

Re-telling ‘*Sumé*: Music and Revolution

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Cover of the album *Sumut*, depicting a 19th-century woodcut of an Inuit having killed a Norseman. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumé_\(band\)#/media/File:Sumut_cover.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumé_(band)#/media/File:Sumut_cover.jpg)

Abstract

This is an investigation into the inter-relationship of music, nationalism and decolonization situated within the ongoing struggles of the Greenlandic people as they continue to try to achieve the absolute sovereignty and independence promised by unfettered home rule. This is also a reminder about how stories can be told and travel across time and space through music as a medium. It is also the very human story of one of many youthful rock bands from the nineteen-seventies that would inadvertently give shape to a generational revolution in ways that, in many ways, eclipsed the Western narratives of the British invasion, the summer of love, and even Woodstock when seen from a Greenlandic perspective and within the context of Greenlandic decolonization.

Introduction: *Sumé* – the Sound of a Revolution’

“*Sumé* – the Sound of a Revolution” was the first Greenlandic film to ever be shown at the Berlin film festival. *Sumé*, the subject of the film, was the first rock band ever to sing in the Greenlandic language. Greenland was granted home rule by Denmark in 1979. In 2008, Greenlanders voted in favor of an act that granted their government even more power. Before being a Danish territory, Greenland has also been under the Norwegian crown, and was even briefly claimed by Portuguese explorers in 1499. (DW, 2021).

The film, “The Sound of a Revolution,” is also a portrait of a culture slowly emerging from centuries of colonialism fueled by the transformative power of music, and rock music, in particular, framed as an act of defiance, which provided and framed a revolution against a regime of colonial oppression. Greenland had been ruled by Denmark for over 200 years before *Sumé* began performing and recording in Greenlandic within an era of student activism and emergent musical forms of expression and youth culture, *Sumé* found an audience, both in Greenland and Denmark, releasing three albums between 1973 and 1977, that would change the world.

Sumé – the Sound of a Revolution was the first Greenlandic film to ever be shown at the Berlin film festival and a review of the film screened in Berlin summarized the project as follows, “Revisiting the 1970s heyday of *Sumé*, the first rock band ever to sing in the Greenlandic language, *The Sound of a Revolution* is also an inspiring portrait of a culture slowly emerging from centuries of colonialism. Though the native population are Inuit in origin, the largest island in the world has been ruled by Denmark for over 200 years...In an era of left-wing student activism, *Sumé* found a keen young audience both in Greenland and Denmark, releasing three albums between 1973 and 1977. Several generations of younger rock musicians, some of whom appear in this film, followed their example by singing in their own language...” (Dalton, 2016)

What followed *Sumé* were several generations of younger rock musicians, some of whom appear in the film, whom would follow *Sumé*'s example by singing in their own language as a form of asserting sonic sovereignty. Using this film as a primary body of evidence, while deconstructing the active music scene in Nuuk today as an ongoing outcome of the band's work, I will revisit the cultural impact of *Sumé*'s relevance as it relates to Greenland's ongoing battle for self- rule, sovereignty and social and spatial justice. How story-telling, music, language and revolution intertwine is, itself, a story worth telling and retelling as we slowly make progress in deconstructing and decolonizing other places and practices across the post-colonial world.

Danish Rule

“In 1979 Greenland was given autonomous status. Inuit became the country's official language” and “The Greenland record industry was born.” (Gronow and Saunio, 184) The method of using rock music as form of protest is certainly not new, and this phenomenon was taking place elsewhere at the time in Europe and North America, conflated with the Viet Nam War and the rise of youth protest culture at the time. But in Greenland this form of protest defined a very different type of rebellion, and a very different intentionality by the artists.

