

Enhancing Storytelling about *Skábma* Traditions in Early Childhood Education and Care as Part of a Sámi Decolonising Process

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ABSTRACT

In *Sápmi*¹, there are many stories and traditions tied to *skábma*, or the dark time of midwinter. *Skábma* is considered a sacred time and space. Some of the stories and traditions, which stem from Sámi Indigenous religion and are related to various invisible beings, are still passed on through oral traditions and storytelling. This article explores what it can mean for children, educators and researchers to creatively engage with lesser-known Indigenous religious traditions, stories told by older generations and current traditions, in ways that give further life to them. The research aim is twofold: the article studies both how co-research within an Indigenous context is conducted, and how educators and children in a Sámi Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centre managed activities and searched for and created new stories based on *skábma* traditions. The research question is: In what ways can strengthening storytelling in the ECEC setting function as a contribution to Sámi decolonisation processes? The research materials were collected through ethnographic fieldwork. The fieldwork was methodologically framed as critical utopian action research that considers the social learning of the children, educators and researchers that participated in the activities. Accordingly, this article shows how educators and children at an ECEC centre in *Sápmi* conducted activities to search for and create new *skábma* stories based on Indigenous traditions. The researchers were invited to learn about stories and traditions in which their attentiveness to the present was connected to valuing the past and taking responsibility for a sustainable future. The latter was achieved via storytelling by the educators, a *duodji* (Sámi craft) activity and children's playtime. The article concludes by discussing how the search for and creation of traditions, such as sharing food with ancestors, involve decolonising processes.

¹The traditional land of the Sámi people is called *Sápmi*. It encompasses northern part of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Kola Peninsula in Russia.

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ABSTRÁKTA

Nanusmahttit mitalusaid Skábmavieruid birra ovdaskuvllas² oassin sámi dekoloniserenproseassas

Sáms gávdnojit ollu mitalusat vieruid birra mat gullet skábmaáigái, dahje guovdu dálvvi sevdnjes áiggi birra. Skábma árvoštallo bassi áigin ja báikin. Muhtin mitalusat ja vierut vulget sámi eamiálbmotoskkus ja dasa gullet oaidnemeahttun ealibat, ja dat fievrriduvvojit ain ge viidáset njálmmála árbevieruid ja máinnasteami bokte. Dát čálus suokkarda maid sáhtta mearkkázis mánáide, oahpaheddjiide ja dutkiide jus kreatiivvalaččat ángirusšet unnit dovddus eamiálbmotoskkolaš vieruide, mitalusaide maid boarráset buolvvat leat mitalan ja dála áiggi árbevieruide dakkár vugiiguin mat fievrridit daid viidásit. Dutkamuša ulbmil lea guovttesuorat: čálus suokkarda sihke movt ovttasduktan eamiálbmogiid birra čadahuvvo, ja movt pedagogat ja mánát smávvamánáid guovddážiin fuolahedje aktivitehtaid ja ohce ja hutke ođđa mitalusaid maid vuoddu lea skábma-vierru. Dutkamuša gažaldat lea: man láhkái sáhtta nanusmahttojuvvon máinnasteapmi ovdaskuvllas doaibmat reaidun sámi dekoloniserenproseassas? Dutkanmateriála lea čohkkejuvvon etnográfalaš gieddebarggu bokte. Gieddebargu lea metodalaččat hábmejuvvon kritihkalaš utopalaš akšuvdnadutkamuššan, mii giedahalai mánáid, pedagogaid ja dutkiid sosiála oahppama, guhte oassálaste aktivitehtain. Čuovvovaččat čájeha dát čálus movt mánát ja pedagogat mánáidguovddázis jodihedje aktivitehtaid ozadettiin ja ráhkadettiin ođđa skábmamáidnasiid maid vuoddu ledje eamiálbmotárbevierut. Dutkit bovdjuvvojedje boahit oahppat máidnasiid ja árbevieruid gos áicilvuohtha dála áigis lei goallostuvvon árvoštallat vássánaiggi ja váldit ovdasvástádusa bistevaš boahtteáigis. Dan majemusa olahedje pedagogaid mitalusain, duodjebarggu bokte ja mánáid stoahkama bokte. Čálus loahpahuvvo digaštallamiin movt árbevieruid ohcan ja hutkan, nugo juogadit borramuša máddariiguin, buktet mielddis dekoloniserenproseassa.

