



NILS-ASLAK VALKEAPÄÄ:  
INDIGENOUS VOICE AND MULTIMEDIA ARTIST

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## Abstract

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943—2001) was the greatest Sámi multimedia artist. He made his debut as an author in 1971 and is so far the only Sámi who has been awarded the prestigious Nordic Council's literature prize, for his book of poetry and old photographs *Beaivi, áhčážan* (1989) (*The Sun, My Father* [1997]). In this article Harald Gaski provides an analysis of two of Valkeapää's most renowned pieces of lyrical writing. Both are long-poems; the first one is a tribute to indigenous peoples' values and philosophy, while the other one is only available in its Sámi original and thus a linguistic and cultural manifestation. It is a challenge, therefore, for the author of this essay to explicate for a foreign reader why and how the poem represents a migrating reindeer herd and why the content of both poems is relevant and important for indigenous peoples today.

## Introduction

One of the poems in which Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's multi-faceted artistic outlook is best expressed is the untranslated poem no. 272 in the prize-winning book *The Sun, My Father* from 1997.<sup>2</sup> The poem is, among many things, a typographical representation in words of a reindeer herd. This poem will be at the centre of this article, but to begin with I want to give a short introduction to Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, in addition to offering an example of another important dimension in his writing: he is an artistic representative of the indigenous peoples of the world. The Sámi together with the Inuit of Greenland are the only indigenous peoples of Europe. In the poetry cycle 'My home is in my heart' in the 1985 book *Ruoktu Váimmus* (*Trekways of the Wind* in English translation), the indigenous peoples' message is expressed especially clearly and Valkeapää alludes there both to a speech by the great Native American Chief Seattle and to an epic Sámi yoik from the period of colonisation.<sup>3</sup> But first a few words about the person and artist, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was born in 1943. He was a Finnish citizen until he settled permanently in Skibotn in Nord-Troms in Norway and changed his nationality to become a Norwegian citizen. He studied at a teachers' training college in Finland. He chose teachers' college not because he ever intended to become a teacher, but because it was an education that trained him in a number of areas he was interested in, among others literature and music.

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2 Awarded the Nordic Council's literature prize in 1991. The original Sámi version *Beaivi, Áhčážan* was published in 1988.

3 There is often a political dimension in Valkeapää's texts. This is most obviously expressed in his debut work, the book of essays *Terveisiä Lapista* that came out in Finnish in 1971. (The Norwegian translation appeared in 1979 with the title *Helsing frå Samiland* and the English translation in 1983 with the title *Greetings from Lapland*). In all of his books of poetry there are clear political points of view and attitudes—perhaps most clearly in *Trekways of the Wind* and in his last book *The Earth, My Mother*.

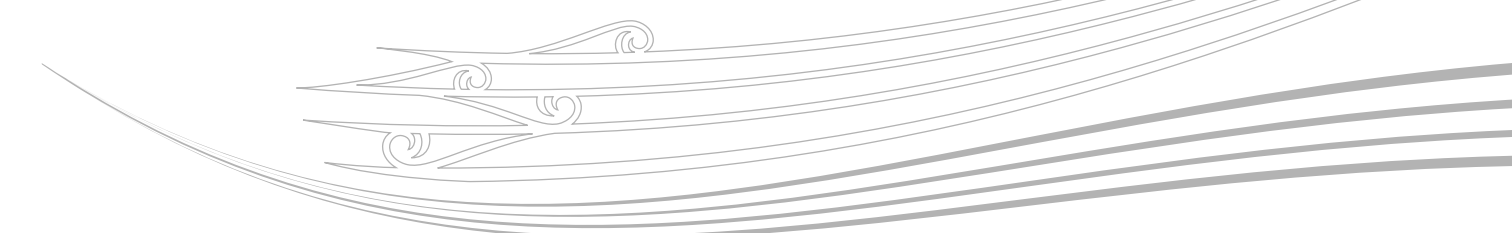


Valkeapää became a revitaliser of Sámi culture and above all of Sámi music. In particular he created a new interest in Sámi yoik at a time when it was in danger of dying out. At the end of the 1960s and after, he combined traditional yoik with modern instruments and popular music, later also combining yoik with jazz-inspired genres in cooperation with some of Finland's foremost jazz musicians. There are still several Sámi musicians who follow this fairly new tradition. As time went on he also developed a new form of more extensive yoik composition that associates itself with the composition of classical music.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was the primary motivator behind the organisation of Sámi artists that gathered speed in the course of the 1970s. In the same period he was coordinator of cultural projects within the now defunct World Council of Indigenous Peoples, and was the organiser of the first festival of indigenous art and culture *Davvi Šuvva* in 1979. This took place in Kaaresuvanto in Finland and Karesuando in Sweden on either side of the Könkämä river that forms the border between the two countries. Many will surely remember him from the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics at Lillehammer in 1994 when he performed his powerful yoik at the beginning of the ceremony. He also performed the opening yoik of the Oscar-nominated feature film *Ofelaš (Pathfinder)* in 1987.

The decade from the middle of the 1980s up to a traffic accident in 1996 that strongly contributed to changing his life was a hectic period for this multimedia artist. He put a lot of time and great effort into creating separate publication channels for Sámi literature and music. The first Sámi publishing houses saw the light of day early in the 1970s, but Valkeapää really wanted to have a publisher that was suited to his own thinking about Sámi art. Therefore, together with close friends he established the publishing house DAT where he had artistic supervision of production. His pioneering music received international recognition, not least when the so-called bird symphony *Goase dušše* was awarded the jury's special prize at the international radio competition *Prix Italia* in 1993. It is a symphony in four parts consisting mostly of nature sounds from his own area in Sápmi, put together as a journey from spring to autumn, from mountain to coast. His pictorial art also got a lot of attention at that time. He was festival artist at the North Norway Festival in 1991 and later some of the same paintings traveled around the world to exhibitions as far away as Japan and China.

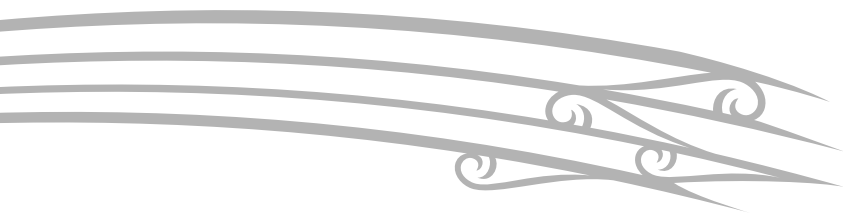
Especially important to Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's art is its holistic nature; he expresses himself in a range of media and modes. A poem can be read in isolation but it is best understood when it is read in relation to his other poems and, perhaps just as importantly, in relation to a yoik on the same theme or an image that accompanies the poem in the form of a photograph, a pencil drawing or a painting. It is in the totality of his expression that one understands Nils-Aslak best, but one can also readily enjoy the works of art individually. His art was intended to be open and inclusive in the same way that he himself was open



to impressions and impulses from the outside that he allowed himself to be inspired by and used in his work. Consider the introductory poems in *Trekways of the Wind* where he begins by greeting the reader with ‘Hello, my dear friend’. This immediately gives the reader a feeling of being welcomed and taken seriously, while it also encourages the reader to become acquainted with the person who is greeting you so graciously. At the same time the pencil drawings that accompany the text give the feeling of wandering in an expansive landscape where you finally meet a person who greets you with a hearty ‘hello’.

