The Problematisation of the Dichotomy of Modernity and Tradition in Indigenous and Sami contexts

Scholars, social workers, museum staff, indigenous leaders and individual members of indigenous communities, who are working in the field of indigenous traditional knowledge, always meet the inevitable question: ”How do you determine what is traditional and what is modern in your indigenous culture?” This question is most often posed by those outside indigenous communities, but nowadays there are also internal discussions on this issue within such communities, among indigenous academics and some experts working in the field of documentation of traditional knowledge. This problem issue has become more and more obvious for me after many years of work as a Sami researcher in different academic institutions, and as a project manager for the Árbediehtu Project on documentation and protection of Sami traditional knowledge (see Árbediehtu Pilot Project 2010) from 2008 until today.

I believe that the question above is based on a dichotomy of modernity and tradition. In this article I intend to problematise this dichotomy. I do not consider the established division into binary oppositions as problematic, but I share the view of many indigenous scholars who argue that the division of tradition and modernity into binary oppositions is hostile to indigenous epistemologies. The focus of this article is on indigenous and Sami understanding of tradition and traditional knowledge, which is based on the Sami theory of knowledge, perception of the world and value system. This understanding can be revealed through investigation of Sami concepts, as

well as through analysis of certain scholarly works by Sami researchers. This article is an invitation to a broader scholarly discussion about the introduction and use of Sami concepts in research as an alternative to basing theorising and analysis on the established epistemologies. In my opinion, the question of "how tradition and modernity can be separated from each other" is a "mission impossible" question, which originates from non-indigenous epistemologies and focuses attention on issues foreign to an indigenous ontology and value system.

**Problematisation as a powerful research paradigm**

Problematisation of an issue is undoubtedly a salient feature of research paradigms, almost regardless of research topic. Problematisation has been closely connected to so-called Western philosophical thought, which is quite strongly rooted in ancient Greek philosophy and the Cartesian understanding of the theory of knowledge. Indigenous scholars, in the early process of decolonising research approaches and methodologies\(^1\), noticed that in research on indigenous issues, problematisation of the indigenous seemed to be a Western obsession (Smith L. 1999, 91). The "indigenous problem" has been "a recurrent theme in all aspects of imperial and colonial attempts to deal with indigenous peoples" (Smith L. 1999, 90). The core of discussions about the indigenous as "the Other" on different levels, e.g. research, journalism, missionary and traveller accounts, literature etc., is simply and briefly expressed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith as follows: "The --- (insert name of indigenous group) problem" (Smith L. 1999, 90). Historically, the problematisation of the indigenous has been connected to the colonisation of indigenous peoples, their territories and resources (see also Dunbar (2008)).

I quote Linda Tuhiwai Smith extensively here because this Maori scholar has had an unquestionable influence on indigenous research worldwide, as well

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\(^1\) According to the mainstream of indigenous theorising, indigenous peoples’ interests, knowledge and experiences must be put at the centre of methodologies and of the construction of knowledge about indigenous peoples (Rigney 1999, 119; about indigenous methodologies in general, see Porsanger 2004; 2007, 13–107; Smith L. T. 1999; 2005; Smith G. 2003; Kuokkanen 2007; 2009, 121–144; *Handbook* 2008). Most indigenous scholars emphasise the importance of the competence of indigenous researchers, prioritise indigenous knowledge as a source, and draw attention to the benefit of indigenous research to the indigenous peoples studied themselves.
as on my own research views and priorities. In my opinion, problematisation as a research paradigm seems to be a powerful tool for indigenous research in a methodological sense. In considering the application of this paradigm to indigenous research, one may argue that such research should break new ground and not merely follow the established research paradigms. I agree that the development of indigenous theorising can give academic circles a breath of fresh air and help indigenous peoples to achieve intellectual independence (Porsanger 2010, 438). However, I also firmly believe that indigenous research can draw on all previous research and theorising (Porsanger 2007, 18).

As a matter of fact, problematisation seems to be a logical part of the Western research paradigm. Generally speaking, Western research operates with the concept of ”problem” as a synonym to ”question”, both in social and natural sciences. For example, in presentations of research issues such as ”the problem of truth in philosophy” or ”the problem of validity in social science” or ”the problem of the use of marine resources” etc. one can easily identify the research problem. Thus, problematisation seems to be deeply rooted in Western theories of knowledge (epistemologies) and approaches to knowledge, especially in relation to yet unknown opinions or a variety of points of view.

In research on indigenous issues, the problematisation paradigm has been quite productive – considered from the point of view of the mainstream Western academy. This paradigm has articulated unequal power relations and is based on values belonging to non-indigenous value systems. The result of the use of this research paradigm is that ”many researchers, even those with the best of intentions, frame their research in ways that assume that the locus of a particular research problem lies with the indigenous individual or community rather than with other social or structural issues” (Smith L. 1999, 92). Indeed, the problematisation of indigenous peoples has focused attention on indigenous individuals and communities as a source of the ”problem” rather than on other circumstances and power relations around indigenous issues. Furthermore, such problematisation has moved researchers’ attention away from the views, values, and often also from the real needs of indigenous peoples, i.e. from indigenous philosophies, epistemologies, ontologies and value systems.

2 In my doctoral dissertation (Porsanger 2007) I proposed a Sami research methodology and applied it to the evaluation of source materials for the study of indigenous Sami religion, and proposed a Sami term *eamioskkoldat* for ”indigenous religion.”
Based on our realisation that problematisation has great potential as a research tool, we can apply it to indigenous research. Problematising the paradigm of the dichotomy of tradition and modernity can give legitimate voice and space to indigenous theories of knowledge. By doing so, we are questioning the whole ”solid” ground underlying the above issue of ”How to differentiate between tradition and modernity”.

