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An Indigenous Research Perspective on Sámi Visual Artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää

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Abstract

This article examines artworks by Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää from the mid-1970s to the end of the 1990s through a new, innovative approach. Traditional art history methods are used and theories from art historians Ernst Gombrich and Erwin Panofsky are combined with Indigenous and Sámi research. Valkeapää wanted to create Sámi imagery, taking inspiration from prehistoric rock carvings, the patterns on the magic drums of Sámi shamans, early Sámi artist Johan Turi's paintings, and Sámi handicrafts.

Keywords: Sámi visual art, illustration, Sámi research, Indigenous research, art history, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, Johan Turi

Introduction

This article discusses the visual art of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (also known as Áilu, Áillu and Áillohaš, 1943–2001) from the mid-1970s to the end of the 1990s. Valkeapää created Sámi imagery through his art, striving to develop specific Sámi images and to interpret old ones through modern experiences, despite the fact that the connection to the old visual heritage of Sámi drums had been broken. According to Valkeapää, ancient Sámi imagery is a language, but those ancient symbols must be read and used in contemporary way, as a new form of artistic expression (Lehtola 2002, 118). Valkeapää took inspiration from prehistoric rock carvings, the patterns on the magic drums of Sámi shamans, early Sámi artist Johan Turi's paintings, and Sámi handicrafts. In my analysis, traditional art history methods are used and theories from art historians Ernst Gombrich and Erwin Panofsky are combined with Indigenous and Sámi research.

Valkeapää was a versatile artist who was well-known nationally and internationally as a representative of Sámi culture. He contributed to the revival of the vanishing Sámi yoik singing tradition, which has become a symbol of the Sámi national spirit (Lehtola 2002, 70). As well as being a musician, Valkeapää was a writer, a visual artist, and a socially influential figure

who was regarded as a cultural ambassador for the Sámi. He played an important role in awakening and strengthening the national spirit of the Sámi in Finland.

First, I shall briefly introduce Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's life and use his extensive repertoire of various art forms to interpret his visual art. In the following chapters, I describe my methodology. Finally, I test my multimethodological approach by analysing Valkeapää's art and visual productions.

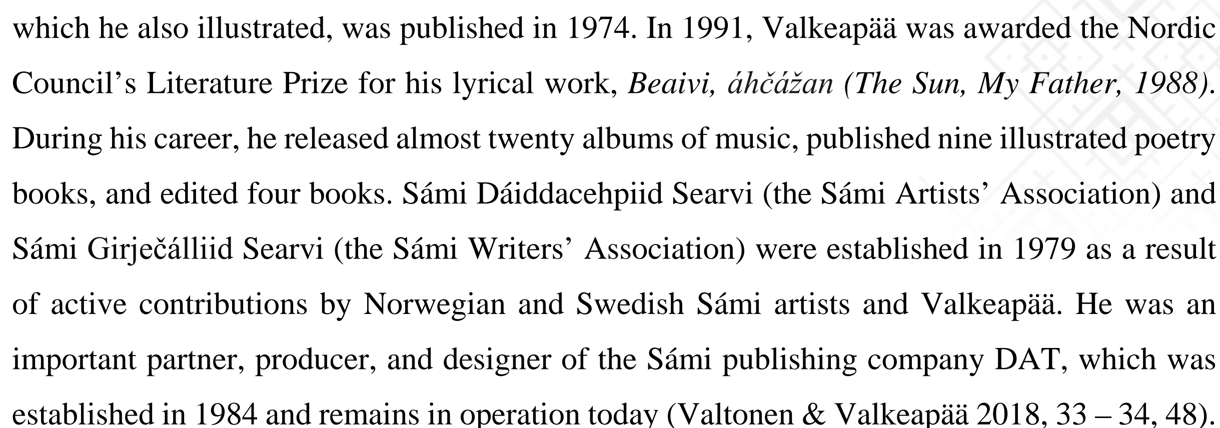
No beginning, no end

In the middle of the 1990s, Elina Helander interviewed Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, who said that he had always engaged in painting, singing yoiks, and writing and that in this creative work, there is 'no beginning, no end' (Helander and Kailo 1999, 119). According Lehtola (2002):

> The worldviews of the Sámi hunting society and nomadic
> society reflected their adaptation to the northern environment
> and way of life. The mythology of these societies
> was closely bound to nature, depicting issues linked to wild reindeer,
> bears, and other animals. The cosmos of these migrant people followed cycles
> symbolizing the year and life.

Valkeapää spent his childhood in a Sámi reindeer-herding community that migrated annually with its herd until the end of the 1950s. His mother tongue was Northern Sámi, and he adopted a Sámi worldview. He became familiar with Western art and culture first at school and later at Kemijärvi Teachers' Training College (1960–1966), where he studied art history, drawing, painting with pastels and watercolours, working with clay to understand three-dimensional art, wood cutting, colour theory, composition and perspectives, among other things. He gained a basic understanding of and good skills not only in visual arts, but also in many other fields of art. Teachers' training colleges boosted the art careers of many artistically talented Finnish youngsters at a time when art academies and art schools existed only in Helsinki and Turku (Hautala-Hirvioja 2017a, 70).

His first book, *Terveisiä Lapista* (*Greetings from Lapland*, 1971), highlighted the situation of the Sámi at the time and it made a strong ethno-political statement. Later, Valkeapää preferred to influence attitudes through his art rather than political pamphlets. His first book of poetry,



which he also illustrated, was published in 1974. In 1991, Valkeapää was awarded the Nordic Council's Literature Prize for his lyrical work, *Beaivi, áhčážan (The Sun, My Father, 1988).* During his career, he released almost twenty albums of music, published nine illustrated poetry books, and edited four books. Sámi Dáiddacehpiid Searvi (the Sámi Artists' Association) and Sámi Girječálliid Searvi (the Sámi Writers' Association) were established in 1979 as a result of active contributions by Norwegian and Swedish Sámi artists and Valkeapää. He was an important partner, producer, and designer of the Sámi publishing company DAT, which was established in 1984 and remains in operation today (Valtonen & Valkeapää 2018, 33 – 34, 48).

According to Marjut Aikio (2005, 89), Finnish painter Reidar Särestöniemi (1925–1981) met Valkeapää for the first time in the summer of 1966 in Kittilä in western Lapland. The painter listened to Valkeapää's music and invited the whole band to his studio. The group ended up staying there for a few days. Särestöniemi was a musician as well, and both artists understood Arctic nature; they identified themselves with nature and with the beliefs, spirits, and stories of earlier generations. Valkeapää often visited Särestöniemi's studio in Kittilä, and it was there that the painter taught him to use oil and tempera colours. In the summer of 1972 Valkeapää composed the yoik *Ná reidaran mole* (Reidar is Painting) for Eeli Aalto's film about Särestöniemi. A Sámi yoik about a person is significant, and the yoik was Valkeapää's tribute to his friend. In 1981, when the Nordic Arts Centre organised the first Sámi art exhibition—*Sámi dáidda*, a touring exhibition showing the relationship between traditional Sámi handicrafts and contemporary art—Särestöniemi was selected as the representative of Finnish Sámi art (Puisto 1981, 130; Aikio & Aikio 2005, 138; Hautala-Hirvioja 2017b, 103–104).