Čoavddussáni: *Sámi ovdaskuvlaoahpahus; dekoloniserenproseassat; eamiálbmotárbevierut ja máinnasteapmi*

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In *Sápmi*, there are many stories and traditions tied to *skábma*,³ or the dark time of midwinter. *Skábma* is considered a sacred time and space. Some of the stories and traditions, which stem from Sámi Indigenous religion and are related to various invisible beings, are still passed on through oral traditions and storytelling. Oral traditions connect the practical and spiritual world (Nergård, 2022). There are various concepts for the dark time in the different Sámi languages; here we will use the North Sámi concept *skábma*.

One dark morning in December, Jannok Nutti and Johansson were invited to participate in a storytelling session at a Sámi Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centre. When we arrived at the centre, the educators led us into the room

² mánáidgárddis

³ The Sámi orthography chosen for the article is North Sámi, even though some examples are from the Lule Sámi area. *Skábma*, meaning ‘the dark time during the winter,’ is a North Sámi word, which has a slightly different connotation in Lule Sámi. In this paper, *skábma* is treated as a concept.

where the session would take place. The room was dark, with just some candles for light. On the floor, the educators had built a midwinter scene with a *lávvu* (a Sámi tipi-style tent) and a reindeer herd grazing nearby. Beside the scene was a bucket with a shovel, a play axe, belts with small play knives and firewood. A Christmas tree was also part of the scene. According to oral tradition, the *Stállu* and his *raid* pass by Sámi settlements at this time of year, and figures that represented the *Stállu's* raid were part of the scene. A raid is usually a team of tame reindeer that is used to transport belongings or people, but the *Stállu's* raid consists of rats and mice.

Sámi author Johan Turi (1910/2012) describes the *Stállu* as ‘part human and part *mánnelaš* or *beargalat* [demons]’ (p. 157). In many of the *Stállu* stories, the *Stállu* is going to catch and eat Sámi children, but they trick him as he is rather stupid. They always escape being caught and eaten by him. The story of the *Stállu's* raid is told in the Christmas song ‘*Vuordit juovlaruohta*’ (‘Waiting for Christmas Eve’) (Gaup, 2013, first published in 1989); it explains the importance of clearing the ground around the *lávvu* so that the *Stállu's* raid does not get stuck. Together with three educators and a group of children, we got to hear the song told as a story by one of the educators. The song was part of the Christmas celebration at the Sámi ECEC centre. The evening before hearing this story, the researchers and educators discussed *skábma* traditions and stories during a workshop led by Westman Kuhmunen in collaboration with Jannok Nutti and Johansson at the centre.

The first Sámi ECEC centre was established in 1969 in Kautokeino municipality in Norway. Not all Sámi families were enthusiastic about the initiative by childhood services; some were concerned that effective Norwegianisation would now begin from the age of three, the age that Sámi children would start attending the centre. There is a long history of forceful assimilation into the majority culture dating back to the 17th century and the removal of some Sámi children to Protestant boarding schools (Lindmark, 2016; Norlin, 2018). In 1971, a flexible Sámi ECEC centre was established in Kautokeino municipality, which was intended to enable the children to participate in local activities and be part of the local culture. The widespread expansion of Sámi ECEC centres did not occur until the 1980s. In Sweden, the first Sámi ECEC centre was established in 1986 in Gällivare municipality, and the aim was to strengthen Sámi children’s identity, culture and language (Kuhmunen & Blom, 1987). Today, there are five Sámi ECEC centres in Sweden.⁴ In Sweden, the North, Lule, Pite, Ume and South Sámi languages are spoken, and this study was conducted

