



The Mountains of Sápmi: Art,
Culture, and Perception in Sámi
Homelands

John C. Ryan, Francis Joy, Peter Armstrand

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windy tundra

tundra winds

fragrances

a ptarmigan's flight

following the shape of the land

cloven hoofs click

life

the herd on the mountain slopes

the river pool yoiks, whispers

-from Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's
*The Sun, My Father*¹

Introduction

In the above lines from Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, the mountain is a sacred and sentient subject existing among other expressive entities—tundra, wind, ptarmigan, reindeer, and river. Throughout his writing, the mountain is a prominent ancestral presence. Named from the Sámi terms *jiehkki* for “glacier” and *várri* for “mountain,” the Norwegian peak *Jiehkkevárri* “stands watching / *Eallenvárri* where avalanches rolled.”² For Sámi people, mountains are communicative beings endowed with consciousness. As threshold environments, they mediate the boundaries between the world of the living and *Sáivo*, the mythical world of underground beings such as *háldi* who protect certain places, animals, and people. Yet, at

the same time, mountains supply the material requirements of Sámi livelihoods including seasonal pastureland for reindeer herds. Figure 1 is an image of a *sieidi*, or sacred place, at Saltfjellet, a mountainous area in Norway that marks the cultural boundary between the southern and central parts of *Sápmi*, the Sámi homeland areas. Throughout *Sápmi*, there are *sieidis* in the form of unusually shaped rocks indicating where, in some areas, the Sámi people once performed sacrificial and offering rituals to *háldi* to help balance the natural order and ensure successful hunting and fishing.

Our objective in this article is to trace the recurrence of mountains as sacred landscapes in Sámi culture through a focus on the traditional drums of contemporary drum maker Peter Armstrong (a co-author of this article) and the poetry of writer Nils-

¹ Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *The Sun, My Father*, trans. Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström, and Harald Gaski (DAT O.S., 1997), original edition, 1988, 80, italics in original.

² Valkeapää, *The Sun*, 46.



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Aslak Valkeapää. In order to contextualize the significance of mountains in their creative work, we begin with an overview of Sámi people, *Sápmi* as their homeland, and *Sáivo* as the other world. The Sámi are the Indigenous people of Northern Europe whose ancestral lands of *Sápmi* traverse Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of north-west Russia. *Sáivo* is a spiritual realm located at the base of mountains and bottoms of deep lakes of regions located within the Arctic areas but also further south where there are no mountains but lakes and where there particular anthropomorphic rock formations which signify ceremonial sites, often located by water. Understanding the significance of the *Sáivo* world within Sámi cosmology is essential to appreciating the role of mountains as representations of gods and goddesses as well as ancestral cultural landscapes because they are often tied to Sámi family names, thus offering Sámi families and reindeer protection and good health. Following an elabo-

ration of Sámi people's relationship to *Sápmi* and *Sáivo*, our discussion shifts to an overview of pareidolia as the perception of the sacrosanct landforms of *Sápmi*. As a connective faculty, pareidolia reflects the patternicity—or pattern-thinking—structuring the work of Armstrand and Valkeapää. Pareidolia, we argue, engenders cosmological identification with more-than-human beings. Armstrand's drums feature mountains and their spirits among reindeer, crane, trees, *lavvus* (traditional dwellings), and *sieidis* (offering places). Mountains that can communicate vital information to the *noaidi* shaman are called passe-ware or "holy mountains." Comparably, the poetry of Valkeapää narrates the sacred resonances of *Sápmi*'s peaks and fells. The poet-singer engages in dialogue with mountains as ancestral beings through his performance of the *yoik*, or traditional chant. In the conclusion, we suggest that the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous creative traditions such as drum making and *yoiking* are essential to the con-

servation of mountain ecologies and cultures in Northern Europe.

Sápmi and Sáivo: Mountains as Sacred Landscapes in Sámi Culture

The Sámi are the only Indigenous people of the European Union³ or, more precisely, of Fennoscandia, the geological region encompassing the mainland's of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Murmansk Oblast, the Karelian Republic, and northern Leningrad Oblast in Russia.⁴ Although demographic data varies, research estimates that the Sámi comprise between 80,000 and 100,000 individuals across central and northern Norway, central and northern Sweden, northern Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of north-western Russia.⁵ During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Sámi were known by the exonyms *Lapps* or *Laplanders*, applied by outsiders and regarded as pejorative today.⁶ The nine recognized Sámi languages spoken in these four countries are considered endangered due to the histories of assimilation that have impacted traditional knowledge

systems.⁷ Like their ancestors, many Sámi people pursue semi-nomadic reindeer herding, requiring deep experiential understanding of the fauna, flora, topography, waterbodies, and seasonal cycles of the land.⁸ During the migration of reindeer, Sámi families would traditionally construct temporary dwellings known as *goahtis* and *lavvus* from timber, fabric, and peat moss.⁹ In addition to animal husbandry, contemporary Sámi livelihoods involve hunting, fishing, gathering, craft-making, education, and tourism.¹⁰ Sámi religion, moreover, is a “pluralistic phenomenon” which today, is varying widely across the region and often integrating pre-Christian shamanistic beliefs with Lutheranism and other traditions.¹¹ Sámi polytheism acknowledges a variety of natural deities inhabiting mountains, rocks, lakes, trees, and animals.