The book that made Nils-Aslak Valkeapää known to a larger public was *Ruoktu Váimmus* from 1985. It consists of three parts, three books that were earlier published separately but that Valkeapää chose to publish as one book with entirely new illustrations. The three texts received more attention when they were published together than when they came out singly, especially after the Swedish translation *Vidderna Inom Mig* was printed in 1987. At that time the Sámi authors’ society, together with the Faeroese and Greenlandic authors’ societies, had obtained the right to nominate books for the Nordic Council’s literature prize. *Ruoktu Váimmus* was nominated as the Sámi candidate for the prize in 1988, and the book was actually thought to be one of the favorites yet it did not receive the prize. Not until 1991 did he get it for the lyrical work *Beaivi, Áhčážan* that came out in a so-called Scandinavian translation the same year with the title *Solen, Min Far*. There the poems are translated into bokmål, nynorsk and Swedish in the same book but the photographs from the Sámi original are omitted at the wish of the author himself. The same is true for the translation of *Beaivi, Áhčážan* into English and Finnish. The fact that the poems are translated into three different languages in *Solen, Min Far* has to do with the fact that the statutes for the Nordic Council’s literature prize at that time required that nominated Sámi, Greenlandic and Faeroese books had to be available in Scandinavian before they could be assessed. The closest the translators came to Scandinavian was to use the three existing language forms spoken in those areas the Sámi inhabited.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää’s last book was *Eanni, Eannážan*. (This book is not yet translated into English but the title means *The Earth, My Mother*.) In the book we come to understand better how absorbed Nils-Aslak was with the importance of traditions to indigenous people. The book is meant to open up a wider perspective on the place and importance of indigenous peoples in the world and as such is both an extension and continuation of the prize-winning book *The Sun, My Father*. The Sámi stood at the centre of *The Sun, My Father*, while in *The Earth, My Mother* the first person narrator goes on a visit to other indigenous peoples in the jungle and the desert. It is nevertheless clear the whole time that the first person narrator is a guest; he does not pretend that he can be one of the peoples he visits, but he registers similarities in values and manner of living. In *Trekways of the Wind*, too, the first person narrator was on a visit to his kindred in Greenland and on the American prairie. So, in many ways in *The Earth, My Mother* we are presented with the completion



of the journey he began earlier. And thematically there are several similarities between *Ruoktu Váimmus* and *Eanni, Eannážan*, not least in the criticism of civilisation—it is man himself in all his self-righteous grandeur that is the greatest threat to all life on earth. The first person poet stands shoulder to shoulder with the oppressed and remembers in ironic expressions how the erudite and genteel people in their time used to look down on the northern indigenous people, yet they were not able to manage without help precisely from those they called primitive.<sup>4</sup>

Valkeapää also wrote a play that was performed twice in 1995 in Japan. In the original Sámi it was first staged at the Sámi theatre Beaivváš in 2007 as *Ridn’oaivi ja Nieguid Oaidni* (*The Frost-haired and the Dream-seer*). In this piece he shows clearly how we are all part of Nature, how everything is tied together and how we are connected to each other. The piece in many ways represents Valkeapää’s artistic testament and expresses the indigenous peoples’ view that the future for the whole human race is dependent on our showing respect for Mother Earth.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää died on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 2001. He was on his way home after a trip to Japan where he had been part of a chain poetry performance with Finnish and Japanese authors.<sup>5</sup> In order to have some support for the long journey Valkeapää traveled together with a Japanese friend, Junichiro Okura, who lives in Helsinki. It was at his friend’s house that Nils-Aslak Valkeapää died. He is buried at Birtavárre cemetery in Nord-Troms. On the gravestone is written:

Vuolggán  
Vuoi sáhtášin boahtit  
Manan guhkás  
Vuoi lagabus livččen  
Du váimmu

(I leave / in order to come / travel far away / in order to be closer / to your heart)

His epitaph comes from the poem which concluded his contribution to the ‘chain-poetry’ he participated in in Japan, and is a variant of a portion of the final poem of *Trekways of the Wind*.

4 For example, poem no. 416 in *The Sun, My Father*: ‘they were fine / noble gentlemen / could not sit by the fire’.

5 ‘Chain-poetry’ performance is an old Japanese poetic tradition and has the effect that several authors (in this case there were four) write poems that are chained together so that they make up a connected recitation. Nils-Aslak Valkeapää’s poem was the last link in the chain, and the entire ‘chain-poetry’ result was published in a Japanese newspaper at the same time as the performance at the festival.



## ‘My home is in my heart’

The section in *Trekways of the Wind* that starts with the poem ‘My home is in my heart’ covers 24 pages in all, including several pages with only illustrations and comprises a poetic whole. It shows how indigenous people the world over have tried to argue for their rights to land, water and spiritual values, but have not been understood because the penetrating colonists have not been willing to listen to another type of reasoning than what they themselves represent. The lack of a common frame of reference and the ability to communicate between the indigenous representative and the colonising new settler in the end makes the indigenous person silent: ‘I say nothing / [...] Just show them the wide expanses.’

The poem has clear parallels to the well-known speech Chief Seattle is supposed to have given in December of 1854 during the negotiations on an agreement between the local Indian tribes in the Washington territory in the present northwest corner of the USA and the newly named Governor and Chief Negotiator Isaac I. Stevens who represented the settlers in the area and the American President. Seattle’s speech was held in his own Indian language, Lushootseed, and one of those present, Dr. Henry Smith, took detailed notes according to sources. Thus we have a certain basis to relate to when we evaluate the well-known Indian Chief’s rhetorical question to the Governor’s wish to buy Indian land: ‘How can you sell or buy the air? If we do not own its freshness and the glimmer in the water, how then can the White man buy it from us?’<sup>6</sup> Essential here are the similarities to Nils-Aslak Valkeapää’s poem on the same theme, namely, the loss of the right to administer one’s land, one’s history and one’s identity.

Both texts represent indigenous literature on a high rhetorical level relating to the effort to get the colonists to understand that they must think differently about the land they want to conquer. In his speech Seattle explains to the white Governor how the land is one with the Indians, how their kinship and attachment is tied to the land and that they therefore cannot give it away. Valkeapää’s poem also has a Sámi parallel in an old epic yoik<sup>7</sup> that was

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6 Since then the speech has been rewritten several times. For additional information about Chief Seattle’s speech, see among others Furtwangler *Answering Chief Seattle* (1997), Kaiser ‘Chief Seattle’s Speech(es): American Origins and European Reception’ (1987) or Gifford et al. (eds.) *How Can One Sell The Air? Chief Seattle’s Vision* (2005). In his book Furtwangler briefly examines the attention the speech garnered as a result of the increased environmental awareness from the end of the 1960s and onwards. In 1987 the German scholar Rudolph Kaiser presented four different versions of Seattle’s speech: Smith’s ‘original’ from 1887, a new translation from 1969 made by William Arrowsmith on the basis of Smith’s Victorian English, another new translation done by Ted Perry (1970–71) on the basis of Arrowsmith’s text as a manuscript for an ecological film, and finally an adaptation of Perry’s version that ended up as an inscription for the *Spokane World’s Fair* in 1974. These versions are reproduced in the book *How Can One Sell The Air? Chief Seattle’s Vision*, with an introduction on Chief Seattle and the Indian tribe Squamish today.

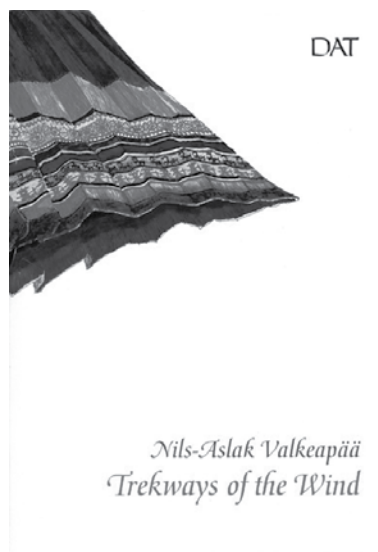
7 Read an analysis of the old yoik in Gaski, 2004. In addition, see J. Fellman (1906) for the actual text. A translation of Fellman’s text is available at the web-pages of the University of Texas: [<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/dieda/hist/fellman.htm>], but the translator only regards this to be a draft translation. Nevertheless, the translation gives an impression of what the text is all about.



