

# Complex Yoiks – A Time Traveller: Aboriginal Oral Traditions Among the Sámi in Sweden

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## Introduction

This article presents research on the oral narration context and content of Yoik, the traditional Sámi acapella form of singing. The Sámi people are recognized as Indigenous in northern Fennoscandia. Although yoik has been brought into the modern world through combining with music forms such as rap and country, yoik traditionally was created and performed by individuals who imparted their own experiences of people, animals, and places on their narratives. For it to conform to its traditional form, yoik can never be taken out of its original context, because outside of that context the narrative becomes something else, only text, taking on new connections. The word yoik is used as if it were a verb, which comes from the north Sámi word *juoigat*. To yoik is to express yourself verbally with song or speech; one yoiks a song that is to say a *vuolle*, *vuölle*, *vuelie*, or *luobti*. The differences between what one calls songs is only geographical. In the Scandinavian languages the word yoik has also become a substantive noun, nominative, one talks about the wolf's yoik, person's yoik, and so on. Every individual has its own song, but you cannot create it yourself, it has to be given to you. Animals do, as well, have their own songs. Some sing them with characteristics; you have to be the animal you are describing in the song. Landscape is a third theme that has to be described. Sometimes these themes are intertwined, which is what professor Israel Ruong calls 'complex yoik' (Arnberg et al, 1997).

Yoiking tradition can be considered Indigenous (i.e., aboriginal) dating to before the transition to reindeer herding in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The ethnomusicologist Ernst Emsheimer (1964) recognized the yoik as the oldest singing style in Europe. We do not know how it exactly sounded back then. The first documented yoik is from Schefferus' book *Laponia* from 1673 (Schefferus et al, 1956).

The station master Karl Tirén was one of the earlier collectors of yoik during the early 1900s in Sweden. In Finland, Armas Launis (1908) did the same kind of collecting with 800 transcriptions and recordings. Though, its traditional form arose in the last century after the Sámi were influenced by the Western European cultures. It is said that when the juke box was introduced in the late 1950s at the café in Guovdageaidnu, Norway, it influenced the old tradition. One can hear it as

well in the forest Sámi traditions that Swedish folk music also influenced the singing style. A way to degrade another Sámi was to yoik him like a waltz in 3/4 beat (Stoor, 2007: 51). Nils Petter Svensson, a forest Sámi reindeer herder from Mausjaur, Arvidsjaur parish, Sweden that fit into the yoik time frame, was a traditionalist who transitioned to the modern form. When he was yoiking in 1953, Burman brothers who were playing the accordian, and Nils Petter Svensson was yoiking them as he himself was an accordian. Svensson's greatest tribute to the old tradition is his way to use the song as a form of storytelling, as I will explain later.

### Johan Turi's description of yoik

The first Sámi who described yoik was the Sámi author Johan Turi. He was a pioneer and with his 1910 book *Muitalus sámiid birra* [*An Account of the Sámi*] came to be considered as the father of Sámi literature (Turi & DuBois, 2012). Turis' approach was to create a story where the reader was present as an audience and, in the story, the yoik is along as a natural part. The first time he presented a yoik, a wild reindeer's tune in the first part of the book, he described a reindeer herder who received a visit by a wild bull reindeer and allowed it to mate with his female reindeer.

Muhto son oáččui goit goddenáli, sus šadde bohccot dego  
gottit, nu šalgadat ja beavrrihat, ja dan olbmui šadde  
rievddalmas bohccot. Ja juohkehaš gáđaštii su bohccuid, go  
dat ledje olu čábbábut go iežáin.

Gotti luohti

Goddi, goddi, nana, nana,  
goddi, goddi, manat dego suoivvanas,  
goddi, goddi, nana, nana,  
voja, voja, čuovggadii dego silba,  
goddi, goddi, voja, voja, nana, nana,  
voja, dego čuovžaguolli.  
(Turi & DuBois, 2012: 67)

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He got in all cases the wild reindeer's offspring, [thus] his reindeer became like wild reindeer, so shiny and high legged, and that man got reindeer who differed from all of the others. And everyone envied him his reindeer, because they were much more beautiful than the others.

### The Wild Reindeer's Song

Wild reindeer, wild reindeer, nana nana,  
wild reindeer, runs like the shadow,  
wild reindeer, wild reindeer, nana nana  
voia voia, shiny like silver,  
wild reindeer, wild reindeer, voia voia nana nana

voia, shines like a whitefish.