Until 1972 painting was a hobby, but from that year onwards it became increasingly professional activity (Valtonen & Valkeapää 2018, 42). Valkeapää's paintings were displayed for the first time in Koutokeino and Oulu in 1973. Next, the Nordic Library Conference invited Valkeapää to hold a solo exhibition at the Rovaniemi City Library in 1975. After these exhibitions, he concentrated on writing and making illustrations and graphics for his own albums and publications as well as for books by other Sámi writers (Hautala-Hirvioja 2018, 283 – 284).

The new genre of music created by Valkeapää was internationally recognised. He composed music and acted in the first Sámi fiction film *Ofelaš* (*The Pathfinder*, 1987). It was made by

Norwegian Sámi Nils Gaup and was nominated for an Academy Award in the Best International Feature Film category, but it did not win an Oscar (Tuoriniemi 1988, 49). Valkeapää cooperated with the Sami theatre, too. He was awarded the Prix Italia in 1993 – a special prize awarded through an international radio contest – for *Goase dušše* (*Bird Symphony*). He performed together with Finnish musicians Esa Kotilainen and Paroni Paakkunainen in the opening ceremony of the *1994* Winter Olympics in Lillehammer and was responsible for the cultural programme of the games (Lehtola 2002, 124; Valtonen & Valkeapää 2018, 29–34).

In an interview in 1991, Valkeapää considered writing to be more important than painting. He said, 'Painting is therapy for me. I want to keep it to myself. It is not my profession' (Talvensaari 1991). However, he held four exhibitions in Norway and Denmark in the beginning of the 1990s. Having been elected as the leading artist for the cultural programme at the Lillehammar Winter Olympics, Valkeapää had numerous exhibitions from 1993 to 1994 in several countries, including the United States, Japan, Spain, and Germany (Valtonen & Valkeapää 2018, 44).

Valkeapää was seriously injured in a car accident near his home in northwestern Lapland in February 1996, after which health issues forced him to move to Skibotn, Norway. Following a traditional Sami method, a hexagonal *Lásságámmi* house was built there. Valkeapää withdrew from public life, but continued to write, take photos, and make three-dimensional artworks using natural materials (Valtonen & Valkeapää 2018, 44). He had been a keen photographer since the end of the 1950s, and from the beginning of the 1990s, he used his photos in his illustrations. He openly discussed his situation and told in 2001 that he could not draw meticulously anymore because of the accident. He enjoyed walking on beaches along the shore of the Arctic Ocean and finding treasures, such as pieces of driftwood, shells, rocks, stones, and bones, which he used in his artworks (Holma 2011).

His last book, *Eanni, Eannážan* (*Mother, My Little Mother*), was published in 2001. Besides many prizes, he was also awarded honorary doctorates at the University of Oulu and the University of Lapland. Valkeapää died in Espoo in 2001 at the age of 58 as he was returning home from a trip to Japan (Valtonen & Valkeapää 2018, 55; Lehtola 2002, 129).

Research position

The methodology applied in this study is based on Indigenous and Sámi research and on art history. In addition, E.H. Gombrich's ideas and Erwin Panofsky's studies of iconography have been applied. Theories such as feminist, posthumanist, race, and class theories share the same perspective as Indigenous research in that knowledge in itself is not seen as the ultimate goal. According to Shawn Wilson in *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, 'Both paradigms share the axiology that a research is not seen as worthy or ethical if it does not help to improve the reality of research participants' (2008, 37). Indigenous and traditional ways of thinking enrich and broaden Westernised scientific understanding and analysis. Today, it seems to be possible to connect both traditions, that is, academic and indigenous knowledge and research (Ahvenjärvi 2017, 54): 'Contacts between science and Indigenous knowledge can be referred to as postcolonial moments.... During postcolonial moments, cultural and human diversity has been taken into account, and even respected' (Helander-Renvall 2016, 141).

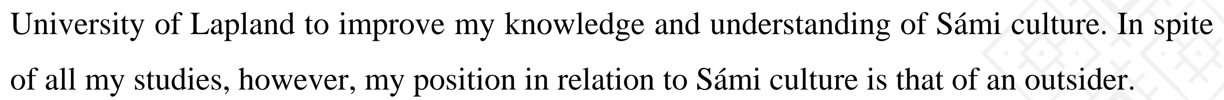
During the study years at Kemijärvi Teachers' Training College, Valkeapää's Sámi-mindedness became stronger (Valtonen & Valkeapää 2017, 21–24). By heritage, Valkeapää was Sámi, but his education and artistic training had been completed at institutions set up by national majority populations (Lehtola 2002, 118). Against this background, a mixed-method approach that combines art history with Indigenous and Sámi research is the most appropriate way to analyse his art.

To understand Indigenous methodologies, *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook* is a good work to start with. It begins positively: 'Congratulations! In opening this book, you have engaged in an act of decolonization' (Waziyatawin and Michael Yellow Bird 2005, 1). Through this book, I learnt to identify hidden colonial aspects and to avoid them, which I found very important. When using Indigenous methodology, it is ethically correct to present one's background, one's relationship to the research subject, and one's motives (Chilisa 2012, xix–xx; Kuokkanen 2007, ix–xxii; Smith 2012, 22–232). This is essential because all ideas, knowledge, and interpretations are developed through relationships. One of the most critical aspects is the ethical responsibility to ensure that knowledge and people are not exploited (Wilson 2008, 134; Kovach 2010, 36).

Researchers must understand that their own experiences, education, and worldviews influence their research and that when using Indigenous methodology, it is necessary to understand and articulate one's own place and trammels (Seurujärvi-Kari 2011, 35). One must position oneself to show the interpretative lens, to open up one's intentions, and to be able to reflect (Kovalach 2010, 46; Chilisa 2012, 177). My identity is Finnish and urban; I was born in Oulu, about 500 kilometres south of the Sámi area. Since 1970, the Sámi language has been taught at the University of Oulu[1]. Before my art history studies, I studied in Oulu at Teachers' Training College (1976–1979) and I had Sámi college friends. My paternal ancestors were Sámi, but their Sámi language changed to Finnish at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The following generation built a farmhouse in Alakurtti. My father's family lost their home after the Winter War (1939–1940), when Finland had to cede the eastern part of Salla (in northeastern Lapland) to the Soviet Union. After the Second World War until his death in 1970, my grandfather was a fisherman on lake Inari in the Sámi area. In 1984, I moved to Rovaniemi in the Arctic Circle area of Finland, not far away from the Sámi area.

During my years of study, my methodological thinking has evolved based on a qualitative humanistic tradition. At the end of the 1970s, I became aware of concepts such as otherness, hegemony, Eurocentrism and, shortly afterwards, feminist art history and other critical voices that are part of humanities. I studied art history and ethnology, which also dealt with the Sámi cultures of Finland. Through writing my doctoral thesis, *Lappi-kuvan muotouminen suomalaisessa kuvataiteessa ennen toista maailmansotaa* (*Shaping the image of Lapland in Finnish visual arts before the Second World War*, 1999), I became familiar with how Scandinavian artists depicted Sámi people and their lives. I continued my academic research by concentrating on art and culture in the Euro-Arctic region. I was an active member of the Sámi Art Resort Project (SARP) at the Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø (2010–2016), and I published some articles about Sámi visual art. I also was one of three curators of *Saamelaista nykytaidetta, Dálá Sámi dáidda, Sámi Contemporary*, an exhibition that visited Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Germany (2014–2015). My fellow curators and I wrote and edited the exhibition catalogue. Finally, I studied Sámi research (35 ECTS, 2017–2019) at the

[1] Since 2001 The Giellagas Institute for Saami studies has been part of the University of Oulu. Today Giellagas Institute is responsible for Finland's highest education and research into Saami language and culture.