Knowledge building

As I have expressed elsewhere (Porsanger 2010), indigenous research has passed through a period of emancipation and rigorous criticism of non-indigenous ways of theorising, with a clear focus on the argumentation for, and defence of, the distinctive characteristics of indigenous knowledge. Today, when indigenous research has gained in strength, there is, in my opinion, a need for the production of new knowledge based on novel approaches and concepts that derive from our own cultures, and for theorising on the basis of these concepts (ibid.). Such research will be capable of competing with traditional academic research; indeed, it will enrich our academic knowledge. Furthermore, as emphasised by Sami scholar Vigdis Stordahl (2008, 262), knowledge building is an important part of the process of nation building.

Indigenous research can be expected to produce new knowledge which our communities require and need for development processes conducted on their own terms. For example, in the Árbediehtu Project, the project workers have found that local Sami communities are gratified that their traditional knowledge is taken seriously both as knowledge and as a source of reliable information, which can and should contribute to local development on the terms of local people. Many times the local participants in the project meetings were overcome by emotion; it seemed that people have waited a long time to experience recognition of their traditional skills and knowledge.

Both indigenous and non-indigenous scholars can contribute to knowledge building. In my opinion, the most exciting and challenging experience we indigenous scholars have had from about the year 2000 until today is to live and be actively involved in the ”methodologically contested present”. This term is proposed by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln in their introduction to the Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies (Handbook 2008, 4), where they apply this term to the historical period from 2000 to 2008 in qualitative research in North America. This historical phase of the
methodologically contested present is full of excellent contributions by many brilliant scholars challenging the established research paradigm (see for example Handbook 2008).

The suggestion, application and use of novel methodological solutions, as well as knowledge production on this methodological basis, are part of what Denzin and Lincoln call ”the future” – a current historical moment in qualitative research. In their view, this moment is happening now, it ”confronts with the methodological backlash associated with the evidence-based social movement” and ”is concerned with moral discourse, with the development of sacred textualities” (Handbook 2008, 4). Denzin and Lincoln point out that this future historical moment ”asks that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community” (ibid.). In my opinion, an addition must be made to Denzin and Lincoln’s optimistic account of the future research challenges: the established research paradigm of natural sciences is also being increasingly questioned in the indigenous context, especially in connection with traditional knowledge.

Much has happened in research since 2008, when Denzin and Lincoln described the moment of the ”current future”. I believe that in many parts of the indigenous world, we indigenous scholars still find ourselves in the very moment of the methodologically contested present, which North American qualitative research seems to have already passed, according to Denzin and Lincoln.

At present, many of us are actively involved in the shaping of ”the future”. The next chapter of my article provides an insight into some achievements of Sami research which form part of knowledge building and have disputed the established methodologies. In my view, the period of the methodologically contested present in Sami research started almost about 35 years ago with the groundbreaking contribution by the Sami philosopher Alf Isak Keskitalo. In 1974, at the Seventh Meeting of Nordic Ethnographers at Tromsø Museum in Norway, Keskitalo gave a remarkable presentation about research as an inter-ethnic relation. He addressed the then prevailing asymmetry in research between the Sami and the Nordic societies. This article, originally published in Norwegian, was twenty years later also published in English (Keskitalo (1976) 1994) in the research series Dieđut, the well-known publication channel for Sami research outcomes from the Nordic Sami Institute, where Alf Isak Keskitalo was the first head of the department of language and culture.
research. In my opinion, it is no coincidence that the establishment of the Nordic Sami Institute in 1973 and Keskitalo’s presentation in Tromsø in 1974 are closely related in time. These events mark the beginning of the empowerment of Sami research. Keskitalo’s contribution has influenced subsequent generations of Sami scholars, especially after its publication in English, which made his article widely available to international Sami research circles. Keskitalo argued for a paradigm shift and the use of a Sami theory of knowledge (see also Stordahl 2008, 256–257). Starting from the mid-1990s, and not coincidentally from the Keskitalo’s publication in English in 1994, Sami researchers became increasingly more active in contesting the established research paradigm.

Emancipation, empowerment, criticism of Western theorising and methods, and use of indigenous epistemologies have been strongly emphasised in indigenous research during the last decades. The whole field of research on indigenous traditional knowledge seems to be an exciting intellectual landscape, full of challenges and possibilities to bring indigenous understandings to scholarly investigations. The questioning of the dichotomy of tradition and modernity also seems to be part of this exciting journey. Sami epistemology provides the opportunity to move away from this dichotomy, and start argumentation from the standpoint of the Sami theory of knowledge. Sami research is full of noteworthy examples of the struggle to find a legitimate place between the playgrounds of different epistemologies.

Modernity and tradition in Sami research

Many Sami scholars have expressed their views on modernity in indigenous, and specifically Sami, contexts. The question of “How traditional Sami society and traditional ways of life relate to modernity” has been touched upon in many publications by Sami scholars. This article is simply a tentative review of some of the Sami researchers’ opinions on tradition and modernity. There are many more remarkable scholarly contributions which could have been analysed here, but limited space obliged me to make a selection for this article. Some of the scholarly works quoted are from the mid-1990s, while others are

3 Nowadays the research series Dieđut is published by Sámi allaskuvla / Sámi University College (www.samiskhs.no/index.php?c=143&kat= DIE%26%23272%3BUT). The Nordic Sami Institute became affiliated to Sámi University College in 2005.
quite recent. The review does not follow any particular chronological order, but is thematically structured.