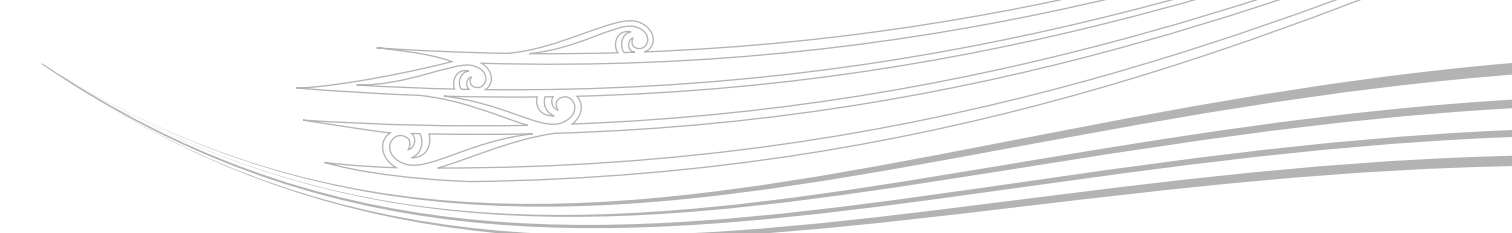
most probably presented as an antiphony between Noaidi, a shaman, and Suola, a thief, where the point is that it is the thief who has stolen dominion over the waters, the flowers and the fields. The shaman though has not given up his faith in the power of words, so he challenges his Sámi listeners to fight against the settler's dominance—a parallel to today's situation for the world's indigenous people in the cultural-political area.

The opening of Valkeapää's poem is a description of how 'My home' lives in the first person, how it is always with him everywhere and how the environment around the home ties good memories and closeness to him: 'The yoik is alive in my home / the happiness of children sounds there / herd-bells ring / dogs bark / the lasso hums / In my home / the fluttering edges of *gáktis* / the leggings of the Sámi girls / warm smiles'. The opening gives us the context in which to see the rest of the poem: it is full of precious and familiar sounds; it is reminiscent of the attraction of the billowing edges of the Sámi women's costumes and bell-clad leggings. (See also the book's cover illustration.) At the same time it includes the yoik and the smile that tie the heart and the home together.

Valkeapää is not afraid to use the word 'heart' in his poem in spite of it being perhaps the most clichéd expression of all. In Sámi it is a little different relative to the literary tradition: the poetic usage does not have as long a tradition and therefore has not managed to produce so many clichés. At the same time the poem creates a connection between the first person's emotional scale of feelings and a widened understanding of what home may be. The concept acquires a new dimension in the metaphor home-heart. The connection becomes so immediate that one no longer reacts to the way it is expressed. This is a parallel to the assertion that Valkeapää is not writing *about* nature but writing nature. One might say that it becomes even more striking in English: the first line in the verse sounds 'My home is in my heart'—something that can actually carry the thoughts of Country & Western music which, according to Valkeapää himself, is not so very unnatural since Country & Western has always had the same point of departure as the Sámi yoik, namely, the love of what is familiar and near.<sup>8</sup> The proximity, the familiarity—between the poet-first person (the person speaking) and us as listeners or as the primary addressees of the poem (the



<sup>8</sup> Personal communication.



Sámi readers)—is maintained and strengthened on page 2 in the section: ‘You know it brother / you understand sister’. But it is interrupted when the intruders are introduced: ‘but what do I say to strangers / who spread out everywhere / how shall I answer their questions / that come from a different world’. The opening idyll is broken, the cultural collision a fact. The parallel with the modernised version of Chief Seattle’s speech and the old Sámi yoik is obvious: how to get the other one, the outsider (who in addition thinks he has the power, authority and right to manage the correct understanding of the situation), to be able to see the matter from the side of the oppressed, of the minority?

The poetic images that follow are simple but very descriptive, besides making a significant part of what in the poem moves indigenous listeners all over the world.<sup>9</sup> This is the migratory belonging that is not tied to just one place but embraces the entire area that one moves in and forms the concept of what one understands as his home: ‘You are standing in my bed / my privy is behind the bushes / the sun is my lamp / the lake my wash bowl’.<sup>10</sup>

On the next page the conflict between the internal mutual understanding—the understanding that the author’s voice insists on through the constant reference to ‘you know brother / you understand sister’ and similar expressions—and the forces pressing from the outside is deepened. The intruders have law books that they display and can claim that the land does not belong to anyone and therefore falls to the State. This motif Valkeapää returns to further on in the poem and also in later books.<sup>11</sup> On the following page the author’s voice becomes more rhetorical in its way of referring to the questions of the outsiders by asking how one is supposed to explain the understanding of where the home is from the point of view of a nomadic lifestyle.

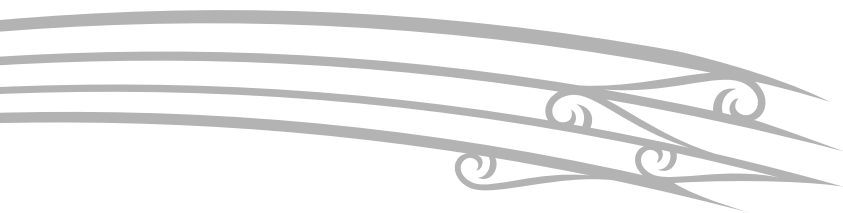
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9 Experienced personally on several occasions, especially those times I performed with Nils-Aslak at various international arrangements in the period 1993—2001 with what he used to call a ‘poetry concert’, that is, yoik and poetry combined with Sámi and English recitation.

10 Here I omit the illustrations that are on the same pages as the poems as well as the following five pages that are only images, before returning once more to the words and a specification of what the expanded definition of home implies, namely, that the whole *siida*, the whole area and all who live there, are included in the concept. It is not my intention to undervalue the meaning of the images as part of the total expression where poem and images belong together, but in this analysis I choose to concentrate on the words. It is not a matter of ekphrase poetry (poetry written as a comment to or inspired by images or visual art) but rather of Valkeapää’s multimedia or all-artistic expression, which I do not have room to look at more closely here in relation to the poetry section in question. I do, however, want to point out the one important fact about the images, namely that they symbolise several indigenous traditions including those of other circumpolar people. In this way they contribute to extending the poems’ content to be relevant to others and not just the Sámi. (The place names mentioned in the poem are Sámi and thereby situate the poem in Sápmi geographically, while the images draw their symbols from other indigenous peoples too).

11 See among others *The Sun, My Father*, especially poem no. 71 about the internal aspect. See also, for instance, in *Nu guhkkín dat mii lahka* (not translated into English yet) the poem about the asymmetrical relationship in the meeting between indigenous peoples and the colonisers that reads ‘we have lived here / from generation to generation / [...] but when / they / come / they find / this land, us / [...] and they walk through us / without seeing, as you see’. Both of these poems have the same painful undertone that one can find in ‘My home is in my heart’ and in the old antiphonal song, ‘The thief and the shaman’, where the minority’s representative has given up dominion over the land but still insists on linguistic and cultural freedom.