While *Sumé*'s band members might have looked and sounded like so many other shaggy-haired rock bands of the time, their choice to sing defiantly in Greenlandic, the local Indigenous language that had been virtually erased by the Danish state, was potent and truly revolutionary. Western rock music and Indigenous language were able to form an unusual, but effective alliance as a form of resistance. This unusual alliance is still a legacy that continues today in Greenland. The underground music scene in tiny Nuuk continues to thrive and local post-punk bands and even folk duos continue to write about race, oppression and the colonial condition as an ongoing dialogue with decolonization through music. Andreas Otte's lengthy article “Nuuk Underground: Musical Change and Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Greenland” discusses how these new forms of Greenlandic nationalism are emerging from this culture of musical protest among a new generation of Greenlandic musicians today as a new form of nationalism rooted in Indigenous identity, transnationalism and postmodernity. (Otte, 2015)

However, the Danish state tells a different version of the story, as one might expect. “In January 1979 a referendum on greater autonomy was held in which 63% of the voters voted in favor of a Home Rule, and on May 1st, 1979, Greenland Home Rule was established.... The Act on Greenland Self-Government was granted to Greenland on June 21, 2009 (Act no. 473 of 12 June 2009) and was an extension of powers enacted in the Home Rule act of 1979 (Act. No. 577 of 29 November 1978). Through the Home Rule and Self-Government Acts Greenland has the right to elect its own parliament and government, the latter having sovereignty and

administration over the areas mentioned in the Self-Government Act such as education, health, fisheries, environment and climate...” (Government of Greenland, 2015)

Decolonization

The literatures and frameworks shaping decolonization today provide yet another methodology to further understand *Sumé*'s long-lasting decolonizing impact as a contribution to a movement in the seventies, but also to current movements as the notion of decolonization is being re-shaped by a bold new generation of Indigenous scholars (Byrd, 2011; Corntassel, 2015; Coulthard, 2014; Tuck, 2021,2014; et.al.)

The complex project of Greenlandic decolonization and *Sume*' has been told and now retold in lived lives, oral narratives, nostalgia and, more recently, through film. The new story that is told, so many years later, reflects that the youthful intentions and ultimately disappointing results of *Sumé*'s call to revolution as a brief moment in time, but is much more. The music of *Sumé* represents remembered human lives lived as part of an ongoing and perhaps endless struggle for autonomy, respect and reclamation of land, traditions and language in Greenland.

The project is a story told with pathos and empathy using home movie footage and interviews with Greenlanders now much older who look back at this era with nostalgia as they hum the melodies and repeat the lyrics of *Sumé*'s landmark album sung in Greenlandic. A sense of melancholy despair is painfully evident in the shoulder shrugs of a much older Malik Høegh, the prophetic lead singer of *Sumé* and author of the band's most powerful lyrics, as he responds to questions from interviewers in the film. Høegh confesses that he is sadly unable to see much real change in peoples' lives at all as a result of his work. Høegh is older, wiser and even more ambivalent about his effects as an activist.

Music and Decolonization

The thoughtfully written and passionately performed anti-colonial anthems written by Høegh and *Sumé* that once advocated anti-colonial ideas like those expressed in the song, *Nunaqarfiiit*, "It is time to live again as Inuit and not as Westerners," are still relevant and play in the background of the film as a structural subtext. But, while these songs became a catalyst for mobilizing Greenlandic struggles and gave the Greenlanders hope in 1973, these same songs now evoke sadness and produce nostalgic memories of loss for a time long past when there was genuine hope for decolonization.

Of course, all of these layers of narrative and recollection are deeply intertwined within discourses of nationalism, subjectivity and identity formation, but it is within the interconnectedness of language, autonomy and Indigenous status that the origins of the Greenlandic music industry derive deeper meanings – especially if viewed through a transnational lens. What are the lessons for others fighting similar battles in the work of *Sumé*? It is here, within this materially-grounded narrative, that I wish to situate yet another layer of this telling and retelling to prove that the dominant narrative of colonization always remains in control despite all good intentions from all sides. “If we follow (Linda Tuhiwai) Smith's (1999) recommendation that we revisit and analyze site by site, our histories as formulated under western eyes, we must also revisit how the tools of the west are used by those variously oppressed by them.” (Oikawa, 22) There are no innocents and there is no innocence in this struggle. The troubled relationship between the researcher and the researched is fraught, as is the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