I agree with the view of some Sami scholars who argue that presentation of modernity and tradition as binary oppositions diverts our attention from indigenous understandings of tradition, and forces discussions to take place in the arena of epistemologies alien to indigenous ways of thinking. One Sami researcher, Rauna Kuokkanen (2009, 168), rightly argues that taking for granted "a dichotomy of tradition and modernity" makes indigenous peoples’ epistemologies invisible. Kuokkanen suggests giving a voice to indigenous ways, traditions and methods (in Sami she uses terms vierut ja vuogit, which can be translated as ‘ways; customs; methods’). These ways and methods cannot be adjusted to a linear perception of argumentation, neither to divisions into "pre-modern versus modern" or "traditional versus modern" (Kuokkanen 2009, 168–169). In Kuokkanen’s opinion, division into these binary oppositions has resulted in an understanding that indigenous culture belongs to the pre-modern period and that culture therefore cannot be connected to modernity (ibid, with references to Elisabeth Povinelli and Colleen O’Neill).

The question of the use of dichotomies in Sami research was touched upon already in the 1990s. When discussing the role of women in traditional Sami society and in modern times, the Sami scholar Vuokko Hirvonen (1996) argues for the need for change in research paradigms and perspectives. She encourages Sami scholars to do research on their own culture. Inspired by feminist critics, Hirvonen suggests that instead of using only dichotomies, scholars can combine personal, cultural, subjective and objective factors into the knowledge process, which will enable them to understand what they are seeing and how they are seeing (Hirvonen 1996, 9–10). Hirvonen’s suggestion to question the use of dichotomies has a direct connection to epistemology, which deals with the nature and basis of knowledge, and also with ways of knowing, especially with reference to the limits and the validity of knowledge.

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The idea of achieving a better understanding of “what researchers are seeing” by the use of their indigenous epistemologies has an ontological character, because ontology deals with assumptions about the nature and relations of being, i.e. of reality. Thus, Hirvonen draws attention to the necessity of the use of Sami epistemology and ontology in research, and considers the division into dichotomies as a non-productive approach to Sami research. It is worth mentioning that both Hirvonen and Kuokkanen disapprove of the use of dichotomies in connection with ”traditional versus modern”, seemingly because the opposition of tradition and modernity is alien to the Sami context.

In the 1990s and early 2000s many Sami researchers were strongly influenced by the ideas of the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, who differentiated between traditional (pre-modern) culture and post-traditional (modern) culture (Giddens 1991). Among Giddens’ characteristics of modernity we find the following: a modern focus on specialised expertise rather than a holistic traditional way of doing things, and also the disembedding from time and space in the modern era (ibid).

Johan Klemet Kalstad and Arvid Viken (1996) rely upon Giddens’ theorising in their considerations of how traditional knowledge is challenged by modernity in the case of Sami tourism. The writers seem to have accepted the theoretical, linear placement of tradition and modernity. In their view, Sami institutions play an important role in the process of ”reinventing Sami traditions and re-embedding Sami institutions and cultural expressions”. At the same time these Sami institutions are ”monuments of transformation from tradition to modernity” (Kalstad & Viken 1996, 35). Despite the fact that Kalstad and Viken proclaim a need to ”find compromises [...] between tradition and modernity [...]” (1996, 41), they do not seem to be quite comfortable with the insertion of tradition and modernity into a linear development process. They state that there is no definite boundary between tradition and modernity, and that in the case of Sami tourism, for example, tradition tends to be increasingly modern (1996, 35). Thus they implicitly mean that a differentiation of tradition and modernity as oppositions is not entirely possible in the case of Sami tradition. However, this remains in the background of Kalstad and Viken’s theoretical considerations, which are very much based on the established way of thinking in the 1990’s.

Kristine Nystad (2003) in her study of the career choices of Sami boys in Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino, also based her theoretical considerations on Giddens’ ideas and the theorising of other European and Norwegian
sociologists. Nystad operates with the concept of the ”meeting” of tradition and modernity in her analysis of possible reasons for the rejection of some Sami boys of the possibility of formal education in favour of remaining in the traditional Sami way of life. When operating with the theoretical concept of ”tradition and modernity as oppositions” – borrowed from Giddens and other sociologists – Nystad asks the following question: ”Can traditional and modern be united? Should we rather look at tradition as not being in opposition to modernity?” These questions show that the researcher is breaking free from an established linear perception of tradition and modernity. The questions have seemingly arisen from the empirical data (interviews with Sami youth and their families). Nystad seems to recognise that her empirical data do not fit into the established theoretical frame, in which tradition and modernity are opposed to each other both in time and content. This opposition belongs to the linear perception of ”development” processes. Nystad makes a brilliant discovery in her empirical material: making a choice between a ”traditional” and a ”modern” career and way of life is actually a question about the Sami value system. Reindeer herding with its traditional knowledge is considered as much more valuable than other jobs and formal education. This is not a choice of abandoning tradition and moving ”forward” on the linear time scale towards the ”modern” way of life. This is not an option to choose between two opposite alternatives, tradition and modernity, but rather a preference for continuity in the traditional Sami way of living within contemporary society.

