political movement. In this escalation of ‘the final struggle’ for reindeer herding and the survival of the Sami cultural, the younger generation continually underlines the importance of moral support from the elderly. Elderly activists are celebrated on Facebook and Twitter and, in my interviews, the importance of the older generation as transmitters of Sami culture is referred to constantly by the younger generation (Liliequist 2015, forthcoming).

**Indigenous methodologies**

My analysis has a postcolonial starting point whose basic assumption is that people in the Nordic countries are influenced by a colonial discourse that still has an impact on perceptions of the Sami (Ledman 2012). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has emphasised how important it is that the Western academic community critically examines its research on indigenous people and that such research is permeated by ethical considerations of the ‘research objects’, i.e. the people who are often affected and influenced by the research. She is of the opinion that the research should be from the indigenous people’s own perspectives. It is time for a decolonisation of the research field of indigenous peoples, she says, where you stop exoticising and stereotyping.

Within the research field of indigenous methodology, the importance of respecting and putting forward the ontologies of the native people themselves is stressed, ways of thinking that differ from Western academic traditions. It is crucial, they say, that the Western theories do not obscure the native
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people’s own knowledge and values. By applying this method, the scholar could form a bridge between native people’s and Western images of the world (see for example Kovach 2010).

I am inspired by Rauna Kuokkanen’s (2006) research on the decolonisation strategies that Sami are developing to stand up against the postcolonial image of indigenous people. Poka Laenui (2000) describes the process of colonisation and decolonisation of indigenous peoples as happening in different stages. I have also found the concept of stigma – as defined by Erving Goffman (1972) – useful, meaning the branding of the Sami as inferior human beings, something which threatens their self-esteem and creates a feeling of shame.

Intersectional research perspective
I have used an intersectional research perspective in which the emphasis is on the intertwining of different power conditions (Krekula, Närvänen, Näsman 2005). Gender, ethnicity, age and social belonging are the most prominent factors in my study. Ethnicity is defined as the social community that is characterised by an imagined kinship. That means that Sami identity is to be seen as something dynamic and changing (Eriksen 1993). I assume a gender perspective which implies that there is a gender order in society with a male dominance, but that gender is at the same time changeable and varied depending on social, political and cultural circumstances (Aléx 2008). Social affiliation is also important in identity work. Nowadays the majority of the Sami are not involved in reindeer herding. The conditions differ depending on whether one lives in a reindeer herder family or has a job outside reindeer herding.

Narrative analysis of life stories
The material will be analysed by a method in which the dominant themes in the life stories are highlighted in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and social class. The narrative perspective applied to the material is based on the idea that the life story that is told constitutes a cultural construction, in which the respondent makes some choices from their personal memory bank. According to this view, the individual story is dependent on the culture-bound ideas of what a life story should look like, but the narrator also focuses on the events that seem important at the moment of telling (Arvidsson 1998:20-21). The way one describes one’s life is thus seen as closely linked to the individual’s identity work. The storytelling is part of the identity work, where some things are emphasised and others
toned down. The life story is a form of self-presentation that describes who I am in relation to the rest of the world. I have analysed my three informants’ life stories by asking the following questions: Who are ‘we’ in the story and who are ‘they’? What strategies are emerging in the battle for a positive self-image when one belongs to a minority and is also a woman? How is subordination described and how is a possible resistance being shaped? How do you look at yourself in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and social class? When is the Sami identity important and when are other aspects of identity being put forward?

I have used a narrative analysis in which the life stories’ underlying points, the ‘moral of the story’, are highlighted, thereby allowing access to values and world views. One can often find key events and key words in a story that appears to be central to the narrator. Dramatic turning points in the story also show themes that are central to self-presentation (e.g. Arvidsson 1998; Johansson 2005).

I have chosen to produce personal portraits of three women in order to get a picture of the complex and individual nature of the cooperation of the dimensions of ethnicity, gender, age and social class. As Maria Carbin and Sofie Tornhill (2004) have stressed, in the intersectional analysis it is important to look at each specific situation in its historical and social context, and when looking at the individual level the concrete relations between the power dimensions can be analysed.

