

Violeta Basa

Babeş-Bolyai University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0547-4443>

## “A very strong stream it is”: An Interpretation of Yoiks about the Gievdneguoika Waterfall

This article is devoted to yoik, the traditional vocal music of the Sámi people. It explains what yoiks are and what meaning they have in Sámi culture as an expression of remembrance and emotions. The study analyses the lyrics of three yoiks about a waterfall on the Kautokeino river called Gievdneguoika, and examines how they express emotions. It also considers what these yoiks and the literary techniques they rely on say about the cultural values and attitudes of the Sámi people.

**Keywords:** yoiks, Sámi lyrics, Sámi music, Sámi culture

### 1. Introduction

My inspiration for analysing yoiks (the traditional vocal music of the Sámi people) about the Gievdneguoika waterfall came from a conversation with the yoiker and scholar Ánte Mihkkal Gaup after hearing him yoik about Gievdneguoika at the Sámi University in Kautokeino. The yoik was evocative of the place, which I had visited with a class of Sámi language students but was unfamiliar with as a cultural object among the Sámi in Inner Finnmark. (Unless otherwise noted, the term “Sámi” will henceforth be used in this article as shorthand for Northern Sámi.)

I am from Romania and started working as a teacher at the Sámi High School and Reindeer Husbandry School in Kautokeino in 2013. Kautokeino is a municipality in Norway where the majority are Sámi, and where most of the population speak the Northern Sámi language. As a part of that community and as a student of the Sámi language, I have had the opportunity to experience and explore many aspects of Sámi culture. I have worked as a teacher of Sámi youth for ten years now. I have also been a student at the Sámi University, where I have studied the Sámi language and literature, traditional knowledge, life view and faith, and have also studied yoik. I have also been a member of two Sámi choirs, where we would often perform yoiks,

and through these I made connections with Sámi yoikers and mentors, both in Kautokeino and in other Sámi localities, where we would travel to perform and practise.

Yoiks can be examined from many perspectives. I told Á.M. Gaup that the lyrics in his yoik about Gievdneguoika reminded me of lyrics in Romanian folklore, where rivers can be used as an expression of grief or to remember loved ones who have passed away. He told me that the yoik is also a warning: it cautions people about that section of the river. In encounters with other cultures, we may have different perspectives when interpreting texts. A wider comparison between Sámi and Romanian expressions of emotions through song falls outside the scope of this article, but this perspective of the author should be kept in mind when reading it.

I have looked at three different yoiks about the Gievdneguoika waterfall, all of them with the same eponymous title: “Gievdneguoika” by Ánte Mihkkal Gaup from the record *Min máilmmi skearrus* (1986), “Gievdneguoika” by the group Nuorra Juoigít [Young Yoikers] from their CD *Nuorra Juoigít* (2003), and “Gievdneguoika” by Rávnna Biret Ánne from her CD *Dološ luohtemuittut* (2019) (Á.M. Gaup 1986; Eira et al. 2003; Bongo 2019).

In this article, the starting point is how emotions and memories are expressed in yoiks. In particular, I will look at the ways the Gievdneguoika waterfall is described and used in yoiks to express emotions and remembrance. By examining the use of yoiks in expressing and processing emotions, and investigating what this says about Sámi culture, I will try to show a new perspective on interpreting yoiks and reflect on my role as a researcher and performer, and at the same time a newcomer to Sámi society.

## 2. Methodology

There are both dangers and opportunities in examining cultural aspects as an outsider. One can see things from a fresh perspective and bring new ideas, but also miss certain aspects due to lack of knowledge of the cultural context. To explore the subject, I had qualitative conversations with native Sámi speakers who had grown up in Kautokeino. I also discussed yoik with practitioners, both amateur and professional, from various parts of the wider Sámi community.

In Kautokeino, I divided the conversations into two groups. The first group were people who were asked about the three yoiks about the Gievdneguoika waterfall, how they interpreted them, and what led them towards that interpretation. The second group were reindeer-herders and others who were familiar with Gievdneguoika and could explain its place in the cultural landscape, so I could place the yoiks and the thoughts of the first group into a cultural perspective. After collating these conversations, I then discussed them with Sámi colleagues to get a final assessment of whether my research and interpretations made any false assumptions about the Sámi and their culture.