As ethicist Anna Lydia Svalastog and historian Gunlög Fur observe, “Sámi

7 Hanna Helander, Pigga Keskitalo, and Tuija Turunen, “Saami Language Online Education Outside the Saami Homeland—New Pathways to Social Justice,” in *Finland's Famous Education System: Unvarnished Insights into Finnish Schooling*, eds. Martin Thrupp, Piia Seppänen, Jaakko Kauko, and Sonja Kosunen (Springer, 2023), 303–4.

8 Inger Marie Gaup Eira, Ellen Inga Turi, and Johan Mathis Turi, “Sámi Traditional Reindeer Herding Knowledge Throughout a Year: Herding Periods on Snow-Covered Ground,” in *Reindeer Husbandry Adaptation: Adaptation to the Changing Arctic*, eds. Svein Disch Mathiesen, Inger Marie Gaup Eira, Ellen Inga Turi, Anders Oskal, Mikhail Pogodaev, and Marina Tonkopeeva (Springer, 2023).

9 Mathis Persen Bongo and Inger Marie Gaup Eira, “Learning by Herding – Transmission of Sámi Reindeer Herding Knowledge and Skills,” in *Reindeer Husbandry Adaptation: Adaptation to the Changing Arctic*, eds. Svein Disch Mathiesen, Inger Marie Gaup Eira, Ellen Inga Turi, Anders Oskal, Mikhail Pogodaev, and Marina Tonkopeeva (Springer, 2023), 126.

10 Trude Fonneland and Tiina Äikäs, “Introduction: The Making of Sámi Religion in Contemporary Society,” in *Sámi Religion: Religious Identities, Practices and Dynamics*, eds. Trude Fonneland and Tiina Äikäs (MDPI, 2020), 2.

11 Fonneland and Äikäs, “Introduction.”

3 Sanna Valkonen, Saara Alakorva, Áile Aikio, and Sigga-Marja Magga, “Introduction: Introduction to the Sámi World,” in *The Sámi World*, eds. Sanna Valkonen, Áile Aikio, Saara Alakorva, and Sigga-Marja Magga (Routledge, 2022), 3.

4 Håkon Hermanstrand, Asbjørn Kolberg, Trond Risto Nilssen, and Leiv Sem, “Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives,” in *The Indigenous Identity of the South Saami: Historical and Political Perspectives on a Minority Within a Minority*, eds. Håkon Hermanstrand, Asbjørn Kolberg, Trond Risto Nilssen, and Leiv Sem (Springer, 2019), 4.

5 Eirik Larsen, “Sápmi,” in *The Indigenous World*, ed. Dwayne Mamo (The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2024), 464; Regeringskansliet, “About the Indigenous Sámi,” accessed November 23, 2024, <https://sanning-skommisionensamer.se/en/about-the-indigenous-sami/>.

6 Veli-Pekka Lehtola, *The Sámi People: Traditions in Transition*, trans. Linna Weber Müller-Wille (University of Alaska Press, 2004), 10; Valkonen, et al., “Introduction,” 3.



people are participants and agents in complex relations and have a part in both Fennoscandian and global histories.”¹² Understanding these “complex relations,” especially to mountain environments, requires appreciating the significance of *Sápmi* in the Sámi worldview. Traversing Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia’s Kola Peninsula, *Sápmi* (in northern languages) or *Saepmie* (in southern languages) refers to the ancestral homelands of the Sámi people.¹³ Figure 2 delineates the location of *Sápmi* across four nation-states and provides place names in the Northern Sámi language. The shaded area represents the current extent of *Sápmi* with its southern boundary demarcated by the cities and villages of Trondheim, Norway at the mouth of the River Nidelva; Östersund, Sweden; Kolari, Finland; and

Sosnovka, Russia on the White Sea. As Europe’s only Indigenous society, the Sámi occupied these areas until displacement and Christianization began to intensify in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the present era, Sámi mostly inhabit northern Fennoscandia except for people residing in Oslo, Stockholm, Helsinki, and other urban centers. In Sámi languages, the term *Sápmi* denotes “a region,” “a language,” and “a human.”¹⁴ As the “Land of the Sámi,” *Sápmi* supplies the range of resources required for material existence and spiritual well-being.¹⁵ *Sápmi* comprises diverse environments—from extensive coniferous forests and coastal areas near the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans to highland habitats characterized by fells and the Caledonian mountain ridge.¹⁶ According to North Sámi historian Veli-Pekka Lehtola, a “common thread for all Sámi groups is the adaptation of their way of life to the yearly cycle of nature and to the specific local natural en-

12 Anna Lydia Svalastog and Gunlög Fur, “Introduction,” in *Visions of Sápmi*, eds. Anna Lydia Svalastog and Gunlög Fur (Arthub Publisher, 2015), 11.

