

“The North Chose Us”: Selected Poems by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää as Expressions of Sami Cultural Ecology and Indigenous Rights Concerns

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Abstract: This article analyzes three poems by acclaimed Sami poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. The author examines poetic language to underscore its ability to evoke Sami identity and the geography and ecology found where the Sami live in Fennoscandia (the far north of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and northwestern Russia). The author also weaves together each poem’s theme(s) in order to emphasize the importance of the Sami’s distinct perspective toward the lands surrounding them, and the Sami’s place as its first inhabitants. Throughout the article, the author connects poetic structure, form, and content, bringing together aesthetic and indigenous rights concerns, especially Sami rights to determine their own cultural practices, which involve a deep relationship with Fennoscandia’s ecologically-specific co-inhabitants: for example, its reindeer, fish, and birds.

Keywords: poetry, poems, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, Sami, identity, geography, ecology, Fennoscandia, Sweden, Norway, Finland, northwestern Russia, aesthetic, indigenous rights, cultural practices, reindeer, fish, birds

doi:10.18113/P8ik159699

Storytelling practices among the Sami (the indigenous people of northern Scandinavia¹) reflect a rich and vital wellspring of cultural knowledge and cultural memory. From the traditional *joik*² to contemporary hip-hop, oral and folk traditions, arts, crafts, theatre, myth and legend, poetry and prose, Sami storytelling traditions express a celebration of cultural identity and an affirmation of their right to exist as an indigenous people in the geographic context of the landscape and ecology to which they are by right of birth connected and in which they find their identity and very meaning as a native and “first nation” people. Life and land for the Sami are intimate and inseparable. Despite documented evidence of their indigenous habitation in the northern regions of Scandinavia from at least the time of the last ice age, the Sami people face increasing threats to their traditional livelihood and their very right to exist and enjoy a meaningful

human life in their native lands. Mining and other industrial interests continue to force the Sami out of their native lands and compromise their ability to maintain a coherent cultural identity. Such dispossession in the face of continued colonial encroachments is given voice through Sami narratives—perhaps one of their last remaining means for the articulation of their cultural identity and indigenous existence. Storytelling practice and traditions are also potentially empowering ways for the Sami to gain wider recognition as an indigenous people with rights to self-determination in their native environments and to continue the very difficult but very necessary process of cultural renewal, or at the very least, survival.

This article provides a reading of selected poems by the Sami poet and artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943-2001) as performative expressions of Sami cultural ecology and indigenous rights concerns, specifically land rights and the right to self-determination. Notwithstanding the obvious limitations of indigenous Sami poetry in English translation,³ it is to be hoped that this reading can offer some sense of the aesthetic reactions and connections that emerge from the poems, and the intimate links the poems have with the landscape ecology and Sami indigenous identity, which Valkeapää's work seeks to express.⁴ Valkeapää's poetry is selected here due to his recognized status as a central voice in the Sami literary, artistic, and performative tradition—a tradition that is colorful, vibrant, vital, and a key element of Sami indigenous culture and identity.⁵ The idea of a “folk” or “oral” tradition, which is generally invoked in these kinds of discussions, is perhaps less pertinent than capturing the powerful and polyphonic resonances that speak to a shared sympathy in the collective human imagination even as they articulate a particular, unique Sami perspective.

The Sami literature and language scholar and translator Harald Gaski notes that Valkeapää's poetry and art are to be best understood as a “totality in all the different modes of expression he chose to use.” Any one poem “can be read in isolation, but it is best understood when it is read as a continuity” (Valkeapää 2003). That is precisely the approach intended in this reading. The poems selected all come from Valkeapää's acclaimed collection *Trekways of the Wind*, with one exception, which is the following poem, included in a dialogue with Valkeapää, with the aptly titled heading, “I have no beginning, no end.” Valkeapää writes:

and life dressed, showed off

with colors

visions

life

exquisite
the North chose us
as did the reindeer
the fishes
birds,
they all decided
and we
were given the spring day's marvel
the stories of the blue night
the North
nurtured us
strained (Helander and Kailo 102)

From a purely visual perspective, what stand out in this poem are the free form and flow of the lines and the images. There is the clear and palpable sense that one is right in the middle of things, truly *in medias res*. This poem addresses the reader at the level of the mind and it engages the senses. An event is alive and happening—impressions are forming, a voice and a vision are being articulated, in the moment, *now*. In this sense, the poem is a form of dance, a performance, and not just an utterance or a song—although it *is* that, as well. At the same time, a kind of sacred history is being recounted. The poem is thus also acting as a creation story, an account of the Sami's existence, if not of their origin: “the North chose us / as did the reindeer / the fishes / birds, / they all decided” (102). The Sami, that is to say, did not simply arrive in their land of ancestral origin, as a result of random nomadic wandering. The land and its inhabitants—especially the reindeer, the fishes, and the birds—*selected* the Sami, they *chose* the Sami as caretakers and co-creators to share in maintaining the integrity and balance of the landscape and ecology—in other words, to share in the heart and body of the place itself. Agency here, while perhaps not entirely surrendered, is transferred to the will and way of nature. In contrast to the colonialist view of settlement and conquest, in the sense of discovering and staking a claim to the land, it is here the Sami, who have been claimed, are “chosen,” by the land. In this connection, it is thereby the region—the North—and the animals (reindeer, fishes, and birds) that are, in effect, if not in fact, the truly native life forms and