(Turi & DuBois, 2012: 67)

Turis' chapter on the Sámi songs begins with a five-line description of yoik. One of the most recognized meanings is "It is an art to remember other people. Some are remembered in hate and remembered in love, and others remembered in mourning" (Turi & DuBois, 2012: 198).

Turi writes an epic yoik where the reader ends up in a yoik story about a young couple who are dating [to be free for marriage – idiomatic expression]. Finally, he describes a young man's song and the reindeer's song. The last five lines in the chapter contain a description of the yoik, which is also often cited.

Juigamus lea dakkár, go lea rievttis čeahpes juoigi, de lea nu hávski gullat, goase čirrosat bohtet guldaleddjüide. Muhto go dakkár juoigit leat, guđet garrudit ja bániid gasket ja uhkidit goddit bohccuid ja velá isidanai, ja de dat leat ahkidat gullat (Turi & DuBois, 2012: 199).

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Yoiking is such, that if it is really artful, it is very pleasant to listen to: tears nearly come to one's eyes while listening. But if it is that kind of yoiking that includes swearing and gnashing of teeth and threats to kill reindeer or even their owners, then it is terrible to hear (Turi & DuBois, 2012: 199).

If one transfers Turis' writing to plain speech then the reader finds himself in the middle of a performance. The only difference is that the reader will never be able to influence Turis' text. That Turis continues to be cited and discussed depends, according to my understanding, that he described a reality and reality cannot be wrong. Thus, Turis becomes a theoretician whose theses are tested again and again.

Linguist Nils Jernsletten begins his article *Om joik og kommunikasjon* (Jernsletten, 1978) by discussing Turis and he shows that someone who does not recognize Turis' context believes that Turis' text deals with something other than yoik, and Jernsletten further develops Turis' thoughts. Specifically, he makes his reflections more precise:

The yoik, *luotti*, is also not an objective, characterizing musical-poetic description of the people who belong to the group. It reflects the subjective perception of others of man, or of animals or landscapes if that is what the yoik is named after (Jernsletten, 1978: 110).

Jernsletten (1978: 111) writes that a *luotti* does not exist by itself other than if a collective adopts it and therefore confirms a personal yoik individual's identity in the society. Further, he writes that when a person dies his/her personal song gets forgotten. Through a turn on the reasoning, he means that as long as the individual's *luotti* is remembered the man lives on, even if he is physically dead (Jernsletten, 1978: 11). That viewpoint is strengthened by Turis' discussion about yoik as a memory art (Turi & DuBois, 2012). Even Rydving discusses the term "life" as a qualitative concept

in a pagan environment, and it is again played out in the yoik as a memory art. One lives as long as one is remembered (Kjellström et. al., 1988: 84).

### The early 1900s recordings

To speak further on what example Karl Tirén's diary can give, one such example is a description about, among other things, a settler couple who is having a wedding and there are a lot of Sámi taking part. The crowd is good [idiom] with many yoiks, but there comes a moment where conflicts appear, for example "rikklappen Bánta" (the rich man Bánta, the name indicates he is rich) wants to yoik a hate song to the farmers, which he is reluctant to do. Even Tirén receives criticism and slanderous songs are yoiked toward enemies on the Norwegian side of the border (Tirén, 1914-1915: 4f). Tirén has documented a yoik, probably from the same wedding.

Utne le avo ja hauske tanne  
 Brutas li fauro  
 Tanne lä tjåkonam svånska ja same  
 Ja lä te ko vieljatja ja åbbatja  
 tal mia roligisjavos vänak  
 Tirén lä ai tanne

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Today, we had it good here  
 the bride is beautiful  
 Here are both Swedes and Sámi  
 and we are friends and family  
 and the funny and nice friend Tirén is also here.

(Tirén, 1914-1915: 20).

The reindeer herder and author Lars Rensund writes about a wedding three years earlier in 1912 between Nils and Anna Lasko.<sup>1</sup> Rensund describes the event as if it were the biggest wedding ever. In Rensund's explanation there are no hints about ethnic disagreements, except he describes in detail how meager the soups and foods were. Tirén and Rensund are completely agreed on the question about yoiking. The foremost yoiker, according to Rensund (Rensund, 1984: 80) was Lars Erik Steggo, Bebno-Pera, who was the groom's stepfather and he yoiked a kin song.