Nystad does not conduct any deeper theoretical analysis of this discovery, but she makes the Sami value system visible in her scholarly analysis, and her research has thus a direct connection to the most recent achievements in the field of indigenous methodologies. In indigenous methodological thinking, there is one important dimension over and above epistemology and ontology, i.e. that indigenous scholars have been insisting on the inclusion of their respective axiologies (value systems) in research. Value systems deal with the nature, types and criteria of values and value judgments, as well as with ethics (Porsanger 2007, 25). Considerations of axiological assumptions in the Sami

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5  The Western understanding of the concept of development has been recently questioned in indigenous contexts; see for example contributions to the International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Peoples’ Development with Culture and Identity organised by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York in January 2010, published by Tebtebba Foundation, see Towards an Alternative Development Paradigm 2010; see also Porsanger 2010; Kuokkanen 2009, 160–163.
context, with respect to tradition and modernity, might give new insights into the Sami understanding of tradition.

”What is modern and what is traditional” does not seem to be an essential question for Sami scholars, who build their considerations on Sami epistemological ground with respect to the Sami value system. This makes them recognise and pay respect to Sami tradition as being an inevitable part of present-day life in Sami communities. Thus, Klemetti Näkkäläjärvi, in his early scholarly works on Sami reindeer herding, expresses the functional value of Sami tradition as follows: ”The earmark system of the Sami can be compared with the functioning model of any social system of modern Western society” (Näkkäläjärvi 1996, 93). When making this comparison, Näkkäläjärvi argues that the traditional earmark system is very sophisticated, and this tradition cannot be subordinated to modern social systems in time. In my view, Näkkäläjärvi implies that the hypothetical difference between traditional and modern might make no sense if traditional knowledge is taken seriously and if it is recognised as a knowledge system which is as valuable and as valid as Western ”scientific” knowledge. This is an epistemological question, articulated by Näkkäläjärvi (1996, 81) in his notable statement that it is not at all self-evident that indigenous scholars ”should use the conceptions of majorities when creating theories”.

A scholar of literature, Harald Gaski (1997), in his discussion of Sami culture in present-day Norway, during the ”new era”, seems to be forced to operate with the concepts of tradition and modernity. However, he is convinced of the impossibility of an opposition between tradition and modernity in the Sami context. Furthermore, Gaski emphasises that the present-day Sami relationship with the environment is strongly traditional from the point of view of Sami ontology and the Sami value system. This is not a question of being ”old fashioned”, because this understanding would place his argumentation within a linear conception of tradition and development. Gaski expresses Sami epistemological assumptions as follows:

”Even though the Sami probably are one of the most modernized indigenous peoples in the world, their role as communicators between an ever more estranged ”Western” conception of Nature and the indigenous peoples’ preferred holistic view expressing the statement that all creatures are fundamentally dependant on each other, is important and steadily growing.” (Gaski 1997, 24.)
The use of some concepts, e.g. ”Nature”, in Gaski’s writing might appear problematic. However, in my opinion, his message is about Sami tradition which does not fit into the established ideology of modernity, and the fact that tradition cannot be placed as a ”forerunner” of modernity that presupposes a linear placement in time and space. As for the use of the established terms and concepts in writings of many Sami scholars, I believe that one has to consider the fact that indigenous Sami research is quite young. The development of Sami research terminology and analytical tools on the basis of Sami epistemology has so far had quite a short history. In the 21st century, the development of Sami research based on rich Sami epistemology has become a very popular research topic. Many Sami scholars have recently produced new and exciting research results in this field, and the present volume on Sami traditional knowledge is an example of this process.

Rauna Kuokkanen (2009) in her recent work on indigenous knowledge, philosophy and research, makes an extensive evaluation of the Western history of thought since the Greek philosophers and the Age of Enlightenment, which in her opinion has shaped the opposition of modernity and tradition. Kuokkanen discusses colonialism and post-colonial theories, Cartesian and positivistic epistemologies, the concept of development etc. She notes that the traditional and modern are interconnected, and that the dichotomy of these concepts has been a powerful tool to marginalise and suppress indigenous peoples and to place them outside ”modern” society (Kuokkanen 2009, 165–166). Nevertheless, Kuokkanen criticises some Sami scholars, who in her opinion have not been critical and analytical enough, and have referred to the Sami as ”the modern indigenous peoples, who have left their tradition to history” (ibid.). Without going into a detailed analysis of the Sami scholarly works on the subject, Kuokkanen (2009, 167) further asserts that ”many Sami researchers” have adopted the modernity–tradition dichotomy as their analytical tool without any evaluation of the validity of such a dichotomy. I agree with Kuokkanen on the idea that Sami research has accepted many established theoretical concepts, especially in the period prior to the 2000s. But I radically disagree with her overall statement about Sami research in general, which has left ”tradition to history”. As a matter of fact, this statement exemplifies a linear perception of tradition and modernity, which Kuokkanen is actually criticising.

My brief tentative review of some Sami scholarly works is intended to show that all the Sami researchers mentioned and quoted (A. I. Keskitalo, V. Hirvonen, R. Kuokkanen, K. Näkkäläjärvi, J. K. Kalstad, H. Gaski,
K. Nystad) are struggling with a kind of intellectual dissatisfaction caused by the use of the established Western theoretical concepts of modernity and tradition, which do not fit the Sami context. I believe the time is coming when Sami research will make Sami epistemology more visible, operative and efficient. Indigenous Sami knowledge can and should be given priority as a source. Sami concepts can be used as analytical tools, and they might give inspiration to modern theoretical thinking about "tradition".

**Indigenous concepts and theorising**

In the history of thought, many concepts which have their origin in indigenous traditions are nowadays widely accepted and employed in various academic disciplines. For instance, in the study of religion, one can mention the concepts of *shaman* (from the Evenki language, one of the Tungusic languages of Siberia), or *mana* and *taboo* (from *mana* and *tapu* in Polynesian traditions).