Using personal portraits of participants also functions as a decolonising method, in order to avoid stereotyping and to get a picture of the complex and individual nature of the subject. The three participants represent different categories; Judit, 80 years old, has lived most of her life in the city and is a locally famous role model for the younger generation, Sakka, 69 years old, is a female pioneer in the Sami Parliament living in a village, and Britta, 61 years old, is a world famous visual artist, living in a reindeer herding family. Judit is anonymised, while Sakka and Britta, who are well-known celebrities – Sakka in the Sami community and Britta in the international art-world – have chosen to use their own names.
From internalised colonisation to transmitting of traditions

Judit, an 80-year-old woman, is originally from a forest Sami reindeer herding family, but she has lived most of her life in Umeå and worked as a teacher. In her life story three different stages (cf. Laenui 2000) appear that denote changes in attitudes towards the Sami, both within and outside the Sami group. The first stage is represented by her grandfather's generation who spoke South Sami and in an obvious way identified themselves as Sami. Judit's family lived on a farm along with two uncles with their families and her grandparents, and they were all reindeer-herding forest Sami. The adult males moved seasonally around with the herd, while the women, children and elderly were left at the farm. The second stage is characterised by the stigma that was attached to the Sami culture during Judit's adolescence. The concept of stigma describes the branding that the Sami experienced when the disparaging attitude of the 'true Swedes' intruded into their whole lives and threatened their self-esteem. For Judit's parents the stigmatisation began in school. Judit's mother went to municipal elementary school and lived in a so-called labour cottage (a kind of reform school where children would learn to work). Judit's father attended a school founded by a missionary association with non-Sami children and he was boarded at a farm in the village where the school was. It was forbidden to speak Sami at school, and Sami children were often teased by the non-Sami children and constantly felt that the Sami were regarded as inferior by those around them.

There are some stories in which where the stigmatisation is particularly evident, stories that have been etched in Judit's memory. These episodes turn into key events that are passed on from generation to generation. Judit’s father often told her about his mother’s funeral when he was twelve years old. He had to walk a long way to the church village and of course wore his finest clothes – the Sami frock. There were many farmers with horse-drawn carriages that went by because it was a major holiday and everyone would go to church, but not one stopped to offer a ride or even ask where he was going. ‘Nobody cared about where that Sami rascal was going. Can you believe how adults... and even though he was on his way to his own mother’s funeral, he thought that the worst thing was that nobody cared. It was a long time before he wore Sami clothes again even though he was a reindeer herder his entire life.’ The event had quite far-reaching consequences; he opted out of wearing the Sami frock and speaking
the Sami language, and it was only after retirement, when the Sami ethno-
political movement had started, that he could feel proud of his own culture.

During school and through the attitudes of the surrounding ‘Swedish’ com-
munity, Judit’s parents had experienced that it was for the best to become as
Swedish as possible, and they wanted to give their children a good start in life.
Their strategy for the children to escape racism was to not teach them Sami and
to avoid dressing in a Sami way. Judit’s parents never spoke Sami with the chil-
dren. Sami was a ‘secret language’ for the children that the adults only spoke to
each other when they dealt with issues that were not intended for their ears. The
ban on speaking Sami and the bullying of the Sami children also occurred dur-
ing Judit’s school days. Judit was not teased herself, but her brother constantly
had to defend himself against the bullies. ‘Oh, how he fought in school!’

It was the school years that socialised the Sami children into alienation. But
to Judit, who did well in school and was not teased by the other children, the
Swedishness was in some respects appealing. In this way she was ambivalent in
her approach towards the Sami, which is something she has been ashamed of
and forced to deal with as an adult. The remorse for having denied the Sami –
even if only in her thoughts – is a theme that Judit returns to time and time
again. Since Judit was doing well in school her parents paid for higher education
for her, and this was unusual among ‘common’ people at that time.