⁴ In Norway, ECEC centres support Sámi children in preserving and developing their language, their knowledge and their culture regardless of where they live. According to the *Framework Plan for Kindergartens*, Sámi ECEC centres shall ‘help preserve and develop Sami cultural heritage and promote modern-day Sami language, culture, ways of life and values’ (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 24). Sámi ECEC centres or Sámi departments in Norwegian ECEC centres can apply for funding from the Sámi Parliament for the aim of developing and building early childhood services based on Sami values, language, culture and traditional knowledge. In 2023, the Sámi Parliament granted funding for 17 Sámi ECEC centres and seven

in close collaboration with a centre in Sweden where both North Sámi and Lule Sámi languages are used.

There are examples of how Sámi Early Childhood research is a growing field. In 2008, Storjord published a dissertation on children in Sámi ECEC centres. Further, both Balto (2008) and Jannok Nutti (2010) conducted actions research projects in which ECEC centres participated, with the aim of decolonising the educational settings and transforming Sámi knowledge into teaching by renewing and adapting Sámi traditional knowledge and learning methods. In her dissertation, Kleman (2015) investigated bilingual role-play in a Sámi ECEC centre. In another Sámi ECEC research project⁵ the aim was to create changes in the structure by making Sámi philosophy and traditional knowledge central. This project was funded by the Sámi Parliament and headed by Marikaisa Laiti.

This article explores what it may mean for children, educators, and researchers to creatively engage with lesser-known Indigenous religious traditions, stories told by older generations and current traditions, in ways that give further life to them. The research group working on the article consists of both Indigenous Sámi and non-Indigenous Sámi researchers.

Our intention is not to recreate religious traditions but rather to find ways to make complicated historical material from the colonial era relevant in today's education. We make a distinction between Sámi Indigenous religion in the 17th and 18th centuries and Sámi *vuoimnalaš árbevierru*, which 'cover traditions, customs, and beliefs that have come to bear a distinctly Sámi character, regardless of their origin' (Kaikkonen, 2020, p. 12). Accordingly, this article provides an account of research conducted with educators and children at an ECEC centre. The research aim is thus twofold: the article studies both how co-research within an Indigenous context is conducted, and how educators and children at a Sámi ECEC centre managed activities and searched for and created new *skábma* stories based on *skábma* traditions. The fieldwork was conducted as an ethnographic fieldwork framed as critical utopian action research. Our research question is: In what ways can strengthening storytelling in the ECEC setting function as a contribution to Sámi decolonisation processes?

Sámi Indigenous religious traditions in a colonial context

It is almost impossible for us today to fully understand Sámi religion prior to Christianity. The existing written sources from 1670 to 1755, which are essential to our understanding of Indigenous Sámi religion, show how Sámi religion has been influenced by several religions. The texts were produced in an era of confrontation between the Sámi and Christians, who made efforts to obliterate Indigenous religion.

Sámi departments in Norwegian ECEC centres (<https://sametinget.no/aktuelt/bevilget-tilskudd-til-samiske-barnehager-og-samiske-avdelinger-i-norske-barnehager.7453.aspx>).

⁵ The research project *Sámi mánát ođđa searvelanjain* (<https://samas.no/se/a/dutkan/proseavttat/sami-manaidgarpedagogihkka-odda-aiggis>).

The same individuals who were assigned to eradicate the religion also recorded and described Sámi traditions (Rydving, 1993/2004), and this created complicated secondary source materials.

It has become common to discuss the period and these encounters in terms of Nordic colonialism. Education, taxation and conversion as well as religious policies show that the Sámi area was viewed as a colony by Nordic countries (Fur, 2006). In addition to missionary work, the Swedish Crown used administrative, financial and juridical means to expand into Sámi areas; Sámis, in turn, used different strategies to argue for their rights (Fur, 2006; Rydving, 1993/2004). One consequence of encounters with missionaries was the alteration of *skábma* traditions. Rydving's (1993/2004) work on religious change has shown that it was once possible for Sámis to partake in both Indigenous and Christian rituals, especially if they did not clash in time and space. Sámi *skábma* traditions, their midwinter rituals, occurred at the same time as one of the most important Christian holidays: Christmas. For Sámis living near churches, it became more and more problematic to maintain Indigenous rituals due to Christianity's demand for exclusivity, and the *skábma* tradition of the Winter Festival was eventually replaced by the celebration of Christmas (Rydving, 1993/2004).