13 Hermanstrand, et al., “Theoretical,” 8; Siv Ellen Kraft, “Sámi Indigenous Spirituality: Religion and Nationbuilding in Norwegian Sápmi,” *Temenos* 45, no. 2 (2009): 179–206 [179], doi: 10.33356/temenos.7900.

14 Valkonen, et al., “Introduction,” 3.

15 Lehtola, *The Sámi*, 46, 88.

16 Lehtola, *The Sámi*, 88.

vironment.”¹⁷ As both a geographical and cultural designation, therefore, *Sápmi* figures prominently into the depictions of mountains in the work of drum maker Peter Armstrand and poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, featured in this article.

The Sámi people of Norway regard mountains as sacred because the entrances to *Sáivo*, “the underworld,” are located at their bases.¹⁸ Gods in human or animal-like forms are known to reside on mountains and by lakes and rivers as physical manifestations of *Sáivo* spirits. The spirits of Sámi culture reside in *Sáivo*, the other-than-human realm where deities, spirits, and deceased ancestors or *saivoolmak* provide guidance and wisdom to the *noaidi*, a term translated variously as “healer,” “shaman,”¹⁹ or “religious specialist.”²⁰ In contrast, the Sámi of Finland understand *Sáivo* as an upside-down underwater domain located beyond a small hole at the bottom of deep double-bottomed lakes.²¹ For Sámi cultures across *Sápmi*, the guardians of the *noaidi* take the form of snakes, fish, birds, reindeer, wolves, bears, and other spirit animals inhabiting *Sáivo*. Moreover, along with animal entities, the spirits of deceased *noaidi* dwell in *Sáivo* where they protect the reindeer herds of the living world. To be certain, the landscapes of *Sápmi* bear traces of ancestral activities in lakes, mountains, and *sieidi* or

ceremonial sites.²² As a case in point, Saana—or “Sána” in the Northern Sámi language—is a 1,029-metre-high fell in northern Finland near Kilpisjärvi Lake that is held sacred by Sámi people. For further illustration, there is also Tromsdalstinden, a 1,238-metre mountain near Tromsø, Norway that looms over the landscape with its commanding shape and height. Sacred mountains such as these are “dangerous” and thus demand “respect” and “distance” due to their otherworldly powers.²³ Closely connected to Sámi spirituality are the drum and the *yoik*, both essential to *noaidi* ceremonies and to the perception of mountains as sacred topographies.²⁴

Landscape Perception in Finland: Pareidolia as Pattern-Thinking

It is crucial to bear in mind that, in Finland, there are no mountains below the Arctic Circle. The country's highest peaks—Halti, Ridnitšohkka, Kiedditšohkka, and Kovddoskaisi—are located in the far north close to Norway. Found throughout Finland, however, are sacred rock formations known as *sieidi* in the Northern Sámi language and *seita* in Finnish. Some of these were perceived cosmologically as mountains by the distant ancestors of the Sámi. In the country's southern areas below the Arctic Circle, sacred places as such were perceived to contain faces, heads, mouths, eyes, ears, and other anthropomorphic shapes in stone formations manifest within them. In the form of paintings, Sámi ancestors created an enduring archive of human and animal interactions with spirit beings on these rock complexes. Prominent examples of these

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Trude Fonneland, *Contemporary Shamanisms in Norway: Religion, Entrepreneurship, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 29.

¹⁹ Konsta Ilari Kaikkonen, “From, Into, and Back: Translations of the Sámi Words *Noaidi* and *Noaidevuohhta* in Context,” *Religion* 49, no. 4 (2019): 539–70, doi: 10.1080/0048721X.2018.1505673.

²⁰ Fonneland, *Contemporary*, 9.

²¹ Metsähallitus, “Mysterious Saivo Lakes,” accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.nationalparks.fi/en-US/akassaivoandseitapahta/mysterioussaivolakes>.

²² Fonneland, *Contemporary*, 67.

²³ Siv Ellen Kraft, “The Making of a Sacred Mountain: Meanings of Nature and Sacredness in Sápmi and Northern Norway,” *Religion* 40, no. 1 (2010): 53–61 [60], doi: 10.1016/j.religion.2009.08.011.