### 3. What is a yoik?

Yoiking is the native Sámi form of musical expression. The yoiker Lena Susanne Gaup writes: “we Sámi say that you yoik someone, some animal or some place, not that we yoik *about* someone or something” (L.S. Gaup 2009: 2).<sup>1</sup>

For the Sámi, when someone or something has been given a yoik, the yoik becomes an intrinsic quality of the person or object. In the same vein, the owner of a yoik is not the person who made and performed it, but the person who it is about. Harald Gaski writes that a yoik has “a clear framework for production, function and performance. It belongs to a community and makes the yoiked a part of the community” (Gaski 2007: 98).<sup>2</sup>

Yoiks are an important tool for preserving the oral traditions of the Sámi. Yoiking is used to describe the lives of the Sámi, people and places, animals and landscapes, family lines and the Sámi way of life. The lyrics are short, but through lyrical and evocative literary techniques still manage to say a lot. The melody must fit the lyrics and the subject, and evoke the same emotions.

The author of the first work published in the Sámi language, Johan Turi, describes how yoiks bring out emotions: “The singing of the Sámi is called yoiking. It is an art for remembering others. Some you remember with anger and some with love, and some people you remember with sorrow. [...] And the name of such a song is *luohhti*” (Turi 1910/1987: 163).<sup>3</sup>

To analyse a yoik, one needs to understand the role of the lyrics and the melody, and how they interact.

The lyrics in a yoik are called *dajahus*, which can be translated as “what is said”. They can be short sentences, opinions, or single, descriptive words. To fill out the parts between *dajahus*, yoik syllables are used, which have no lexical definition. According to Frode Fjellheim, these can be mimicry (imitating animals or other sounds) or sound-painting, which means that the melody invokes the shape or nature of the object being yoiked (Fjellheim 2004: 4). Common yoik syllables are: *la, nana, lo la, hei lo, voi voi, nan na*; there are also modal phrases such as *de dat, gal*, and auxiliary verbs: *lea, leai*. Nils Jernsletten writes that a yoiker will shape the *dajahus* together with the yoik syllables so that it is pleasant to hear: “A good yoiker can shape these syllables so it makes the most expressive sound image, together with rhythm, intonation and voice modulation” (Jernsletten 1978: 119).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “mii dadjat ahte son juoigá olbmo, ealli dahje báikki, ii ge ahte son juoigá muhtima dahje juoga man birra.” This and all subsequent quotations have been translated by Violeta Basa. (V.B.)

<sup>2</sup> “klare rammer både for produksjon, funksjon og utøvelse. Den hører til i et fellesskap og gjør den joikede til en del av fellesskapet.”

<sup>3</sup> “sápmelas lavluma dadja juoigamin. Oat lea okta muintingoansta nuppiid olbmuid. Muhtumat muitet vasis ja muitet rahkisvuodain, ja muhtumat muitet morastemiin. [...] Ja dan lavllu namma lea luohhti.”

<sup>4</sup> “Čeahpes juoigi sáhtta hábmēt dakkár stávvaliid nu ahte leat mielde ávdnemen dan eanemus dovddaheami jietnagova, ovttas ritman, intonašuvnnain ja jietnamodulašuvnnain.”

Yoik syllables are also used to control the pacing: they give the listener time to contemplate the preceding lyrics and can signal that more is said than just the meaning of the words.

The term *dajahus* is used to differentiate yoik lyrics from other similar texts, like stories, sayings, poems, and so on. The word *dajahus* itself describes how the lyrics are made: it is what is said about someone or something, and it is short. It is rare to have a longer narrative in a yoik. According to Vuokko Hirvonen, in yoiks words are used frugally, the language is different from the vernacular, and the subject is described in the lyrics succinctly (Hirvonen 1991: 7).

When analysing yoiks, the melody must also be taken into consideration. Stéphane Aubinet even holds that the *dajahus* has a subordinate role to the melody, “enriching, inflecting, or diverging from the melody’s value rather than determining it” (Aubinet 2023: 5). Traditional yoiking is performed without instruments, which gives the yoiker freedom in terms of both melody and intonation to vary the yoik according to their feelings and mood at the moment. A person yoiks how they feel is right, and each person brings their own individual interpretation to the piece. These are elements that, when coupled with the lyrics, help to evoke the subject and give the listener a deeper understanding of the meaning of the yoik.

A yoik should bring out what is typical and particular about the subject, both in the *dajahus* and the *luohti*. You must therefore be very familiar with the subject when you make a yoik. The texts are short but descriptive; through poetic language and the use of images they can say a lot with a few words. The melody of a yoik can be varied and improvised on the spot, but it always has a recognisable motif that is repeated. The melody and text should both suit the subject. Aubinet writes that yoik melodies are not so much considered created as found, that melodies are “virtually present in the perceived environment, waiting to be sung and established as stable yoiks” (Aubinet 2023: 92).