Sámi Indigenous religion in the 17th and 18th centuries was integrated into the daily lives of families and closely interwoven with the landscape through hunting, fishing, reindeer herding and other activities. The family consisted of living relatives, and the relationship with deceased relatives was maintained through various rites, for example, by sharing food with them. The deceased, as well as other beings, were able to manifest themselves to the living in different situations and places (Rydving, 2014).

Calendrical rituals as well as oral traditions were performed during various seasons and at different locations. During midwinter in the first half of the 1740s, the missionary of the Gällivare parish, Pehr Högström, saw small boats set up in trees in the forest around the winter dwelling places. The boats were placed on intertwined branches. The trees, their branches and the boats were all coated with reindeer blood. These boats were created in connection with the slaughter and sacrifice of reindeer. Parts of the animals, such as their bones and antlers, were sacrificed and placed on a ritual *luovvie* (storage stand). In other vessels, the missionary saw cheese made from reindeer milk, fish and small pieces of bread. The food was placed in boat-shaped or cone-shaped vessels made from birch bark. During the *skábma* celebrations at this time, these birch boats were hung in trees close to the *goahhti* (Sámi turf hut). Food gifts were offered to one of the Indigenous invisible beings, named *Ruohtta* in Lule Sámi, so that fertile women would not get harmed (Högström, 1747/1980). These boat-shaped vessels, which contained offerings of food, were the focus of the *skábma* workshop with the educators.

Indigenous research in a Sámi educational setting

Sámi Early Childhood research has tried to examine how Sámi educational settings can be transformed and decolonised to allow Indigenous educational perspectives to

become an integral part of the everyday life of ECEC centres. Smith (2022) stressed in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* that Indigenous research methodologies have been derived from the struggle to survive as a people and the need to reclaim, reformulate and re-establish Indigenous cultures and languages. Storytelling, oral histories and the perspectives of elders have become important parts of Indigenous research: 'Each individual story is powerful. But the point of 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, 2022, pp. 165–166). Following the postcolonial theorist Spivak (1993), decolonising methodologies does not mean that we can recover an ideal precolonial past, or in our case a precolonial religious tradition, but rather involves acknowledging the impact of colonisation. Thus, Battiste (2005) describes a decolonising process that starts with acknowledging that we need 'scholars competent in both knowledge systems to converge and reconcile these and other knowledges, ways of knowing, and systems' (p. 103).

The decolonising process is central to this research, and the data for this study were gathered from ethnographic fieldwork with participatory observations collected within the research project *Sámi Children as Thought Herders: Storytelling and Critical Philosophical Inquiries in Indigenous Early Years Education*. As part of the project, *skábma* activities were conducted at a Sámi ECEC centre in December, two years in a row. The first year, the earlier mentioned *skábma* workshop with the educators was arranged by Westman Kuhmunen in collaboration with Jannok Nutti and Johansson. The workshop was followed by a day of *skábma* activities: storytelling by the educators, a *duodji* activity and children's play. The activities were also conducted during the second year but without the workshop. During the workshop that was conducted the first year, the educators participated actively in the workshop, and thereafter they planned and conducted the activities with the children and participated in analytical discussion afterwards together with Jannok Nutti and Johansson. The children were invited to participate in exploring *skábma* stories, *duodji* and traditions. The educators gave them time and space to play with the materials used when telling *skábma* stories, in discussions about the *duodji* they were creating and in sharing their own experiences. The research material consisted of notes and audio recordings of observations and conversations, as well as photographs and short videos. In ethnographic studies, researchers observe and talk with the participants, and gradually understand the context (Reeves et al., 2008). The ethnographic fieldwork was framed as critical utopian action research that considers the social learning of all participants, in this case mainly the children, educators and researchers (Nielsen & Aagaard Nielsen, 2006). Social learning focuses on the democratic interests of the participants and on building spaces for communication (sharing stories) in which new understandings (new stories) can be formed; the experience and expertise of all participants are considered equally legitimate (Egmoose, 2015). Thus, these are spaces for a joint critique that resists colonially structured practices (Vidal, 2006). This involved the researchers learning *with* the educators and children (Ingold, 2017, 2021). Kovach

