

Gákti as a Promise

The Multisensory Visuality and Aesthetics of *Duodji* in Ecclesiastical Spaces

Maarit Magga

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Lectio praecursoria: Maarit Magga's dissertation "*Gákti* lupauksena: *Duodjin* moniaistinen visuaalisuus ja estetiikka kirkollisissa tiloissa" was examined at the University of Lapland (Faculty of Art and Design) on the 16th February 2024. The opponent was Professor Maarit Mäkelä (Aalto University) and the custos was Professor Emerita Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja (University of Lapland).

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I have examined the essence and manifestation of Sámi *duodji* (Sámi crafts) in my research *Gákti lupauksena – Duodjin moniaistinen visuaalisuus ja estetiikka kirkollisissa tiloissa* (“*Gákti as a Promise – The Multisensory Visuality and Aesthetics of Duodji in Ecclesiastical Spaces*”).

My research is artistic research on *duodji*, or Sámi crafts, comprised of a theoretical analysis and an artistic production. It contains influences from Indigenous research and emphasises the internal knowledge and competence of Sámi culture. My research contributes to the new kind of conceptualisation taking place in research on *duodji* now that this research is centering on Sámi knowledge¹. Thus, I wanted the practical experiences of making Sámi crafts to be a central method of producing and understanding information. I have included myself as part of the research process. I have analysed ways of knowing and being through a theoretical model I have developed, as well as gathered material and analysed research results.

I have presented my production, i.e. the visual process of creating, in exhibitions and the printed version of my doctoral thesis. The first two exhibitions have been assessed as part of the thesis. The first exhibition consisted of preparing for Christian family festivities – confirmation and baptism – and the second one of crafting *duodji*-based art textiles for the Hetta Church in Enontekiö. The third collected exhibition was displayed at the Gallery Valo in the Arktikum Science Centre and Museum in Rovaniemi, Finland². In this gallery, I presented experiments with materials, sketches, and the

comprehensiveness of *duodji*, engaging, together with younger people, in experimental crafting in a traditional setting of a Sámi tent I called *LaavuStudio* (“Tent Studio”).

During the past year, my research has aroused a great deal of interest in the crafting community of my home region, Enontekiö, and indeed, I am convinced that it is both meaningful and needed, especially from the point of view of the community. My interplay with the youngest members of our craft makers’ community yields a picture of the meaning and understanding of *duodji* across generations: I hope that the skill of the older carriers of this heritage will be transferred to the younger ones through my research. The know-how of those who are experts in our crafting tradition has strengthened the knowledge basis and perspective of my research. One could say that I have studied my subject at the last moment since as many as half of my informants passed away during my research period.

Over the years, I have become positive that *duodji* carries an exceptional amount of tacit knowledge and that little of this internal knowledge of the community has been documented in written form. Therefore, I have considered it extremely important to examine the knowledge and worldview yielded by *duodji*, and even to apply this way of knowing to academic research. Usually, artistic research requires making art, and the know-how relied upon in this activity is manifested as a special mode of knowing.³ My research shows the comprehensive nature of *duodji* and the multiple levels and unpredictability of creative activity.⁴

- 1 Sigga-Marja Magga, “Gákti on the Pulse of Time: The Double Perspective of the Traditional Sámi Dress,” in *The Sámi World*, eds. Sanna Valkonen, Áile Aikio, Saara Alakorva & Sigga-Marja Magga (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 91-92.
- 2 *Ráidallasas – Duodjin moniaistinen visuaalisuus*. Väitöstutkimuksen taiteellinen osio – Duoji máhggááiccat visúálavuohhta. Nákkusdutkamuša dáiddaláš oassi. 17.2.–23.3.2024.

3 Anne Sunila, *Ulotteisuus – elettytilallisuus: Ympäristösi-donnainen maalaustaide* (Espoo: Parus Verus, 2019), 8.

4 Saara Jäntti, Riku Laakkonen & Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, “Yhteisö, taide ja tutkimus: keskustelu eettisistä mahdollisuuksista tietämättömyyden tilassa,” in *Yhteisötait-een etiikka: tilaa toiselle, arvoa arvaamattomalle*, eds. Lea Kantonen & Sari Karttunen (Helsinki: Taideyliopiston Teatterikorkeakoulu 2021), 311. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-353-038-6>

Sámi crafting is interwoven with the entire Sámi way of life, manifesting material culture in time, place, and experiences, as the following story highlights:

As a young girl in Markkajoki, I spent a lot of time with adults. Our mother's uncle Aslak lived close by in his cabin. He was a bachelor who often accompanied me, for example, on skiing trips. I never got to know him as an adult, but there were lots of good stories about him. Maybe the best one was the story about his marriage plans. Great-uncle Aslak had been engaged at least four times, and then he and the fifth bride were about to get married. Uncle Aslak had asked his nieces to make him proper wedding attire, and they had done so. Once again, the wedding was called off. Our mother and her sisters wondered whether the plan to marry really was genuine or whether their uncle had just fooled them into making him new clothes.⁵

I grew up in a time when television was not as common as now, and our social life revolved around telling stories. At some point, I began to reflect on the content and the knowledge provided by our narratives and of course, the details of *duodji*.

In 2019, I studied Textile and Style of Expression to complement my doctoral studies on art at the University of Lapland. During my studies, I created an installation called *Lupaus* ("Promise"), which intertwines Uncle Aslak's story with Sámi man's clothing. To interpret *duodji*, one needs to craft it: one cannot understand it without making and seeing it, living with it and being able to perceive it in its context.

I reproduced Uncle Aslak's Sámi attire, or *gákti*, for my son by using the materials of the 2020s. In doing so, I also revived a decorative design that was on the brink of being lost in my



Image 1. A renewed *gákti* for my son. Image: Johanna Labba, all rights reserved.

community and family. Uncle Aslak's coat still exists, and my information on it is based on the information I received from my close relatives, especially my mother. I realised that I could get all the necessary information for my research on *duodji* by examining my community's notion of beauty and ways of making crafts. The ways of thinking, beliefs, customs, values, and ties to the land and area that are linked with *duodji* are manifested by my example piece of clothing, Uncle Aslak's *gákti*: it was the task of the women of the family to prepare for family festivities by making the clothes and designing them based on the collective knowledge so that the clothing embodied the family's design traditions and *duodji*'s notions of beauty.

"One must deliver what one promises", says an old Sámi saying. We will never know what

5 Maarit Magga, *Gákti lupauksena: Duodjin moniaistinen visuaalisuus ja estetiikka kirkollisissa tiloissa* (diss., University of Lapland, 2024), 13–14.

Uncle Aslak or his bride promised, but for me, his *gákti* was a promise that allowed me to study *duodji* in my own way. For a Sámi, the *gákti* is not merely a piece of clothing but something that carries special meanings. My “promised *gákti*” is manifested in two ways: as a traditional piece of clothing worn by Uncle Aslak, and, after renewal, as a more artistic reproduction for my son. Both processes of making the attire relate to a narrative that reflects the spiritual dimension of *duodji*. I do not refer to religion here, although my research is of a Christian nature. I use the word “spirituality” to describe the worldview and the philosophy of life *duodji* reflects. My understanding of the earlier generations’ way of thinking became clearer when I went looking for moss for a baby’s cradle with my aunt Elle:

Finally, we found a good place and carefully started to pick tufts from a red, thick moss hummock. We didn’t take more than we needed but kept all the time in mind that the plant should not be destroyed, and we should not leave any traces of picking moss in the area. Before we left, Aunt Elle advised me to bless the offerings we had taken from the land: “Jesus, bless us, do not infect us. If you are from the day, return to the day. If you are from the water, return to the water. If you are from the soil, return to the soil. If you are from the wind or the cold, go back.” In closing, you had to say a blessing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁶

This was a small, common undertaking as such, but it reveals something essential about the Sámi way of thinking, the relation between land and spirituality, and the coexistence of an ancient religion and Christianity.⁷ We people should thank nature for its riches. Nature should be respected. We must not take more from nature than we

6 Maarit Magga, “*Vásihit báikki – sággon govat muitalit*” (Masterdutkan, Sámi allaskuvla, 2015), 57.

7 Sanna Valkonen, “Saamelaisen luonnonuskonnon ja lestadiolaisuuden suhteesta,” *AGON* (2014): 16.



Image 2. Image for the front cover of my dissertation made by Hannu Tikkanen. Image: Hannu Tikkanen, all rights reserved.

need for ourselves, and we must not leave any traces behind. In everyday life, our views and understanding of life and appropriate behaviour become visible, contributing to the definition of beauty and the essence of *duodji*.⁸