University of Lapland to improve my knowledge and understanding of Sámi culture. In spite of all my studies, however, my position in relation to Sámi culture is that of an outsider.

Application of the art historical approach and indigenous methodology

Although art historian Ernst Gombrich wrote about Western art, he presented some general ideas that also apply to handicrafts, folk art, and Indigenous art. He posited that there is no reality without interpretation, that our eyes see the world in the same way our ancestors did, and that our brains interpret nature and objects like the brains of earlier generations. According Gombrich (1991, 21), no craftsman has not made a vessel of a shape he has never seen. Erwin Panofsky developed a method for interpreting Renaissance art, but his iconological approach was criticised for being too strict and too committed to Central European art. As a flexible humanist, I employ some Panofsky's ideas to interpret art in a hermeneutic way[2], for example to look for its context. The same occurs in Indigenous methodologies, where 'things have to be put into context' and their context must be respected in order to understand 'how the knowledge is hermeneutic' (Wilson 2008, 102).

On the most basic level of Panofsky's method, a researcher simply explains what there is in a work of art. The second level requires familiarity with the artist's culture (Panofsky 1972, 54). My knowledge of Sámi culture and history is thus helpful in conducting this study by applying Panofsky's method at its second level. I have learnt to understand Sámi history, Sámi culture, the Sámi way of life, and the relationship of the Sámi with nature and land through literature published by Sámi scholars such as Harald Gaski, Elina Helander-Renvall, Veli-Pekka Lehtola, and Irja Seurujärvi-Kari and through lectures given by Sámi researchers such as Rauna Kuokkanen, Klemetti Näkkäläjärvi, and Sanna Valkeapää[3].

The third level of Panofsky's method enables one to identify the meaning of an artwork. Here, the researcher must look for more context, such as the social, educational, and political systems and the religious, symbolic, and mythical atmospheres that existed during the artist's lifetime. The researcher also requires synthetic intuition to draw conclusions (Panofsky 1972, 66).

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[2] The process or way is known as a hermeneutic circle. Interpretation of details affects the interpretation of the entire phenomenon; reviews of these interpretations produce a deepening understanding of the phenomenon.

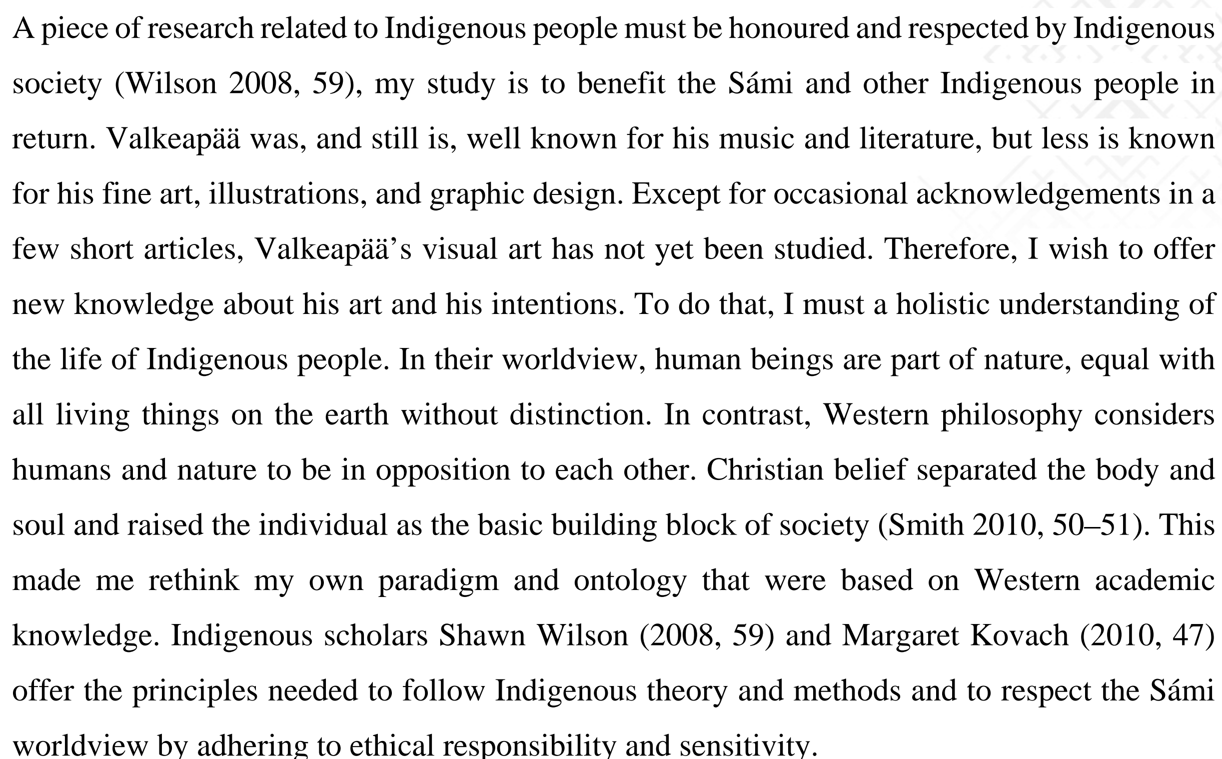
[3] Also Aile Aikio, Anni-Siiri Länsman, Anne Mare Magga, Päivi Magga, Sigga-Marja Magga, Hanna Outakoski Rauna Rahko-Ravantti, Kaisa Rautio Helander, Jarno Valkonen, Taarna Valtonen & Tiina Äikäs.

Indigenous research requires the presence and an understanding of symbolic and metaphorical representations. It is reasonable to approach traditional knowledge and Indigenous art through the senses and intuition (Kovach 2009, 41; Wilson 2008, 55). The third level of my analysis relies on my knowledge of the literature on Sámi cosmology and culture that Valkeapää could access from the 1960s to the 1990s. It was important for him and other young Sámi artists to revive the forms and values of old Sámi culture that could be found in books and early Sámi handicrafts and objects. I therefore chose to use the following relatively old sources to facilitate my interpretation: books about pre-Christian religion, including *Suomen suvun uskonnot. Lappalaisten uskonto* (*Religions of the Finns. Religion of the Sámi*, 1915) by Uno Holmberg and Sámi author Johan Turi's book *Muitalus sámiid birra* (*Book of Lapland*, 1910), and ethnographic books, including T.I. Itkonen's *Suomen lappalaiset vuoteen 1945 I ja II* (*Sámi in Finland until 1945, parts I and II*, 1948) and Karl Nickul's *Saamelaiset kansana ja kansalaisina* (*The Sámi as a people and as citizens,* 1970). The only books about Sámi visual art written before the beginning of the 1990s were Ernst Manker's *Samefolkets konst* (*Sámi Art*, 1971), István Rács's *Saamelaista kansantaidetta* (Sámi Folk Art, 1972), and the catalogue of Nordic tour exhibitions *Sámi dáidda* (Sámi Art, 1981).

'Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviors as an integral part of methodology', wrote Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012, 15), further pointing out the following:

> They are 'factors' to be built into research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in languages that can be understood (Smith 2012, 16).

I decided to write this article in English because Valkeapää is the most famous Sámi in the world. He was the Sámi representative at the first meeting of The World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP, 1975) in Port Alberni, British Columbia, Canada and worked as a cultural coordinator of the WCIP from 1978 to 1981 (Valtonen & Valkeapää 2017, 46–47).