There was a clash of cultures in Judit’s mind between the ‘Swedish’ percep-
tion of normality which existed in school and the perception in the Sami home
environment. For example, she had been told at school that the home should be
cleaned and decorated for Christmas. But in her home it wasn’t easy to keep
everything in order around Christmas. That was the time when the reindeer
herd came by and her father – together with all the reindeer herders of the Sami
village – found shelter in the three cabins on the farm. It was very crowded with
‘men and dogs and kids’ in the little one bedroom cabin. ‘There were backpacks
containing food that should be cooked on the wooden stove, and there were
dogs to be fed, and there was shoe hay to be dried, and we only had one bed-
room and a kitchen, and we children had to sleep on the floor – and we thought
that it was so funny!’ But one Christmas Judit ventured to say to her mother: ‘I
hope the reindeer herders won’t come for Christmas!’ But then she was told that
they are welcome when they come! ‘...I almost felt guilty for my thoughts when I
got older!’
The only Sami words that were used in the family were ‘akka’, which means grandmother, and ‘ajja’, which means grandfather, and the only one who spoke Sami was the grandfather. He never translated his words. Instead he insisted that the children must understand what he said. ‘It was too bad that he didn’t make the children practise speaking themselves too!’ Judit exclaims. The grandfather tried to pass on the Sami language at a time when the Sami culture was undervalued by the surrounding society. ‘Oh, how I have since thought about how he could have felt! We never talked about it, but how would he have conceived that everything he thought was good was bad? What we thought was important we then saw as meaningless. I have thought about it so much... I will be accountable for it on the Day of Judgment!’ she says half-jokingly but still upset.

Through school, but also through the attitudes of her parents, Judit experienced an ambivalence in her view of the Sami during this period. To some extent she internalised the view of ‘the Swedes’ in which the Sami were seen as ‘the others’. The third stage implied a period of decolonisation, a restoration of the Sami identity and the Sami culture, and this gained momentum in conjunction with the Sami identity politics movement of the 1970s. Judit’s parents experienced a revitalisation of the south Sami culture. In their retirement they worked as guides at the church cot in the county town during the summers. Judit’s husband had initiated this activity through the tourist office. Judit’s father told the visitors about the life of the forest Sami and her mother served refreshments in the cot. They enjoyed it so much that they continued doing it until the father died. ‘They didn’t want to stop, it was their life!’

Judit’s husband gave up reindeer herding when he got a position at the County Administrative Board, where he could work with reindeer husbandry issues in a more overall way. Judit did not really want to move to the city, but ‘when I had to, I thought I should make something of it’, so she started taking courses at the university alongside her job as a special education teacher. Both spouses were very active within a party in the Sami Parliament. Nowadays Judit is a sought-after speaker and storyteller on the subject of forest Sami culture and she speaks at museums, local history days and the like.

But the most important task that Judit has taken on in her old age is to teach her children and grandchildren not to forget their Sami origins, even though they live in the city. Judit often helps her grandchildren with their homework. One of her grandchildren, Maja, was very upset that they did not get to read about Sami people until the 8th grade and then there was only a short
Piece about the Sami language. Judit says that it is a shame that we have not come any further, despite the fact that for many years the Sami Parliament has demanded that teaching of Sami culture and history should be mandatory when educating teachers.

Judit has compiled a leaflet with information about their family background and general information about the forest Sami. She wants her grandchildren to have a Sami identity: ‘Oh I must say that I have succeeded!’ she says with a proud smile. As an example she mentions Maja trying to have a discussion about Sami history in school. In a review of ‘Little House on the Prairie’, which Maja had for homework in Swedish, she equated the situation of the Native Americans with the situation of the Swedish Sami: ‘The Sami have also had their land taken from them!’ Judit was a little hesitant: ‘But should you really write that?’ Yes, she wanted to hear her Swedish teacher’s reaction. ‘Well, what did she say then? Nothing! It was like my dad, nobody cares!’ Judit exclaims. In this case Judit associates the silence of the school with the indifference that her father experienced when he was a 12-year-old Lapp boy and he had to walk many miles to his mother’s funeral and not one single adult stopped to ask him where he was going. Even today, society is permeated with an indifferent silence when it comes to Sami history, Judit says.

Sakka – female pioneer and advocate for the Sami outside the Sami villages

After having read the interview with Sakka Stångberg on the internet, I felt that I had to interview her. How had she managed to accomplish so much being a single mother of two children and the only woman in the political context where she was for many years? I had to hear about where she got her motivation and about the obstacles she had faced along the way. In between all of her commitments I succeeded in getting an interview and we sat and talked eagerly, sometimes interrupting one another, in my home. When she left it felt as if we were old acquaintances who would meet again many times. Sakka connects easily with other people and she is not afraid to speak out on controversial issues – ‘I’m so old now so I can say whatever I want!’