The interaction between the lyrics and the melody is used to express emotions. Sometimes they can seem to indicate different feelings, and the listener must then interpret what is meant by this contrast, and often further context and knowledge of the subject can give a different interpretation.

Jernsletten writes that a yoik is used to express what one remembers and feels at the moment (Jernsletten 1978: 118), and can express feelings such as anger, love, yearning and grief. He notes that a yoik about a person is “therefore not an objective, descriptive musical/poetical portrayal of the subject. A yoik reflects the subjective perception and personal experience others have of the person, animal or landscape” (Jernsletten 1978:110).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “ii leat nappo objektiiva, govvideapmi musihkalašpoehtalaš čilgehus dain olbmuin mat gullet jovkui. Dat speadjalastá earáid subjektiiva ipmárdusa olbmos, eallis dahje eanadagas, jus dat leat manin luohti lea gohčoduvvon.”

In her book *Luondu Juoiggaha* [Nature Makes Me Yoik], Maj-Lis Skaltje has collected interviews with a number of Sámi people about their relationship with yoiking, what value it holds for them, and where they get inspiration to yoik. A recurring source of inspiration is nature:

You can't just “catch” a yoik. You must have a voice [fit for yoiking] and everything, a desire to yoik, too. When you have been in the woods, you are “in the air”. It is nature which brings the yoik, the wind, the rivers, and also if you are well-tempered yourself. (Skaltje 2005: 262)<sup>6</sup>

Also people can inspire a yoik. The person who creates a yoik must be perceptive and creative, and know how to say a lot with few words:

You get the melody from what the person is like. Those who are good yoikers, they saw, searched with their eyes and their ears, searched in nature, everywhere, to collect the parts for yoiks. A yoiker must have a deep personality. They must bring out vividly the person, their manner, what the person is like. And not just [people]. They saw it in reindeer too. (Skaltje 2005: 261)<sup>7</sup>

Not everyone can make a yoik that endures in people's memories and is yoiked to invoke the subject. To yoik is a personal, subjective performance, and, likewise, to hear a yoik is a personal, subjective experience. If the character and temperament of the yoik does not match that of the subject as the listeners know them, then the yoik will not bring to mind the subject. A yoik must invoke the subject, whether it is a person, an animal or a place, and has to invoke emotions connected to the subject in both the performer and the listener. To analyse a yoik, one should analyse its performance to see how it affects people familiar with the subject, how the lyrics and melody combine to have this effect, and whether the yoik manages to invoke the subject.

#### 4. Yoik as an expression of emotions and remembrance

Skaltje writes that her interviewees use yoik to remember: “It is a music for reminiscing, when you bring to mind the people who used to be and you yoik” (Skaltje 2005: 75).<sup>8</sup> Another of Skaltje's interlocutors says: “and their yoik is left behind, and someone yoiks it. In that way they remember that person. People also use

<sup>6</sup> “Ii dat leat dušše dohppet luodi. Dus ferte Leahkit mielde jietna ja visot, dáhttu maid. Go leat mehciin leamaš, don leat áimmus. Dat lea luondu mii buktá visot dan luodi, bieggá, jogat, ja jus dus lea somás luondu iežánat.”

<sup>7</sup> “Nuohhta dat válde olbmós. Dat mii lei buorre juoigi dat oinnii, ozai čalmmiiguin, ozai beljiiguin, ozai luonddus, juohke sajis, gos gálga oažžut čoahkkái luđiid ja juigosiid. Juoigi ferte Leahkit eanet čiekŋalet olmmoš. Ferte oažžut heakkalaččat čoahkkái dan, makkár lea dat luondu, makkár lea olmmoš, makkár lea giinai. Iige dušše dan. Dat oidne bohccuin maid.”

<sup>8</sup> “Dat lea dal muitomusiikka, go muitá daid olbmuid, mat leat leamaš ovdal ja juoigá.”

it to tell others about the person and bring them to mind in others” (Skaltje 2005: 262).<sup>9</sup>

In smaller communities, it can be difficult to talk about sensitive subjects, as everything is interpreted from differing perspectives and contexts, arising from the connections between the people in the community. Who performs a yoik and how it is performed influences how it is received; whether it captures the nature of the departed and manages to evoke them determines if it remains in the collective memory.