Slontja bardne juokalvasav (häjav. – brolåbev) tagai Rahpeni,  
 nelje vareh juokalvassai pievdi  
 Arvasav, Barturtev, Njasjav, Tjådjakav.

Slontja's son had a wedding in Rappen  
 Peoples from four mountains he invited  
 Arvas, Barturte, Njasja, Tjidjak  
 (Rensund, 1984: 80).

One can assume that a nine-year-old Israel Ruong could have been at the same wedding that Rensund describes. Ruong was two years younger than Rensund and Ruong was one of the Sámi authors who discussed the role of yoik within the society. To remind you, “Feel and Yoik”<sup>2</sup> is the title of the chapter that Ruong wrote in the work *Yoik*, which is often used as a theoretical basis in the scholarship about yoik (Kjellström et. al., 1988). Ruong borrows the author Johan Turis’ reasoning and meaning that it is an *art of remembrance*, which lies in the experience (Arnberg et. al., 1997: 38). Ruong made an interpretation and translation of an example of such an experience by Mattias Andersson’s song “Reindeer Herd at Oulavuolie.” Ruong characterizes the song about the mountain Oulavuolie as a complex yoik, where the motif threads are intertwined (Arnberg et. al., 1997: 24). The motifs are the landscape, the reindeer, and the humans, and the complex yoiks contain parts of two or three motifs. The text, melody, and rhythm give a picture of the life and the work, “... a picture transposed to and carved into an artistic force field, which from ancient times is the Saami’s own” (Arnberg et. al., 1997: 14). Moreover, one can compare Ruong with the American ethnopoetics Dell Hymes (1981) and Barre Toelken (1995). Ruong understands, like Hymes and Toelken, that the language can be translated and interpreted, also interpreted more than how he translates it. Ruong creates poetry of simple texts that sometimes are prettier than the original language. His concept of complex yoiks is used by many yoik researchers (e.g., Kjellström et. al., 1988). To conclude, what a complex yoik means, it is a song which could be about a mountain, at the same time deals with people who lived there or the life that was lived there. There are thus several parallel actions in a complex yoik and time dimensions could co-exist. Ruong’s development of Turis’ memory art theories make it understood that the yoik functions as a type of inner travel, where the yoiker takes his memory to places he or others have been (Arnberg et. al., 1997: 24).

### **Nils Petter Svensson yoiks his father**

Nils Petter Svensson (1884–1963) was a reindeer herder in the Mausjaur reindeer herding community (sameby) in Arvidsjaur Parish. Svensson appears as an informant both within Uppsala landsmål arkiv (ULMA) collection during the 1940s and in Swedish Radio’s collection during the 1950s. He was also an informant to Ernst Manker of the Nordic Museum (Manker, 1968). In ULMA’s yoik meeting minutes, which describes when a number of yoikers and storytellers had gathered to yoik and explain songs and stories for ULMA’s fieldworkers<sup>3</sup>, it says that Nils Petter Svensson, among others, sang a song about waiting for the uncles Johan and Lars Mattsson in the morning, when they should have been coming back from a small game hunting with their catch, birds. Svensson yoiked “with completely open mouth and not ugly but somewhat stressed baritone” (Moberg, 1943: 9). It is clear, that Svensson’s performance has a narrative character according to Moberg. Svensson uses gestures and the content is happily about life’s events. His uncle Lars Mattsson returns in several stories, among others, including how the uncle will learn ancient arts from a shaman (Moberg, 1943: 10). It is striking how the shamans emerge during the

performance within the group that sat together. During the group's meeting, the topic of conversation moves frequently toward the supernatural, like the weather, about shamans, and so forth. N.P. Stenberg explained about how his uncle who learned to make predictions like a shaman, which according to the meeting minutes should have happened during the 1720s.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the explanation about N.P. Stenberg's uncle, it is natural that Nils Petter Svensson speaks about his uncle who had similar shamanistic abilities to Stenberg's uncle. The narrators changed positions; sometimes they are audiences and sometime speakers. Nils Petter Svensson returns in a later situation as the same man who warned the women to examine the shaman's medicine cabinet (Moberg, 1943: 10).