Sumé used specific imagery to sell their ideas as well, but their images were deliberately violent and critical, as was their music, with purpose and effect. As Pekka Gronow and Ilpo Saunio explained, “The first Greenlandic LP...appeared in 1973. It was made in Denmark by a group of Eskimos studying there. They had formed a group called *Sumé*, which performed new Greenlandic rock in the Eskimo, or Inuit, language. On the cover of the first *Sumé* record is an ancient woodcut of a wickedly smiling Eskimo hunter who, with a knife, is cutting off the hand of a European trader he has just killed.” (Gronow and Saunio, 184) Land’s desires to “re-centre” the ‘landscapes, images, languages, themes, metaphors and stories in the Indigenous world’ (Tuhiwai Smith, 199 in Land, 147) is turned on its head by *Sumé*.

Indigenous Perspectives

Nellejet Zorgrager writes about the *Kautokeino* rebellion of 1852, an uprising by the Sámi people of *Kautokeino* against the Norwegian state from the perspective that most of the publications about the uprising, including the precise circumstances that had caused the rebellion, were told “from the outside” of the events looking inwards, as is not uncommon with colonial narratives. What is most important about Zorgrager’s re-telling is that the narrative is framed “from the inside” (259-297). Her key focus is on how a film, *Kautokeino-opprøret* (The *Kautokeino* Rebellion, 2008) was able to tell the story of the *Kautokeino* rebellion from “a Sámi point of view.” (Nordlys, 2008 in Zorgrager, 286)

In this particular case, a documentary film about a rock band who sang protest songs in their own language in 1973 presents a moment in time that can also be transformed to a dangerous “orientalizing” artifact that might even reinforces the project the originating work was meant to disrupt. What happens when a story becomes a film and can be marketed as an Indigenous *thing* – an object representing a culture locked out of citizenship and trapped in prehistoric filmic time? What then does this artifact become when it is positioned to promote and sell a narrative to sell Greenland as a tourist destination?

The myth that colonization has now been resolved through home rule is the other subtext. The problems have not been solved and colonization, post-colonization and neo-colonization remain problems. I worry that this film might become another form of “contract” between colonizers and the colonized and *Sumé*’s most lasting message in the film is that decolonization is an ongoing project. Home rule has not solved any problems. Land states that “When non-Indigenous activists serve anti-colonial interests, they manifest a subjectivity that refuses the colonial logic that rigidly treated people according to the ascribed categories of Indigenous and on-Indigenous.” (109) The framework Land suggests for “decolonizing solidarity in theory and practice reflects some elements of a debate between modernism, structuralism, redistribution and materialist analysis, on the one hand, and postmodernism, post-structuralism and the critique of binaries on the other.” (110)

The shift in control of the narrative and who is orchestrating the actors is also crucial to understand in order to apply Clare Land’s proposal for non-Indigenous researchers to methodologically broaden their scope as a critical methodology. Perhaps analogously, Paulette Regan’s “An Apology Feast in Hazelton: Indian Residential Schools, Reconciliation, and Making Space for Indigenous Legal Traditions” lays out a similar settler engagement methodology that demands a willful surrender of control by the settler through an invitation to “bear witness” through participation in a shared experience meant to “recognize and respect, without appropriating.” (Regan, 40) By relocating truth and reconciliation in the “feast hall as a paradox” Regan proposes that “within the context of the Hazelton feast, the Gitxan connect the

cultural loss experienced by (Indian Residential Schools) survivors to a powerful reclaiming of culture, family, community and nation bringing the transgressors – Canada and the United Church – into to the feast hall, not as guests but as hosts with very particular responsibilities to fulfill.” (61-62) The conflation of memory, ritual and orchestrating control becomes a tool to relationally invert power and the power of controlling the narrative in a useful and productive way, that portends to how ‘*Sumé* used its own positionality strategically and spatially.

Lingering Lessons

The larger question of how the Greenlandic story of home rule told through the eyes of *Sumé* might function as a lasting pedagogy, and productive counter-narrative, for Canadian Indigenous peoples and how this particular story can be placed in conversation with Settler/Indigenous methods theorists like Clare Land might be useful to theorize as a pedagogy. The usefulness of this intellectual exercise might, itself, also become a site (or a space) for decolonization to appear using film as a mode of accessible discourse. Land’s text, *Decolonizing Solidarity: Dilemmas and Directions for Supporters of Indigenous Struggles*, is foundational to my argument.

