

# True North



A scene from the movie Frozen II showing a glowing ice spire in a snowy mountain landscape. The spire is a tall, jagged structure of ice, glowing with a bright blue light. It stands prominently in the center of the frame, rising from a snow-covered mountain peak. The surrounding landscape is a vast, mountainous region covered in snow, with various peaks and ridges visible. The sky is a mix of purple and blue, suggesting a twilight or dawn setting. The overall atmosphere is cold and majestic.

Scandinavian studies professor  
Tom DuBois collaborated  
with Disney to make *Frozen II*  
an authentic representation  
of indigenous Nordic cultures.

BY KATIE VAUGHN

A scene from the  
movie *Frozen II*.

PHOTO: DISNEY

**T**he first impression *Frozen*, Disney’s 2013 animated blockbuster inspired by Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen*, makes is through music. As the opening credits appear onscreen, viewers hear a “vuelie,” a song of the Sámi people indigenous to what is now northern Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Viewers next see ice harvesters and a boy dressed in clothes inspired by Sámi outfitting — a young Kristoff, with his reindeer sidekick Sven in tow — but their attention is quickly directed to the fictional town of Arendelle, where Princess Elsa is concealing magical powers. And it stays there for most of the movie, leaving just a hint of the people who have shaped Scandinavia since ancient times.

In the highly anticipated sequel, which hit theaters in November 2019, indigenous Scandinavian culture plays a major role — and is authentically and respectfully portrayed, thanks in part to Tom Dubois, a folklorist and chair of the Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic.

*Frozen II* sees Elsa, along with sister Anna and friends Kristoff, Sven and snowman Olaf, leaving the kingdom to trace the origins of her powers. The group is drawn to an enchanted forest, where they meet members of the Northuldra — a fictional indigenous group inspired by the Sámi’s clothing, dwellings and connection to nature — and Arendellian soldiers who have been trapped in the woods for more than 30 years.

“*Frozen II* moves out of Arendelle and goes north,” DuBois says. “They’re in a very different world, and the film really takes that original vuelie as motivation.”



*Frozen II* features the Northuldra (top) — a fictional indigenous group inspired by the Sámi people (bottom) of Norway, Sweden and Finland.





### Hollywood Calls

So how did a UW-Madison professor who's been teaching and studying Sámi culture for three decades come to influence the follow-up to the highest-grossing animated film to date? It has a lot to do with DuBois' reputation and connections.

One of DuBois' former graduate students, Jackson Crawford, had been teaching at UCLA and provided cultural expertise for the first *Frozen*. When Disney decided to explore the Sámi side of the story in a sequel, Crawford insisted DuBois was the expert to consult.

DuBois held a "Skype seminar" for Disney, answering questions and providing an introduction to indigenous Nordic cultures. Then he and a handful of others helped Walt Disney Animation Studios' head of creative development plan a two-week itinerary to Finland, Norway and Iceland for the film's creative team.

"They had very specific requests," DuBois recalls. "They said, for instance, 'We need to see a forest in the fall.' There was lavish attention to all of the details—what the light is like, what the leaves look like, how they sound crunching on the ground. They wanted to soak all this up."

DuBois wasn't able to join the Disney team on that trip, as fall 2016 classes had just begun at UW. But he connected them with his friends and contacts across Scandinavia, which provided a full picture of Sámi contemporary life and history.

"Every Disney Animation film begins with research," says Peter Del Vecho, producer of both *Frozen* films. "Tom introduced us to individuals from the Sámi

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Folklore, and Religious Studies

community who helped us deepen our connection to the region. We are grateful for his collaboration.”

Also crucial was the Disney team connecting with leaders of the Sámi Parliaments of Norway, Sweden and Finland. The Parliaments created an advisory group, called the Verddet, to assist the filmmakers in accurately and respectfully portraying their culture in the movie. And as part of the collaboration, they requested that *Frozen II* be dubbed in Sámi, as well as Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish.

“Not only do Sámi children see themselves represented in the movie, but they hear it in their own language,” says DuBois. “It’s incredibly powerful.”

The International Sámi Film Institute praised the project, stating on Facebook that there are few films for Sámi children and to have such a major movie offered in their language is “just unbelievable and such a precious gift.” The group

added that the cooperative approach “is groundbreaking in so many ways and a good example of how companies can collaborate with indigenous peoples in a truly respectful way.”

#### Star Power

DuBois hopes audiences enjoy the film as much as he does, even if they didn’t get to view it at the movie’s official wrap party in Pasadena, as he did back in November.

“It was wildly fantastic,” he says of the event for the roughly 300 contributors to the film, plus other guests.

In addition to the movie itself, what DuBois found most touching was the film screened beforehand, a video showing elements of the research trip he helped organize. Another highlight was the final frame of the movie’s credits — a special thanks to the cultural advisors, which included DuBois, his colleagues and friends in Scandinavia and Colin Connors, a graduate student who helped lead the Disney team on a visit to Iceland during their research trip.

Back on campus, DuBois has appreciated talking with his students about his experience with *Frozen II*. He can share the excitement of being part of such a cultural moment, but also explore the significance of Disney collaborating with indigenous communities.

“It’s what the whole education idea is about — we share resources and they take them and push them forward in new and exciting ways,” he says. “What a beautiful thing to be involved in.” ■

## Studying the Sámi

BY TOM DUBOIS

Since time immemorial, Sámi people — Sápmelaččat — have lived in the northern tracts of what today is known as Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.

They practiced a largely sustainable way of life based on hunting, fishing and reindeer husbandry, living alongside their farming neighbors for many centuries, in fact, for thousands of years. Through pernicious legal maneuvers and assertions of racial difference, the rights of Sámi people were abridged over the 1700s and 1800s by leaders of neighboring states, who asserted ownership over Sámi lands and viewed the Sámi as a subject people to be controlled, absorbed or removed.

My scholarly work has focused on three areas in relation to Sámi culture. First, I have studied the worldview and religious traditions of Sámi before Christianization and their practice of traditions that scholars term “shamanism.” Second, I have worked to make the ideas of early 20th-century Sámi intellectuals better known to international readers through careful and culturally informed translations of works like Johan Turi’s *Muitalus Sámiid birra* [*An Account of the Sámi*] of 1910, one of the first books ever written by a Sámi person. Third, I have worked to document the creative and effective ways that Sámi people since the late 1970s have used media to promote an agenda that underscores Sámi rights and that makes common cause with indigenous peoples in other parts of the world.

These three foci in my research map the onset of colonization, initial attempts at dismantling colonization and the ongoing hard work of “decolonization” that indigenous communities around the world are engaged in today.

When a major Western entertainment corporation like Disney enters into dialogue with the leaders of an indigenous community and respects the cultural rights and dignity of that community, an important step in decolonization occurs. I am convinced of these two things: colonization involved us all; decolonization requires us all.

Tom DuBois, the Halls-Bascom Professor of Scandinavian Folklore, Folklore and Religious Studies in the Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic, where he is also the department chair.

Lavvu is a temporary dwelling used by the Sámi people.



Reindeer husbandry has been and still is an important aspect of Sámi culture.



Traditional Sámi knife, handmade with a reindeer horn handle decorated with traditional carvings.



The Sámi people have their own folk costume, the kolt.