Svensson contributes to Swedish Radio's 1953 recording with ten individual songs and all are personal yoiks. The characteristic of all of his recorded yoiks is sentimentality; *barbme b  hta* "grief comes" again in several situations. Even Svensson's approach to switching between speech and song is recurrent and does not seem to be a coincidence. In a recording from 1963 he began an interview by saying that he knew not so much, but the interviewer Tryggve Sk  ld convinced Svensson of the opposite and in several seconds, he started his explanation. Svensson regularly yoiked very slowly. He liked to draw out the notes and has much sentimentality in his voice (Svensson, 1963). St  len describes his yoik technique in a way that represents a minor tradition and formula structure that was common in Arvidsjaur (St  len, 2001: 36ff).

His father's song

[sung] la la aja aja  
sorrow comes when I remember (father)  
gu bien gu aja aja  
he was strong at work  
you should not be afraid to send  
the dogs to the reindeer

the reindeer you must tame  
[spoken] you should not be afraid to send the dogs to the herd  
[sung] but so was the herd also tame  
the reindeer were tame  
they remained still during the rest periods.

I remember when he drove the herd  
with the help of the dogs  
from the camp fire he sent the dogs  
Turn reindeer! He called

Mother wanted once to drive  
the herd away  
then father called to the dogs  
[spoken] turn reindeer, he called

and the dogs set off  
and turned the reindeer  
and mother could not  
drive the herd away

[sung] The good reindeer dogs  
could not get the reindeer from the rest place  
yes, a good reindeer dog had my father  
naja vaja aja aja  
(Arnberg et. al., 1997: 175).

This song is to the father, but as Gaski (2000) has pointed out, there are regular implied moments in the yoik, and that happens even here. The song in this case also mostly describes the father's dog. Ruong reveals that Svensson uses the word *sjoåvana* to mean a good reindeer dog (Arnberg et al., 1997: 174). It shows also how good the herding dogs were in his father's time, which suggests that dogs had become worse in the later time during Nils Petter Svensson's old age.<sup>5</sup> Johan Turi writes about the yoik as a memory technique and in that case Svensson uses the yoik as a way to be transported back in time. The yoik awakens feelings within him. When one listens to the recording, one notices that Svensson took upon himself his father's role in the middle of the melody in the father's song. He does not sing about his father, but he becomes the reality of his father. That is apparent when he calls for his dogs and calls out *jårgot* "turn". Even the word *håskobtit* "to yell for the dogs to turn the reindeer herd" (Schlachter, 1958: 68) takes on a significant meaning. It explains to him how a reindeer herd should be tended. He speaks for others, *galgabetet*, "you [plural] should tame the reindeer and you should not be afraid to drive the herd with dogs." When he talks about the time that the mother wanted to drive away the reindeer, the song transitions to talking and he is back as Nils Petter Svensson for several seconds. But as soon as he yells to the dogs then he is back in the father's role again, *jårgot* "turn" becomes the key word again. This is clearly the example of a portion of the yoik's dynamic. One yoiks not about anything, except one yoiks something and as a yoiker one can change perspective when it fits the context. Nils Petter Svensson has for several minutes not been himself but his father Anders Svensson, who commands both his dog and wife. When one analyzes Anders Svensson's wife's role, she can appear to be a weak person. But if one compares when Nils Petter Svensson yoiks the mother's song, the mother appears as a strong and powerful woman who was along for the migration and drove the herd along with the dogs. Nils Petter Svensson finished with the words *die lü geuvros gummo* 'it was a strong old woman' to underscore the power with his mother (Ruong, 1954: 54). A translation shows that the mother was the strongest and most diligent one of the married couples. She is moving and skiing the whole time, while the husband sits near the fire pit and controls the dogs.

In an interview with Tryggve Sköld, Svensson yoiks his father and, although the text is not really the same as in Swedish Radio's recording, the performance itself is similar. Svensson was not as moved, but the relationship between his father's and mother's song are intimately associated with each other. He transitioned from yoiking his father to yoiking his mother with a little bridge of small, short spoken words (Svensson, 1963). When Nils Petter Svensson

yoiked his father in 1943 (Moberg, 1943), ULMA thus described his yoiking exactly in the same way as in 1953 and 1963; it became a genealogy where speech and singing switches. That indicates that the father's song is not only a musical story, but song's expression becomes a performance, where the context determines the mood that one can hear in Svensson's voice. That seems to be found as a standardized form that he assumes and that is heard strongly by his father and the family. One can ask if the father was a lazy man and wonders if there was a conflict between the mother and father, where he wanted to drive away the herd. That is probably an exaggeration to claim that the father was lazy, and I will not go so far in my interpretation. But apparently, he was careful with resting time for the reindeer (and for himself). That is important knowledge, which is significant for a good reindeer herder, in other words to know when the reindeer need to rest.