Land presents the idea of Indigenous research as a site of Deleuzian unfolding and fraught narratives using Land’s own flawed, but reflective subjectivity in her own work as she contends with her own privilege and complicity as a colonist. Land’s experiences and willingness to relationally situate herself within her own troubled situatedness gives her a vantage point to foresee where and how others might fail by her own example. This is a valuable experience for Land and for her readers to conceptualize. Scholars like Eve Tuck remind us:

Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all. In fact, settler scholars may gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware. Yet settler moves to innocence are hollow, they only serve the settler. (Tuck, 2014, 10)

How were desires for Greenlandic autonomy, self-rule, sovereignty, and autonomy forged through the hard labour of creating, distributing and performing *Sumé*’s music on home soil in Greenlandic? What were the conscious and unconscious trade-offs made by the band to achieve its political goals, and how did they maintain control of their own trajectory? One possibility is that if music is framed as an extension of language, it might elicit an effect similar to oral narratives, which would also deconstruct settler-colonial relations using the tools of the colonizer potentially. It was the pliability of language and music that *Sumé* understood. From Elvis to the Beatles rock music has always been a medium for youthful revolt and music’s ability to cross and blur definitions of race, class and gender continues to make space for conversations about others to occur, despite the dominant narrative.

***Sumé*’s After-effects**

Today the former members of *Sumé* are no longer the wild-haired radicals that they were in their early twenties. They are, like most others of their generation, retirees and pensioners. However, by using Native Greenlandic people’s language and Greenlandic lives to retell this story the film becomes as crucial as the sound recordings in keeping a story alive and current that is critical to maintaining the promise of home rule. I first watched this film on a university campus in Nuuk. Every college kid in the auditorium knew this film and knew the music of *Sumé*. They also knew

what the music had meant to their parents and grandparents, which they spoke about afterwards.

The cyclical and inter-generational re-telling of this story using Greenlandic language and now, film, also further located the narrative mnemonically in time and space by spatializing how displaced and resettled Greenlanders could recall listening to *Sumé* in their own living rooms in 1973, even though they were confined within the oppressive apartment blocks built by the state at the time that had removed them from their traditional homes and separated them from the land that meant so much to them. The interviews were all filmed in Greenlandic as well to further assert authority. The film became a decolonizing method as well.



One of Nuuk's many large apartment blocks constructed by Greenland's Technical Organization. Image by Adam Grydehoj.

I find signs of hope and methodological promise in the technical and creative means taken up in how this film was made as a record of human experience, not as a documentary, *per se*. The film presented a thoughtful and sensitive collection of voluntarily gathered and montaged archival film footage donated to the filmmakers by the local Greenlandic population to collectively include many forms of narration and remembering in an act of sincere and authentic co-creation. The film clips, television interview clips, interviews and fragments of discussions were kept as genuine and authentic as those who offered them to this cause. Each piece of data was treated like a gift by the film makers and the results were a collective remembrance. The directors and film-makers surrendered as much artistic control as possible to the community, and allowed the new meta-narrative to unfold as people told their stories from their own perspectives. Some wept as their memories returned to them. The methods employed were respectful and deferential.

The dangers of using film as a methodology for retelling *Sumé's* story are plentiful and need theorizing. Mona Oikawa actively situates herself within her own work as a form of critical conversation with this problematic of complicity and usefulness methodologically too. Oikawa uses spatialization and the retelling of social histories to ferret out competing ideologies in her conscious confrontation of Indigenous frameworks too in her work. Oikawa avoids overly limiting white theories such as the cool abstraction of post-structuralism in her work, but uses frameworks relationally by positing them in dialogue with Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies as a methodology. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai thoughtfully ponders about the risks incurred when indigenous peoples use academic writing to discuss their history and situation of oppression; in doing so, she asks, do they not run the risk of writing about indigenous peoples "as if we really were 'out there,' the 'Other,' with all the baggage that this entails"? (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 36). In other words, does this kind of dualist and logocentric

thinking not inevitably find their way into our representations? As she adds, “academic writing is a form of selecting, arranging and presenting knowledge. ... [it reinforces and maintains] a style of discourse that is never innocent.” (Oikawa, 17)