In the image used as the cover illustration for my dissertation, the focus is on a man’s Sámi

8 Päivi Magga, “Defining the Sámi Cultural Environment. New Perspectives for fieldwork,” in *The Sámi World*, eds. Sanna Valkonen, Áile Aikio, Saara Alakorva & Sigg-Marja Magga (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 134; Lovisa Mienna Sjöberg, *Att leva i ständig välsignelse. En studie av sivdnidit som religiös praxis* (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 2018), 122; Mari Teigmo Eira, “Duodji historjjálaččat,” in *Duodji Reader. Guoktenuppelot Sámi čállosa duoji birra. Twelve essays on Duodji by Sámi Writers*, doaimm. Harald Gaski & Gunvor Guttorm (Karášjohka: Sámi allaskuvla & Norwegian Crafts, 2022), 36; Marit Mikkelsdatter Eira Murud, *Dol-lagáttis. Ved bålet* (Guovdageaidnu: Bárus, 2018), 12.

attire, *gákti*. When making Sámi crafts in practice I realised that it was possible to reflect the essence of *duodji* theoretically, the way I did when dealing with Uncle Aslak's clothing. Thus, I examine the essence of *duodji* through and with the help of *gákti*. *Gákti*, or traditional Sámi clothing, became a theoretical basis and the artistic inspiration for me. I began to see theory as an image that guided me in my research and formed the theoretical foundation I created and called "Gákti structure". Thus, the *gákti* structure is my tool for interpretation both theoretically and artistically, and it brings together two ways of knowing, diminishing the unnecessarily drastic differences between theory and practice and between disciplines⁹.

The *gákti* structure is based on the design of a man's coat among the families of Jauristunturi Fell, and in terms of details, on the pattern of the 1940s, the period when Uncle Aslak wore the attire. I examine the back of a man's coat, as it tells about the cutting of the piece of clothing and the decorative design, as well as the community's conception of aesthetics. The land in the background affiliates the piece of clothing and the person wearing it to the area, showing that people belong to the land and a community.

The details of this piece of *duodji* represent the understanding of a certain area, community, and kin of what a beautiful and appropriate Sámi handicraft looks like. In my research, *duodji* was a tool for remembering as it is part of the unwritten history of a family and kin. The *gákti* design as a Sámi tradition did not represent just a relic of the past for me but connected me with

9 Harald Gaski & Gunvor Guttorm, "Duodječállosiid mearkkašupmi sámi ádejupmái duojs ja eallimis," in *Duodji Reader. Guoktenuppelot Sámi čállosa duoji birra. Twelve essays on Duodji by Sámi Writers*, doaimm. Harald Gaski & Gunvor Guttorm. (Karášjohka: Sámi allaskuvla & Norwegian Crafts, 2022), 12; Harald Gaski, "Indigenous Elders' Perspective and Position," *Scandinavian Studies*, Volume 91, Number 1-2, Spring/Summer (2019): 260.

my late relatives¹⁰. The design of the *duodji* (a Sámi craft) in the picture is hardly used anymore or has been changed, for time has an impact on the existence and development of a living piece of clothing. In fact, conscious renewal keeps the *duodji*-based culture alive. It is also possible that the younger generations of the craft makers of *duodji* no longer have the same kind of shared view of, for example, the composition and the use of colours as the older craft makers had.

The picture also shows a *ráidallas*, a ladder, that was earlier used when erecting a Sámi tent and covering the tent frame with a tent cloth. Through it, I describe my background, cultural competence, and ability to understand *duodji's* world of ideas. The ladder represents my climb: the way I have experienced and internalised *duodji* when crafting and doing research on it. The ladder was made from a birch with two stems. Thus, it symbolises the fact that my research became divided into two branches: the traditional collective "clothing *duodji*" and the more individual "duodji art". The carrying out of both activities lies in Sámi crafts, though their perspectives are different. The ladder lacks the uppermost step because we people are never complete and none of us can ever control everything.

The list of contents and the names of the chapters in my thesis are based on vocabulary dealing with traditional clothing (*gákti*) and concepts referring to Sámi handicraft or crafts (*duodji*). *Gákti* is comprised of various parts, based on which I have shaped and visualised the theoretical part of my research. *Vadjanmálle*, or the cut pattern, reflects the occurrence and making of regional *duodji* on the level of communities. *Hervemáhttu*, or composition skill, refers to the shared skill and knowledge of the community which is put into practice by individuals. Through this term, I conceptualise my position

10 Veli-Pekka Lehtola, *Entiset elävät meissä. Saamelaisten omat tarinat ja Suomi* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2022), 43.