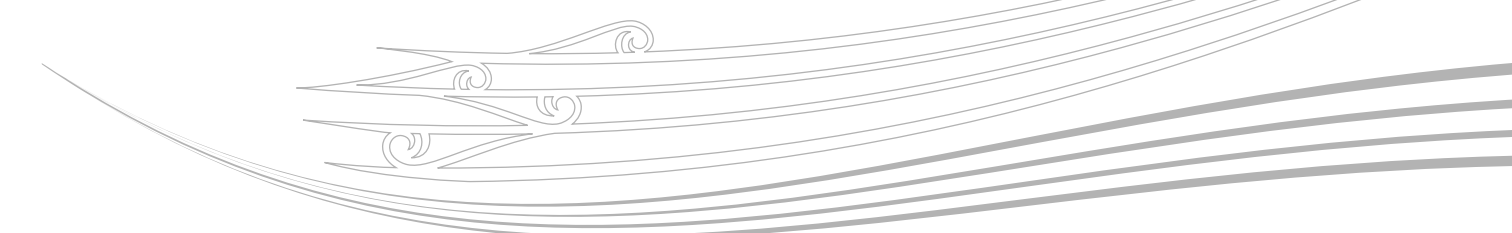
After having held forth in the poem about the meaning of the different places for the *siida*'s basis of life and about the connection of the geography and topography to the indigenous life-experience, the first person narrator returns to the contention of 'the others' about having right on their side: 'They come to me / and show books / Law books / that they have written themselves / This is the law and it applies to you too / See here'. Whereupon the dejected, almost defeatist answer comes: 'But I do not see brother / I do not see sister / I cannot / I say nothing / I only show them the tundra'. This answer has two levels of addressee. On the one hand, it conforms with the shaman's admission to the Thief in the old antiphonal song from the colonisation of Sámiland (Gaski, 2004: 42—45). This is a power-relational acceptance of the colonist's mastery over the Sámi. On the other hand, the shaman's message is also directed inward toward Sámi society as a negation of the above admission. Thus, between the lines, it constitutes a strong appeal to the Sámi to stand together in defense of linguistic and cultural rights. Valkeapää's text also expresses this resignation, but it is precisely in this apparent surrender of faith in the strength of one's own arguments that the opposition lies.<sup>12</sup> 'I only show them the tundra' is the resignation that is transformed into an understated opposition. From what the author's voice has told us readers so far about his own and his people's use of the tundra, there is no doubt that the strongest argument lies precisely in the documentation of the way nature, from the smallest details to the great relationships, has always represented *the home*.

After two more pages of illustrations without text, as if to allow the full content of the assertion 'I only show them the tundra' to sink into the reader, the first person narrator concentrates again primarily on internal communication. He sees the tundra, and we know this far into the text that the verb 'see' carries more meaning than just registering that the tundra is there. It means understanding how important it is for the first person narrator and his people, for their survival, their sense of belonging and indeed their very identity.

On the next page and again on the second last page of the poem section we almost move into the mythological sphere where the first person narrator's heart reflects the sounds that in this connection represent the mythological entities, namely the magic drum and the sacrificial stone. The sound of the beating of reindeer hooves can be reminiscent of the drumming on the magic drum, which has its counterpart in the thundering earth and the power of the sacrificial stone. In the chest of the first person narrator this 'it' is heard, which affirms for him that what he has said is true. He hears it both with open and closed eyes. Toward the end of the poem, he hears a voice call the blood's *yoik*<sup>13</sup> that comes from 'eallima duogábealde', thus in a way from the backside of life and continues or goes to the

12 An additional aspect that is interesting in this context is the Sámi tradition that shows disagreement by being silent, i.e., the very opposite of the Norwegian expression that 'he who is silent acquiesces'. Therefore the poem has a binary argumentation about itself: it first tries to explain to the intruders in a language they ought to understand, but when not even that avails then the poet returns to the Sámi tradition of being silent, which of course is also misunderstood by 'the others'.

13 His own blood that encompasses his ancestors and, thus, the memory of the people as a collective.



other side of life, 'eallima duogábeallái', 'from the dawn of life / to the dusk of life'. Thereby the Sámi case usage with inessive and illative is also included: 'bealde' (in, on, from) and 'beallái' (to).

This yoik of the blood leads us over to the last page of what makes up the text of the poem cycle. It is both a repetition of what is expressed on the previous pages and at the same time a summing up of the theme that points forward and that concludes by affirming the truth, the legitimacy, of what has been treated in the poem. This is that the geography, the moods towards the landscape and the people in it, the persons, the sisters and the brothers are all included in the first person narrator's heart, in his home: 'All of this is my home / these fjords rivers lakes / the cold the sunlight the storms / The night and day of the fields / happiness and sorrow / sisters and brothers / All of this is my home / and I carry it in my heart'.

In a way the construction of this poem section is almost like a monograph. It has an introductory presentation of the approach to the problem: belonging, identity and the right to one's own territory geographically, materially and spiritually. Further on there follows a more thorough documenting of the internal view of the question. Thereupon the conflict is introduced—through 'the others' diverging view of the matter forcing its way out. Then the argumentation documents almost down to the last detail the Sámi settlement and use of the areas over a long period, before the voice of the majority is expressed through reference to laws that they themselves have written. Herein lies the main parallel to the situation of other indigenous peoples: it is the coloniser who sets the conditions from which he himself assesses the situation and on the basis of which he judges. When the first person narrator has demonstrated that the communication is not functioning, he becomes an introvert and stresses even more strongly the emotional dimension of the matter; he ends the whole thing with an in-depth summation of the introductory presentation that 'My home is in my heart' and all that he carries with him.

The author's voice tries to get his own people to realise that what we believe and think is reasonable. Then we only have to try our best to argue face to face with the majority society for our own right. This is what the shaman did during the first period of colonisation and what many others have done since then. Valkeapää places himself into Sámi literary and cultural history on a level with the Sámi classical writers, Johan Turi and Paulus Utsi, who also stressed communication as an important means for increased understanding from the side of the majority society. They all place great weight on the inner values in Sámi culture, the pride of the people and how all of this is part of keeping up one's spirits and contributing to the continued existence of a Sámi lifestyle.

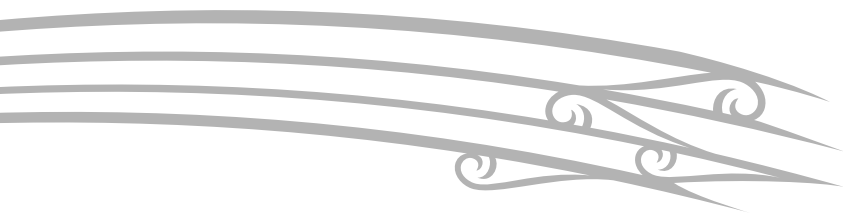


## The multimedia herd

In the rest of this article I wish primarily to demonstrate how poem no. 272 in *The Sun, My Father* functions intra-textually with Valkeapää's reindeer herd metaphors. The reindeer herd is a central motif in several of Valkeapää's books; it is found as pencil drawings in *Trekways of the Wind* and as photographs and painting in the book *Nu Guhkin Dat Mii Lahka* (not translated into English), in addition to the typographically-set reindeer herd in *The Sun, My Father*.







If we compare poem no. 272 in *The Sun, My Father* with the pencil drawings from *Trekways of the Wind* (without pagination) we see quite clearly that the same idea returns. The poem runs over several pages in the book: the herd is in motion from right to left, the opposite direction to our reading of the book. In both 'the poems' of the versions there are a couple of animals that stand a little off to the side from the rest of the herd, 'eaidánas ealli'.<sup>15</sup> While in no. 272 there are only tracks of the herd left on pages 7 and 8 in the poem, in *Trekways of the Wind* we zoom in on a close(r) picture of the herd on page 3 in the pencil drawing of the reindeer sequence. The two reindeer that are by themselves, separated from the rest of the herd on the first page of the article, are turned towards the herd, almost in the opposite direction, and thus emphasise the impression of an observer role, a parallel to the role of the artist in society or of the *noaidi*,<sup>16</sup> the shaman, in the old Sámi society.

I will return shortly to 'eaidánas ealli'. But while I am on the subject of the parallelism of this theme, the reindeer metaphors or Valkeapää's intra-textuality (or perhaps rather: intercommunication) with himself, I want to show how the reindeer herd is also included in the book that was made with a special eye to Valkeapää's participation in the opening ceremony at the Olympic Games in Lillehammer in 1994: *Nu Guhkkín Dat Mii Lahka (So Far the Near)*. In this book the herd is first represented as three photographs that immediately follow each other. This also constitutes a parallel to *Trekways of the Wind* in that in both books we come closer to the herd in the picture, drawing numbers two and three. In addition, the last image in the book shows a reindeer herd and the sun, two important symbols in Valkeapää's universe.

