

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää – a powerful poetic manifestation

Harald Gaski

Sámi University of Applied Sciences & UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943–2001), or Áillohaš as he used as his artist name for a period of time, was the greatest Sámi multimedia artist. He made his debut as an author in 1971 with a book of essays, and is so far the only Sámi who has been awarded the prestigious Nordic Council's literature prize, for his book of poetry and photographs *Beaivi, áhčážan*, 1989 (*The Sun, My Father*, 1997).

The reason I have chosen to write about Nils-Aslak Valkeapää in the context of oppositional art is his position as a leading cultural figure among the Sámi for most of his artistic life, spanning from the 1960s until his death in 2001. Áillohaš was a great source of inspiration for his younger artistic followers, and although he never wrote distinctively political texts – except for his debut book, *Greetings from Samiland* – his poetry and yoik revealed and expressed so much Sámi pride and dignity that his art work got to play an instrumental role in building up Sámi self-esteem and political courage, so in that sense Áillohaš' art also has represented a political aspect. Besides, he himself was inspired by the old oppositional yoik songs from the time of colonisation, which was a theme he returned to in new and innovative versions all through his writing – not least as a manifestation of Sámi power at the ceremony for the Nordic Council's literature award in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1991, which I will return to as the main topic for the second half of this essay. But first some introductory biographical remarks about Áillohaš.

One of the poems in which Valkeapää's multi-faceted artistic outlook is best expressed is the untranslated poem no. 272 in *The Sun, My Father*. The poem is, among many things, a typographical representation of a reindeer herd. As a Sámi, who together with the Inuit of Greenland, are the only Indigenous peoples of Europe, Valkeapää was an artistic representative of the Indigenous peoples of the world. In the poetry cycle 'My home is in my heart', published in the 1985 book *Ruoktu váimmus (Trekways of the Wind)*, the Indigenous peoples' message is expressed especially clearly, and Valkeapää alludes there both to a well-known speech by the Native American tribal leader, Chief Seattle, and to an epic Sámi yoik from the period of colonisation.

Valkeapää was born in 1943. He was a Finnish citizen until he settled permanently in Ivgubahta in Northern Norway and took on Norwegian citizenship. He studied at a teachers' training college in Kemijärvi in Finland, not because he ever intended to become a teacher, but because it was an education that trained him in a number of areas in which he was interested, among others literature and music. He 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 falling out of daily use among the Sámi as a result of colonisation. From the end of the 1960s onwards, he combined traditional yoik with modern instruments and popular music, later also merging yoik with jazz-inspired genres in cooperation with some of Finland's foremost jazz musicians. Several Sámi musicians still practice this form. As time went on, Valkeapää also developed a new extensive kind of *yoik* composition, which he associated with classical Sámi music. Valkeapää was the primary motivator behind the organisation of Sámi artists that gathered speed in the 1970s. In the same era, 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 Gárasavvon on the border between Finland and Sweden on both sides of the Geaggáneau river, which forms the border between the two countries. Many will remember him too from the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics at Lillehammer in Norway 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 *Ofelas* (*Pathfinder*) of 1987.

The decade from the mid-1980s up to 1996, when Valkeapää was involved in a life-changing traffic accident, was a hectic period for the artist. He put great time and effort into creating separate publication channels for Sámi literature and music. The first Sámi publishing houses emerged early in the 1970s, but Valkeapää 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 could supervise the artistic 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. This symphony in four parts,

consisting mostly of nature sounds from his own area in Sápmi, was put together as a journey from spring to autumn, from mountain to coast. His pictorial art also received much attention at that time; he was festival artist at the North Norway Festival in 1991, and later some of the paintings produced there travelled around the world to exhibitions as far away as Japan and China.

Valkeapää expressed himself in a range of media and modes, but especially important to his art is its holistic nature. A poem can be read in isolation, and yet it is best understood when it is read in relation to the 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. 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 inspired 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 you a feeling of being welcomed and taken seriously, as well as encouraging you to become acquainted with the person who is greeting you so graciously. The pencil drawings that accompany the text reinforce this by giving 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 Valkeapää known to a larger public was *Ruoktu váimmus* from 1985. It consists of three volumes that were earlier published separately, but that Valkeapää later 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. *Trekways of the Wind* was nominated as the Sámi candidate for the prize in 1988, and the book was one of the favourites, but it did not win. Not until 1991 was Valkeapää awarded the prize, for the lyrical work *The Sun, My Father*, which came out in a ‘Scandinavian’ translation the same year with the title *Solen, min far*. Here, the poems are translated into the two official Norwegian languages (*bokmål* and *nynorsk*) and Swedish in the same book, but the photographs from the Sámi original are omitted at the

behest of the author himself. The same is true for the translation of *Beaivi, áhčážan* into English and Finnish. The reason why 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 must be available in a Scandinavian language before they could be assessed. The translation team then chose the three spoken languages in the areas inhabited by the Sámi.