Conclusion

Whose story is this to tell? Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright write:

In each instance, a particular definition of who constitutes the “Native” is put forward. Some, like the one articulated by Lawrence and Dua in the Canadian context, are part of efforts at decolonization where many “Natives” are subordinated and defied (by the dominated and the dominating) metaphysically as being of the land colonized by various European empires.” (Sharma and Wright, 121) “Research ‘through imperial eyes’ assumes that Western ideas are the only ideas possible. But this is an approach to Indigenous people “which still foregrounds a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to bring progress into the lives of Indigenous people – spiritually, intellectually, socially and economically.” (58)

The film and *Sumé*'s second life shows the promises of new technologies as methods of story-telling and the inherent dangers of how non-Indigenous scholars, and film makers, undertaking such work, both artistic and scholarly, must resist being positioned “in service” of the white, Eurocentric dominant narrative. The film and its chain of distribution also shows a need to define Indigeneity relationally within a non-homogenizing context; the need to understand settler-colonialism as an ongoing project; and the need to revisit Indigenous victories and defeats as a temporal and spatial phenomenon using the language and transnational histories of other tales and trajectories

The legacy of *Sumé* remains in place, on the ground in in imaginaries, and in the land, sovereignty and desire for independence all looming beneath Nuuk's thriving contemporary music scene today, thanks to *Sumé*. The relationality between Greenlandic sovereignty and popular music has remained viable as a decolonizing tool, just as punk rock and skateboarding reclaimed territory in Southern California in the 1980's for marginalized groups uniting sonic and spatial sovereignty as one.

There are now numerous influential Indigenous musicians who have followed *Sume*'s trajectory, particularly in Canada, including early Indigenous rap bands like Tribal Live and Snotty Nose Rez Kids as well as Juno-award winning popular Canadian artists like Buffy Saint Marie, Tanya Tagaq and Celeigh Cardinal. Indigenous Sovereignty, nationalism and revolution told through music remain a potent form of story-telling in place. Furthermore, it is worth pondering how have Indigenous rights and the structures of settler colonialism prevented decolonization as an imaginary to be realized in Greenland, and what does this mean to Indigenous peoples and nations in Canada? Could a new methodology for decolonization include “radical settlers” (or even documentary filmmakers and sensitive, but not patronizing, scholars)? Could the creative work of others simply create new forms of cultural capital to sell Greenland to a new generation of European settlers? There are risks.

In Western European linear-time, the past vanishes into obscurity, perceived as dimensionless and infinitely small at the vanishing point of linear perspective. It is the dead past, he (*Wub-e-ke-niew*) says, for the most ‘westerners,’ who define so much of

their experience in terms of evolving technology and the ideology of progress.”
(Freeman, xviii)

I am inspired in how *Sumé* was able to transcend generations and reshape the discourses of Indigeneity spatially and temporally using popular music and language in collusion as a contemporary form of decolonizing pedagogy, which has now become a part of Greenlandic collective identity. The discourse of decolonization within the particularity of the Greenlandic context is complex and particular, but was receptive to music as a form of decolonizing art that I intertwined within the lived lives of real people in real time trans-generationally. *Sumé* has on explaining the transformative powers of both music and film as ways of story-telling and why stories matter, particularly in this particular story of nation reclamation.

Studying how music and nationalism became fused within the collective imagination of a generation under siege by their colonizers also reminds us of the importance of music’s ability to transcend place, space and time, and assert *spatial sovereignty* through story-telling as a method of resistance by oppressed peoples over their oppressors. This paper is, therefore, also about music and language as still viable methods of resistance, as well as a call to revitalize critical assessment of music, film and other forms of story-telling as methods of decolonization that can be severed from colonial practices and control by design.

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Postscript

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