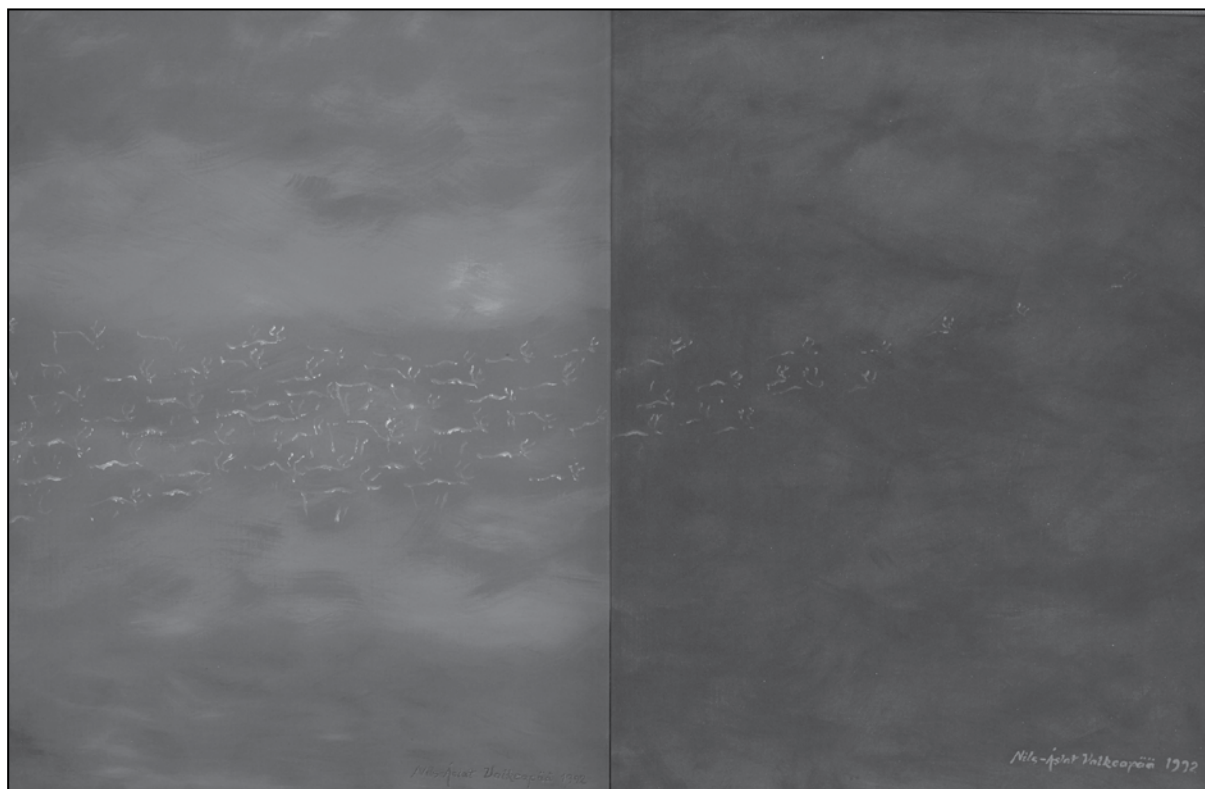
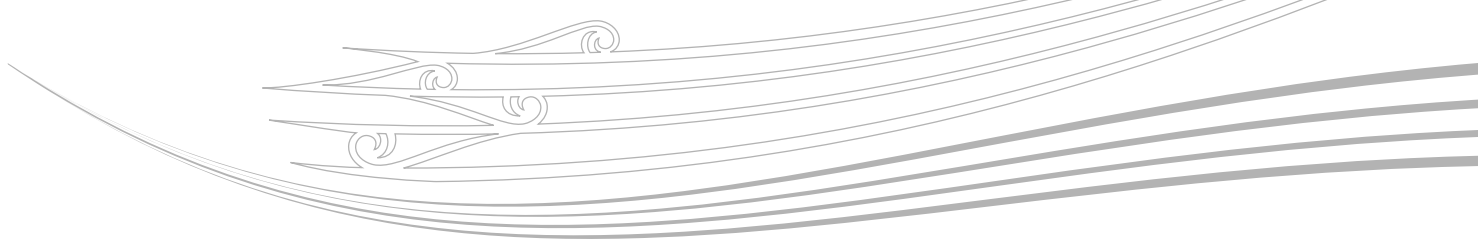
In *So Far the Near* there is, however, one important difference in the reindeer herd reproduction. In the paintings from 1992, reproduced about ten pages before the end of the book, another herd appears, an almost mythological reindeer herd.

The herd is on the move, but there are two essential differences in this herd compared with the other representations of the reindeer herds. Here the movement happens from left to right. Not only so, but the herd is not tied concretely to any base. It seems more as if it is flying or running away, up toward the sky. This is a possible allusion to the conclusion of poem no. 558 in *The Sun, My Father* where the first person narrator returns to the Sun, to father, which is also a movement away from the earth and upwards to the sky: 'the sky glows / I'm coming, / the Sun, my father / I am coming, I come / [...] a path / to the sun'.

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15 An animal that gets along best by itself (KN III: 859).

16 Noaidi was a key figure in the traditional Sámi belief system, most often he was a man, but there are also accounts of female noaidis. Noaidi was the main tradition bearer, the medicine man, and the main interpreter of the messages given by the sacred drum, which was instrumental in reading the future, not least the outcome of hunting and the result of curing and healing.



There are three paintings (the one above, and ones on pages 165 and 166). The painting on page 165 has the foremost reindeer (those that have come furthest up and forward) as hardly visible and seem to be disappearing into the clouds, into the sky. The next two paintings can dimly perceive a source of light that gives a clear gleam and outline of the individual animals in the herd, and as such strengthens the impression of a sun in the background that is drawing the herd towards itself.<sup>17</sup>

The paintings in this series are part of Valkeapää's more mythical and mythological productions. In these he has taken as a point of departure the rock carvings and magic drum figures and placed them in a new context, as bearers of a long tradition that in the Sámi case (that is to say, Valkeapää's use and understanding of it) goes all the way back to the Sámi creation myths and the time before Christianity was introduced. The motifs in

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17 This is also a parallel to Anders Fjellner's mythical poem 'Death of the Sun's daughter', which was written down around 1850, and is found in an English rendering among other places in Gaski (2003). The Sun's daughter says on her deathbed:

The sun slowly sinks, withdraws its light.  
The Sun's daughter to father goes,  
Takes with her too the Sun's children.  
Morning will come, will it not?



and of themselves are not new; they have followed Valkeapää the whole time from his first books but, as repeated paintings in a book, they represent here a new expression.

In spite of the fact that Nils-Aslak Valkeapää never owned a large reindeer herd in real life,<sup>18</sup> he compensated for this by writing, conjuring up, a private reindeer herd. In the perception of the artist's work, this imaginary herd takes on a separate concrete form of expression as represented on the book pages in the form of drawings, paintings, photographs, and, not least, as traces in words in the form of terms and typography that gives names to the individual animals. On top of all this, he places the herd in a phonetic and realistic working context while it is on the move.<sup>19</sup>

### 'Guolbanat coarvin sugadeame'

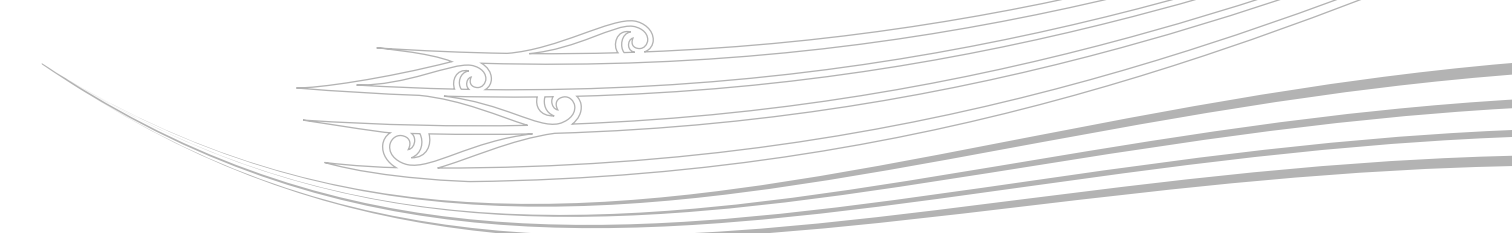
The prefaces to the Scandinavian and English editions of *Beaivi*, *Áhčážan* have different grounds for leaving poem no. 272 untranslated. In the preface to *Solen, min far* I argue that the poem is untranslatable: 'cannot be expressed in any other language than Sámi'. Thereafter follows an explanation of what the poem expresses: a reindeer herd, and how the poem contains an aesthetic dimension in addition to the linguistic, and how the typography and terminology usage participate in giving the poem life, and really set it in motion. The preface to the English translation is, naturally enough, more introductory both of Sámi culture and of the book itself. The explanation as to why poem no. 272 remains untranslated in *The Sun, My Father* points to the author's own wish that it should only be expressed in Sámi. The translators also draw support for the decision in Ezra Pound's remark that some things can only be expressed in the original language. Moreover, it is stressed that in addition to the linguistic dimension the poem also contains a visual way of thinking behind it.