A piece of research related to Indigenous people must be honoured and respected by Indigenous society (Wilson 2008, 59), my study is to benefit the Sámi and other Indigenous people in return. Valkeapää was, and still is, well known for his music and literature, but less is known for his fine art, illustrations, and graphic design. Except for occasional acknowledgements in a few short articles, Valkeapää's visual art has not yet been studied. Therefore, I wish to offer new knowledge about his art and his intentions. To do that, I must a holistic understanding of the life of Indigenous people. In their worldview, human beings are part of nature, equal with all living things on the earth without distinction. In contrast, Western philosophy considers humans and nature to be in opposition to each other. Christian belief separated the body and soul and raised the individual as the basic building block of society (Smith 2010, 50–51). This made me rethink my own paradigm and ontology that were based on Western academic knowledge. Indigenous scholars Shawn Wilson (2008, 59) and Margaret Kovach (2010, 47) offer the principles needed to follow Indigenous theory and methods and to respect the Sámi worldview by adhering to ethical responsibility and sensitivity.

Open discussion is considered by many Indigenous and Sámi scholars, such as Bagele Chilisa (2012, 203–211), the best method for collecting research material. The act of discussing is very close to the Sámi method for resolving issues—they have a rich oral tradition, and storytelling is common. In a discussion, both subjects are equal voices, which makes it possible for the parties to learn and understand one another. Equal, honest and respectful dialogue creates the best opportunities to understand one another well (Helander and Kailo 1999, 21–23; Valkonen and Valkonen 2018, 19–21). I did not have the opportunity to speak to Valkeapää before his death. Instead, I learnt about him through the television interviews *Olbmo dolggit - Ihmisen sulat* (Human Feathers, 1996) and *The Wind is Blowing Through My Heart* (2002), in which he spoke about art and culture. I also read his interviews in books, magazines, and newspapers and studied his articles, poems. and books, which have been translated into Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, and English. Today, there are ten notable Sámi visual artists in Finland, and most of them started their artistic careers in the early 1990s. Thus, Valkeapää was the only prominent visual artist for a long time, but he was also a famous multi-artist and a journalist and he had his own radio broadcasts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Sámi researchers Taarna Valtonen & Leena Valkeapää, the editors of the book *Minä soin - Mun čuojan. Kirjoituksia Nils-Aslak Valkeapään elämäntyöstä* (*Writings about the work of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää*, 2018), read my

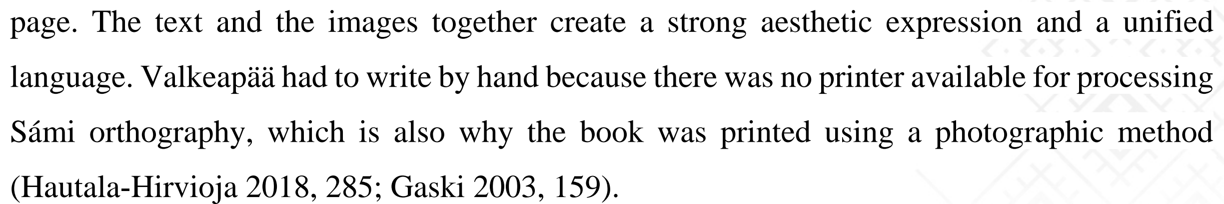
previous article about Valkeapää's early visual art and offered me good advice, for which I am very grateful.

Visual storytelling in the 1970s

As mentioned earlier, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää staged three solo exhibitions, one of which was held in Rovaniemi in 1975. One of the works on display in that exhibition was the oil painting *Silloin aurinko oli aina luonamme* (*At That Time the Sun Was Always with Us*, 1975). The title of the painting conveys a yearning for times past, and its composition resembles the segmented patterns found on Sámi drums (Hautala-Hirvioja 2008, 279). In the middle of it is a large, yellow-orange human-faced sun. The Sun is often seen in drawings on Sami drums, and the Sámi have many sun-related stories as well (Helander-Renvall 2006, 5). After the exhibitions, Valkeapää focused on writing and illustration.

In 1974, Valkeapää published his first collection of poems that received a positive response: 'He already masters the means of visual storytelling…. the graphics both in the ink drawings and in the book *Giđa ijat čuov'gadat* [*Spring nights so light*] are appealing and refined' (Alftan 1975). Valkeapää wanted to illustrate his books in the same fashion as his Sámi role models Johan Turi (1854–1936) and Paulus Utsi (1918–1975) did. He never met Turi, but Utsi was his distant relative, and they worked together on a few occasions, for example in organising Sámi festivals.

A teacher of Sámi handicrafts and an active Sámi politician, Paulus Utsi stressed the importance of writing in the Sámi languages. In 1992, Valkeapää edited the book *Paulus Utsi: don canat mu alccesat* [*Paulus Utsi: You Bind Me to Yourself*] (Hirvonen 2018, 135). Turi's book *Muitalus sámiid birra* (1910) was so important for Valkeapää that in the middle of the 1960s, he translated it into Finnish for his own use (Valtonen & Valkeapää 2018, 35). Later, in 1994, Valkeapää edited the book *Boares nauti Johan Thuri* (*The Old Wolf Johan Thuri*) that was based on Turi's correspondence between 1904 and 1936 with Emilie Demant Hatt (Hirvonen 2018, 135). Turi's *Muitalus sámiid birra* is a holistic work; the text is about Sámi reindeer herding and culture, but he also included drawings that explained and completed his stories. Valkeapää's art must be considered as a whole in the same vein as the art of Turi and Utsi; his poems consist not merely of his choice of words but also of their placement on the



page. The text and the images together create a strong aesthetic expression and a unified language. Valkeapää had to write by hand because there was no printer available for processing Sámi orthography, which is also why the book was printed using a photographic method (Hautala-Hirvioja 2018, 285; Gaski 2003, 159).

Valkeapää's first book, *Giđa ijat čuov'gadat* tells a story that spans a year from one spring to the next through summer, autumn, and winter. The seasons are an important part of life for the Sámi and other people living in the north. After the winter, the spring comes in with force, the summer passes quickly, the autumn comes too soon, and the winter brings a long-lasting darkness. The illustrations in the book vary from impressionism to symbolism, but they lack the sentimental, exotic, and romantic touch so often seen in images of Lapland. Most of the pictures are representational, and the drawing technique is generally based on Western fine art. Valkeapää's personal experience of unity with nature and his ability to turn that experience into an aesthetic expression through words and pictures can be seen even in this first book. In his poems and drawings, Valkeapää depicts the essence of Sámi culture and the Arctic landscape from an insider's perspective (Hautala-Hirvioja 2017b, 102). Despite the Western influence on his technique, Sáminess and nature are the most essential subjects in his drawings and poems. Valkeapää explained his choice:

> It is a question of Sámi people and their environment. Can this environment be destroyed and these people killed in the process?... Nature and the environment are the lifeblood of the Sámi. We are used to this environment, so we can also use it. We do not exploit natural resources in vain. (Tönkyrö 1975, 3)

Nature is important and essential to Sámi identity, and Valkeapää considered his own relationship with nature the basis of his existence (Mattila 2015, 96).