Sakka is the name that her parents wanted her to have and what she wants to be called. ‘But in those days it was the priest who decided what the child should be named and he made it into the Swedish name Sigrid’ she says.
Sakka has been a teacher and principal at the Sami school in Tärnaby for over 30 years, and has been active in the union and in politics since the 1960s. She started the first southern Sami language camps for young people, and has been involved in Sami cultural activities such as Sami children’s theatre, courses, lectures and more. She is still active in the local associations Vapsten sijte and Vadtejen saemiej sijte, and fights for the rights of the Sami who do not own reindeer, appeals against mining establishments, and organises festivals, concerts, lectures and courses. She has initiated a volunteering group consisting of retired Sami who help the Sami residents at the nursing home. There is no way to count all of the things that she is or has been involved in, and she only mentions a few of them in my interview with her. I have found the rest of it in different news articles on the internet. When I talked to her she wanted to emphasise the struggle for the Sami who are outside of the Sami villages and the difficulties she has come across as a female activist in a male-dominated context.

Sakka says that the original incentive for her dedication to politics and culture is an incident in 1971 when her family was excluded from their territory in Björkvattsdalen in the parish of Tärnaby, where they had been herding reindeer throughout the years. They were repressed by migrating north Sami, who was forced by the State to move down south and who had support from the County Administrative Board. ‘It all comes back to this,’ she says emphatically. It was the starting point of her lifelong struggle for the Sami who are outside of the Sami villages and hence lack the rights of the Sami village. Sakka suggests that the reindeer grazing law of 1928 drove a wedge between the reindeer herding and the non-reindeer herding Sami and created a conflict which remains to this day. The state policy was to sift the wheat from the chaff and exclusively define the reindeer owning Sami as Sami. The rest of the Sami were to be assimilated into Swedish society. In fact, Sakka says, many Sami – especially in Björkvattsdalen – were jacks of all trades. They made a living out of a combination of reindeer herding, hunting, fishing, handicraft and small-scale farming. Many Sami also started up settlements.

Together with another family, Sakka’s family were the original reindeer herders in Tärna and in the south Sami way they conducted an intense form of reindeer herding with small herds which were guarded carefully. In 1936 the northern Sami were deported to Tärna and since they conducted extensive reindeer herding with large herds which were allowed to roam in the wild, conflicts soon arose both with settlers and with the first group of Sami, the original Sami
as Sakka calls them. Due to this controversy Sakka’s father gave up reindeer herding and the other ‘original’ reindeer herding family in the area moved away. Sakka’s uncle’s family tried to carry on, but the County Administrative Board refused to acknowledge them as belonging to the Sami village and supported the migrating northern Sami families instead. Sakka interprets this as the state wanting to promote reindeer herding on a large scale at the expense of small-scale herding. On the contrary, Sakka wants to highlight the benefits of the Sami mix of occupations which was particularly well developed in Björkvattsalen. Sakka believes that the tradition of a creative combination of many different occupations in the Sami history of Björkvattsalen is the reason why so many creative people are active in the area today – craftsmen, artists, musicians, filmmakers and so on. When Sakka tells the story of Björkvattsalen she also tells her own story – her life has the same components as the story of the area – the versatility and struggle for rights which has been fought on so many levels.

Sakka had a seat in the Sami Parliament for 12 years, from 1971 onwards. She was the first female board member and had a tough struggle against prejudices from her male colleagues. They questioned how Sakka, who worked as a teacher, would have time to attend the meetings, ‘as if being a teacher was some sort of a calling’. The resistance was both an obstacle and an incentive to her commitment to politics. Sakka describes how she was often carelessly treated and felt run over; people would ‘forget’ to call her to meetings, she wouldn’t get the same information as the other board members, etc. Sakka explains this by saying that she violated old ideas about how Sami women should conduct themselves in public contexts. The women were supposed to stay in the background, be happy, laugh and offer coffee and let the men discuss the important issues. ‘I hate being the one who makes the coffee!’ Sakka exclaims. She also had negative reactions from women: ‘Can you imagine that I had to hear ‘Don’t be so clever, it’s too hard on the men!’’ The male self-esteem had to be maintained and the frankness and competence of Sakka was a threat to their masculinity. Sakka thinks that the fact that she was single made it easier for her to violate the gender norms. Her father’s support and political commitment also meant a lot. It was he who encouraged her to study history and the Sami language and eventually move on to teacher training college. On the contrary, her mother thought that there was no point in studying, since Sakka would marry soon anyway.