Purely objectively, one can no doubt claim that it would be possible to translate the poem. Seen from the point of view of the translator, in principle everything should be able to be transferred to another language, but the question is what would be the purpose of such a translation? One possibility would be to do an explanatory rendering, such that one translates the terms in a descriptive way.<sup>20</sup> Thus where it is necessary one would preferably

18 Valkeapää himself on various occasions spoke about one of the reasons why he did not become a reindeer-herding Sámi, but chose another profession (for instance in a lecture at the University of Tromsø May 7–8, 1990). That explanation is the same as the first person narrator gives in poem no. 52 in *The Sun, My Father*: 'I was expected to / I ought to / kill / time stopped / my heart pounded / reached my ears / blood rushed in my head / I saw the eyes of the young female reindeer, in her eyes / tears / or in my eyes'.

19 On the CD where he himself reads aloud the poems from *The Sun, My Father*, it is clear that no. 272 is put into a context with a reindeer herd on the move (DATCD 10).

20 This would be a parallel to what Professor Israel Ruong did with the epic yoik 'Renarna på Oulavuolie (The Reindeer on Oulavuolie)', where he translated one Sámi term by using many explanatory words in Swedish and English (cf. *Yoik-Yoik*: 158-62). In that yoik, however, typography was not important, as there was no attempt at creating a visual comprehension of the text.



use several words in English to bring out the content of the Sámi term. It would be possible to do this with other poems, but in this special instance where one word in most cases stands for a concrete reindeer, one would either have to reduce the number of animals in the herd to maintain the typography, or alternatively increase the number of pages in the book. In this way it might be possible to maintain the typographical setting, even if one would have to use many more words than the original has in order to make the reindeer names understandable for an English reader. This would disturb the balance in what the typography and terminology represent in the Sámi original.<sup>21</sup>

In principle there is thus no talk about untranslatability per se, but because of the poem's other artistic intentions and references to facts, the need for a translation is less compelling. In the same way as a reindeer herd grazing and in motion during migration will be exotic for outsiders to observe, it might be just as exotic to allow the visual expression to dominate the reading of poem no. 272 in *The Sun, My Father*. Printing the poem in Sámi even in a translation would perhaps somehow allow the foreign reader to appreciate its visual impact even though not understanding the words. Besides there is the important additional aspect that the author has read aloud all of *Beaivi, Áhčážan* on CD and cassette, including music and natural sounds, so the reader/listener also has another medium to relate to, or through which to acquire extra information and perception.<sup>22</sup>

## Observer and object on the same tundra

If we take the first page of the poem as an example, 'láidsteaddji uuuuuuu uuuuuu roahpebiellu gunká', we already have here two words that in Konrad Nielsen's dictionary take up considerable space in laying out their meaning: 'Láidsteaddji' is 'the one who (walking or driving) leads a reindeer after himself in order to get the others to follow along', (KN I: 484); 'roahpebiellu' means 1) large rectangular iron bell with coarse, rough sound,

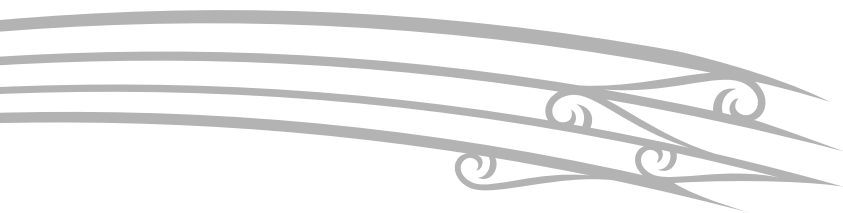
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21 What is problematic with such an explanatory translation, however, would be that one would most probably have to reduce the number of special terms that one chooses to have in the poem. This in turn would mean reducing the number of reindeer in the herd, implying that one would be rustling someone else's reindeer! This would be unethical with regard both to the law and to Sámi tradition. Precisely with this sort of challenge Nils-Aslak Valkeapää brings out what is special about the Sámi language, and the poem is in this manner supplied with a politicised dimension precisely by the simple fact that it demonstrates that the Sámi language is superior to English for describing Sámi experiences. Additionally, the author manages to connect language and reality together in a form that through its practice makes an interesting comment on the representational part of linguistic activity.

There exists another way of solving the translation problem, simply by letting the original stand, and provide a glossary of the specific terms for the interested. This is done by Professor John Weinstock in his animation of the reindeer herd on the web. See <http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/diehtu/siida/reindeer/poem.htm>. In this way the Sámi original is preserved in form but a glossary of the terms allows the curious to investigate further.

22 According to oral communication with Kathleen Dana on May 22 1988 at Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont in the USA, the combination of visual expression in reading the book and listening to Valkeapää's own recitation of poem no. 272 functioned perfectly in the classroom situation with her students. Before playing the tape, Professor Dana had an introduction to the Sámi original as well as the English rendering without pictures, *The Sun, My Father*.





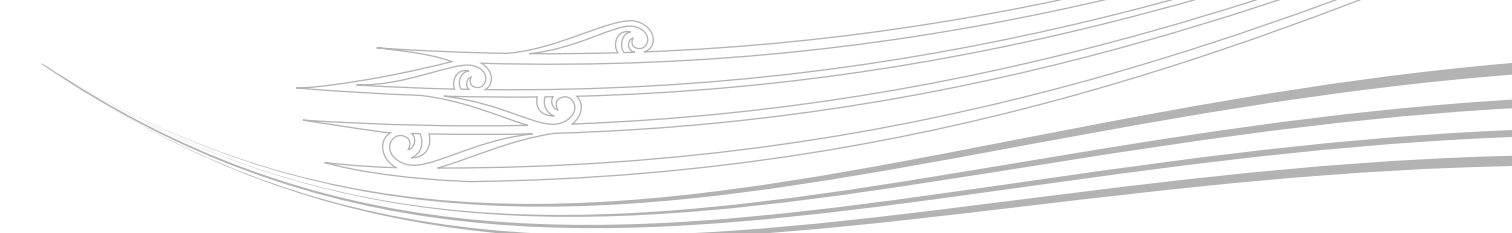
2) name of a female reindeer that has such a bell' (KN III: 308). Moreover, this one line in the poem is written in italics. In comparison with the rest of the poem's setting, this is supposed to indicate that onomatopoeia tied with reindeer and migration is included as an important component: on the one hand, the 'uuuuuuu' sounds are of course reminiscent of shouts, driving shouts to get the herd to move. On the other hand, 'roahpebiellu gunká' tells us that the bell is ringing, and therefore that the reindeer wearing the bell is moving.

The next page of the poem affirms the impression that the text in italics represents onomatopoeic expressions that also create rhyme and vowel harmony, in addition to alliteration and assonance: 'duoddarat eallun bárusteame báraideame máraideame'. The main message in this line is that the tundra is billowing as a herd, for 'duoddarat' is tundra, 'eallun' is the essive of *eallu*, a herd, and all three following verbs signify wavy motions. For their part the words in normal script describe being furthest forward in the herd, being leader and pathfinder.