A yoik consolidates an individual’s place in society, and to yoik someone who has passed away is to keep them present in the minds of people. Among the pre-Christian Sámi, to be alive was considered more than just a biological quality, and a person was regarded to be alive for as long as their yoik was kept alive (Stoor 2007: 62).

There are a lot of strong emotions which are expressed when remembering the past and the people who have passed away through song. These emotions affect the voice of the singer, the melody and frequencies. The yoiker seeks to evoke their emotions in the yoik, to influence the mood and emotions of the listeners. In addition to using the voice, the yoiker can also use body language, imitation and facial expressions to affect the listeners.

To show your emotions and longing through singing is a way of showing respect for the dead. The environment where the person lived, their relationships and social network, their skills and knowledge, and their position in society can influence how they are remembered in song. How a song is interpreted and what emotions it brings forth is influenced by the cultural norms of the performer and the listener. A song of remembrance is an expression of a real and natural experience that the listeners can feel and interpret.

## 5. The cultural landscape of Gievdneguoika

Harald Gaski writes that yoiks should be interpreted and analysed in their cultural context. The researcher interprets cultural expressions that have their basis in implicit and aesthetic qualities of the culture in which they were created (Gaski 2000: 197). When analysing a yoik, one should be aware of the relationship that it has with the social and cultural milieu in which it is performed (Graff 2004: 159). Therefore, to analyse yoiks about Gievdneguoika, one needs to know the background of the location and its place in the cultural landscape of Kautokeino.

---

<sup>9</sup> “ja das lea luohhti báhcán, de leat juoigan. Dat lea de muitán dainna málliin dan olbmo. Olbmot maid diehtaledje dainna málliin ja muite nuppi olbmo dainna juoigamiin.”

First, a short description of the waterfall is needed for context. The name Gievdneguoika comes from the Sámi words *gievdni*, which means a pot, and *guoika*, which means a waterfall; the name aptly describes the shape of the terrain around. (An alternative theory is that the name comes from someone who dropped a kettle while crossing.) The name refers to both the waterfall itself and the stretch of the river above it, where there is a strong current. The waterfall is on the Kautokeino river, about thirty kilometres from the town centre of Kautokeino. Before there was a road to Kautokeino, the river was used for travel, and Gievdneguoika was considered to be the most dangerous of the waterfalls that had to be traversed on the way.

A man living close to Gievdneguoika told me that when they built the road, they first reached the waterfall, but did not build a bridge, so it was an important crossing point in the summer and autumn. The steep banks made it unusable in winter. The first road was built in the 1960s, so there are still people who remember travelling on the river.

Gievdneguoika, being a strong and dangerous current and waterfall, has a distinct place in the cultural landscape of Kautokeino, and is a natural subject for a yoik. As Á.M. Gaup told me, the river might take your life if you are unwary, and so a yoik can be used as a warning, and can invoke emotions connected to the knowledge about the waterfall. In this way, the emotions are connected to the place and the yoik it inspires; like the place itself, they can be invoked when the need arises.

Another person, a retired reindeer herder, told me that since the waterfall is right next to where the road between Alta and Kautokeino branches off to Karasjok, the name is known even to people who are not familiar with the landscape around Kautokeino. He felt, however, that the younger generation does not think of the place the same way as his generation. For younger people, it is a point which connects north, south and east, while older ones remember struggling when they had to cross Gievdneguoika.

The landscape is also part of cultural memory of the local community, and its significance gives rise to cultural expressions. The fact that the waterfall has inspired at least three different yoiks indicates the position it has in the minds of the local Sámi. These yoiks examine the relationship between the people, the landscape, and the history of the place. They can therefore be viewed as implicit expressions of remembrance and emotion. By yoiking, the yoiker brings out painful memories, but also gets some solace.

## 6. “Gievdneguoika”, performed by Ánte Mihkkal Gaup

I have looked at three different yoiks about the Gievdneguoika waterfall and how it evokes emotions in the listener. To help me in this, I talked with three people from Kautokeino, who listened to the yoiks, read the lyrics, and tried to explain how they evoked emotions in them.

The first yoik is “Gievdneguoika”, performed by Ánte Mihkkal Gaup; it can be found on the record *Min máilmmis* [In Our World], which Gaup, Mari Boine and Anders Porsanger released in 1986 (Á.M. Gaup 1986).

The lyrics of the yoik and my English translation follow, with the yoik syllables abbreviated in brackets:

Gievdneguoika go nu golggada  
 Oalle, oalle čábbát golggada  
 muhto ale mána beare fávlái  
 De gal soaitá guoika ráigi jo  
 njiela, njielastit jo go jo  
 [de lalle ...]