Sakka describes reading Berit Ås’s (a Norwegian feminist scholar) article on male master suppression techniques as a key moment; this was exactly the way...
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she had been treated! “Ever since then I speak up!” She gained some extra strength from placing her experiences in a patriarchal structure. She lectured on the master suppression techniques at the Sami Parliament and encouraged the women to come forward, and she also organised seminars on equality. She has experienced how the new generation of Sami women take their place in public in a totally different manner, and that sometimes the women are even more active than the men.

Sakka is still seen as a controversial figure in the public eye. Her age and the increasing focus on equality in the Sami public context means that she is treated with respect most of the times nowadays. But there are exceptions. At a seminar at Umeå University where scholars, reindeer herders and representatives of the County Administrative Board met to discuss the history and future of the reindeer husbandry a few years ago, Sakka said she was grossly insulted when she tried to object against the victorious historiography in which the Sami who are excluded from the Sami villages are left out. ‘Calm down bitch!’ shouted one of the representatives of the families who had driven away Sakka’s family from the reindeer husbandry. A female representative for the Sami who have lost their rights and who is not afraid to speak her mind is still perceived as provocative in certain contexts. A part of Sakka’s image of herself is also that she refuses to be a victim; instead, she fights against all odds until she drops. This is also apparent from the image she gives of herself as a child. There was a lot of bullying in the nomadic school:

Everyone was homesick and other children often stole candy or dried meat, which they had sent from home. I cried and told the matron everything, even though I knew they would beat me up for it. But I didn’t care so much. I was probably already more sure of myself, even at that time.

One example of Sakka’s practical way of linking the generations together is to create quality of life in retirement homes. She consolidates generations by bringing Sami pupils from primary schools to the elderly in the retirement home to practice their Sami in conversation with them. Sakka is critical of the development of the local retirement home. Although they live in a society where a relatively large proportion of the population are Sami, nothing has been done to make the elderly Sami feel at home. She says that the elderly people at the retirement home feel that nobody listens to you when you become old and that this is especially so if you are Sami. Sakka has put a lot of energy into improving
the situation of the elderly Sami, and she has also managed to encourage other retired Sami to join in the volunteer work. You do not have to do much, says Sakka, to satisfy the elderly Sami’s needs, which she summarises in three words: language, food and nature. She and her group of volunteers have strived to grant their desires: for example to introduce reindeer meat on the menu, to teach the staff at least some essential everyday phrases in the Sami language and to help the elderly to get out on excursions into the mountains. She explains that no great effort is required for the elderly to get a sense of coherence, meaningfulness and continuity. For those Sami who suffer from dementia, the Swedish language has often vanished and South Sami is the only language they understand. Some of the staff really want to learn, she says, but not all.

Ethnicity, class and gender are the dominant aspects of Sakka’s story. The primary motivation for her political and cultural struggle has been the exclusion of the Sami who do not own reindeer. The fact that she, as a woman, has encountered resistance has been an obstacle along the way, but it has also motivated her even more. Her father’s support has meant a lot to her, and her eagerness to learn has also strengthened her in her struggle. Sakka refers to Berit Ås when it comes to the suppression techniques of the patriarchy, and she mentions Israel Ruong, a scholar in the field of Sami history and culture, when she promotes the Sami combination of occupations and Elsa Laula when she speaks of the struggle of the Sami who do not own reindeer. Her strategy has been to refuse to see herself as a victim and to turn possible weaknesses into strengths. For example, she often chooses to see the fact that she has been a single mother of two children as an advantage: ‘And since I don’t have a man by my side I haven’t been stuck in the old gender roles...’ Over the years she has experienced a greater equality in the Sami public context. Nowadays, she often gets the appreciation which usually is granted to the elderly in Sápmi and among the young people she is often regarded as one of ‘the elders’, meaning an esteemed and respected pioneer.