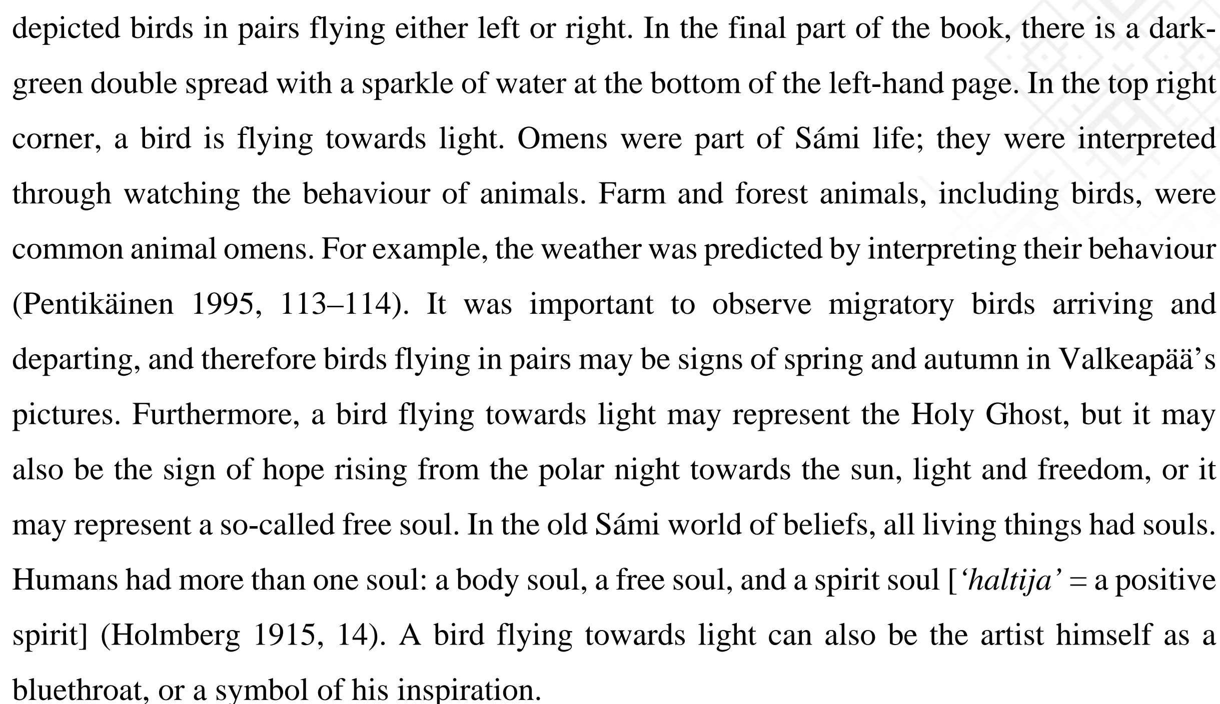
Valkeapää was able to print his second book, *Lávllo vizár biello-cizáš* [*Sing to Me, Bluethroat*, 1976], because printers of that time could already deal with the Sámi alphabet. The themes of the book include Sámi identity, the position of a minority, brotherhood between Indigenous peoples, and the transformation of the Sámi world of experiences. Some of the content of the book is based on Valkeapää's experiences from the time when he had to adapt to a Finnish school and live far away from his family. He also describes the old, environment-friendly Sámi

way of life and regrets the occupation of the Sámi area and its division with state borders (Paltto 1988).

Drawings of various kinds were used in *Lávllo vizár biello-cizáš*: some were drawn freely, some were similar to woodcarvings, and others were tonal drawings created with dotted and scratched marks on a dark background. No lines are used in tonal drawing and the pictures merge into a smooth, dark surface (that in Valkeapää's book is actually blue-green). Among the most famous works of tonal art are the drawings and lithographic prints made in the 1880s by the French pointillism artist Georges Seurat. Both in his tonal drawings and line drawings, Valkeapää uses dots, short lines, and concentrations of dots and lines to intensify the atmosphere of his works, which are often visionary or dreamlike. His technique was influenced by Sámi carving, the method used for making figures on magic drums, and by decorations on the Sámi handicraft *duodji*. These handicraft items are made of hard materials—wood, bone, and antlers—that are decorated with grooves or dots or piercings made with the tip of a knife. Rich and diverse ornamentation has been achieved by combining these grooves, holes, and dots (Skaltje 2003, 103–104; Manker 1971, 81–84). One of the oldest ways of making pictures and decorations was the carving technique used on the sacred wooden *siedi* poles. They were erected on the banks of fishing waters to connect with the livelihood with natural forces and spirits by offering sacrifices to *siedi* (Pulkkinen 2005, 390).

The book *Lávllo vizár biello-cizáš* includes images inspired by the landscape, while the subject matter builds on the surrounding environment and the Sámi way of living, especially reindeer herding. Reindeer appear in Valkeapää's poems and illustrations repeatedly, and it is considered to be an essential element of his poetry. Instead of being a mere practical issue and a source of livelihood, reindeer were, above all, animals with aesthetic, political, and social functions attesting to the indigenousness of the Sámi way of life. In addition, a connection with the reindeer and reindeer nomadism establishes and identifies an artist as a Sámi (The Wind Blowing Through My Heart 2002; Mattila 2014, 10–11).

Valkeapää's first book, *Giđa ijat čuov'gadat*, presents a selection of impressionistic bird images, some of which have been stylized and even abstracted. Birds were important to Valkeapää already in his childhood. They were his friends, and even as an adult, he was keen to observe them (Olbmo dolggit 1996). In his second book, *Lávllo vizár biello-cizáš*, Valkeapää



depicted birds in pairs flying either left or right. In the final part of the book, there is a dark-green double spread with a sparkle of water at the bottom of the left-hand page. In the top right corner, a bird is flying towards light. Omens were part of Sámi life; they were interpreted through watching the behaviour of animals. Farm and forest animals, including birds, were common animal omens. For example, the weather was predicted by interpreting their behaviour (Pentikäinen 1995, 113–114). It was important to observe migratory birds arriving and departing, and therefore birds flying in pairs may be signs of spring and autumn in Valkeapää's pictures. Furthermore, a bird flying towards light may represent the Holy Ghost, but it may also be the sign of hope rising from the polar night towards the sun, light and freedom, or it may represent a so-called free soul. In the old Sámi world of beliefs, all living things had souls. Humans had more than one soul: a body soul, a free soul, and a spirit soul [*'haltija'* = a positive spirit] (Holmberg 1915, 14). A bird flying towards light can also be the artist himself as a bluethroat, or a symbol of his inspiration.

Valkeapää's image world is characterised by the structuring of the mythical past and the interpretation and presence of the Sámi world view. Good examples of this are a drawing across two pages in the final part of *Lávllo vizár biello-cizáš* and the cover of *Giđa ijat čuov'gadat*. The book cover depicts a time when everything is still fine in Sámi life; life is-rich and there are big fish swimming in lakes, big birds wading in waters, and large reindeer herds roaming freely. Many of Valkeapää's poems describe the ancient Sámi way of life as a good, albeit lost, time; a time when there was harmony between man and nature (Mattila 2015, 80). The book cover brings out nostalgic memories related to the past way of life and old experiences of the landscape and nature. The two-page picture in *Lávllo vizár biello-cizáš* depicts a new way of life that is approaching. Valkeapää called it a bloodless genocide, describing the colonisation of the Sámi area that began in the late 16th century when borders, tradespeople, priests, liquor, and even new words, such as war, tax and hell, became part of the Sámi way of life (Saarikoski 1978).