²⁴ Kraft, “Sámi,” 188.

complexes include the Astuvansalmi paintings created circa 3,000–2,500 BCE on a conspicuous boulder along the shoreline of Lake Ylovesi in south-east Finland. The massive rock resembles the head of a slumbering god whereas its paintings feature images of men, women, moose, fish, foxes, bears, wolves, and boats.²⁵ The Astuvansalmi paintings present narratives of inter-species communication between people, animals, and spirits. A second example of such a formation comes from the prehistoric rock paintings at the head of the Verla rapids of the River Kymi in the south-east of the country.²⁶ The Verla paintings include “a small horned anthropomorph ‘riding’ an elk figure”²⁷ as well as depictions of a human figure and moose just above the waterline of the river. The stone itself is shaped like the head of a bear.

It is possible the prehistoric ancestors of the Sámi people regarded anthropomorphic boulders at Astuvansalmi, Verla, and elsewhere as sacred mountain microcosms suitable for rock paintings that would serve as mediums of interchange between the earthly and spiritual worlds. Historically, the Sámi ancestors associated boulder formations on southern rivers and lake shores cosmologically with the high peaks of *Sápmi*, as gods and spiritual beings in both human and animal forms, as well as fish and reptile forms, creating a spiritual and psychological terrain connecting land forms across time and space. Located in western Finland between the village of Äkäslompolo and the Swed-

ish border, for instance, Pakasaivo is a sixty-metre-deep spring-fed lake with a name that invokes the *Sáivo* underworld. In addition to its sacrality, Pakasaivo is hydrologically unique in that its lower and upper water layers never intermix due to a thermocline, or transitional zone, at a depth of approximately 12.5 metres.²⁸ The water below the thermocline is low in oxygen but high in hydrogen sulfide; these chemical conditions have the ability to preserve objects sunken in the lake for millennia.²⁹ Located north-east of *Pakasaivo* in Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park is *Äkässaivo*, a “steep-walled ravine lake” featuring Seitapahta, an anthropomorphic stone head measuring ten metres wide and thirty metres high.³⁰ Well before Christianization began to intensify in the seventeenth century, Sámi people understood the lake and its distinctive rock formation as a powerful ceremonial site entreating respectful relations. According to the Finnish ethnographer Samuli Paulaharju writing in the 1920s, “not everyone dares to go behold [Äkässaivo]; at least not those who are faint of heart, for the ravine lake is overlooked by towering rocky walls.”³¹

In Sámi culture, human and creaturely forms perceived on boulders such as Seitapahta manifest cosmological landscapes gathering human and non-human beings of the past and present. These shapes apprehended in stone formations signify the existence of supernatural beings. Understood as the perception of sacred phenomena that manifest on rocks, stones, boulders, mountains and other ecological materialities, pareidolia mediates between the spiritual and

25 Antti Lahelma, *A Touch of Red: Archaeological and Ethnographic Approaches to Interpreting Finnish Rock Paintings* (The Finnish Antiquarian Society, 2008), 25–28.

26 Francis Joy, “Shamanism and Rock Art: The Dancing Figure and the Stone Face at Hossa, Northern Finland,” *Suomen Antropologi* 32, no. 1 (2007): 77–89.

27 Lahelma, *A Touch*, 56.

28 Metsähallitus, “Mysterious,” para. 1.

29 Ibid.

30 Metsähallitus, “Äkässaivo and Seitapahta,” accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.nationalparks.fi/en-US/akassaivoandseitapahta>, para. 1.

31 qtd. Metsähallitus, “Mysterious,” para. 1.

earthly worlds. In studies of environmental perception, pareidolia refers to the discernment of familiar and meaningful images in backgrounds or textures that activate one's curiosity, imagination and creativity.³² For neuroscientist Lorenzo Diana and colleagues, pareidolia is closely connected to creative cognition:

"When looking at backgrounds, textures (e.g. clouds, rocks, and walls), or simply at elements or objects in a particular spatial arrangement, we often perceive seemingly real patterns resembling, for example, faces, animals, body shapes, and so forth."³³

Pareidolia, moreover, is encompassed within a broader range of projective faculties known as *apophenia* or "patternicity."³⁴ Pattern-thinking entails the identification of meaningful patterns in the everyday world. Rather than illusory "sensory deception,"³⁵ pareidolia induces sympathetic identification with both natural and preternatural environments. According to philosopher Roy Brand, pareidolia is integral to spiritual experience as a "universal human phenomenon [evident in those] who attribute a will and consciousness to everything. Gods, humans, animals, the dead, plants, the weather, and often inanimate objects, are all seen as having an appe-

tite or will, a viewpoint, and cognitive abilities."³⁶ Through projection and communication, pareidolia bridges the lacustrine and montane, the human and more-than-human, and the ordinary and otherworldly. Nonetheless, we recognize the difficulty in drawing a comparison between the Western concept of pareidolia, the abodes of spiritual beings within *Sápmi*, and their possible manifestations within trees and rock formations. These interconnections deserve further research beyond the scope of this article. Yet, encountered throughout *Sápmi* and elsewhere—including across southern Finland—pareidolic resonances can be said to inspire art, crafts, poetry, song, and spiritual practices, as demonstrated by the drum making of Peter Armstrong and the poetry of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää.