Britta Marakatt Labba and art as resistance

‘It is the Sami myths and nature that have inspired me in my art,’ says Sami artist Britta Marakatt in her speech at the opening of an art exhibition in Umeå. She emphasises the stories about the first mother, the goddess Akka and her
three female helpers, and she explains to the audience that the woman has had a strong position in Sami culture.

Britta is primarily known for her embroidered textile art, and she mixes social criticism with Sami myths and a strong sense of nature in her poetic embroidered stories. Her pictures are miniature worlds with scenes from the everyday world, political reflections, stories about Sami culture and history, and always with the presence of magnificent nature. Britta describes herself as a political artist and she thinks that the artist’s role in society should be to highlight urgent issues. Her pictures have been about the Sami struggle for rights combined with issues of environmental degradation and racism.

Recently Britta has been busy creating pictures dealing with the mining exploration in Sápmi. An embroidery that was finished recently depicts a mountain scene which is unspoilt and beautiful on one side and an exploited mining landscape on the other. She says that this piece is a comment on the protests in the summer of 2013 against the mining exploration in Gállok/Kallak (Gállok is the Sami name of the place) west of Jokkmokk, where the activists built barricades and hindered the work of the mining explorers with their own bodies. The fight in Gállok is one of many cases which show that the Sami struggle today is supported both by national and international environmentalists and by individuals who want to support the rights of native people. She mentions the similarity with the fight for Alta in Norway in 1979-81, where the expansion of the Alta river threatened to destroy large areas of reindeer grazing land. Then, as now, the environmental movement stood in solidarity with the Sami. The major difference is the big international participation which has been mobilised by Facebook and Twitter. Britta’s piece ‘The Crows’, which is a political picture from the fight for Alta, was frequently shared in social media in connection with the actions in Gállok. ‘The Crows’ depicts the activists chained together outside of their cots, looking up at a flock of crows in the sky. The crows are coming down with open claws and at the same time they are transformed into policemen. This is one of the most talked about pieces when it comes to Sami art.

The piece ‘Events in time’ is about the massacre on the Norwegian island of Utøya in 2011, when about a hundred young people were shot and sixty-nine of them were killed by the Nazi Anders Behring Breivik. Using textiles that she had found among Sami relatives and German flour bags with Nazi symbols from the German occupation of Norway, she creates a timeline between World War II Nazism and the event on Utøya.
Britta was born in 1951 during an autumn move between Tornedalen in Sweden and the summer residence in northern Norway. Her father was killed in an accident when Britta was five years old and he left her mother with ten children, the youngest being only eight months old. The family managed to keep the reindeer thanks to some help from their relatives and Britta’s older brother: ‘He knows hard work!’ Britta was deeply affected by the death of her father. When asked about what made her choose an artistic career, she says that it is the melancholy which she felt as in her childhood and that made her a sensitive and observant child. She used to observe people’s faces and every detail in her environment and she remembered everything in pictures. Britta also describes her home as a creative environment. The children used to take charcoal from the fireplace and draw on the canvas of the cot, and when there was a wedding in the village they would run there and beg to have the empty cake cartons to draw on. When the siblings sat and drew they used to imagine places they had never been to, for example the fair in Jokkmokk.

Britta’s art is characterised by using what is at hand in nature and in her environment. Her use of the sackcloth from the German flour bags and the fact that she dries fish skin to apply to pictures are examples of this. Using what is at hand is something that Britta says she learnt growing up. For instance, the flour bags had previously been used as a cot door. Everything was used. At school she was encouraged by teachers who could see her talent, and as early as the second grade she had written in a friend’s notebook that she wanted to work with ‘something involving drawing’ when she grew up.

According to Britta, her political stance was shaped by the left political movement of the seventies. ‘Everyone was left-wing then!’ Her time at the School of Design and Crafts in Gothenburg was dominated by the left movement which predominated, and the fight for Alta – a political controversy in Norway in the 1970s and 1990s – shaped the approach which she has taken throughout her life, where the struggle for Sami rights has been mixed with other antiracist issues and a strong commitment to issues concerning the environment.