To summarize Nils Petter Svensson's yoiking, one can say that he was an emotional person and he used the expression *harbme báhta* 'grief comes' on several occasions. *Ábme báive* 'the past times' is another formulation that he is using in other songs and it is a reverent way to speak of the dead (Arnberg et al., 1997: 176ff). It is not at all uncommon that the memory comes back for him with an event that belonged "to the old days", when for example one was with the herd migration on Lake Mausjaur (Arnberg et al., 1997: 176). By looking at several different songs that belonged to Nils Petter Svensson's family, one sees the context and in the analysis of his father's song that has several parallel actions. We also understand Nils Petter Svensson's relationship to his surroundings, relatives and friends better. By the way, Nils Petter Svensson himself appears very knowledgeable within reindeer herding, judging from Tryggve Sköld's interview with him (Svensson, 1963). Svensson yoiks the same song, which Anders Hesekeel Mattsson yoiked for Swedish Radio, "Reindeer doe talked to the herder" (Arnberg et al., 1997: 190). The melody is the same but the text is a little bit different, and in addition, Svensson changed between speech and song. The content is that the doe says to the reindeer herder that he should not be hungry, he shall slaughter her calf.

## Summary

Oral history is a typical folkloric research tradition. The yoik is a story that is either sung or spoken. It concerns often the activities that were handed down from mouth to mouth over several generations. It is first during the late 1900s that large studies were made of the yoik. The earlier examples from the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are more scattered and not collected with a goal to give the yoik an overall picture. In order to understand the yoik, one should include the yoik's context, or the yoiker's social background in order to understand the content with the text. A message has a double subjectivity, both the sender's message and the receiver's possibility to interpret the message. Such a connection gets the performative aspect's large significance, the actor and listener have a connection that influences the occasion. One calls it performance and it is an artistic action, which includes both the actor and the listener (see Bauman, 1977: 4). The actor is able in the narrative moment, dependent upon the view of the public, to give meaning that can be interpreted differently depending upon the listener's knowledge in the topic. To understand those codes, one must have insight into the actor's culture. In the stories there is knowledge that builds upon traditional values.

Nils Petter Svensson, Arvidsjaur Parish comes from a Forest Sámi tradition, since he was from the Sámi reindeer herding community, Mausjaur, situated in the village Borgsjö. Svensson has



a yoik tradition where both speech and song are important ingredients in the yoik; he is in other words a yoiking narrative. Svensson blends the spoken knowledge with the song: when he yoiks his father he changes between speech and song. The speech also becomes a changing perspective also in the song: when he speaks, he does it from his father's perspective. Nils Petter Svensson acts from a short period as his father. The song to the father is also an example for what Israel Ruong calls a complex yoik. A complex yoik has several parallel actions and themes that are intertwined. That is to say that yoiks which deal with his father also deal as much with his father's good dogs, with his mother, with how one herds reindeer in a good way, with places, and gives a good picture of the relations between families.

Nils Petter Svensson is travelling in time in his songs.

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## Notes

1. Anna Lasko has left several examples of yoiks to Karl Tiréns documentation.
2. Ruong published the same article in the Institute for Folk Life Research publication series but under another title, Om joikning [About Yoiking. To remember, feel, and reproduction] (Ruong 1976).
3. On August 27 – 30, 1943 ULMA gathered its informants. That is the time for the great church days (Storstämmingshelgen, annually fourth weekend in August) where all of the Sámi in the region are gathered in the “Lapp Town” in Arvidsjaur.
4. The actual time disappears in stories. N.P. Stenberg was born in 1881 and his uncle should have been active more than 160 years earlier. “Uncle” in this case probably stood as a concept for an older person.
5. I have myself heard many times stories about how much better dogs were in earlier times and that has been exemplified with different stories from the old days.

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