The Mountains of Sápmi on Drums: The Work of Peter Armstrong

As an instrument of divination and "ecstatic excitation," the drum has been a vital part of Sámi culture for thousands of years.³⁷ The seventeenth century, however, marked the widespread confiscation and destruction of Sámi drums associated with the *noaidi* and sacred places.³⁸ Due to its integral role in *noaidi* rituals, the drum became the principal object of the missionary campaign to dispel animistic beliefs and convert Sámi

32 Lorenzo Diana, Michael Frei, Alvin Chesham, Denise de Jong, Kathrin Chiffi, Thomas Nyffeler, Claudio L. Bassetti, Nicole Goebel, Aleksandra Eberhard-Moscicka, René M Mürli, Thalia Goldstein, and Oshin Vartanian, "A Divergent Approach to Pareidolias—Exploring Creativity in a Novel Way," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 15, no. 2 (2021): 313–23, doi: 10.1037/aca0000293; Derek Hodgson, "Seeing Beyond Pareidolia: Implications for Palaeoart," *Rock Art Research* 40, no. 2 (2023): 159–185.

33 Lorenzo, et al., "A Divergent," 314.

34 Hodgson, "Seeing," 160.

35 Cornelia Kaufmann, Neelya Agalawatta, Tim Outhred, and Gin Malhi, "Phenomenal Insight: Pareidolia—I See?" *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 53, no. 1 (2019): 89–90 [89], doi: 10.1073/pnas.2401196121.

36 Roy Brand, "Pareidolia," accessed January 3, 2025, <https://www.parterreprojects.com/pareidolia-1>, para. 3.

37 Åke Hultkrantz, "The Drum in Shamanism: Some Reflections," in *The Saami Shaman Drum*, eds. Tore Ahlbäck and Jan Bergman (The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1991), 12.

38 Francis Joy and Peter Armstrong, "The Beliefs and Practices of Peter Armstrong, Sámi Drum Maker and Healer and the Expressions of Sámi Religion in a Contemporary Setting," *Shaman: Journal of the International Society for Shamanistic Research* 31, nos. 1–2 (2023): 61–88 [62].

people to Christianity.³⁹ During this turbulent period, nonetheless, the drum assumed a significant function as a symbol of Sámi resistance to cultural loss as well as a source graphically documenting the confrontation between Indigenous and Christian spiritualities.⁴⁰ The drum continues to serve as an expression of Sámi sovereignty and traditions, as evident in the work of Peter Armstrand, a Sámi shaman, healer, drum-maker, and handicraft instructor from Kiruna, Swedish Sápmi.⁴¹ According to Armstrand, “the Sámi have always held mountains as sacred because they host diverse life forms and communicate their powers to the Sámi shaman. Mountains perform this work energetically. Known to talk, mountains can be



heard if the listener is properly attuned to their voices. The shaman reads or interprets the mountain's

39 Kraft, “Sámi,” 189.

40 Håkan Rydving, “The Saami Drums and the Religious Encounter in the 17th and 18th Centuries,” in *The Saami Shaman Drum*, eds. Tore Ahlbäck and Jan Bergman (The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1991), 29.

41 Joy and Armstrand, “The Beliefs,” 88.

energy as a means to gather crucial information.”⁴²

In many Sámi languages, a mountain with the capacity to communicate to the shaman is known as *passe-ware* or “holy mountain.” Such mountains have a supernatural power that resides within them and watches over the forests of the area. The shaman

also has his own personal sacred mountain with its unique expressions and healing pathways. At the same time, a mountain will communicate with reindeer and other animals about potential hazards in the environment. Figure 3 is a contemporary Sámi drum made by Peter Armstrand from pine wood and covered with reindeer skin. The top section features a Sámi shaman

holding a drum in a holy place or *passe-ware*. This is where he encounters the spirits. At the top right side of the drum is the shaman's helper in the form of a bird. At the top left side is the Sámi god of the wind, *Bieg-golmái*, who ensures that the mountain is kept clean and clear. Suspend-

42 Peter Armstrand, Email to Francis Joy, August 1, 2024.

ed above the mountain is a Sámi sun design. The middle and lower sections of the drum depict a reindeer, crane, trees, *lavvu* (traditional dwelling), and *sieidi* (offering place).⁴³

Figure 4 features an oval-shaped contemporary Sámi drum created by Armstrand from pinewood and a reindeer skin. The upper section of the drum includes a Sámi sun, which is a motif drawn from a seveneenth-century drum. The sun is positioned at the centre of the Sámi cosmos. In addition, there is a bear on the holy mountain. In Sámi culture, bears are sacred animals, and so it is not uncommon to find one illustrated in the mountain landscape of a drum.