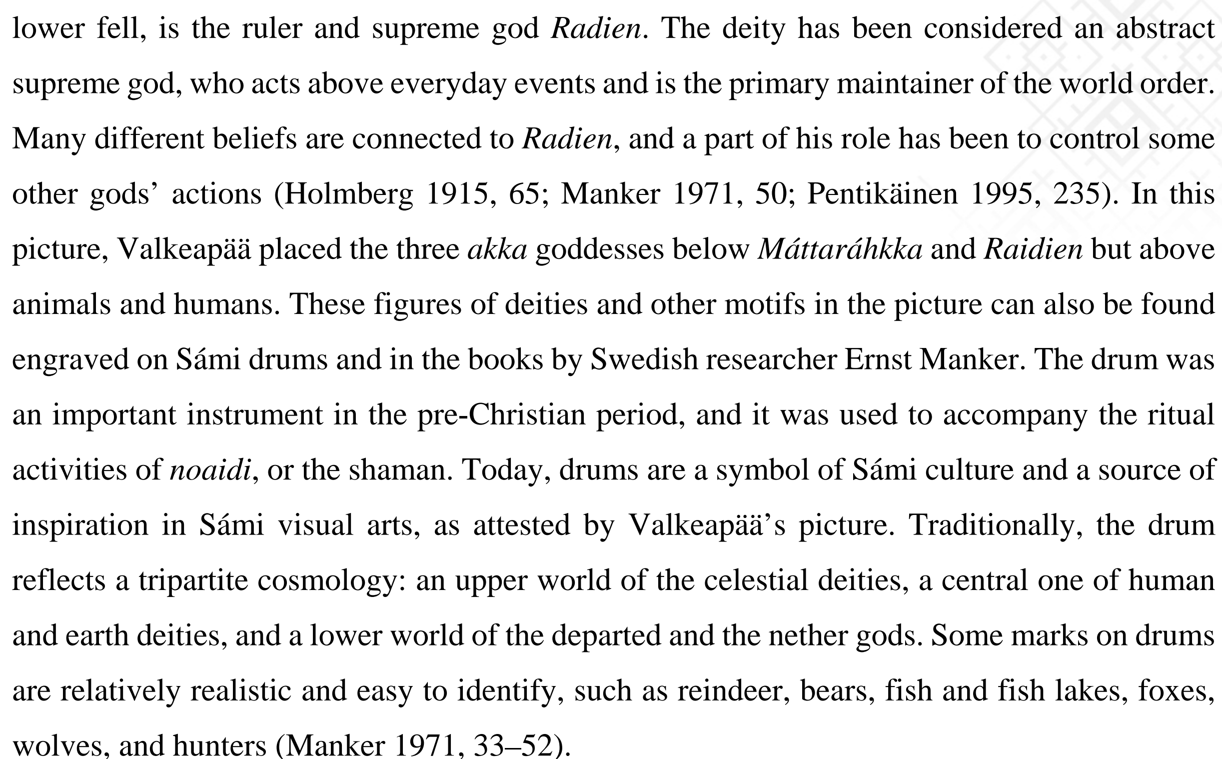
The Sun and ancient gods

The double-spread image in *Lávllo vizár biello-cizáš* depicts the Sun, the creator of Sámi culture, in the upper right corner of the picture. In the pre-Cristian period, Sámi people trusted in the old deities, the Moon, and the Sun. They offered sacrifice to the Sun and the daughter of

the Sun to ensure prosperous reindeer husbandry and to overcome illnesses. It was the daughter of the Sun who was regarded as the initiator of deer hunting and reindeer herding; hence her important role in Sámi culture. The feminine figure of the daughter of the Sun, based on old mythology, was possibly strengthened by the cult of the Virgin Mary of medieval Catholicism. When the polar night period came to an end, the Sun was honoured in many different ways, and around Midsummer, people used to eat sacred sun porridge. Sámi people regard themselves as daughters and sons of the Sun; in the oldest mythology, the Sun was the mother of all life. There are various views on the Sun's role: the Southern Sámi define the Sun as a woman, while the Eastern Sámi define the Sun as a man (Holmberg 1915, 61–63; Itkonen 1948, 308–309; Manker 1971, 51; Pentikäinen 1995, 120). Valkeapää seems to have thought that the Sun is male, as indicated by the name of his book *Beaivi, áhčážan* [*The Sun, My Father*], published in 1988.

The picture in *Lávllo vizár biello-cizáš* also has an upside-down crescent moon in the sky. Its meaning here is not clear, but the related cult concentrated on the darkest period at the turn of the year. In many Sámi areas, the Holy Moon rose around the winter solstice. People believed caution was needed during the polar night period, especially in December, because different dangers – ghosts and wandering spirits – were lurking in the dark. The Moon, however, gave light during the polar night, and people could even read its disk to predict the weather. Another feared time was February, when the moon had to compete with the Sun (Holmberg 1915, 64; Pentikäinen 1995, 124–127). Winter and the polar night period are hard times for many northern people. The appearance of the sun seems to evoke life and joy in animals, humans, and deities. The strong, vernal sun disk makes the whole of nature wake up to life again after two dark months. Sunbeams are clearly connected with both the landscape and humans, which may further augment the meaning of the sun disk. The motion of the sun represents the cycles of the seasons, the whole of life, and eternity – it is a circular motion, which always turns an ending into a new beginning (Bermann 2009, 41–42, 401).

In the above-mentioned book, in front of the Sun and at the highest point, stands *Máttaráhka*, one of the four *akka* (old maid) goddesses; the others are her daughters *Juksáhkksá*, *Sáráhkká* and *Uksáhkká*. Their central role was to look after the births of both humans and animals (Holmberg 1915, 13). The daughters and two elks are standing in the middle of the picture, not very far away from the Sámi village. Between *Máttaráhka* and her daughters, at the top of the



lower fell, is the ruler and supreme god *Radien*. The deity has been considered an abstract supreme god, who acts above everyday events and is the primary maintainer of the world order. Many different beliefs are connected to *Radien*, and a part of his role has been to control some other gods' actions (Holmberg 1915, 65; Manker 1971, 50; Pentikäinen 1995, 235). In this picture, Valkeapää placed the three *akka* goddesses below *Máttaráhkka* and *Raidien* but above animals and humans. These figures of deities and other motifs in the picture can also be found engraved on Sámi drums and in the books by Swedish researcher Ernst Manker. The drum was an important instrument in the pre-Christian period, and it was used to accompany the ritual activities of *noaidi*, or the shaman. Today, drums are a symbol of Sámi culture and a source of inspiration in Sámi visual arts, as attested by Valkeapää's picture. Traditionally, the drum reflects a tripartite cosmology: an upper world of the celestial deities, a central one of human and earth deities, and a lower world of the departed and the nether gods. Some marks on drums are relatively realistic and easy to identify, such as reindeer, bears, fish and fish lakes, foxes, wolves, and hunters (Manker 1971, 33–52).

The lower right area of Valkeapää's drawing shows life in a Sámi village as an inseparable part of nature under the protection of old deities: the reindeer herd is flourishing, there are many birds, and the waters are full of fish. A Sámi family can be seen next to three *goahti* huts that are tepee-style Sámi dwellings. A little farther away, behind the village, a Sámi man is riding a reindeer sleigh up a fell slope. Two Sámi men are hunting a bear with bows. The bear is much bigger than the other characters, almost as tall as a *goahti* hut, according to hierarchical proportion. The bear was considered sacred, and in some parts of the Sámi area, the most sacred of all animals (Itkonen 1948, 364).