“indigenous” inhabitants. The Sami thus gain their aboriginal status by virtue of their acceptance by the native animals and greater regional influences that “chose” the Sami and “nurtured” the Sami, despite the hard fact that such a nurturance is “strained.” This is a radically different view of nature and territory and human-environment relations. It is a view that emphasizes connections over conquests, relationships and responsibilities over rights—although the crucial question of “rights” is hereby framed and understood as applying to those peoples who have the right “fit,” one might say, both evolutionarily and ethically, who are best suited to the environment and the needs and concerns of the land. The Sami are the right fit for their landscape because they adapt themselves to it, and live in a balanced state of reciprocity with it, rather than try to force it to fit their imagined economic imperatives. Adaptation for the Sami is both a practical matter and an ethical relationship. This relationship is reflected throughout the work of Valkeapää and much of Sami poetry. Cultural ecology for the Sami is a very real and embodied experience.

The Sami way of life—“the old Sami life”—claims attention in Valkeapää’s *Trekways of the Wind*. The following lines are excerpted from a longer narrative poem:

How I respect
the old Sami life
That was true love of nature
where nothing was wasted
where humans were part of nature

Not until now have they realized
that the people who lived here
ten thousand years ago
melted to become the Sami

That is a long time
The wanderings of the Egyptian Pharaohs
The riches of the Roman empire
The glory of the Greek culture
short moments if you compare

...

How I respect the ancient Sami way
How everything was utilized
everything that could be used
from reindeer pelts coats shoes sinews for thread
boil fry split dry

If you were hungry you were
but no one should mention starvation

In this affluent world
every other child is starving
and one third
eat two thirds
of the world's food

...

How I respect old Sapmi
How could they have lived for ten thousand years
without the right
to call the Samiland Sapmi
without the right to Sapmi
to be Sami

How could they have lived for ten thousand years
in discord with nature
see the smart ones of the present
pollute the world poison
eat it barren
gnaw its bones
Homo Sapiens the wise human

...

How I respect Sapmi
and the Sami life
but what can I do
what
I hide in the depths
in the hiding places of the tundras
to watch silently
how my land is destroyed
our Sapmi
like lemmings in a flock
they spread everywhere
I blink

In the depth of my being
a yoik grows
sadly
with tears in my eyes
I yoik in the voice of the heart
how I respect
Sapmi

This is an intimate, powerful, comprehensive, and certainly personal account of the poet's connection to Sami culture and identity and the landscape and lifeways that define those relationships. While in many respects the poem speaks for itself, a few observations might be useful in drawing out the question of Sami cultural ecology and indigenous rights and identity. In the most basic and vital sense, the Sami are the Sami by virtue of their relationship to the land. However, as a displaced or dispossessed people, they are, culturally and geographically, in a state of contradiction and loss: discursively and in terms of their indigeneity. The "old Sami way of life" is articulated as having ancient roots indeed: 10,000 years by both Valkeapää's account and reckonings in the archaeological record.⁶ Legal complications aside, a people with a 10,000 year history is a people that should, at the very least, be granted a fairer hearing with respect to their right to inhabit their native lands and conduct their affairs, that is, to express their cultural lives and maintain their existence as an indigenous people in a manner peaceable and respectful of international politics, regional customs, and economic needs.

Acknowledging the existence of the Sami people is at least a start, but acknowledgement is far from enough to meet the needs of any people, particularly where cultural heritage and lands rights are concerned. The Sami Parliament, for example, might be recognized by some governing orders as a serious and legitimate decision-making body in their own right, with increasing visibility at such platforms as the United Nations. But in terms of having a viable and influential place on the world stage, in terms of having a voice, there is considerable room for increased recognition and cooperation among the international community, and particularly in the case of Scandinavia. To the extent that governing bodies and corporate interests can insist on constant and all-but-unregulated industrial expansion (billed always in the twin imperatives of "development" and "economic growth") with cold detachment and disregard for the rights of the indigenous Sami is an unfortunate argument for the failure of the human species to reconnect to a sense of that which makes *humanity* a term of value and significance.⁷

The health of one culture contributes to the health of all cultures. This is a basic moral truth and speaks to the heart of the poetry included in this article, and throughout the life and work of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. The fundamental point is not only Sami rights, vital

and serious as these rights are, but the much larger and universal matter of biodiversity because cultural diversity is reliant on biodiversity. This connection is clearly established in a report issued in 1999 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*. Klaus Topfer, Executive Director of the UNEP, explains this connection and how the loss of cultural diversity can in many ways be more serious, and carry greater threats to human survival, than biodiversity as generally conceived:

Besides the profound ethical and aesthetic implications, it is clear that the loss of biodiversity has serious economic and social costs. The genes, species, ecosystems and human knowledge that are being lost represent a living library of options available for preventing and/or adapting to local and global change. Biodiversity is a part of our daily lives and livelihoods, and constitutes the resources on which families, communities, nations and future generations depend. (xi)

Central to understanding this connection between biodiversity and cultural diversity is not only knowledge of their relationship, but also the basic matter of respect, which presupposes and reinforces any sense of an ethical and moral conscience. "Respect for biological diversity," Topfer argues, "implies respect for human diversity. Indeed, both elements are fundamental to stability and durable peace on earth." Moreover, he writes:

The key to creating forms of development that are sustainable and in harmony with the needs and aspirations of each culture implies breaking out of patterns that render invisible the lives and perspectives of those cultures. It is the concern of many people that biodiversity must be appreciated in terms of human diversity, because different cultures and people from different walks of life perceive and apprehend biodiversity in different ways as a consequence of their distinct heritages and experiences. (xi)

These observations hold particular relevance for underrepresented indigenous peoples such as the Sami. The future of the Sami and the future of life on this planet will depend in large measure on how human beings going forward come to understand and respect the connection between cultural diversity and biodiversity, and the vital links common to, and constituent of, each.

The most appropriate way to conclude this article on Sami storytelling and indigenous rights concerns is with an observation by Valkeapää about the particular importance of the Sami as a culture and as a people. The following passage is a transcription of his words recorded in a film directed by Lennart Mari, *The Winds of the Milky Way* (1977):

I am Ailu and I am Sami, different from the rest.

We are a small people and our culture is different. Moving amongst a larger people I even have to use another name. But I'm still a Sami and I don't want our culture to be diluted by larger cultures. The world would be poorer if we had only one culture....

The multiplicity of cultures strengthens the world, and thus each individual culture becomes stronger. The diversity of cultures is also important in a therapeutic sense. People speak of primitive cultures. I believe that the development or lack of development of a culture depends on the observer, and how values are assessed. Our Arctic culture is important for the whole world, because it contains experiences within it that other cultures don't have.

Or again, to return to *Trekways of the Wind*, here is a shorter poem that expresses a similar, sentiment about the matter of culture and language and what both might bring to bear on the future of the Sami way, its survival in every sense of the word:

The redness of evening
Birch tops sway against the sky
The reflection of light in the river

Everything remains unsaid
Still

¹ The Sami are the indigenous people of the far north region of Fennoscandia, which includes the northernmost regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and northwestern Russia (the Kola Peninsula). Estimated population ranges from between 70,000 to 100,000 depending on how certain individuals identify as Sami and how demographic figures are counted. For more information about Sami history, culture, indigenous concerns and ethnological accounts, see Broadbent, Gaski, Gaski, Helander and Kailo, Kuokkanen, Lehtola, and Valkeapää .

² A brief definition for *joik* (also *yoik*) is that it is the oldest and most popular traditional Sami musical form, a kind of melodic chant that is improvised and rhythmically structured by the feelings and moods of the occasion. A *joik* is often sung in honor and celebration (and sometimes in mourning and lament) of a particular place.

³ Gaski discusses the richness and textuality of Sami languages and the difficulties of translation.

⁴ Sources that explore the connections between culture, place and space (what might be conveniently designated as “cultural ecology”) include Hirsch and O’Hanlon, Johnson and Hunn, and Nazarea.

⁵ Detailed discussions of Valkeapää’s poetry and other performances situated within Sami art and literary traditions can be found in Cocq and Dana. Valkeapää’s own book, *Greetings from Lapland*, is also relevant in this connection.

⁶ The exact origins of Sami habitation remain an uncertain point of archaeological investigation. However, it is a mostly accepted consensus among anthropologists that Sami genetic and cultural ancestry in the region can be traced to the last ice age. Sami habitation and settlement is established beyond dispute in Scandinavia from at least the Late Iron Age and Medieval periods (ca. 800-1300); see Broadbent in Herva and Lehtola.

⁷ Sami history is unfortunately rife with abuses and injustices committed against them, particularly over land resources (most notably timber) and mineral rights. Conflicts and abuses continue to this day. See Brown, Ellis, Madslien, Osborn, and Shukman for recent accounts of national and geopolitical conflicts over Sami land rights and the encroachments of mining and other industrial activities. Ellis directed a documentary film by the same title, *Under Northern Lights*, that provides a more visual and human account of the conflicts and struggles particularly as such matters affect Sami indigenous rights and cultural identity. Note especially the blatant disregard of Sami rights by

representatives of mining companies, particularly in the case of the oddly, and insultingly, named Beowulf Mining.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the library staff at Penn State University Libraries, whose assistance and resources were vital in the research for this article, and certainly appreciated. Thanks also to Drs. Judy Bertonazzi, Audrey Maretzki, and the ICIK for providing the forum. I wish especially to say a sincere word of thanks to the Sami people, who have taught me much about humility, humanity, and the vital need to preserve not only their culture and environment, but all culture and all the land and water and air that sustain life on the planet, the place we call home. It is to the Sami people with deepest respect and gratitude that this work is dedicated. Any errors or omissions remain my responsibility.