In the northern sky, the bear constellation plays a major role in the astral mythology of northern peoples. At the bottom of the drum are two mountain grouse. These birds hold a special status in Sámi culture as weather messengers. In the winter grouses are white but, in the summer, they turn brown. They are difficult to see on the

mountain in winter because of their colour. In the late autumn, when encountered by the roadside, the grouse herald that snow would soon arrive. In the late spring, when people are wondering if the winter has ended, if they notice a white grouse by the road, it means more snow is due. One could say the mountain is an interlocutor who informs the grouse and the birds,

in turn, inform humans.⁴⁴

Figure 5 features a drum by Armstrand depicting a sun above the sacred mountains of *Sápmi*, which are covered in snow, as are the trees. A grouse with a white coat is also visible. The black and white designs of the drum signify both the light and dark aspects of existence. The winter in



Sápmi can last between six and seven months of the year. When the grouse is brown in the summer, it is very difficult to see because it is camouflaged in the land. The sun and mountains close to the sky are linked to astral mythology and the spirits of Sámi culture. When the sun sets behind the mountains, the skyline and horizon

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

become beautifully coloured in both warm and cold seasons.⁴⁵ In all three examples of Armstrand's contemporary drum-making practice, mountain landscapes are intimately connected to Sámi spirituality and *Sápmi* ecology. More than an inanimate landform or mere geological designation, the *passe-ware* is a living ancestral ecology connecting the *noaidi* to the world of spirits and deities in order to acquire information, heal suffering, and maintain good relations between beings. A similar perception of mountains as sacred topography is apparent in the poetry of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, the subject of the next section.

The Mountains of Sápmi in Words: The Song-Poetry of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää

Known as Áilu the Northern Sámi language and by the stage name Áillohaš, poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was born into a reindeer-herding Sámi family in 1943 in Enontekiö, Finland and passed away in 2001 in Espoo, Finland. He lived in Finnish *Sápmi* until his father's death after which his family moved to Norwegian *Sápmi*.⁴⁶ Valkeapää was one of the most

prominent Sámi artists and activists of the twentieth century. In addition to his standing as a major Sámi poet, Valkeapää was a *yoiker* (traditional Sámi singer), musician, composer, performer, artist, photographer, painter, and cultural ambassador.⁴⁷ He released thirteen albums between 1968 and 1994, highlighting his prolific and wide-ranging creativity.⁴⁸ Valkeapää's

versatile innovations across multiple genres continue to contribute distinctly to the revitalization of Sámi culture, especially the *yoik* tradition, and the advancement of the Sámi rights movement.⁴⁹ The landscapes of *Sápmi*, including its peaks and fells, feature prominently in his varied body of work.⁵⁰ For instance, the cover design of Valkeapää's



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47 Ibid.

48 Discogs, "Nils-Aslak Valkeapää," accessed November 29, 2024, [https://www.](https://www.discogs.com/artist/791141-Nils-Aslak-Valkeap%C3%A4%C3%A4)

[discogs.com/artist/791141-Nils-Aslak-Valkeap%C3%A4%C3%A4](https://www.discogs.com/artist/791141-Nils-Aslak-Valkeap%C3%A4%C3%A4).

49 Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja, "Traditional Sámi Culture and the Colonial Part as the Basis for Sámi Contemporary Art," in *Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Svein Aamold, Elin Haugdal, and Ulla Angkjær-Jørgensen (Aarhus University Press, 2017), 101.

50 Harald Gaski, "Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: Indigenous Voice and Multimedia Artist," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 4, no. 2 (2008): unpaginated, doi: 10.1177/117718010800400211.

45 Ibid.

46 Lehtola, *The Sámi*, 129.



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album *The Magic of Sámi Yoik* (1998) depicts a vibrantly hued landscape evocative of autumn with an angular peak in the background, a rounded fell on the right side of the composition, and birch trees occupying the foreground

(Figure 6).⁵¹ Valkeapää's painting conveys the "enchantment of the land" and the "'magic' of the yoik" experienced by the artist as his performance "animates the environment

51 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *The Magic of Sami Yoik* (Finlandia Records, 1998).

and brings forth to attention some of its possibilities, such as heightened presences, memories, or affects."⁵² The album *The Magic of Sámi Yoik*, among others, presents an example of the convergence of poetry, song, visual art, and the sacrality of *Sápmi*'s mountains in Valkeapää's work.