Valkeapää's last book was *Eanni, eannážan (The Earth, My Mother, 2017)*, which revealed how absorbed he was by the importance of traditions to Indigenous people. The book opens up a wider perspective on the place and importance of Indigenous peoples in the world, and as such is a continuation of *The Sun, My Father*. Here, the Sámi stood at the centre of the book, while in *The Earth, My Mother* the narrator goes on a journey to visit other Indigenous peoples in the jungle and the desert. It is clear throughout that the narrator is a guest who does not pretend that he can be one of the peoples he visits, but he registers affinities in values and modes of living. In *Trekways of the Wind*, too, the narrator is 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 *Trekways of the Wind* and *The Earth, My Mother*, not least in the criticism of civilisation – it is man, in all his self-righteous grandeur, who is the greatest threat to life on earth. The poet stands shoulder to shoulder with the oppressed, and remembers in ironic expressions how the erudite and genteel people looked down on the northern Indigenous people, yet were unable to manage without help from precisely those they called primitive.

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 Beaivvás 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 legacy, and expresses the Indigenous peoples' view that the future of the human race is dependent on showing respect for Mother Earth.

Valkeapää died on 26 November 2001. He was on his way home from a trip to Japan, where he had been part of a chain-poetry performance with Finnish and Japanese authors. Chain-poetry performance is an old Japanese poetic tradition, where several authors (in this case there were four) write poems that are linked together to make up a connected recitation. Valkeapää's poem was the last link in the chain, and the entire result was published in a Japanese newspaper at the same time as the performance. Valkeapää had travelled 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 Biertavárri cemetery next to the graves of both of his parents. On the gravestone are the words:

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).

This epitaph comes from the poem that concluded Valkeapää's contribution to the chain-poetry, and is a variant of a portion of the final poem of *Trekways of the Wind*.

In the North Where I live: Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's elegant statement when receiving the Nordic Literature Award

The year was 1991. The place was Copenhagen. And the reason why I was there was to see Nils-Aslak Valkeapää receive the Nordic Council Literature Prize. As usual, I was late, and took a seat far back in the hall. It wouldn't have helped to have arrived earlier, because the first rows were in any case reserved for the Nordic government leaders and their bureaucrats. On the contrary, I noted the symbolic significance of the fact that we guests who were Sámi remained, once again, seated by the door. The symbolism was reinforced by the fact that after the music prize had been awarded – to an outstanding Danish jazz musician – the Danish TV crew turned off their film lamps and started to dismantle their equipment. So by the time the moment finally came to award the

literature prize, the media's attention was already beginning to turn away from the scene. In the opinion of the television journalists, the newspapers had already written enough about this pristine force from the tundra land, this mystical man from the far north.

Sámi Radio was there, of course, but had agreed to buy the footage from Danish Public Broadcasting, so now they were in a tight spot. But a Sámi never travels out into the world without a few extra supplies; storms may arise that last longer than expected. We've learned this while living close to the rugged nature of the north. Another thing we've learned, after dealing with *dáža* (non-Sámi) over a long period, is never to trust Scandinavians. Both lessons proved important here. The extra provisions, in the form of Sámi Radio's own television equipment, were not too far away to fetch during the Danish Prime Minister's lengthy and comprehensive introduction. One would almost believe he had read the book. Perhaps he even had. In addition, the Literature Prize Committee had time to speak a few words about the barren beauty of the tundra and the rich culture of such unproductive lands. In the meantime, the Sámi Radio crew managed to get ready to tape Valkeapää's acceptance speech.

The speech was a dramatic play, an artistic presentation of a political message far more effective than thousands of reports by lawyers and politicians. It was a show, as Americans might say, that I believe those in the first row of the hall would rather have listened to from where we sat in the back. A small man from the north was given a big voice. It was a splendid opportunity to reach them all, and what they saw and heard was a message of truth that should have moved the justice-preoccupied Nordic politicians, internationally engaged in solidarity work and equality for different peoples. They learned that it's a long way from the grand words of the UN General Assembly to a small session of the Nordic Council in Copenhagen on a cold winter evening in February. The journey is even longer from the barren plateau between Gilbbesjávri and Gárasavvon where Valkeapää was from.