Gievdneguoika go nu golggada  
 oba, oba čábbát golggada  
 oba, oba čábbát golggadii  
 muhto ale mana beare fávlái  
 de gal soaitá guoika ráigge jo  
 čotta ráigge njielastit jo  
 [da lai ...]

dušše duššat geaidnu lei jo  
 Gievdneguoika go nu golggadii  
 oalle, oalle čábbát golggadii  
 [lei jo ...]

Gievdneguoika, it flows  
 Softly, softly it flows  
 but don't go too far out  
 Maybe the lip of the fall  
 swallows, swallows you up  
 [de lalle ...]

Gievdneguoika, it flows  
 softly, softly it flows  
 softly, softly it flowed  
 but don't go too far out  
 Maybe the lip of the fall  
 swallows you down the throat  
 [da lai ...]

Just the way to grief it was  
 Gievdneguoika, it flowed  
 softly, softly it flowed  
 [lei jo ...]

(Transcription and translation by V.B.)



Gaup’s “Gievdneguoika” describes the flow of the river: it seems to be tranquil, but the yoik warns against wading out, as there is danger lurking in it.

The melody evokes the flow of the river and paints a sound image of its course. At first the yoik is slow – “softly flowing” – like the river above the waterfall. Then it speeds up and becomes quite lively, like the waterfall itself, and then tones down again, like the river below the waterfall.

The three stanzas are separated by yoik syllables. There are two sections of the lyrics that repeat: the description of the flow of the river, and the warning. There are free elements that modify the flow of the yoik, like the word “jo”, which is used to end several of the lines, and which does not necessarily have a meaning, although it could be interpreted as a particle indicating a finished action – “*njielastit jo*” could be understood as “swallowed already”.

The Sámi I spoke to thought it was a lively yoik, which described the waterfall well and was slightly melancholic. As explained, the melancholy feeling came from the contrast between the melody and the lyrics, the melody being robust while the lyrics had a darker tone.

Some thought it had a regretful tone. After deliberating, they thought it might come from the shifts in the lyrics. The description of the flow is first in the present tense, then shifts to the past tense. The warning changes in the second stanza: “*čotta ráigge njielastit jo*”, “swallows you down the throat”. The last stanza does not repeat the warning, just the alliterative line “*dušše duššat geaidnu lei jo*”, literally “just a road to tragedy it was”, which, together with the non-repeated warning and the shift of the description to the past tense – “softly it flowed” – strikes a regretful note, as if it was too late, and the thing warned against had happened.

## 7. “Gievdneguoika”, performed by Nuorra Juoigit

The second yoik is also called “Gievdneguoika”; it is performed by the yoik group Nuorra Juoigit [Young Yoikers] on their eponymous 2003 record *Nuorra Juoigit* (Eira et al. 2003).

My translation is as follows, with the yoik syllables again abbreviated in brackets, and an additional indication of how many times the yoik syllable line is repeated. In addition, the pronoun “they” is added, which in the Sámi original is indicated by inflecting the verb. Also, the Sámi language does not have gendered pronouns, so I use the gender neutral singular “they”.

- Oba garra rávdnji lea, [hei jo loi le loi le lo] (x5)
- Soames olmmoš bisánii, Gievdneguoika geahčadii, [hei jo...] (x4)
- Gievdneguoika juoiggadii, [hei jo...] (x5)
- Oba garra rávdnji lea, [hei jo...] (x5)
- Soames olmmoš bisánii, Gievdneguoika geahčadii, [hei jo...] (x8)

A very strong stream it is, [hei jo loi le loi le lo] (x5)  
 Somebody halted for a while, Gievdneguoika [they] beheld, [hei jo...] (x4)  
 Gievdneguoika [they] yoiked, [hei jo...] (x5)  
 A very strong stream it is, [hei jo...] (x5)  
 Somebody halted for a while, Gievdneguoika [they] beheld, [hei jo...] (x8)

(Transcription and translation by V.B.)

The melody of the yoik has a droning, steady quality, imitating a constant flow of the river, like you would experience if you were to stay at one spot and observe it, and the repeating yoik syllables give it an unceasing feeling.

This yoik has two stanzas, each broken by a repeating line of yoik syllables, which are important for the pacing. The lyrics repeat twice: a line describing the stream, then two lines that describe someone stopping up, gazing at the waterfall, then yoiking the waterfall, by which it is meant that the person yoiks a *luohhti* about it. The second time, the line about yoiking Gievdneguoika is not repeated, and the yoik ends with several repetitions of the yoik syllable line. The description of the waterfall is in the present tense, while the description of the person is in the past tense.