It is not my intention to interpret every single word in this long poem, but I wish to explain sufficiently thoroughly that a reader with no Sámi experience gets the impression of how carefully thought out the representation of the reindeer herd is, and also how the reindeer herd represents something more than just the herd itself. Page 3 of the poem concerns a billowing landscape represented by waving reindeer antlers, but also amusing compounds like 'čoarvemearran biellobalvan' (like a sea of antlers as bell clouds) and 'leavedolgin girjjohallá' (motley as a lucky feather).<sup>23</sup> The non-italic script represents various reindeer, cows and bulls, and various reindeer names based on hair colour.

The italic script on page 4 still sustains movement and shows how the entire tundra is alive with the reindeer herd, but at the same time it also affirms that this represents the northern area's basis of life, *davviguovllu eallenvuođđu*. The non-italic-script that is above the italic brings in new reindeer names, while the writing below is taken up by nouns and verbs. The substantives are for reindeer names, while the verbs describe motion connected with the reindeer's way of moving, while the words furthest down such as 'gurgalit' and 'šávihit' mean to begin to go or move lined up in a row (KN II: 241) and to come pouring along with a great noise (KN III: 636). 'Skavgalit' means to frighten or chase away (KN III: 429). These words together with the typography that is busy allowing the words (read: the animals) to spread out across the whole page, contributes to giving an impression of a herd on the verge of spreading out, something that is affirmed on the next two pages where the herd is spread over both book pages.

<sup>23</sup> A feather that brings luck. 'People who wear a leavedolgi are lucky in finding all sorts of things.' (KN II: 605).



The first animal we meet at the top of page 5 in the poem is *menodahkes, eaidánas ealli*,<sup>24</sup> which also represents the animal that thrives best by itself. *Menodahkes* is used of reindeer, horses or cows that are in the habit of trying to avoid being taken hold of. When it occurs as the first morpheme of a reindeer name, it refers to the reindeer's appearance, as for example, *menodahkes čuoivvat* (KN II: 653). *Eaidánas ealli*, *eaidánas* means a person or animal that prefers to keep to itself. It comes from the verb *eaidat*, to become a stranger to something or someone, to keep apart by itself, without having anything to do with others (KN III: 859).

On the other side of the herd, furthest down the page, we have two new verbs, 'ravgat' and 'oaguhit', where the first one means to be frightened and go away, run away, especially for reindeer (KN III: 267), while *oaguhit* means to let a reindeer or a horse walk, or to drive carefully with reindeer when the snow cover is poor or the animal is tired (KN III: 154—44). The verb just above is 'lávdá', which means that a herd spreads out (KN II: 510), which affirms and is affirmed by the visual impression we get from the typographical arrangement of the words on the page. Again we have the same distribution on both sides of the italicised text, namely that on the upper part of the page are the nouns, the animals, the terms, while on the lower part of the page is a mixture of both nouns and verbs. The verbs represent movement and sound. The italicised text is introduced with *gearráda* that describes the waves washing up on land, while line number two plays on the similarity in sound in verbs and nouns where the herd stands in the centre. This is also the case with words like 'jiellat' (eyeball), and 'geallu' (how it shines, radiates from the herd), in themselves clear, positive-valued words that strengthen the emotional dimension in the text with regard to what is being described.

On page 6 of the poem furthest up the page we meet 'iđat' and 'iđihit', which mean respectively a strange reindeer that appears in the herd (KN II: 363) and to 'get roaming reindeer into one's herd' (KN II: 364). The two words are a noun and a verb from the same root. It is natural that these are placed at the edge of the herd where of course they first come in, and on the other side of the herd we meet 'ravdaboazu' and others that mean reindeer that stay at or near the edge of the herd (KN III: 264). The herd on the book pages is in other words put together in a very realistic manner, almost an identical rendering of a real reindeer herd. At the same time the herd has clear parallels to humans in a crowd.

On the same page there are also people. They are there from a geographic connection relative to the seasonal dwelling place. They are identified by the nouns 'njárggahas'

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24 This animal, the figure or metaphor for the somewhat withdrawn observer or evaluator we meet most clearly again in poem no. 558. There, too, it occurs at the top of page 3 in the long poem (thus occupying the same position as in no. 272), but there it is more clearly representative of the artist's view or the shaman's panorama over the society that the concerned party is a member of, although this position/role requires a certain detachment from that same society.



and 'suolohas'. The first means one who stays on a peninsula (i.e., undertakes summer migration to a peninsula), and the second means one who has a summer dwelling place on an island. They are also identified as herders by the terms 'guođoheaddji' and 'eallogoahkka'. Furthermore the verbs on this page describe human activity more than on the preceding pages, both in the shape of one seeing the herd, geahčadit, and missing animals that should have been there. There are also several words that can be glossed as drive-shout to get the herd to move. What is interesting is that the words furthest to the right on the page are of this type, while the words furthest left (and thus in the direction the herd is moving) describe the sounds that the herd and the bells make. This implies that the herders have got the herd moving so that it is now in motion from right to left. By contrast, we continue our reading of the poem further through the book in the left to right direction that we normally read the text, so that the herd is again behind us. We walk in the opposite direction to it, and end up only seeing the tracks after the herd has passed.

The writing in italics on this page contains both sounds that the reindeer make, landscape, movement and finding and staying on the track even if it is snowed over and can hardly be made out (*doalli*, KN I: 544), together with an allusion to the text in the Sámi national anthem 'dávvgáid vuolde' (under the Big Dipper—almost a mythical reference to Sámiland). All of this helps unite the thematics in the two font types in the poem on the second last page. It also mediates and stands for a double relationship to the Sámi existence, not only as belonging to this area both through the activity and adaptation that reindeer herding represents, but also through a mythical legitimising that this is our land—Sámiland. None of this is mentioned explicitly in comprehensible text, but it is conveyed only through what for Sámi readers would be a well-known reference, namely to Isak Saba's 'Sámi people's song'. This includes the words 'Guhkkin davvin dávvgáid vuolde, sabmá suolggai Sámieatnan' (Far up north under the Big Dipper, slowly rises Sámiland). Like so many other of Valkeapää's texts, this poem about a reindeer herd migrating has about it these extra culturally-cued implications that ties it to myths, ideas and practical everyday life in a combination that opens the eyes of the observer to see the well-known through a new lens.

It is interesting to note the detail that, because our reading of the poem and the herd's migration go in opposite directions, the drive-shouts to get the herd to move ahead become the words we take with us on our further reading of the book. Both the herd and we as readers are urged on and hurried by the same words, but we are driven in opposite directions. The tracks (the dotted lines) that start on this page (page 6 of the poem) and continue over the whole of the next page without another word therefore become the tracks of the herd that has now passed and the tracks that we make on our wandering in the same landscape. But at the same time they exemplify and demonstrate how closely connected animals and people are with each other in natural man's holistic and ecologically based understanding of our presence on Mother Earth.