The left side of the double spread refers to the strict conversion that started in the late 16th century and tells about the destruction of the old Sámi world. A priest in a black gown, pictured in hierarchical proportion – he is three times taller than the others – is approaching a group of *goahti* huts. He is accompanied by a large group of people with bows and arrows, about to confront the Sámi. Dark birds are descending from the sky and turning into humans to join the group against the Sámi. These birds may be crows; in Sámi mythology and tales, crows represent authority and the power to decide over other people's fate. They use all available means to consume and destroy everything they encounter. The majority in power brought along a new religion, which is illustrated by a church with three towers and crosses. It also bought

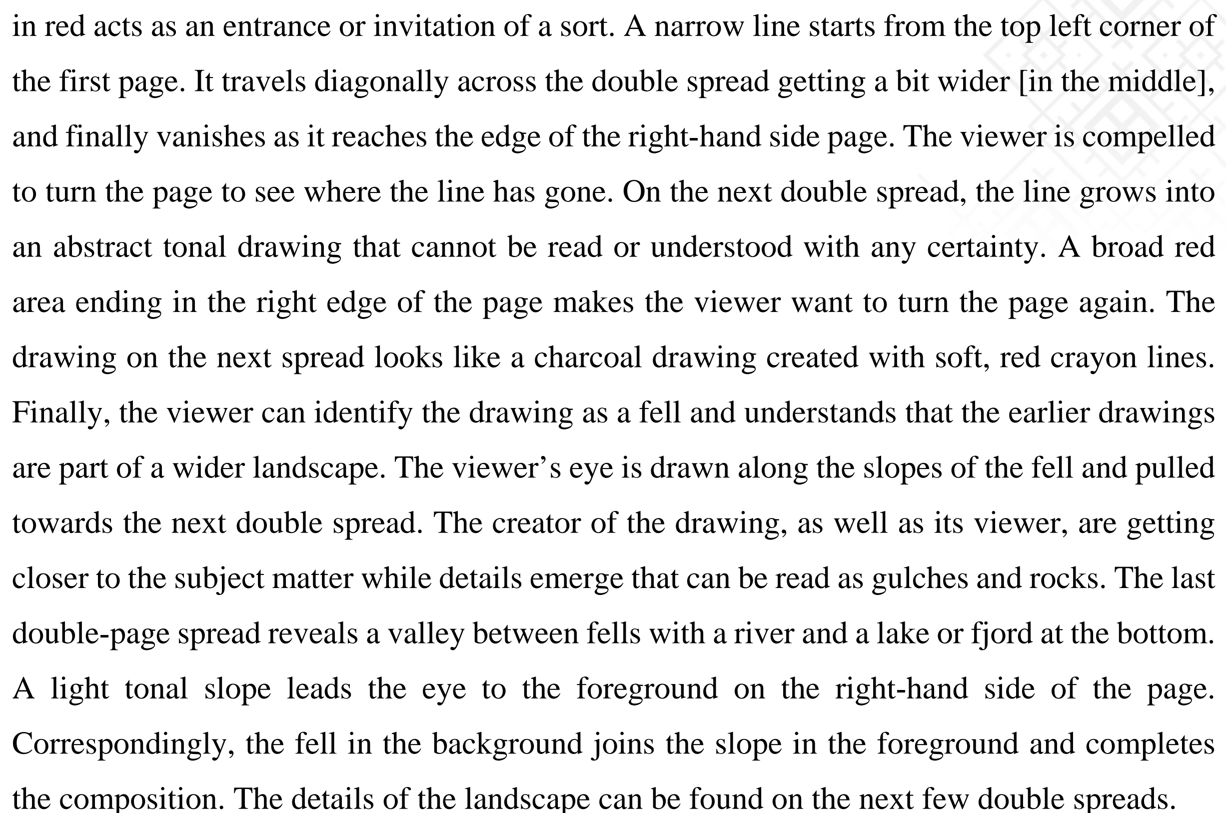
along a new way of life, which lead to decadence and violence. The liquor bottles and a new type of axe, at the bottom of the left side, represent the ugly face of the dominant Western culture. Valkeapää recounted that even priests were liquor dealers and the settlers took Sámi concubines; they were like spiders in Sámi villages and drew the taxman's attention to the wealth of the Sámi (Ruoho 1978). In Valkeapää's picture, the situation is shown to be so bad that even the birds and fish are trying to escape the force threatening the old Sámi way of life.

The expansion of artistic expression in the 1980s and 1990s

Valkeapää met other Indigenous people when working as a cultural coordinator of the WCIP. He saw Sámi culture as part of a larger tradition of Indigenous peoples. Among so-called civilised Western peoples, nature is separate from culture, whereas among the Sámi and other Indigenous peoples, it is part of culture (Dana 2003, 7, 254). Valkeapää considered cooperation between Indigenous peoples important. He said, 'Cultural exchange between Indigenous peoples is the best way to generate and intensify cooperation at this stage' (Korhonen 1977). According to him, northern Indigenous cultures share similar concepts and experiences that are worthy of coming to light (Dana 2003, 211). These ideas and experiences of other Indigenous peoples' situations influenced the content of Valkeapää's third collection of poems, titled *Ádjaga silbasuonat* (1981).

In his poems, Valkeapää described the emotions evoked by his meetings with other Indigenous peoples, such as the Inuit and Native Americans. The poet himself is the narrator in the poems: he is angry – furious – and feels ashamed and disappointed. The final part of the book contains a strong statement against alienation between nature and humanity as well as a demand to guarantee Indigenous peoples the right to be different and have ownership of their own natural resources (Paltto 1988). *Ádjaga silbasuonat* comprises almost thirty drawings; some of them are the size of a double-page spread, others are on one page. One picture deals with fishing, while the others are related to Inuit life, Native American life, Sámi symbols, and Indigenous peoples in general.

In his interviews, Valkeapää repeatedly emphasised his own experience of nature as a source of artistic inspiration. This experience can be seen in the nature pictures of his first two books of poems and in the beginning of the book *Ádjaga silbasuonat*, where a nine-page-long drawing



in red acts as an entrance or invitation of a sort. A narrow line starts from the top left corner of the first page. It travels diagonally across the double spread getting a bit wider [in the middle], and finally vanishes as it reaches the edge of the right-hand side page. The viewer is compelled to turn the page to see where the line has gone. On the next double spread, the line grows into an abstract tonal drawing that cannot be read or understood with any certainty. A broad red area ending in the right edge of the page makes the viewer want to turn the page again. The drawing on the next spread looks like a charcoal drawing created with soft, red crayon lines. Finally, the viewer can identify the drawing as a fell and understands that the earlier drawings are part of a wider landscape. The viewer's eye is drawn along the slopes of the fell and pulled towards the next double spread. The creator of the drawing, as well as its viewer, are getting closer to the subject matter while details emerge that can be read as gulches and rocks. The last double-page spread reveals a valley between fells with a river and a lake or fjord at the bottom. A light tonal slope leads the eye to the foreground on the right-hand side of the page. Correspondingly, the fell in the background joins the slope in the foreground and completes the composition. The details of the landscape can be found on the next few double spreads.