On the surface, the lyrics have little information, and the people I spoke to interpreted the yoik through the pacing, how they understood the act of yoiking the waterfall, and how they themselves thought of Gievdneguoika. Overall, they felt that the yoik was contemplative, given the drone-like nature of the melody, the repeated lyrics, and how nothing really happens. They said that it invoked a feeling of being alone in nature, of being near the river.

The first line emphasises the strength of the stream, as a subtle warning. The listeners I spoke to felt that the repeated yoik syllable lines between the line about the person looking at the waterfall and the one about yoiking it indicate that some time passed while the person looked at it, and that the person spent the time thinking. The yoik they perform is brought out by looking at the waterfall. Aware of the cultural connections of Gievdneguoika, the listeners felt that it must have been an act of remembrance. The lyrics seem to indicate that it is someone travelling by foot, which also indicates a different time, as few people would pass Gievdneguoika on foot these days.

In the second stanza, the lack of detail makes it ambiguous whether the repeated lines describe the same event – it might be a different time, or a different person altogether. According to one of my interlocutors, the absence of the line where the person yoiks Gievdneguoika seems to signify that looking at the waterfall does not awake any memories, which could mean that whatever is remembered in the first stanza has been forgotten, or the yoik itself has been forgotten. This gives the yoik a melancholy feeling; the waterfall flows on as strong as ever, and people still pass by, but memories fade.

## 8. “Gievdneguoika”, performed by Rávnna Biret Ánne

The third yoik, again called “Gievdneguoika”, is performed by Berit Anne P. Bongo (Rávnna Biret Ánne, in the patro- or matronymic Sámi naming tradition) on her record *Dološ luohtemuittut* [Old Yoik Memories] from 2019 (Bongo 2019).

My translation, with yoik syllables in brackets, is as follows:

[Lei jo ...]  
Dolin go  
luoitile Gievdneguoika vulos  
Buot alimus dulvi  
[Lolo...]

Go dat ledje Ante ja Leammu ja Ovlla  
[jo lo...]  
go gasku guoika bohte  
de gal nu jo diškalii go  
beaivi vel čuvgii čada báruid  
[jo lolo...]

Dat lei dalle go  
eai lean vel biilaluottat  
ja ii ge lean ii šaldi ge  
[lolo...]

[Lei jo ...]  
Long time ago  
they went down Gievdneguoika  
The highest flood  
[Lolo...]

They were Ante and Leammu and Ovlla  
[jo lo...]  
they got to the middle of the fall  
then it splashed so  
the sun even shone through the waves  
[jo lolo...]

It was back when  
there were no car roads  
and not even a bridge  
[lolo...]

(Transcription and translation by V.B.)

The Sámi I spoke to felt that it was a yoik that evoked another time, and that the yoiker sought to pass on a way of knowing the river, and the struggles of the older generations. The melody has a recurring motif which evokes a waterfall, and which is repeated several times at the end. My interlocutors felt that the melody was sorrowful and evoked longing, and seemed to signify that the river brings both life and death. Unlike in the case of the other two yoiks, the melody did not invoke or paint a “sound picture” of the river to the listeners. One of them said that it felt like it invoked the feeling the yoiker had when seeing the bridge over the river, being reminded of the hardships people had experienced when they had to brave the waterfall.

The yoik has three stanzas, with no refrain or repetitions, with sections of yoik syllables bookending the stanzas, in between, and after the line naming the men. It describes a time when the spring flooding on the Kautokeino river was as high as anyone could remember (“*buot alimus dulvi*”). Three men, Ante, Leammu and Ovlla, are implied to be traversing the waterfall, and there is much splashing, going so high that the sun could be seen through the water.

What exactly happened is not described further, and the listener must use context to deduce what the yoik is about. The men, named in the past tense, the hazardous conditions; a great splash, then a moment of beauty: the sun shining through the water. The people I spoke to thought this pointed towards a fatal accident in which all three men drowned. They had not heard of these men or such an accident, but, given the reputation of Gievdneguoika, they felt it was a natural deduction.

The last stanza describes how this happened before there were other ways to travel, when boat travel was a necessity; the listeners thought this gave the yoik a melancholy and plaintive ending. Some also read it as regretful, as the lack of roads and bridges meant that there was no easy way to get help in case of an accident.