(2009) stresses: ‘In light of an indigenous episteme, it makes sense that the etymology of data is the gift and fits with “a learning for the gift”’ (p. 156; the quote refers to Kuokkanen, 2007). According to Kovach (2009), data are the gift of another’s story to a researcher. Reflecting on story in pedagogy and research, Kovach refers to Archibald’s (2008) term ‘storywork.’ Stories are about connection; they nurture relationships, kindle reciprocity, compel responsibility and thrive where there is respect. Our turn to Sámi storytelling traditions is thus methodologically grounded in decolonising research processes and in a postcolonial framework that acknowledges stories and narrative forms of expression as Indigenous forms of holistic epistemologies and worldviews (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Styres, 2017). Hence, this article contains numerous stories: historical stories, Westman Kuhmunen’s story from her research work and collaborative work with an elder, a *duojár* (crafter) and reindeer herder, the educators’ personal stories, stories that the educators told to the children and our story that we developed during our joint work on the research project.

Our understanding of the theoretical and practical performance of scholarship as part of the same research process draws on Ingold’s (2017, 2021) notion of the researcher as a learner who corresponds with and in the world. This process involves the researchers learning with the educators and children, and together working on what the practices and stories told about and during *skábma* could mean in Sámi early childhood education today. During such a process and practice, learning is understood as relational weaving. A corresponding process of research knowledge emerges in the intertwined narratives of journeying together. That is, in the process of research, we create stories. Those stories are ways to relate through narrative; they are ‘occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow [in] the process of spinning out their own’ (Ingold, 2016, p. 93). In a narrative relational research process, ‘there is no point at which the story ends and life begins’ (Ingold, 2016, p. 93). Rather, our text can be read as a momentary event in a larger narrative braid – a knot in the weft.

This intertwined relational narrative consists of our narratives as researchers, those of the educators and children, and the shared collective stories within the Sámi community. However, the relational narrative braids have threads that are problematic and raise questions of what it means to learn about, with and through material that was collected in a colonial setting and is about traditions that were practised centuries ago. The historical material is a thread that can take many different roles in the narrative relational learning process. In responding to colonial complications, we engage in learning with the works of the Indigenous scholar Styres (2017, p. 49), who describes engagement with Land⁶ as a form of learning involving a holistic continuity of the spiritual, emotive, cognitive and physical. Such holistic learning is, according to Styres, lived as a self-in-relationship. This is an identity that is formed and grounded in relationship with and through the Land as a first teacher (p. 56). In

⁶ Styres capitalises it.

a colonial space, forming a collective and individual self-in-representation involves a '(re)membering' or 'being able to bring forward our minds and (re)conceptualising ancestral traditions, knowledges, and philosophies in new, dynamic, and contemporary ways, gesturing towards and active *doing*' (Styres, 2017, pp. 56–57). Thus, the very process of relational learning with the *skábma* material in a Sámi ECEC context is decolonising; it is what Styres (2017) calls 'an unsettling process of shifting and unravelling the tangled colonial relations of power and privilege' (p. 36). The story that we share in this article is about how researchers, educators and children learned about *skábma* at a Sámi ECEC centre.