In the framework of the implementation of Article 8(j) of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, two Mohawk terms have been adopted internationally in connection with traditional knowledge: *akwé: kon* and *tkarihwai:ri*. *Akwé: kon* means ‘everything in creation’, and it expresses a holistic comprehension of the world. The term has been chosen as a name for the voluntary guidelines for the conduct of cultural, environmental and social impact assessment regarding developments proposed to take place on, or which are likely to impact on, sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities (*Akwé: Kon Guidelines 2004*). *Tkarihwai:ri* means ‘the proper way’, and is used as a name for the voluntary code of ethical conduct for the work with traditional knowledge, to ensure respect for the cultural and intellectual heritage of indigenous and local communities (*The Tkarihwai:ri Code of Ethical Conduct 2010*).

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6 In the dictionary sense, *mana* is ‘the power of the elemental forces of nature embodied in an object or person’, and *taboo* is generally understood as ‘banned on grounds of morality or taste’, but the original meaning is ‘forbidden to profane use or contact because of what are held to be dangerous supernatural powers’.

7 For the text of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, see: www.cbd.int, and especially for Article 8(j), see: www.cbd.int/traditional.
Many indigenous concepts were "discovered" by outside scholars studying indigenous spiritual and religious traditions. These concepts have been recognised as precise and meaningful concepts that describe the foci of the studied phenomenon, and are nowadays part of both research and everyday language.

The notion of "discovery" related to research on indigenous peoples and their traditions has been a much discussed issue among indigenous scholars around the world, especially during the last decade (Smith L. 1999; 2006; Smith G. 2003; Kuokkanen 2009, 150-151, for more references, see also Porsanger 2004). The notion of "discovery" has its roots in the way of thinking about indigenous peoples as "the Other" as different, exciting, unknown (to use some positive connotations related to otherness; it is worth mentioning that a list of references to the negative connotations, e.g. superiority, logical/illogical, primitive state of mind etc. might be very long). Academic "discoveries" made on the basis of indigenous epistemologies, as e.g. in the case of the term *shaman*, are often inventive and even profound, but after a while indigenous concepts begin to be filled with a content consistent with the Western epistemologies and conceptual understandings. Most of the academic "discoveries" about indigenous traditions are made on the basis of Western epistemologies. These "discoveries" may be met with scepticism by the indigenous peoples themselves. It has been pointed out that what academic circles may consider as a "discovery" might not meet the standards of legitimate knowledge or pass the verification tests set up by the indigenous people studied (see Berkes 2008, 15).

Understanding a particular indigenous tradition by the use of concepts which derive from the very same tradition and language is a sound starting point for indigenous theorisation, as has been argued by many Sami scholars (Keskitalo (1976) 1994; Näkkäläjärvi 1996 and 2008; Guttorm 2006; Balto & Østmo 2009; Hirvonen 1996 and 2009; Porsanger 2007 and 2010; Sara 2003 and 2010 [in print]). This kind of theorisation is concerned with indigenous understandings, meanings, connotations and connections. Many indigenous scholars found inspiration in their indigenous ways of thinking, when

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8 See also a report "Preliminary study of the impact on indigenous peoples of the international legal construct known as the Doctrine of Discovery", submitted for the 9th session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues by Special Rapporteur Tonya Gonnella Frichner (see Frichner 2010). This study illustrates the extent to which the Doctrine of Discovery has served as the foundation of the violation of indigenous peoples’ human rights, particularly in the case of the United States’ law system.
attempting to use indigenous concepts as analytical tools (as for example in Kaupapa Maori research). This might open for possibilities to break free from dichotomies. One can select words from the level of the object language, which in semantics and logic is the ordinary language used to talk about things in the world. This contrasts with meta-language, an artificial language used by linguists and others to analyse or describe the sentences or elements of the object language itself (Porsanger 2007, 4–5).

In order to develop indigenous theorisation, there is a need for special research methods that may be (and usually are) innovative for the “traditional” academy. One has to rely on ways of analysing which are appropriate and meaningful in a particular indigenous context. For example, the Yupiaq scholar Oscar Kawagley illustrates an indigenous Yupiaq research approach with the help of the Yupiaq concept *tangruarluku* ‘to see with the mind’s eye’. This concept stems from Yupiaq epistemology and, in Kawagley’s words, it “transcends that which we can perceive with our endosomatic sense makers and illustrates how a Native perspective may provide a way of bringing the so-called mythical subjective world and the objective scientific world together” (Kawagley 1995, 144–145). R. Kuokkanen (2009, 213) argues that indigenous concepts “seek to emphasize the possibility of conducting research according to perspectives and values stemming from indigenous communities – research that reflects and thus reinforces indigenous culture more than just at the level of the research topic”. Thus, Kuokkanen links epistemological and ontological questions and value systems.

**Tradition and traditional knowledge in an indigenous context**

How can indigenous concepts of tradition and traditional knowledge help us to break new ground in theorisation and distance ourselves from the dichotomy of tradition and modernity? Indigenous knowledge provides us with concepts and meanings. I adhere to the view of many indigenous scholars in the field of traditional knowledge that there is an urgent need to research indigenous concepts of such knowledge. This might give us a more detailed understanding of the indigenous concept of tradition.