## 9. Conclusions

There are a few literary techniques that the analysed yoiks have in common. The lyrics are subtle, and the events are only hinted at rather than described, which means that one needs to know the context to understand what they are about. The yoiks by Ánte Mihkkal Gaup and Nuorra Juoigit shift between the past and the present tense, with events described in the past tense, and descriptions of the river and nature in the present tense. The Sámi I spoke to about the yoiks did not notice these details right away, but they thought that they helped invoke a melancholy mood. One of them said that it evokes a feeling that it is nature that abides, unchanging, and the people of the past are present only in memories, before they also fade away. The cultural context of Gievdneguoika is an important element of these interpretations.

Some of my interlocutors explained that the Sámi do not like to impose themselves on others. The absence of direct reference to accidents in yoiks can express compassion, as a knowledgeable listener would appreciate that the yoiker is considerate and does not invoke the tragic events. People remember others through yoiks, which bring out listeners’ memories – they know who the yoik is about, the lyrics and the melody, and the context in which it is performed.

## 10. Reflections

In all cultures there are many aspects that must be considered when analysing expressions of strong emotions. Someone who researches Sámi culture as an outsider must show respect and understanding of this culture and community and be able to preserve the perspective of their interviewees in presenting their research. The researcher should be able to recognise both subtle aspects and the entire worldview presented to them. I have become quite familiar with Kautokeino, having lived here many years. Still, in my research I experienced the challenges present in researching how emotions are expressed; it might be the case that the hesitancy to express strong emotions extends beyond yoiks. The researcher needs to be familiar with Sámi culture, the language, the codes, the relationships between the people he or she talks with (both with each other and the departed), and their history. What is left unsaid in one conversation can be said in another one, with another person, on another subject.

I came to appreciate how yoik is used to communicate the unsaid, and how respectful yoikers are of their audience. A yoik feels alive – each time you come back to it, it has changed and grown, as your understanding has deepened, and you can perceive ever more minute nuances.

The article examines how these yoiks about the Gievdneguika waterfall can be interpreted through the cultural context of the place as expressions of particular emotions and memories. Yoiks must be analysed in the cultural context in which they are created and performed, and the researcher’s background also plays a role in how the yoik text is interpreted. As Professor Gaski (2007) writes, yoiks belong to the Sámi community and make the subject part of the community. The language of yoik lyrics tells us about the way of life of the Sámi, that unity of people and nature, experiences and events, as well as the daily life and the characteristics of the subject.

Researching a community where you are an outsider has its disadvantages: the relationships you have with the interviewees and the attitudes you are met with mean that you cannot always ask freely or get open answers. People can feel conscious about having their words read by outsiders and shape their answers accordingly. It is an advantage to know the Sámi language and terms used in *dajahus*, as well as the cultural references. Also, it is, of course, essential to have the yoiks interpreted by cultural insiders. However, these interpretations are themselves

based in Sámi culture. The researcher must ultimately have some familiarity with the culture to be able to understand what questions need to be asked to bridge the gap between cultures.

Expressions of strong emotions and remembrance can be a sensitive subject in smaller communities. I have spoken to people about various aspects involved so as to get an overall picture of what the Sámi think about and how they experience this.

Kautokeino is a tight-knit community where the social connections have roots that go back generations. When I first came here, I was slightly put back by how people I met would ask about who I knew in Kautokeino, and my relationship with them. Later, I realised that they sought to establish the paths between us in the network of social connections in the community. These relationships are important to the people and must be examined with care. The Sámi, having experienced oppression for centuries, are protective of their traditions and community, and often that protection is through obscurity.

In my view, the yoiks about Gievdneguoika are expressions of remembrance. Yoiks have many layers, and the Sámi I spoke to interpreted them in different ways. A yoik endures when it resonates with the listeners, and the memories and feelings of the yoiker are shared with the audience. “But a yoik doesn’t live, it doesn’t exist before the collective makes use of it” (Jernsletten 1987: 111).<sup>10</sup> In discourse with other cultures, a yoik can get other qualities than those perceived by the Sámi themselves, so it is important to become familiar with the cultural context before making assumptions.

There are many things people feel that are left unsaid, and what is unsaid is often also not acknowledged, even to oneself, yet needs to be expressed somehow; for the Sámi, yoiks are a way to express emotions and feelings, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, to an audience or just to themselves.