Becoming a storyteller by reconnecting with Sámi Indigenous traditions

During the workshop held by the Westman Kuhmunen with the educators, one of the educators recalled *skábma* stories from his childhood. The educator shared many stories with the other educators at the workshop that he had heard during *skábma*, and through that sharing, he came to see that he possessed knowledge that was valuable for both his colleagues and the children. The educator pointed out that the Sámi lyrics of '*Vuordit juovlaruohta*' had the same melody as '*Staffansvisan*', which recalls the Swedish lore of the stable boy Staffan (connected to both pre-Christian rites and St. Stephen the Martyr). The educator underlined that in the Sámi version, the song is not about the stable boy at all: 'I haven't thought so much about the lyrics before, what they mean, but they are about *skábma*. They tell the story about what our ancestors used to do during *skábma* before the *Stállu* passed by with his raid.' The educator was surprised that he had not thought of the song in this way before. During the workshop, he realised that the song was about the preparations for *juovllat* (Christmas), when the *Stállu* travels with his raid through the land. This, however, was not the first reconnection as the reconnection to Sámi Indigenous traditions also took place in other settings.

The first setting was an earlier collaboration between Westman Kuhmunen and the elder *duojár* and herder concerning religious rituals from the 17th and 18th century. They started their conversation discussing the small birch bark boats filled with food that were hung up in the trees. What might these boats have looked like? The goal was neither to make a replica nor to revitalise a ritual but to make the boats relevant to the present. What thoughts and feelings did he put into their making? First, he pointed out that the boats required planning. The birch bark had to be collected in spring or summer and kept moist before finally becoming a piece of *duodji* during *skábma*. The form was probably a traditional vessel for berry picking, but different individuals would have decorated the boats differently, although likely in accordance with a family *duodji* tradition. While reflecting on the recipients of the food gifts (deceased relatives or *Ruohtta*), the reindeer herder created new stories about what would occur when the boat reached the shore. The person and the object in the new story were identified through *duodji*. For example, when the boat reached the shore, it would need a rope to tie it up so that it would not drift away. Oars would also be necessary

for the individual in the boat to make it back (to this world). His story thereby connects to a common narrative in Sámi Indigenous religion in which the *noaidi*, the ritual specialist, travels to the dwelling place of the deceased (Rydving, 2014, p. 402). The boat was made together with the third author's reading and reflection on historical colonial texts, and through the making, new stories were created. The *duodji* thus made the narrative tactile and created new narratives.

The second setting was during the workshop. First, Westman Kuhmunen gave a short Introduction to the Sámi indigenous religion, followed by a presentation of *skábma* rituals in the 17th and 18th centuries as well as oral traditions from the 20th century, and finally *duodji* making in the present time. Sjöberg (2022) points out the importance of avoiding alienation when talking about aspects of Indigenous religion in education, and she suggests using stories told today as a point of departure. Three local stories from Turi's (1910/2012) and Grundström's (1942) collections (one more well-known and the other two lesser-known) were presented to the educators. One story appealed to the youngest educator, who had heard it from his grandparents during his early childhood, and he was eager to find the version told by his family. No one connected with the lesser-known stories, even though they were also local. In addition to stories, *duodji* can be a way to understand Indigenous religion with complicated source materials. A discussion of the making of birch bark boats, which included the association the reindeer herder had with his *duodji*, led to a conversation about food gifts for deceased relatives. We suggest that stories as well as *duodji* can be ways of approaching difficult themes in a setting that is familiar to educators.

The third setting was when the educators transformed Sámi *vuoinnalaš árbevierru* and became storytellers. Calendrical rituals and stories are repeatedly performed and told during specific seasons. At the beginning of the 20th century, Christmas, or *skábma*, was still considered a special and dangerous period where invisible beings and the departed moved around. There was rumbling and roaring in the cold winter air and dogs could get anxious. In the Jáhkámåhkke area, it was believed that departed relatives migrated to their old homes during this time of year and then returned to the graveyard on the Christmas Epiphany. The relationship between the living and the dead was seen as close but also ambivalent; it was both something essential and frightening, especially for children, who had to be observant and careful at this time of year (Grundström, 1942).