Britta grew up with the Sami myths. As soon as she and her siblings saw that their mother was on her way to visit the neighbour, they snuck after her. They sat silent and expectant and waited for the storytelling to begin: ‘Now the storytelling will begin!’ The stories were about the subterranean and other mythical creatures. The children loved to listen to these exciting stories, even though they were a little scary. When, as an adult, Britta lived for a few years with her moth-
er, they came to speak about spiritual things with each other. Being alone with her mother and taking part of her knowledge of the hidden things and about her approach to life is something that Britta sees as invaluable. When someone had passed away her mother comforted her by saying that the dead are not gone, they are still with us all the time. Britta says that nowadays we do not have time to listen to the subterranean, but if we stopped for a moment we could share their wisdom. Her mother’s approach to life was that you should never take more from nature than you absolutely needed, and that you had to thank nature for everything you got: the berries you picked, the fish you caught, the reindeer you butchered, etc. Humility towards nature and the mythical creatures, a stillness and a calm inside – that is how Britta saw her mother. Britta’s particular artistic approach, what she calls ‘the aesthetic of slowness’, comes from her mother. Embroidery takes time and you have the opportunity to reflect as the picture emerges. Britta values the slow process in itself as something beneficial in comparison with the stress of Western society. In the olden days you were never in a hurry, she says, even though people worked very hard. Her mother never rushed and she never raised her voice against her children. ‘Screaming will get you nowhere!’ she always said.

When I ask Britta if she has encountered any obstacles in her artistic career, she says: ‘Yes, it took me thirty years to break through. I am sure that it would have been faster if I had been a man.’ She is aware of the fact that it is hard to establish yourself as a woman in the art world, and especially if you use an art form which is considered typical for women, like embroidery. After her studies she lived at her mother’s house as a way of being able to create pieces for her first exhibition. For three years she worked intensively on her pictures and at the same time she had the chance to spend time alone with her mother. Only now, at the age of sixty-three, she feels that she has established herself and that everything is running smoothly. It can almost feel a bit unreal sometimes, she says. In a radio show the reporter follows her as she is about to speak at the opening of an exhibition in the north of Norway where a crowd full of prominent persons in the fields of culture and politics awaits her. With laughter in her voice Britta says: ‘There I was like the odd man out! But the question is who really is the odd man out!’ As a Sami woman carrying messages, which are sometimes controversial and critical of society, she is aware of her otherness in the establishment, and this is a position that she playfully twists and turns. For one moment the hierarchy seems to be inverted.
It is a disadvantage to be a woman in the art world, Britta notes. In Sápmi on the other hand, she says, the woman has had – and still has – a strong position. This is expressed in the Sami myths, but also practically in the reindeer herding. One example is that her husband always asks her about which reindeer should be butchered and which should be kept; in fact, he asks her about every decision that has to be made in reindeer herding. In the beginning she was surprised that he wanted her to make the decisions: ‘Growing up I had been in school all the time, and because of that I had been estranged from reindeer herding. After my studies I had been occupied with art – I know nothing about reindeer herding!’ Her husband kept insisting on asking her and in the end she figured out why. When her mother-in-law was alive she was always the one who decided what should be done in reindeer herding, and now that she is gone he takes it for granted that Britta should have the decision-making power. ‘But I don’t know anything!’

**Comparative intersectional analysis on an individual level**

In this article I have reflected on three women’s life stories from intersectional perspectives. I have looked at the way different identity strategies emerge in their stories. The challenge has been to make concrete use of an intersectional perspective, to go deep into the complex relationships between age, ethnicity, gender and class to see how the various dimensions interact on an individual level. Depending on special circumstances, current or earlier in their life, age, ethnicity, gender and class are emphasised to various degrees in the different narratives. They also have different decolonisation tools; Judit is a sought-after storyteller, Sakka is engaged in political and cultural work, and Britta expresses Sami politics in embroidered textiles.

All three women emphasise ethnicity in their narratives. Judit’s narrative does not contain any stories of oppression of women or male dominance. She was the only one in her family who had the privilege of further studies and she was not bullied at school because of her Sami heritage, unlike her brother for example. Nor does Judit problematise issues of class. Even though she has been outside reindeer herding in her professional life, she identifies completely with the reindeer owners. She and her husband were active in reindeer herding in their youth, they still belong to their original Sami village, they have always
spent their free time in the area of the Sami village and they still own a few reindeer who are herded by relatives. Judit solely and exclusively emphasises ethnicity, the struggle for the Sami and especially the Forest Sami, as the important guidewire in her life.