The vast fell panorama is a rhythmic yoik-like space with no end. Johan Anders Bær, a master of yoiking from Karasjok, described the essence of this form of song: 'A yoik always goes in circles. It has no beginning and no end' (Koppinen 2013). When looking at the drawing, it feels that the landscape is a journey with more than one view. Valkeapää had walked through that landscape picturing not what was ahead, but what had been left behind – his experiences of nature manifested themselves in strong, recurring memories. The Sámi landscape has been described as an open and unrestricted space surrounding people, animals, and the whole culture. Timeless time – the past, present, and future – as well as melodies of yoik in different times and spaces are present in the expanse of the fell highlands. The notion of time is not linear; to Indigenous and Sámi people, time is a circle with everything beginning again and again.

Landscapes and open spaces are important for the Sámi. For Valkeapää, the wind and expanses represent outer and inner spaces as well as temporal continuity. Expanses open up places and spaces. The wind moves air, smells, sounds – the presence of life – in the expanses. The experience creates a special multisensory relationship between the drawer and the landscape.

The drawer's own size, location, point of view, and mode of transport are present. The drawer adjusts his own existence into the landscape to be depicted (Bergmann 2009, 154–155).

The fell panorama in the beginning of the poem collection *Ádjaga silbasuonat* presents simultaneously the following: near and far, past and present, visible and reminiscent, clear-cut and ambiguous, and material and spiritual. Although no people or buildings are in sight [OR to be seen], the landscape is not empty, because it is filled with ancestors' and Valkeapää's own experiences (Valkeapää 2011, 232). His panoramas represent Sámi people's Arctic living environment—its vastness, spaciousness, and continuity. The viewer is part of the fell highlands. Even when a drawing shows a unique encounter between an individual and a place, the tradition of landscape painting has influenced and is influencing the choice of subjects (Gombrich 1991, 73). The panorama landscape was a very popular subject in Scandinavian National Romantic landscape painting; from there, it was adapted to landscape pictures, postcards, and illustrations of geography textbooks. In Finland, the concept of homeland was often presented as a landscape, a good example of which is *Maamme kirja* (*The Book of Our Country*, 1876) by Zacharias Topelius that was used as a textbook in elementary schools until the 1960s.

Valkeapää had planned to write his fourth book only for the Sámi. Nevertheless, *Ruoktu Vaimmus* (1985) was nominated for the Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 1988. The work is a series of three books published in 1974, 1976, and 1981. Three years later, Valkeapää won the prize for *Beaivi, áhcázan (The Sun, My Father, 1988). The Ruoktu Vaimmus* triology was published as a revised version with some old and some new illustrations, and it was translated into Swedish (1991) and then into English (1994) with the title *Trekways of the Wind* (Gaski 1994). In *Beaivi, áhcázan,* Valkeapää presents photos collected by European museums over six years, together with short poems. The photos depict the Sámi from the 1860s to the 1930s. Valkeapää wanted to use these culturally important photographs and return them to the Sámi (Gaski 1991). His next book was released as part of the cultural programme of the Lillehammer Winter Olympics, and it was published in Sámi and Norwegian under the title *Nu guhkkin dat mii lahka – Så fjernet det näre* (*So Far So Near*, 1994). In that publication, as well as in his last book, *Eanni, eannážan* (*The Earth, Mother of All*, 2001), Valkeapää utilised almost abstract photographs, depicting mostly ice and snow. He stated that he would be happy to stop painting and drawing realistic images altogether (Lappalainen 1992). Valkeapää adopted this abstract

style during the 1990s, sometimes created pictures that consisted of nothing else but individual marks.

In *Nu guhkkin dat mii lahka*, different art forms are combined – poems, nature photographs, and colourful paintings are used to create a whole (Lehtola 1994). The painting *The Dancing Noaidi* (1991) is a good example of Valkeapää's use of Sámi mythology. The figure in this painting is huge, with an intense red sky as a background. At the bottom of the picture are mountains, as well as small people, animals, and *goahti* huts. A dancing Sámi shaman, called a *noaidi*, with two animal heads on his human body, is in the centre of the painting. In traditional Sámi religion, the *noaidis* could fall into a deep trance in which they transformed into an animal and were able to travel in the spirit world. This picture could accordingly represent the shaman journey (Snarby 2012). Amongst the Alta rock carvings in Finnmark, northern Norway, is a similar prehistorical image called the *Human Figure* (2700–1700 BCE). Valkeapää's shaman is not a copy of the Alta rock carving, but can be interpreted as an approach to Sami spirituality, and as an attempt to describe and pay homage to traditional Sámi faith. In this book, there are two paintings from 1992. They depict a herd of reindeer against an abstract, cloudy landscape, or perhaps the sky. The colour composition of the second painting is based on orange tones (such as the colour of the rising sun) and blue tones (as at twilight). The reindeer are barely visible and seem to disappear into the clouds.

The works painted during the 1990s are among Valkeapää's mythical and mythological productions. He took the rock carvings and drums as a point of departure and placed them in a new context as bearers of a long tradition that, in the Sámi case, dates back to the Sámi creation myths before the introduction of Christianity (Gaski 2008, 168). Likewise, in the paintings *Nu guhkkin dat mii lahka* and *Eanni, eannážan*, Turi's influence can be seen for example in the composition: the landscape depicted is vast and there are big reindeer herds.

Conclusion

Like many other young Sámi artists as Kirsti Paltto and Kerttu Vuolab, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was a versatile creator of art. artists. Their work grows from a holistic Sámi mentality, where details are not separated from the whole, a person's thoughts are not compartmentalised, and people are not separated from nature (Lehtola 1991). Valkeapää's concern over Sámi culture

manifested itself in his nature-related subjects. He had a strong relationship with Arctic nature that was based on his Sámi reindeer herder's background. Valkeapää knew that if nature were destroyed, Sámi livelihoods, including reindeer husbandry and fishing, would vanish too. Through his art, he wanted to remind everyone about the importance of all life and to show his respect towards all animals. His visual world is filled with figures and symbols with strong connections to Sámi mythology. They enable modern-day Sámi to reawaken the past in art and to strengthen old values, above all a respect towards nature.

Through his education, Valkeapää became familiar with Western art history and art techniques. At the end of the 1970s, he set about to create Sámi imagery, to reform Sámi music, and to strengthen the Sámi language. The rock carvings in Alta, the figures on shaman drums, the decorative patterns on *duodji,* and the drawings by the early Sámi artist Johan Turi became important sources of his inspiration. Valkeapää wanted to draw attention to the topic and help the Sámi to understand the significance of their own culture. In the 1950s, Finnish culture pervaded the Sámi area after material past of the Sámi had vanished during the Lapland War (1944–1945). The school system took Sámi children away from their familiar culture, as they had to live in dormitories away from home. Many of them lost their language and forgot the traditional Sámi skills passed down through generations—reindeer herding and *duodji* handicrafts.

In the 1970s, Valkeapää and other young Sámi artists in Scandinavia refused to accept the situation. It was important for them to revive the traditions and values of Sámi culture. According to Valkeapää, a living culture is in a constant state of change. Its place is not in a museum, but in our everyday lives. The revival of Sámi tradition is important and guarantees its continuity. Valkeapää helped and encouraged many young Sámi artists (Helander and Kailo 1999, 120–121), and his art gave distinction to the Sámi and strengthened their identity.

It is difficult to describe Valkeapää's cultural innovativeness and significance as a mere contribution to Sámi culture, because he so sovereignly dominated the whole field of art. He came from a northern periphery, was able to incorporate all that he had learnt into Sámi and indigenous knowledge, and regenerated Sámi art, literature and music. He also became acquainted with the International Indigenous People's Movement and incorporated the Sami into it. Today, his art remains an important source of inspiration to the Sámi and other Indigenous people.

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