Like Armstrand's drums, Valkeapää's poetry represents mountains as com-

52 Stéphane Aubinet, *Why Sámi Sing: Knowing Through Melodies in Northern Norway* (Routledge, 2023), 78, 79.

municative entities embedded within Sápmi's network of ancestral relations. In 1974, Valkeapää released his debut poetry book, *Gida ijat čuovgadat* (*Spring Nights So Bright*), and went on to publish nine collections over three decades, all in the Northern Sámi language.⁵³ Of note within his poetic oeuvre are *Ruoktu vaimmus* (*Trekways of the Wind*),⁵⁴ *Beaivi, áhčážan* (*The Sun, My Father*),⁵⁵ and his final collection, *Eanni, eannážan* (*The Earth, My Mother*).⁵⁶ The principal concerns of his writing range from Indigenous solidarity, Sámi cosmology, and Sápmi as the Sámi people's homeland to reindeer herding across the seasons, kinship with all beings, and the *yoik* as culturally vital. In navigating these and other biocultural themes, Valkeapää moves fluidly between creative genres, as Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja astutely remarks:

"A comprehensive approach to creation was typical of Valkeapää's art—he was a synaesthete. While painting, he heard drawings and pictures as music and words. When making music, he saw colours and heard words. And when writing, he heard music and saw colours in his mind."⁵⁷

Valkeapää's work threads visual and textual expressions into an integrated whole. Consequently, the design of his poetry, including the position of words on the page, is a crucial element of his composition. In its content and form, for example, *The Sun, My Father* expresses a Sámi conception of other-than-humans as sentient agents gifted with a language animated by

the land including its alpine habitats. Valkeapää's verse thus inflects the cultural and ecological connections between pebbles, stones, lichen, moss, creek, wind, tundra, and other performative personae who "whispered / spoke / made a *yoik*."⁵⁸

The musicality of Valkeapää's poetry is central to the power of his work to evoke Sápmi's mountains as living presences. Integral to this context is the *yoik*, a Sámi singing practice regarded as one of the oldest continuous musical traditions in Europe. Comparable to the chanting practices of other cultures, the *yoik* is a vocal capacity received by the singer from the environment to bring forth the presence of subjects by mimicking their sounds, forms, and behaviours.⁵⁹ Although condemned as sinful during the seventeenth-century conversion of the Sámi to Christianity, this ancestral form of performance has come to symbolize the recuperation of Sámi cultural traditions.⁶⁰ Consequently, the *yoik* is a vehicle of social and ecological transformation. In *Trekways of the Wind*, the poet alludes to this singing tradition early in the collection:

"In evening the bluethroat sings
It is spring
In me
too something
melts teases out a smile
awakens a *yoik*."⁶¹

The bluethroat song animates—"awakens"—a *yoik*, highlighting the imbrication between singing, performance, and non-human vocalization in the Sámi worldview. The *yoik* is a medium through which human and non-human voices intermingle to generate a shared utterance that includes the bird and the mountain, among others.

53 Hautala-Hirvioja, "Traditional," 101–2.

54 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *Trekways of the Wind*, trans. Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström, and Harald Gaski (DAT, 1994), original edition, 1985.

55 Valkeapää, *The Sun*.

56 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *The Earth, My Mother*, trans. Harald Gaski, Lars Nordström, and Ralph Salisbury (DAT, 2017), original edition, 2001.

57 Hautala-Hirvioja, "Traditional," 102.

58 Valkeapää, *The Sun*, 39.

59 Aubinet, *Why*, xii–xiii.

60 Lehtola, *The Sámi*, 28, 108–11.

61 Valkeapää, *Trekways*, 39.

Comparably, Valkeapää's attunement to *Sápmi*'s articulations is evident in *Goase dušše* (*The Bird Symphony*).⁶² Although not a *yoik* per se, the one-hour arrangement of dripping water, croaking frogs, singing birds, crashing thunder, and other environmental sounds follows the progression of the seasons from spring to autumn, and from fells to coastlines.⁶³

Across his poetry collections, Valkeapää asserts the cultural significance of *Sápmi* as the Sámi homeland traversing the political boundaries constructed by nation-states. Representing *Sápmi*'s myriad voices, Valkeapää's writing conjures the polyvocality of sentient beings in dialogue. Through an alchemy of agencies, his lyrical texts become the language of *Sápmi* channelled by the poet-performer. Recognizing the land as kin, the opening verses of *Trekways of the Wind* offer a prayer-like greeting:

“Bures bures dear brother
how do you do dear sister
How nice to meet you again
see you
Your eyes shining.”⁶⁴