It was as though we in the back rows were lifting up out of our chairs and floating forward, to hover above the room. From there we could see our Norwegian prime minister shrink under the mild words of embarrassing truth pronounced with the half-smile of Sámi irony, a thanks-for-nothing thank you for the last hundred years of neglecting the Indigenous people in the north. We hovered high up near the ceiling, from

where we could closely follow the effects of the performance. And from there, we also saw our own Sámi politicians realise, in a moment of clear understanding, the importance of art in society. On their marvelling faces we could read the question: ‘Why don’t they listen to us in the same way? Why don’t our speeches touch the cockles of their hearts? Why don’t the people hear our politicians’ language? What is it about art that has such a direct effect?’ We, the observers, could in our momentary elevation high up there, full of pride that others were recognising the deeper dimension of our culture, enjoy the double effect of the speech. Just as the yoik texts deliberately play with piling meaning upon meaning, the speech was constructed to appeal to the minds of the Sámi and the Dane, and the associations coming out of the performance either brought the tundra closer or pushed the unknown even farther away.

But what had really happened? Why did we ‘straighten up our crooked backs’, to quote the first Sámi novel, *Daybreak*, by Anders Larsen from the beginning of the twentieth century? What did the man from the tundra say and do on stage in the Nordic Council? After having accepted the award, when he again had the whole stage to himself, he looked up to the left, where a row of flags hung from the walls, then turned his head and looked up to the right. The Sámi flag was nowhere in sight. Then he went to the microphone and said, ‘Honoured representatives of almost all the peoples of the Nordic countries! Honorable people! I belong to the part of the population who, in this context, are that ‘almost’. It is shameful that the northern Indigenous people are not represented. It is shameful.’

Then he went to the grand piano and picked up a small parcel wrapped in grey paper. He took off the wrapping and pulled out a huge Sámi flag, which he then attached to the microphone stand. ‘I present this gift to you, so you can also hang our flag in the row up there.’ Just then and there, it was exactly the symbol that was needed, and it seemed quite as unifying to the Sámi gathered there as when the official flag was first raised at the Sámi Conference in Åre in 1986. Yet, just as our being placed at the back of the hall was symbolic, there was also a humorous symbolism in having the Sámi flag firmly tied to the microphone stand. Its weight kept pulling the microphone down, as if it were bowing its head to receive the message from the stage. And the drooping microphone had its parallel in the heads a number of the politicians, who also sat looking

at the floor. For some of them, this was obviously a political demonstration; for others, it was a gentle and appropriate assertion of power flowing in the other direction – of the power of words, performed correctly at the right time. Elsewhere, it has always been the others, the *dáža*, who have claimed their power by planting the flag in the earth and saying ‘This is ours’. Our resistance has always had to go underground and to be expressed in a language whose energy and opposition can only be grasped by those who understood it. But our flag wasn’t planted on Danish soil with the decree that we hereby claimed Copenhagen. On the contrary, it expressed the simple message that we too wanted to be heard. In this sense, what could be a better choice for a flagpole than a microphone stand?

Finally, Valkeapää performed the traditional Sámi singing, *juoigan*, in gratitude for the prize and the attention. The *luohti* (yoik song) held the energy, the resistance, the woundedness, and the value of the entirety of Sámi cultural history. It rose and dropped away. It was violent and vulnerable. The ocean waves and the storms on the tundra burst out, only a moment later to allow the sun to shine, brushing soft cheeks with warmth: Sámiland for the Sámi, as it is expressed in the Sámi national anthem. An achievement had been carried out, a prize won, and a people rediscovered.

Bibliography / Further reading:

Chief Seattle, *How Can One Sell The Air? Chief Seattle’s Vision*, ed. Eli Gifford, R. Michael Cook and Warren Jefferson, revised version. Summertown, Tennessee: Native Voices, 2005.

Fellman, Jacob, 1906, *Anteckningar under min vistelse i Lappmarken* (Notes from My Sojourn in Lappmarken) Andra delen. Helsinki: Finska litteratursällskapets tryckeri, 254–59.

Gaski, Harald, 2004, ‘When the Thieves Became Masters in the Land of the Shamans’, *Nordlit*, no. 15, Summer 2004: 35–45. University of Tromsø.

Gaski, Harald, 2010. ‘Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: Indigenous Voice and Multimedia Artist’, *Arctic Discourses*, ed. Anka Ryall, Johan Schimanski & Henning Howlid Wærp. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2010: 301–28. (Reprinted by permission of *AlterNative*, where it first appeared in Vol. 4, No. 2, 2008: 155–77.

Valkeapää, Nils-Aslak, *Greetings from Lapland*, London: Zed Press, 1983.

Valkeapää, Nils-Aslak, *Ruoktu váimmus*, Kautokeino: DAT, 1985 (*Trekways of the Wind*, 1994).

Valkeapää, Nils-Aslak, *Beaivi, áhčážan*, Kautokeino: DAT, 1989 (*The Sun, My Father*, 1997).

Valkeapää, Nils-Aslak, *Eanni, eannážan*, Kautokeino: DAT, 2001 (*The Earth, My Mother*, 2017).