Sakka emphasises class in the way that she advocates the rights of the Sami who do not own any reindeer, the ones who have been excluded from the Sami villages and who lack all the rights which are connected to the territories where their ancestors lived. She says with emphasis that the government decision in the 1960s, which led to her family being excluded from their Sami village and replaced with north Sami who were forced to resettle, is the direct cause for both her involvement in politics and her struggle for Sami culture. Sakka’s cultural activity is primarily aimed at highlighting the culture of ‘the original Sami’, the southern Sami in Björkvattdalen who used to make their living through a combination of intense reindeer herding with small herds which were guarded carefully, hunting, fishing and sometimes a smallholding. It was these people who the government wanted to get rid of and, in their struggle for rationalisation, replace with the extensive reindeer herding of the north Sami, who had large herds which were allowed to roam freely. The government approved only of the Sami who were solely occupied with reindeer herding; the combination of different occupations was considered unprofitable and outdated. The ones who were excluded from the Sami villages were expected to assimilate into Swedish culture. Gender is also emphasised in her account. As a Sami woman she has experienced double oppression, both in her struggle against the government to protect the rights of the Sami who are excluded from the Sami villages, and as a female pioneer in the start-up of the male-dominated Sami Parliament, and she is still considered a controversial person by many people.

When Britta emphasises the Sami identity, the concept of the strong Sami woman is a part of the Sami identity, along with the mythical world and the magnificence of nature. The strong woman appears both as a mythical foremother and in today’s reindeer herding. Like Judit, she does not mention the class antagonism between reindeer owning and non-reindeer owning Sami.

The elderly, especially women, are symbols of Sami identity in Sami society and this could be defined as strategic essentialism. Elderly Sami represent the continuity in Sami culture and everything that is worth fighting for. In my three participants’ narratives, it can be seen that they have got a lot of respect from the younger generation as they have grown older. Judit has become a local ce-
lebrity and her grandchild walks in her footsteps. Sakka has gone from having been criticised for breaking the gender pattern to being praised, especially by the younger generation of Sami women. After a lifetime’s work, Britta has finally achieved a high status in the art field, and Sami society is proud to have her as a representative. Christina Åhrén (2008) has described how important working with identity is for Sami youth in the post-modern society. For the Sami who have relocated, the transmission of traditions is especially important since they do not live the everyday Sami life; the Sami identity has to be actively and constantly re-established. The elderly who take on this challenge feel that they are valuable for the younger generation’s Sami identity-building.

I have found some problems, though, to use the term strategic essentialism when analysing the three participants’ own narratives, because there appears to be a conflict between this concept and the perspective of indigenous methodology. To conduct research in accordance with indigenous methodology means taking the experiences and ontologies of the indigenous people seriously. To interpret the three participants’ approaches as strategic essentialism could be seen to dismiss their knowledge and to distort their words. Britta’s approach could stand as an example of this methodological problem. Britta recurrently contrasts the Sami idea of sustainability with the rapacity of Western capitalism. The Sami traditional approach to nature – not to take more than necessary – is contrasted with the exploitation of nature through deforestation, mining exploitation, hydro regulation, etc. The calm (at least in the olden days) lifestyle of the Sami, where time is governed by the changes of nature and the habits of the reindeer and where everything takes its time, is put in contradistinction to the rush and stress of Western society. The spirituality that was present in traditional Sápmi, where one listened to the mythical creatures and one’s deceased loved ones, is contrasted with consumer society’s fixation on the material. The strong position of the woman in the Sami community is contrasted with how Western society treats women.

My three participants live in a context where they are used as symbols of ethnicity, and this strategy in the ethno-political struggle could be seen as strategic essentialism, but I am ambivalent to the term as an analytical tool concerning my participants’ perspectives on life. Instead, I have stressed the importance of taking the alternative, visionary aspect in the accounts of the Sami women seriously. In the light of the discussion on indigenous methodology one could see the approach to nature and how one leads one’s life as described by
Britta as an alternative lifestyle, a vision of how life could be lived in a sustainable society. It is not only a strategy but a way of life that has existed and still partly exists in Sápmi. To take Britta seriously is to see her descriptions of Sami life as a positive alternative vision for society as a whole, and this is the foundation stone of the research field of indigenous methodology.
References


Strategies of decolonisation