Ruohtta evening, corresponding to Christmas Eve, required rigorous preparations that included performing household duties. The *lávvu* needed to be tidied, firewood and water needed to be gathered, and both grown-ups and children were to act in a humble manner. According to the oral tradition of Turi (1910/2012), it was not the deceased relatives but the *Stållu* who would pass by the settlement, who could severely hurt or even kill children. Stories are dynamic materials that change over time, but they often have a historical core. Stories both adapt to and shape society. They convey norms of social behaviour and acceptable values, as well as socialising children into society (Balto, 2023; Fjellström, 1986; Jannok Nutti, 2017, 2018; Nergård, 2006).

Educators and children remembering and reconceptualising stories

The educator who noticed the connection between the song and stories and ceremonies in the *skábma* workshop found a new relation in which the traditions of the ECEC centre emerged with a new meaning in relation to the stories of his childhood. The stories became not only content passed along from one generation to the next but also a way of living in correspondence and conversation with the world, time and land. In this way, the stories became part of the grammar of life, of how to orient oneself in the world and of the relations of a life lived. That is, *skábma* came to be understood through the integration of all these factors, and the educator learned to teach in and through such a relational braid. The stories became part of the lived grammar that tells what kind of thing something is (Ingold, 2016, p. 170; Wittgenstein, 1953). As Ingold (2016) puts it:

In such a world, we can understand the nature of things only by attending to their relations, or in other words, by telling their stories. For the things of this world are their stories, identified not by fixed attributes but by their paths of movement in an unfolding field of relations. Each is the focus of ongoing activity. Thus in the storied world... things do not exist, they occur. Where things meet, occurrences intertwine, as each becomes bound up in the other's story. (p. 160)

The stories' braiding of relationalities continued as the educators learned further ways to live with these stories in the ECEC centre. The educators prepared the scene for the *Stállu's* raid. They also created a ceremonial atmosphere by dimming the lights, lighting candles and speaking softly to the children.

The educator who connected with the song began by stating that he was going to tell the children how their ancestors celebrated Christmas. He had an old book that he pretended to read from, and he began to retell the *skábma* story through the words of the song to the children. The two other educators helped him to explain the story to the children when he stopped during different parts of the song. They talked about the preparations that were made before *juovlaruohta*: cleaning, tidying and cooking. As they talked about the preparations, they used materials to help the children visualise the explanations. The preparations were necessary to make it easier for the *Stállu* and his raid to travel through the land and to avoid interrupting his journey. The educators also told the children what they had learnt from the workshop about how during *skábma*, their ancestors would hang miniature boats in trees close to their dwellings and fill the boats with food for the spirits of ancestors to take on their annual journey to the mountains. Against this background, the educators and the children sang '*Vuordit juovlaruohta.*' After the song, the educator talked about what they had sung about and how these traditions were practised even before the children's grandparents were born.

In the story about the educators, we see how the telling of stories continues the relational braid, as the one educator remembered and reconnected to his childhood stories and gave the children the possibility to connect to the story through their

grandparents. In the act of telling and living a story, several stories are intertwined. Thus, the telling of a story becomes a way to walk along a path.

Yet, of course, people grow in knowledge not only through direct encounters with others, but also through hearing their stories told. To tell a story is to relate, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, bringing them to life in the vivid present of listeners as if they were going on here and now. Here... the meaning of the 'relation' has to be understood quite literally, not as a connection between predetermined entities, but as the retracing of a path through the terrain of lived experience. (Ingold, 2016, p. 161)

The performance of telling the story and singing the song about the *Stállu* during *skábma* created and gave meaning to relations by bringing them to life. After the children had listened to the stories and sung the song, the educators gave the children the possibility to play with the figures and objects in the scene.