When thinking about the role yoiks have for the Sámi, I return to the quote from L.S. Gaup about the Sámi yoiking someone, not *about* them. I have tried to find out what exactly is meant by that, but no one can quite agree on an explanation. One theory I liked was that of a colleague who thought it could be compared to how the Sámi say “*mun oidnen su*” – “I saw him”, not “*mun oidnen su amodaje*” – “I saw his face”. In this sense, yoiking someone can be compared to sensing them, to experiencing them. Stéphane Aubinet writes about how yoikers say that yoiking does not so much trigger memories as makes them tangible (Aubinet 2023: 107).

An important virtue in Sámi culture is to not leave a lasting trace, but let nature reclaim what is no longer in use. Asta Balto tells of an old Sámi man who took his grandchildren out to the fields he had cultivated his whole life and showed them how he had removed all remains of his work so the forest could reclaim the fields. Since there was no one to keep working the fields after him, it was better to let them disappear as he had just borrowed them temporarily (Balto 1997: 95). I have been

<sup>10</sup> “Muhto luohhti ii ealas, dat ii gávdno ovdal go dat kollektiiva joavku lea váldán dan atnui.”

told this attitude not only applies to physical objects and places, but also to mental states and emotions; grief and sad memories should not be passed on, but allowed to naturally fade away as the people who feel the sorrow themselves pass away.

This is something I have experienced myself, when visiting the graveyard in Kautokeino. The first time it was a shock to someone used to the meticulously well-kept graveyards in Romania. The graveyard in Kautokeino is like a parcel of the heath surrounding it, with only gravestones showing where people are buried. Later I came to understand that this is how the Sámi honour their dead, by letting their resting place be reclaimed by nature, to have them become a part of the landscape to which they belonged. They are not forgotten, but have become a part of the memory of the land, not separate from it.

## Bibliography

- Aubinet, S. (2023). *Why Sámi Sing: Knowing through Melodies in Northern Norway*. London: Routledge.
- Balto, A. (1997). *Samisk barneoppdragelse i endring*. Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal.
- Bongo, B.A.P. (2019). Gievdneguoika [Song]. *Dološ luohtemuittut*. Rieban. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hefY5JqPeil> [accessed: 20.10.2023].
- Eira, I.M.A. et al. (2003). Gievdneguoika [Song]. *Nuorra Juoigit*. Rieban. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcUOOMJLevE> [accessed: 20.10.2023].
- Fjellheim, F. (2004). *Med joik som utgangspunkt*. Trondheim: Vuelie forlag.
- Gaski, H. (2000). The Secretive Text: Yoik Lyrics as Literature and Tradition. In: J. Pentikäinen, H. Gaski et al. (eds.). *Sami Folkloristics*. Turku: Nordic Network of Folklore, pp. 191–214.
- Gaski, H. (2007). Juoigan – sámii musihkka máilmmis dahje máilmmemusihkka / Joiken – samisk musikk i verden eller verdensmusikk / Yoik – Sami Music in Global World Music. In: J.T. Solbakk (ed.). *Árbevirolaš máhttu ja dahkkivuogiatvuohta / Tradisjonell kunnskap og opphavsrett / Traditional Knowledge and Copyright*. Kárášjohka: Sámikopijja, pp. 96–122.
- Gaup, Á.M. (1986). Gievdneguoika [Song]. M. Boine, Á.M. Gaup, A. Porsanger: *Min Máilmmis*. Lean As. <https://mariboine.bandcamp.com/album/min-m-ilmmis-2> [accessed: 20.10.2023].
- Gaup, L.S. (2009). *Joik*. Samuelsenberg: Riddu Riddu Senter for nordlige folk.
- Graff, O. (2004). “Om kjærasten min vil jeg joike”: *Undersøkelser over en utdødd sjøsamisk joiketradisjon*. Karasjok: Davvi Girji.
- Hirvonen, V. (1991). *Gumppe luodis Áillohazžii. Luodi šládjateorehtalaš guorahallan ja Valkeapää divttat njálmmálaš tradišuvnna joatkin* [Master’s thesis]. Oulu universiteahhta. Suoma ja sámegeiela instituhtta.
- Jernsletten, N. (1978). Om joik og kommunikasjon. In: S. Hals (ed.). *Kultur på Karrig Jord: Festskrift til Asbjørn Nesheim*. Oslo: Norsk folkemuseum, pp. 109–123.
- Skaltje, M.-L. (2005). *Luondu Juoiggaha*. Guovdageaidnu: DAT.
- Stoor, K. (2007). *Juoiganmuitalusat – joikberättelser: en studie av joikens narrativa egenskaper* [Doctoral thesis]. Umeå universitet.
- Turi, J. (1987). *Muitalus samiid birra*. Johkamohkki: Sámi Girjjit. (Original work published 1910).