## Mu ruoktu lea mu váimmus

Mu ruoktu lea mu váimmus  
ja dat johtá mu mielde

Mu ruovttus eallá luohti  
gullo mánáid illudeapmi  
Biellut skállet doppe  
beatnagat cillet  
suohtan njurggasta  
Mu ruovttus šlivggodit  
láddegávtti healmmi  
sámi nieiddažiid biddojuolggit  
liegga modji

Mu ruoktu lea mu váimmus  
ja dat johtá mu mielde

Don diedát dan viellja  
don ipmirdat oabbá  
muhto máid dajan deidda apmásiidda  
geat gokčēt dán visot  
máid dajan sin jearaldagai'e  
geat bohtet eará máilmmis

Mot sáhtttá čilget  
ahte ii oro gostege  
dehege orru gal  
muhto mun orun  
buohkain dáin duoddariin  
ja don čuoččut mu seanggas  
mu hivsset lea duoid miestagiid duohkin  
beaivi lea mu lámpu  
jávri lávgunlihti

Mot čilget  
ahte váibmu lea mu ruoktu  
ja dat sirdása mu mielde  
Mot čilget  
ahte doppe orrot maddái earát  
mu vieljat ja oappát

Máid mun dajan viellja  
máid mun dajan oabbá

Dat bohtet  
ja jerret gos du ruoktu lea  
Dat buktet báhpiriid  
ja dadjet  
dát ii leat geange  
dát lea Riikka eanan  
Riikka visot  
Dat ohcet assás duolva girjiid  
ja dadjet  
dá lea láhka  
ja dát guoská dunai

Máid mun dajan oabbá  
máid mun dajan viellja

Don diedát dan viellja  
don ipmirdat oabbá

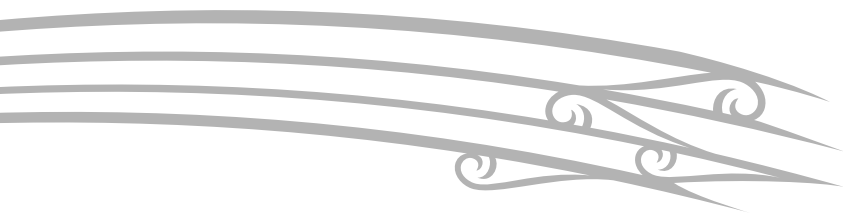
Muhto go dat jerret gos lea du ruoktu  
dajatgo don ahte dát visot  
Skuolfedievás mii lávostalaimet  
giđđajohtolatáigge  
Čáppavuomis mis lei goahti ragatáigge  
Min geasseorohat lea Ittunjárga  
ja dálvet min bovccot leat Dálvadasa  
guovlluin

Don diedát dan oabbá  
don ipmirdat viellja

Min máddarat leat dolastallan Allaorddas  
Stuorajeakke balssain  
Viiddesčearus  
Áddjárrohki hohkai vuonas guollebivddus  
Áhkkováidni lávii suidnet Šelgesrođus  
Áhčči riegádii Finjubávtti vuollái boaldi  
buollašii

Ja vel dat jerret  
gos lea du ruoktu

Dat bohtet mu lusa



ja čájehit girjjiid  
Láhkagirjjiid  
maid sii leat ieža čállán  
Dá lea láhka ja dát guoská dunai  
Geahča

Muhto in mun geahča viellja  
in geahča oabbá  
in jienát maidege  
in sáhte  
Čájehan fal duoddariidda

Ja mun oainnán min duoddariid  
min orohagaid  
ja gulan váimmu dearpame  
dát lea mu ruoktu visot dát  
ja mun guottán  
dan iežan siste  
váimmustan

Mun gulan dan  
go bijan čalmmiid gitta  
mun gulan dan

Gulan juostá  
čietnjalasas iežan siste  
eatnama dapmama gulan  
duháhiid gaccaid dearpame  
ealu ruvgaleame gulan  
vuoit noaidegárrigo  
ja bálvvosgeađgi  
fuobmán  
juostá mu rattis  
savkala jienáda huiká čuorvu  
gupmamiin báhcá dávistit  
ratti ravddas ravdii

Ja mun gulan dan  
vaikko vel rabašin čalmmiidge  
mun gulan

Juostá mu siste čietnjalasas  
gulan  
jiena gohččuma  
ja vara juoigama gulan  
Čietnjalasas  
eallima duogábealde  
eallima duogábeallai

Dát visot lea mu ruoktu  
dát vuonat jogat jávrrit  
dát buollašat beaivvážat garradálkkit  
Dáid duoddariid ija ja beaivvi bealli  
illu ja moraš  
oappát ja vieljat  
Dát visot lea mu ruoktu  
ja mun guottán dan váimmustan

Ruoktu váimmus, DAT 1985

## The Poem by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää:

### My home is in my heart

My home is in my heart  
it migrates with me  
The yoik is alive in my home  
the happiness of children sounds there  
herd-bells ring  
dogs bark  
the lasso hums  
In my home  
the fluttering edges of gáktis  
the leggings of the Sámi girls  
warm smiles

My home is in my heart  
it migrates with me

You know it brother  
you understand sister  
but what do I say to strangers  
who spread out everywhere  
how shall I answer their questions  
that come from a different world

How can I explain  
that I cannot live in just one place  
and still live  
when I live  
among all these tundras  
You are standing in my bed  
my privy is behind the bushes  
the sun is my lamp  
the lake my wash bowl

How can I explain  
that it moves with me  
How can I explain  
that others live there too  
my brothers and sisters

What shall I say brother  
what shall I say sister

They come  
and ask where is your home  
they come with papers  
and say

this belongs to nobody  
this is government land  
everything belongs to the State  
They bring out dingy fat books  
and say  
this is the law  
it applies to you too

What shall I say sister  
what shall I say brother

You know brother  
you understand sister

But when they ask where is your home  
do you answer them all this  
On Skuolfedievvá we pitched our lávvu  
during the spring migration  
Čáppavuopmi is where we built our goahti  
during rut  
Our summer camp is at Ittunjárga  
and during the winter our reindeer are in  
Dálvadas

You know it sister  
you understand brother

Our ancestors kept fires on Allaorda  
on Stuorajeaggis's tufts  
in Viiddesčearru  
Grandfather drowned in the fjord while fishing  
Grandmother cut her shoe grass in Šelgesrohtu  
Father was born in Finjubákhti in burning cold  
And still they ask  
where is your home

They come to me  
and show books  
Law books  
that they have written themselves  
This is the law and it applies to you too  
See here

But I do not see brother  
I do not see sister  
I cannot  
I say nothing  
I only show them the tundra  
I see our fjelds the places we live  
and hear my heart beat



all this is my home  
and I carry it  
within me  
in my heart

I can hear it  
when I close my eyes  
I can hear it

I hear somewhere  
deep within me  
I hear the ground thunder  
from thousands of hooves  
I hear the reindeer herd running  
or is it the noaidi drum  
and the sacrificial stone  
I discover  
somewhere within me  
I hear sound whisper shout call  
with the thunder still echoing  
from rib to rib

And I can hear it  
even when I open my eyes  
I hear it  
Somewhere deep within me  
I can hear it  
a voice calling  
and the blood's yoik I hear  
In the depths  
from the dawn of life  
to the dusk of life

All of this is my home  
these fjords rivers lakes  
the cold the sunlight the storms  
The night and day of the fjelds  
happiness and sorrow  
sisters and brothers  
All of this is my home  
and I carry it in my heart

From Nils-Aslak Vakeapää (1985), *Ruoktu váimmus*, (*Trekways of the Wind* [1994])  
Translated by Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström,  
and Harald Gaski

### Dictionary:

Allaorda	Place name meaning 'high timberline'.
Čáppavuopmi	Place name meaning 'beautiful forested valley'.
Dálvadas	Place name meaning 'winter grazing land and / or winter camp site'.
Finjubákti	Place name meaning 'the leaning cliff'.
Fjeld	(Norw.) A rocky, barren plateau of the Scandinavian peninsula.
Gákti	The colorful Sámi coat.
Goahti	The traditional winter Sámi dwelling, often dome shaped and composed of a wooden frame covered with a layer of birch bark and chunks of peat moss.
Ittunjárga	A peninsula in the Lyngen Fjord; also called the Reindeer Valley.
Lávvu	The traditional Sámi 'tent' used during the migration of the reindeer and is almost identical in shape to the Plains Indians teepee. Nowadays, the lávvu has become very popular as outdoor dwelling all year round.
Skuolfedievvá	Place name meaning 'the owl slope'.
Stuorrajeaggi	Place name meaning 'the large marsh'.
Šelgesrohtu	Place name meaning 'shining brush forest'.
Viiddesčearru	Place name meaning 'wide mountain'.
Yoik	Traditional Sámi singing. It is usually performed solo, without any accompanying instruments. Yoik was formerly connected with old Sámi religious practices. Another important use of yoik was to uphold myths and stories of the past.



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