Image 3–5. The decorations on the back in man's gákti (top left) and off-centre decorations in the same attire (right and down). Image: Maarit Magga, all rights reserved.



Image 6. I created *duodji*-based art textiles on the basis of sketches. Image: Nilla-Máhtte Magga, all rights reserved.

in the research. *Hervenmáhttu* connects me with my region, kin and family, revealing to other people where I belong. The shared knowledge contains, for example, information on how many decorative broadcloth strips are used and how they are positioned in a man's coat.

Sealgehearvvat, or the decorations on the back, symbolise the Sámi multisensory visuality and the *duodji*-based aesthetics, which is the basis of my thesis and the starting point of its artistic part. After all, artistic activity – a production – formed the primary research material of my study.

Doareshearvvat, or the off-centre decorations, reflect the starting points of dressing up for family festivities and *duodji*-based textile art, as well as the harnessing of the know-how and skill provided by *duodji*, and their use in

different operations. *Guovttebealdilli* (the side decorations of the back part) in a man's clothing reflect two kinds of approaches: the preparing of clothing for family festivities and the making of artistic *duodji*.

Crafting traditional Sámi clothing is a straightforward activity. The body knows what it does, and the hands are used to certain habits of working and crafting.

Although my knowledge of Sámi handicraft was profound, the skill did not want to be expressed verbally. Therefore, I aimed to verbalise and piece together how a garment of Sámi handicraft is created. Hands and eyes are the tools that help visualise the finished piece of *duodji*. Often, Sámi crafts are designed and made among a network of relatives so that children get the opportunity to experience and see pieces of *duodji* at an early

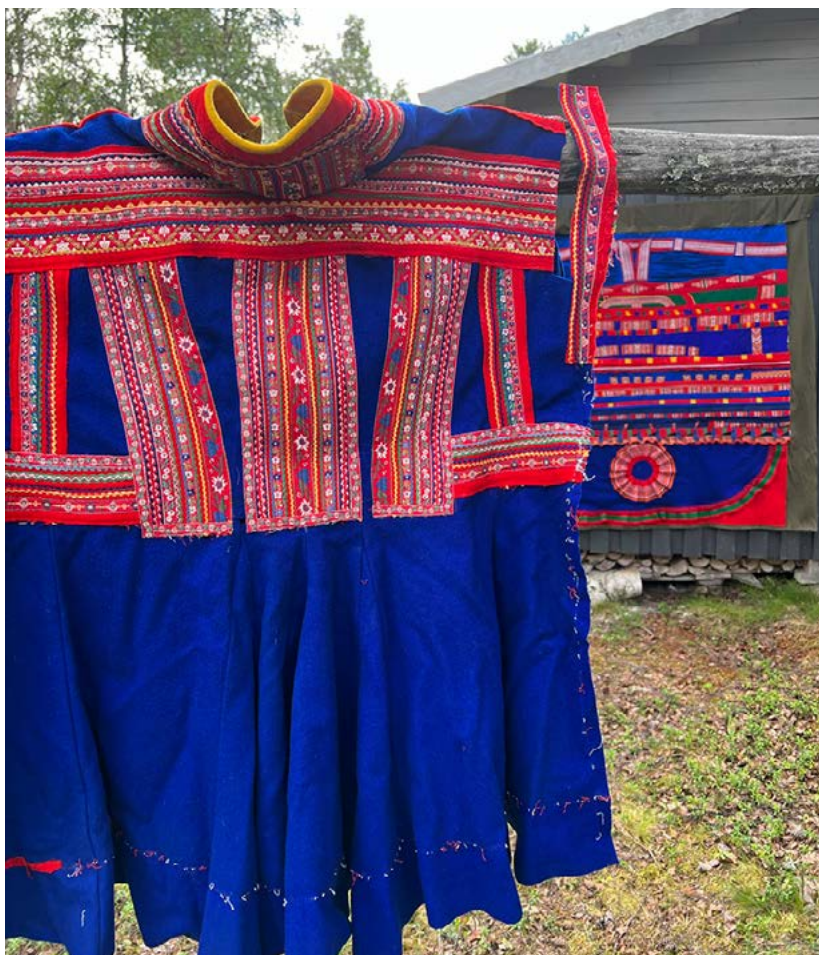


Image 7. Discarded clothes got a new life as a *duodji*-based art textile. Image: Maarit Magga. All rights reserved.

age: their way of thinking about and their eye for *duodji* develop naturally.