The first year the educators organised this activity, a boy asked: 'Is the *Stállu* really alive?' The other children immediately answered, 'No!' Although they responded that he was not alive, they wanted to play. On this occasion, most of the children wanted to play with the belt with the knives, and during the second year, some played with the axe and the firewood. These were likely familiar objects and chores for many of the children. Some of the children also started to play with the *Stállu*'s raid and retold or reconceptualised the story. Some of the conceptualisations were close to the story they had heard, and the *Stállu*'s raid was treated as something to be avoided. Many of the children had probably heard stories about the *Stállu* and were therefore familiar with him. Later, we were told by one of the educators that one day, after the children had scattered toys across the floor, they picked up the toys so that the *Stállu*'s raid could pass through the area. However, in some instances, the mice in the raid were so pretty that the children started to pet them; they then gave them food and put them to bed.

After the free play, it was time to make the birch bark boats to share food with the ancestors. We made the boats and put some dried reindeer meat and gingerbread cookies in them. Rauna Kuokkanen (2007) writes:

In many indigenous epistemes, reciprocity is a key principle and practice; however, it is not practised or understood in constrained terms of give and take but rather in terms of giving back and circulation. Besides building and maintaining interpersonal or group-to-group relationships, reciprocity plays a key role in interactions between the human and non-human realms. (p. 145)

While making the boats, we talked about how we maintained and shared food with our ancestors. Although the main goal with the boat was to share food, many of the children liked their boats made of birch bark and looked forward to taking them home. They wanted to put their prettiest possessions in the boats, and it was obvious that they valued their *duodji*.

Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to show and discuss how children, educators and researchers from different fields of study together engaged creatively with lesser-known Indigenous religious traditions and stories told by older generations and current traditions, in ways that pass on life to them and examine in what way strengthening storytelling in the ECEC setting functions as part of a Sámi decolonisation process. The educators reconnected to stories told by elders, stories they had heard in their childhood, and started to retell them during the workshop. By telling individual stories, they contributed, as Smith (2022) underlines, to a collective story in which every Indigenous person has a place. Furthermore, as the educator chose to retell the Christmas song ‘*Vuordit juovlaruohta*’ to the children, they both took the role of being storytellers and made a place for the children to be part of a collective story. The song was chosen after discussing what kinds of stories they should share with the children, as many of the stories could be frightening. The song is about the importance of keeping the yard clean so that the *Stállu* will not get stuck and do something bad. The educators expressed that keeping order is important so that we do not lose our property, which they felt was something the children should learn to do without being told.

Further, the educators, children and researchers reconnected to Sámi Indigenous religious traditions and created new *skábma* stories by making boats. A reconnection to Indigenous traditions did not mean, as Westman Kuhmunen underlined, a need to choose one tradition over another. Instead, both pre-Christian and Christian religious traditions were acknowledged with an awareness of the impact of colonisation (Spivak, 1993). Although you could, as a Sámi, almost feel some sorrow as traditions and stories were shared. The sharing of these stories brought them to life for the participants, and the educators’ attentiveness to the present was connected to valuing the past and accepting responsibility to create a sustainable future. The educators and the children created new *skábma* stories by learning about an earlier tradition of sharing with ancestral spirits; the present was connected to respect for the past as well as to responsibility for the future and the value of sharing. Sharing was experienced both as story and practice, and created a corresponding relation between past and present. The educators implemented this in a storytelling session with a *duodji* activity, as well as communicating with ancestral spirits through sharing and making time and space for children’s play. Both Sámi Indigenous traditions and contemporary Christmas traditions, such as Christmas trees and gingerbread cookies, were present in the activities, and the children gave life to the stories and their *duodji* in their play worlds. These activities engaged the children, educators and researchers in a decolonising process by connecting them to and letting them interact with traditional stories in the context of their present lives (Styres, 2017). In this way, the educators created new traditions and stories that came to life in the children’s world and through their play. The educators made Sámi traditional knowledge and stories a living part of their Sámi ECEC centre, where the relationships between various practices, stories and

traditions were experienced by the children, educators and researchers. The intention of telling the *skábma* story was not to give the interpretation that it was the only understanding of the activities that took place but rather to present our story with the hope that it can inspire work with indigenous storytelling in ECEC settings, as the *skábma* activities can create a space for social learning and decolonisation by relating the past to the present.

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