Attempts to define tradition have been made by scholars in various disciplines throughout the centuries. In the third millennium, inspired (and in many cases forced) by indigenous research and theorising, many scholars share the
view that traditional ”refers to cultural continuity transmitted in the form of social attitudes, beliefs, principles, and conventions of behavior and practice derived from historical experience” (Berkes 2008, 3). Even though such a definition includes the concept of continuity, it is related to the linear concept of history (”historical experience”) and does not seem to introduce innovative elements. Innovation is always part of indigenous understandings of tradition and is the characteristic feature of tradition in the sense of a process (see e.g. Sara 2003, 124–125; Smith L. 2005, 101; Guttorm 2007; see also Guttorm [2011 in print] regarding innovations and tradition). Coming from Latin, the concept of tradition in general Western understanding, in the dictionary sense, means the action of handing over (transferring). It also implies that the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs is conducted by word of mouth or by example, from one generation to another, without written instruction. Thus, tradition is generally understood as a body of customs, beliefs, stories, and sayings associated with a people, thing, or place. This concept of tradition has also some implicit characteristics: (a) an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behaviour, and (b) cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions.

Even though these very important connotations are connected to our theoretical knowledge about the meaning of the concept of tradition, one can suggest that the meanings and connotations mentioned here make most sense if they are opposed to modernity. Once again, this dichotomy is shaping the very basis for our theoretical understanding of tradition.

According to my knowledge, indigenous concepts of tradition do not seem to be related to any kind of ”opposition” to something that is ”non-traditional”. Rather, tradition is understood as a many-faceted entity which is in a constant process of change and which stems from indigenous concepts of time, space and knowledge. For example, a specific Maori conception of time is based on the idea that ”the past is never behind but is considered as always being in front of the present” (Henare 2001, 218), and this concept is articulated in Maori language structure, narratives and traditional knowledge. Furthermore, the traditional Sami conception of time seems to be cyclical and in a constant

9 Cf. religion: It has long been accepted by scholars of religion that religions are in a state of constant change; they are not systems, but rather processes (see Indigenous Religions 2000, 1).

10 For the impact of this conception on Maori research, especially on indigenous Maori religion, see Porsanger (2007, 38).
movement without end, at least according to some explanations of the star constellations (see Sergejeva [Porsanger] 1999; 2000).

In the indigenous context, it has been demonstrated that traditional means cumulative and open to change (Berkes 2008; Indigenous Environmental Knowledge 2000), and that the concept represents generations of experiences, careful observations and trial-and-error experiments (Grenier 1998, 1). Traditional knowledge tends to be understood as both the process and the information. Basing his argument on extensive knowledge of indigenous concepts of tradition, Fikret Berkes (2008, 8) reasons that the concept of traditional [ecological] knowledge refers to both ”ways of knowing (knowing, the process), as well as to information (knowledge as the thing known)” . This distinction is important for analytical reasons; it is also useful for a proper understanding of the concept of traditional knowledge. It is also worth mentioning that in the history of the concept of traditional knowledge scholars have been challenged by the apparent opposition between tradition and change. This apparent opposition as well as the notion of indigenousness (seen as being particular to a specific geographic area) has led many scholars to apply the term indigenous instead of traditional knowledge. One of the main reasons for this has been an attempt to avoid the whole debate about tradition (Berkes 2008, 4, referring to D. M. Warren, L. I. Slikkerveer and D. Brokensha 1995; see also Grenier 1998; Joks 2009).

### Some Sami concepts

A comprehensive Sami concept for tradition/custom is árbevierru (in this case the North Sami term), which contains two interrelated parts: vierru ‘mode, custom’ and árbi ‘heritage, inheritance’. These two parts have a reciprocal relationship. In the Sami mind-set, neither part of a dual entity is ”first” or ”second”. A dual entity can be visualised as a sphere divided into two interconnected parts. This interconnectedness, in my view, may be the reason for the apparent difficulty of attempts to fit this kind of spherical perception of a dual entity into a linear understanding, which implies that there is a beginning and an end. Such linear, non-holistic, understanding might also explain the difficulty of the above mentioned Sami scholars in accepting the dichotomy of tradition and modernity.

In the concept of árbevierru, ”mode/customs” and ”heritage/inheritance” are interconnected in a reciprocal way. Vierru has a variety of meanings and
connotations: norms and values, customary patterns of thought, action or behaviour, value judgments (criteria of good/bad, right/wrong, beautiful/ugly, useful/useless etc.) and ethical issues (understanding of acceptable/unacceptable). Årbi expresses at least the following ideas: the transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to the other, the succession of generations, the connection between past, present and future, and continuity.

In my opinion, the use of the Sami concept árbevierru instead of "tradition” can better express the indissoluble ties in tradition between the past, the present and the future. Árbevierru indicates the continuity of the ways people do certain things and adhere to certain values (vierru), which are strengthened and validated by árbi (heritage; inheritance). Customs, innovations, wisdom, knowledge, values, heritage and continuity are inseparable from each other in this way of understanding tradition.

Many indigenous scholars have emphasised that the continuity and strength of traditional knowledge lies in its tendency to adjust itself to changing conditions and requirements (Battiste & Henderson 2005, 38–41), to seek a balance between "pure” knowledge and sustainable innovations (Smith L. 2005, 101), to import and innovate but to be successive (Sara 2003, 124–125, 128), to improve and to change (in Sami, rievdadallat, see Guttorm 2007; see also Guttorm [2011]) and finally, to learn and to adapt (Kawagley 1993; Cajete 2000). When indigenous scholars make efforts to bring forward such essential issues, the whole discussion on tradition moves coherently away from the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, and focuses on the indigenous conceptual world. Used as analytical tools, indigenous concepts are deeply and inevitably connected to particular indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and value systems.