The starting point for creating *duodji*-based art lies in collective know-how and its interpretation, just as with the *duodji* that focuses on dressing practices. However, the visual creative process differs from communal *duodji* in terms of planning and experiments with materials and techniques¹¹. *Duodji*-based art focuses on individual crafting and interpretation, and the search for a motif and an idea requires intentional experiments, producing solutions that differ from traditional Sámi crafting and can lead to innovative results. For me, the experience and perception of a public space and the realisation

11 Maarit Mäkelä, *Saveen piirtyviä muistoja. Subjektivisen luomisprosessin ja sukupuolen representaatioita* (Helsinki: Taideteollinen korkeakoulu, 2003), 20.

of how to use it brought about a multisensory visual interpretation of the work under process. The physical making of the materials for *duodji*-based art textiles turned into a hatchery of thoughts and mental pictures. “It was exciting to see traditional materials in a new way. I had never tried using strips of reindeer leather in the frame for woven items so that the result would be a rug,”¹² nor dyed tendon threads for embroidery. I designed *duodji*-based textile art on paper, and these sketches opened the way to a primary idea, as it was easy to change them and see how the artwork was proceeding and what its needs and requirements would be.

There has been no textile art as such in the Sámi cultural heritage. As I wanted to respect the principles of *duodji* by focusing on material

12 Maarit Magga, *Gákti lupauksena*, 164.



Image 8. The hemspiral, *holbespirála*, symbolises the phases of the research. Image: Nilla-Máhtte Magga, all rights reserved.

aspects, textile art was the answer to this multisensory nature of *duodji*. I developed the term “*duodji*-based textile art” to describe individual artworks and to participate through this naming in the field of textile art, among the makers of art textiles, as one who shapes, designs and makes *duodji*.

Holbi, or the hem, is the last piece that is attached to a Sámi dress or coat. It offers a concept for the last phase of my research: the artistic summary and the results. The hem is comprised of strips of broadcloth and decorative ribbons. The hem spiral symbolises my artistic research on *duodji* and the phases of the research process: *duodji* moves and occurs in varied environments, spaces, and times. The people of each era have

their distinct notions of what kind of Sámi handcraft is beautiful. I have needed all the phases of the hem spiral. The hem may sometimes turn around, and the same also happened to my research: there were times when the overlap of work on the theoretical and the artistic part seemed purposeless, but such moments of despair also proved to be useful.

During the final phase of my research, I worked simultaneously on the theoretical questions and the *duodji*-based art textile *Maasta olen minä tullut* (“From the Earth Have I Come”) that was to be situated in a public space. For me, creating with my hands at the same time helped me focus on the core issues of my research, as well as complete it. I realised that I was doing concrete work on the *duodji*-based aesthetics of the Sámi from the Jauristunturi Fell region and living in the heart of multisensory visuality. During my years of research, I reflected on what could be done with clothing that no longer served its intended purpose. Before cutting the garments, I documented them in my archive map in the form of writing and drawings. Altogether, I cut twenty-three dresses or coats into pieces. Mentally, it was not easy to cut the clothes, as I felt I was destroying part of our history. On the other hand, I was aware that I gave new life and new meaning to our heritage, showing respect for those who had passed away. The artwork of my research was displayed publicly for the first time in the exhibition that constitutes the artistic part of my dissertation.

My doctoral thesis begins with a poem in which I describe moments that I have lived when working on a *duodji* – even desperate attempts to give a handcraft a form that would satisfy my eye and enable me to achieve my goals. Sometimes this would take time: I had to wait until my idea was clear and I could embrace it. The words of a poem also reflect how I began to view my research as an image, and how I tried to verbalise my visual idea in the language and dialect of *duodji*.

I leave room for thoughts.

I allow the design to live,

to mature,

until I see it in my soul.

I understand

and make my vision come true.

Doctor of Arts **Maarit Magga** specialises in duodji, Sámi handicraft, design, and art. Her previous education is a Master of Arts in Sámi language and culture. She works as a duodji assistant professor at the Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Kautokeino, Norway. After her doctoral dissertation, she has been interested in artistic duodji and its research through practical experience and tacit know-how.