The translation preserves the Sámi term *bures* for “hello.” The poet addresses *Sápmi* as familial—as brother and sister—personified with “eyes shining.” Rather than strange and ominous, the land offers refuge within its sensuous embrace. Often dedicated to a person, place, or animal, *yoiks* tend to incorporate a performer's ancestral relations, staging an individu-

alized means to know one's heritage vis-à-vis specific places:

“Our ancestors kept fires on Allaorda
on Stuorajeaggis' tufts
in Viiddesčearru
Grandfather drowned in the fjord
while fishing
Grandmother cut her shoe grass in
Šelgesrohtu
Father was born in Finjubákti in burn-
ing cold.”⁶⁵

The preceding lines reveal the speaker's deeply interconnected knowledge of family and environment including *Sápmi*'s mountainous features. The toponym *Allaorda* refers to “high timberline,” *Stuorajeaggis* denotes “the large marsh,” *Viiddesčearru* means “wide mountain,” *Šelgesrohtu* signifies “shining brush forest,” and *Finjubákti* is translated as “the leaning cliff.”⁶⁶

Valkeapää's language evokes the sensuality of *Sápmi*'s mountains, a landscape that might appear barren, harsh, and unwelcoming to an outsider. His work brings the musicality of the land to the fore, deepening the correlation between poetry and song. Throughout the section “Bluethroat, Twitter, Sing” of *Trekways of the Wind*, musical notation accompanies the poetry and drawings.⁶⁷ Within the synaesthetic symphony of the text, the modern world's waste, pollution, and poison contrast acutely to the pure springs of *Adjagorsa*, or “grandfather's gulch,” and *Adjajohka*, or “grandfather's creek.”⁶⁸ The sensuousness of *Sápmi* continues thematically in *The Sun, My Father* in which the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of the mountains figure conspicuously:

62 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *Goase dušše* (*The Bird Symphony*) (Dat O/S, 1994).

63 Kuisma Korhonen and Veli-Pekka Lehtola, “Transmediality and Multimodality in the Artistic Work of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää,” in *Shaping the North Through Multimodal and Intermedial Interaction*, eds. Juha-Pekka Alarauhio, Tiina Räisänen, Jarkko Toikkanen, and Riikka Tuomelius (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 195–96.

64 Valkeapää, *Trekways*, 20.

65 Ibid., 216.

66 Ibid., 2.

67 Ibid., 118–94.

68 Ibid., 146–47.

"step by step
 smell of green, the first grass
 blue heather
 Angelica
 wood sorrel
 upland waters
 towards the sky

 from peak to peak
 these lands
 the valleys
 the high mountain slopes
 over the forests
 towards the
 coast

 meadows
 reindeer calf moors
 land where calves are born."⁶⁹

The poem expands spatially outward from grass, heather, and angelica to peaks, slopes, and valleys, then, finally, to the meadows "where calves are born." The poetic progression from the microscale to the macroscale to the moor underscores the significance of reindeer herding in Sámi cosmology. In this way, Valkeapää positions mountains within the sensuous ecology of *Sápmi*.

Conclusion

"on the mountain peaks
 on high peaks
 colorful adorned birds
 singing like the bluethroat
 deep down in mother's lap
 silver veins of creeks
 lakes glittering like stars."⁷⁰

The resilience and adaptability of Indigenous creative traditions such as drum making and song-poetry are crucial to the preservation of mountain ecologies and cultures in Northern Europe. In *Sápmi*, mountains are connected to local livelihoods such

as fishing, reindeer herding, berry and mushroom picking, and practices intertwined with folklore and local traditions. The above excerpt from Valkeapää's work is an example of an Indigenous poetic ecology in which language interweaves with the materiality of land. The *yoik* is the language of *Sápmi* rendered sensory. Accordingly, the binaries of nature and culture, human and non-human, vocalization and silence, blur and dissolve. Valkeapää's poetry and Armstrong's drum making demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous creative traditions in response to the present-day precarities of the Anthropocene including, in the case of *Sápmi*, land clearance, wind turbine construction, broad-scale mining, and seasonal dislocation from climate change. Moreover, although the term pareidolia refers to an array of phenomena that have human and animal-like characteristics, it is necessary to take into consideration possible connections to the mythologies associated with local traditions of, in this case, the Sámi people. Different spiritual beings exist both above and below the ground in northern and Arctic environments, so it is necessary to consider whether faces and forms perceived in natural environments are representative of powers from within their domains and, as a consequence, have influenced certain manifestations. When taking this into account we see how these forms might indeed be connected to local identities, powers, and sacred landscapes, inspiring songs, art, poetry, drum-making, and other creative expressions in an era of acute ecological change. In this way, appreciating the visionary legacies of Armstrong and Valkeapää are more important than ever.

69 Valkeapää, *The Sun*, 42, italics in original.

70 Ibid., Verse 539.

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