In the same manner as árbevierru, the North Sami concept of árbediehtu for ‘traditional knowledge’ also contains two interrelated parts, namely diehtu ‘knowledge’ and árbi ‘heritage/inheritance’. As far as I am aware, the term árbediehtu for traditional knowledge was first used in writing by Harald Gaski in 2003 (Gaski 2003, 33), in the plural árbediedut, with reference to Sami wisdom transferred from one generation to the other by word of mouth. Nowadays árbediehtu with reference to traditional knowledge seems to be frequently used in Norway, Sweden and Finland, where North Sami is spoken. The most

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11 For more about the concept of árbevierru, and specifically of vierru, see a contribution by Gunvor Guttorm in this volume.
recent example is a book by an authoritative Sami knowledge holder, Lemet-Sárá (Sara H. Hætta), an elder from Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino. Lemet-Sárá has written about the traditional knowledge, experiences and contemporary history of the Sami who settled down permanently on their farmlands (this group is called dálon in North Sami) in the Guovdageaidnu area (see Hætta 2010).

The concept of árbediehtu clarifies knowledge as both the information and the process and emphasises different ways to gain, achieve or acquire knowledge, binding the past, the present and the future together. These two parts of the concept of árbediehtu are interrelated and make a whole. Diehtu has a variety of meanings, and this concept is closely connected to another Sami concept for ”knowing”, i.e. dovdat ‘to know personally; to feel’12. Some meanings of the concept of diehtu can be briefly presented as follows:

• the sum of what is known (knowledge and information): the body of information, and principles acquired through generations and by practice,
• the fact or condition of knowing something or somebody with familiarity gained through experience or association (cf. dovdat),
• the fact or condition of knowing something or somebody, which is gained not necessarily by personal experience, e.g. in the sentence ”Mun diedán gii son lea, muhto mun in dovdda su” (North Sami), different levels of knowing are expressed,
• the fact or condition of being aware of something (cf. gámus dovdat about intuitive knowledge),
• the range of one’s information or understanding.

Diehtu in the concept of Sami traditional knowledge (árbediehtu) stems from and is connected to the practice and pragmatics of living in the Far North with its characteristic resources, which are only slowly renewable. Árbediehtu is the collective wisdom, practical skills and theoretical competence evolved and acquired by Sami people through centuries in order to subsist economically, socially and spiritually.13 Man is seen as an inevitable part of the environment.

12 For theorising about the Sami concepts of diehtit ‘to know’ and dovdat ‘to know personally; to feel’, in their connection to the Sami concepts of gaskavuohta ‘relationship’ and oktavuohta ‘relation’, see Porsanger (2007, 35–38).

13 The knowledge and skills needed to subsist economically, socially and spiritually are directly related to the profound Sami concept of birgejupmi, which is connected to well-being and sustainable livelihood.
Theoretical competence is a substantial part of árbediehtu. The whole way of life of the Sami has always required a high degree of flexibility, which can be expressed by the Sami saying “Jahki ii leat jagi gáibmi” (“One year is not another year’s brother”), meaning that one always has to be prepared for changes because the weather and availability of resources vary from year to year. Thus, theoretical knowledge is the necessary basis for the search for solutions even in unusual or unexpected circumstances.  

The concepts of árbevierru and árbediehtu can provide possibilities for precise and meaningful explanations. Used as analytical tools, these concepts reveal the interconnectedness of economic, social, spiritual, theoretical, analytical, continuous and innovative elements.

Definitions and diversity

In theoretical discussions, scholars (indigenous and non-indigenous alike) are eager to define ”traditional”, ”local”, ”indigenous”, ”traditional ecological” knowledge, etc. I believe that a search for an exhaustive definition of tradition or traditional knowledge moves the focus of indigenous discussions away from the main issue. It is also worth mentioning that the action of definition is not equal to the action of explanation: to define something does not necessary mean to explain the issue. A parallel can be drawn to the words of a Hawaiian researcher, Renee Pualani Louis, in her noteworthy article about indigenous methodologies. She states that the search for a simple answer to the question ”What exactly are indigenous methodologies?” only feeds scholarly beliefs of essentialism and emphasises the ”messenger” instead of the ”message” (Paulani Louis 2006, 132).

The understanding and recognition of the extreme diversity of indigenous traditions is often indicated as being more important than the process of classification (Battiste & Henderson 2005, 37). The Inuit, for example, use

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14 Here the Sami concepts of beireballat ‘to adjust [frequently, continually]’ and čoavdit ‘to solve’ can be mentioned. Traditional Sami pedagogy relies quite significantly on this philosophy of being prepared for challenges and changes, to be able to adapt oneself, to find solutions by oneself on the basis of acquired and possessed knowledge (for more about Sami pedagogy, see Balto 1997a; 2008; Joks 2007; Aikio 2000).

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their own term *Qaujimajatuqangit* for Inuit traditional knowledge (cf. Arnakak 2002; see also *The Inuit Qaujisarvingat* 2010). However, the Inuit Tapiririt Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute emphasise in their *Guide for Researchers* who intend to work with Inuit communities that the term *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* is not quite appropriate, because of its various meanings depending on the community and context (ITK & NRI 2007, 5).

Many indigenous peoples suggest their indigenous concepts of traditional knowledge to be quite comprehensive for an understanding of such knowledge. For example, the Mi’kmaq concepts *telinuisimk*, *telihnuo’lti’k* and *tlinuita’sim* are proposed as desirable and suitable terms, because they encompass connections to various indigenous manifestations as part of a particular ecological order (Battiste & Henderson 2005, 35).

According to Louise Grenier (1998, 1), indigenous knowledge ”refers to the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area”. In Marie Battiste’s view, indigenous traditional knowledge represents

”[...]a complex and dynamic capacity of knowing, a knowledge that results from knowing one’s ecological environment, the skills and knowledge derived from that place, knowledge of the animals and plants and their patterns within that space, and the vital skills and talents necessary to survive and sustain themselves within that environment.” (Battiste 2008, 499.)

Marie Battiste (2008, 499) underlines the fact that traditional knowledge maintains appropriate relationships with all things and people involved in it, and is based on vigorous observation. Participation in traditional activities, stories and daily dialogues are ways to transmit knowledge, which is preserved in language structures (ibid.). Similarly, our elder and Sami language professor, Juho Niillas (Nils Jernsletten) affirms that traditional knowledge ”is transmitted through observing, learning skills, and systematising this in linguistic expressions, terms, and professional jargon” (Jernsletten 1997, 89). These linguistic expressions contain valuable information, perhaps well known locally, for those who use the language and the concepts on a daily basis. But for the academic world these Sami linguistic expressions have
considerable theoretical value. They may provide research tools, which enable us to gain access to the arena of Sami epistemology.\textsuperscript{16}

**Surprised by modernity?**

The tradition-modernity dichotomy has a tendency to leave indigenous peoples outside the contemporary world, which is considered to be "modern" as opposed to the "traditional" world of the indigenous. This dichotomy tends to make continuity and indigenous epistemologies invisible, and as a consequence, the rich conceptual world of indigenous peoples has no use in research as an analytical tool.

In discussions about modernity and indigenous peoples, it is quite often emphasised that globalisation is a challenge for indigenous peoples, that new technologies have an impact on them, that the traditional areas of habitation and traditional ways of living of such peoples are becoming restricted, that Western education has affected them, etc. In these discussions, "non-traditional" is often directly related to "modern", and the question of modernisation frequently appears in debates on indigenous issues. One can quite often hear that a great challenge for indigenous peoples is "to face modernity". According to this view, which is apparently based on the binary opposition between traditional and modern, indigenous peoples seem to be stuck in the past, and have in a way been suddenly surprised by modernity, which has come from the outside world. This view is indeed just a continuation of the perception of indigenous peoples as "the Other".

How is "modernity" perceived in the Sami context by the Sami themselves? The limited space of the present article does not allow for a broad discussion of this topic. Modernity is indeed a Western invention, a construction, as a philosophy and ideology. There is no Sami term for it, just as there are no Sami terms that correspond to the Western concepts of "culture", "religion", "nature" etc. In some Sami scholarly works modernity is often used to mean something "contemporary", as rightly pointed out by Kuokkanen (2009, 167). In her opinion (ibid), this does not refer to modernity as a philosophy or ideology, the main characteristics of which are as follows: rational and scientific thinking, secularisation, materialism, individualism and man’s

\textsuperscript{16} As for example with the Sami snow terminology (see Jernsletten 1997; Magga 2006; Eira & Magga & Eira 2010; Riseth, Jan Åge et al. 2010).
control over "nature". In Kuokkanen’s opinion, the use of the concept of modernity as a synonym of contemporaneity is connected to the social changes that happened in Samiland after the Second World War and especially from the 1960s onwards (ibid).

Indeed, the use of the term "modern" as equivalent to "contemporary" can be easily found in many recent Sami scholarly works, where "modern" appears to describe contemporary time, views, customs, understandings etc. This is especially the case in works written in the Sami language (see e.g. Balto & Østmo 2009; Keskitalo 2009; Lauhamaa 2009; Seurujärvi-Kari 2010). This does not need to be considered as a reference to any theory. Rather, this might be a question of language use, because in Sami one can use expressions like ođđa áigi or dálá áigi or dáláš áigi ‘new time; contemporary time’ and modearna áigi ‘modern time’ as synonyms. The Sami academic world probably needs a debate on the use of such terms. In my opinion, there are also other questions to be addressed: Should we operate with dichotomies like tradition–modernity in our scholarly analysis? Is it a deliberate choice? Should we not rather focus our attention on indigenous understandings which are meaningful for us?

The binary opposition of tradition and modernity hinders scholars from entering the rich conceptual indigenous world, which can offer fresh and exciting solutions. Indigenous theorisation is still struggling to get the recognition it deserves, but indigenous research findings have revealed that traditional knowledge provides ideas and solutions quite independent of the conception of modernity as philosophy and ideology. Indigenous concepts should not be used merely as exotic additions to the established research paradigm. In my opinion, attempts to adjust indigenous concepts to the linear "world of dichotomies", which is based on a perception of oppositions, are not beneficial for the further development of indigenous theorisation. Instead, the academic world might discover and/or create new analytical tools on the basis of already existing concepts found in indigenous theories of knowledge.

In Sami research, Sami philosophy and epistemology can open new perspectives and provide new methodological solutions, which can be very modern and applicable and relevant to academic research. In this statement, I deliberately use the word "modern", more in the dictionary sense, which

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17 On the Sami understanding of "opposition" in the process of comparison, see Porsanger 2007, 46-47.
implies involving the latest techniques, methods, concepts, information, approaches, etc.

The Sami concepts of árbevierru and árbediehtu have a great potential which should be tapped in order to develop Sami academic thinking and Sami research methodologies. Designed on the basis of the rich Sami theory of knowledge, ontology and value system, Sami research methodologies will be innovative, primarily because of the use of new methods, new concepts, and new approaches, which have their roots in the Sami knowledge system.

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